

What Jeremy Corbyn is telling us about Transformational leadership

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As I write this, Jeremy Corbyn is not (yet?) the leader of the Labour Party.

Within a very few weeks he has made an astonishing leap of perception and profile from the obscurity of a long term protestor on the fringe of left wing politics to being within touch of leader of the opposition, and maybe more.

So what does this tell us about leadership, and crucially by observing a real person doing real things, not words posted on various internet forums giving advice on 'four things a leader must do when charging their phone' or the 'five things leaders think about when cleaning their teeth'.

Corbyn personifies the transformational leader, and he does do in an understated, and powerfully authentic manner. This is a man with conviction, and as a true transformational leader, fires people up, gets them excited, divides and polarises opinion, causing conflicting positions to be taken and emotionally charging people into clear 'for' and 'against' camps.

Too many leaders do no more than manage, and this is someone who wants to lead the Labour Party somewhere it hasn't gone in a political generation – that's what's causing all the unusual scenes and that's what's scaring a lot of people within the labour movement.

Love him and his clear message or loathe, Corbyn has got a message, he presents a future state that is radically different to what is and has been, and in any organisation, that unknown future either excites or frightens, leading to fervent followers or petrified opposers.

Transformational leaders need momentum, and this appears to be with Corbyn, they must project belief and integrity, and convince those they lead of a better way. Corbyn does this without shouting or over emotional speeches – this is no Adolf or Saddam – he knows his context well, and delivers his vision in a way that he judges will engage a sufficiently significant number of people to achieve successful election.

Transformational leaders know that the more they seek to change an organisation the more personal become the attacks, and they can cope with this, knowing it's an inevitable consequence of fronting a seriously different way.

This is a rare opportunity to see transformational organisational development in front of us, for real.

Another factor worth pondering is the aftermath effect. Whatever the outcome of any truly transformational effort, whether successful or not, the organisation impacted will have to settle, realign itself, and deal with the wounds of the immediately recent open warfare, with associated celebrations, recriminations, and for some, irreparable damage even irreconcilable differences.

In political terms, the Labour Party found it could not hold together after the last such transformation, and the SDP resulted, later evolving into other forms and associations.

The true test of the transformational leader is not the exhilaration of the campaign, of riding the adrenalin fuelled wave of success - their worth will ultimately be judged in terms of their ability to do what can be done to repair wounds, to unite a fragmented and weakened whole without perceived or real fear or favour shown to those who were for or against.

More conventional organisations are different in many ways to the Labour Party, nonetheless they share a lot of the issues we are seeing unfold in front of us, and leaders can learn a lot from the Corbyn phenomena.

Too many organisations become complacent, dull, and directionless. Transformational leaders offer a vision of the future that concisely convinces a growing number of people that there is a better way worth supporting and by words alone present a genuinely new direction without the need for fine detail or two inch deep reports.

The message alone is the key, together with the authenticity of the messenger. Transformational leaders must appear to those they intend to lead to believe heart and soul in the way forward they present. They repeat a consistent, succinct, and plausible position. They do not create confusion, and they dare to disagree. These are not consensus seekers, they know intuitively that their own position is best made by differentiation from the views and beliefs of others, not taking safe options and compromising principles.

The transformational leader says basically: 'I believe this, if you do too support me'.

Fair enough, there are major differences between political parties and corporate business life – 'I believe this, if you do too support me' may be supplemented by 'and if you don't you're sacked'.

Whatever the differences, look for the universal realities irrespective of context – this is a real leader (or will he be?), and if it's not to be him, then the aftermath issues remain within an organisation that has not been led well in such times before.

Watch and learn you would-be transformers!

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