

Transformational learning

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Transformational learning goes beyond everyday learning. Here we explore the transformational learning journey, and map the territory the journey covers.

What is transformational learning?

Transformational learning is learning that results in a fundamental shift in our worldview, which in turn leads to profound changes in our thoughts, feelings and actions. It is a shift of perception and consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Transformational learning thus affects our understanding of ourselves, our relationships with other people and the wider world, the priorities we hold, and our sense of purpose and direction.

Different levels of learning

Much of what we label 'learning' involves acquiring new information, facts, ideas, skills and techniques, and fitting these into our existing frameworks and belief systems. Referred to as single-loop learning, this type of learning leads to incremental improvements in our performance and enables us to deal more effectively with the challenges and problems we face by doing more of the same, but

doing it better. Often, this will be exactly what is needed. But sometimes, problems and challenges can be dealt with only by doing something different, and then we need to invoke a more complex form of learning.

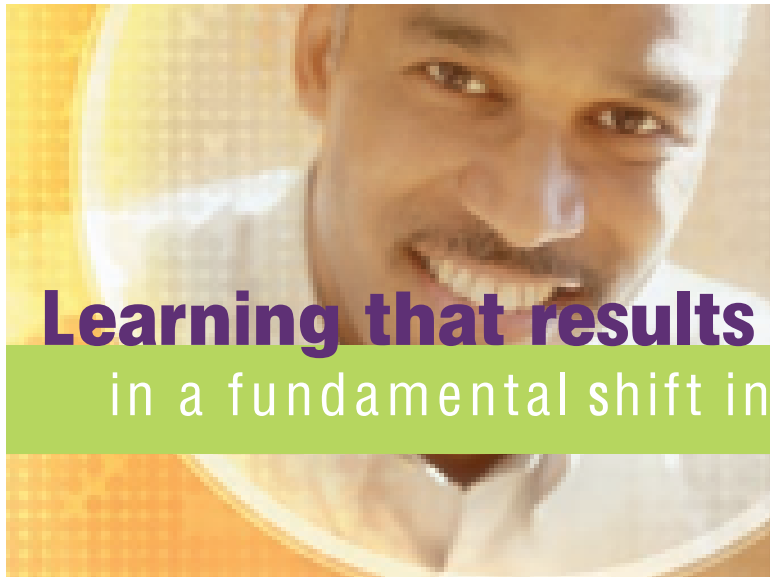
The next level of learning involves helping people reshape their thinking, actions and interactions by changing their frames of reference so that, rather than doing more of the same, they do something different. This is double-loop learning. It involves seeing the problem or situation from a new angle, and hence generating new possibilities, choices and actions. So, rather than the learning resulting in our having new information or greater skill in a situation (as in single-loop learning), double-loop learning additionally leads to a change in our thinking about the situation and in the mental models and frameworks we use.

Triple-loop learning is the most complex and challenging form of learning, and leads to a change in

how we see ourselves and the world we live in. It is this level that is called 'transformational learning'. It involves a shift to a more inclusive worldview and is an integral part of self-actualisation. It can therefore have a profound effect on how we lead our lives, making old ways of thinking and acting obsolete, and causing far-ranging changes in lifestyle and work. It involves not just a change in our thinking, but a more profound change in how we see and experience ourselves.

Key learning points

- ◆ Transformational learning involves a shift in seeing and being, not just acting.
- ◆ Transformational learning can be challenging and difficult.
- ◆ Transformational learning is about lasting, significant and self-directed change.
- ◆ Some paths to transformation have been mapped by explorers of consciousness.
- ◆ Coaching tools and techniques can help clients experience transformational learning.



Learning that results

in a fundamental shift in our worldview

the particular life stage. As our capabilities increase, we will tend to feel increasingly fulfilled and satisfied, and to have a growing sense of contentment and stability. We are able to meet life challenges, and our abilities are in a healthy, dynamic equilibrium with our surrounding life conditions.

While this dynamic equilibrium can in theory continue indefinitely, what often happens is that – as we become increasingly successful in our existing role – our sense of satisfaction and fulfilment starts to decrease. What was once compelling and exciting becomes mundane and boring. We have a sense of outgrowing our existing life, and find ourselves seeking a new challenge or looking for a more meaningful role. And so, we find ourselves in the dissatisfaction phase.

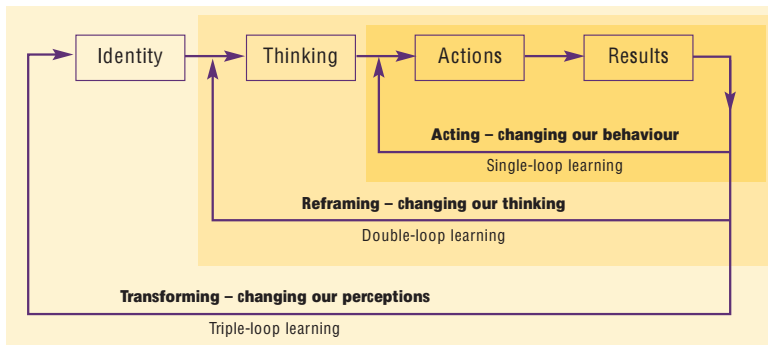


Fig. 1: The three levels of learning

Transformational learning – the journey

One way of understanding transformational learning is as a journey into the unknown. Each time we make this deeply personal journey, we have to leave a place of stability and familiarity, travel into unfamiliar territory where we encounter various tests and challenges, discover a precious treasure, and bring this treasure back to our familiar world. The treasure is lost parts of who we are and, in restoring these lost parts to our selves, we become more whole and move to a more encompassing worldview.

The journey consists of four stages:

- consolidation;
- dissatisfaction;
- letting go;
- synthesis.

Consolidation

When we first arrive at a particular stage in our life and career, we lack many of the skills necessary to operate effectively at that stage. We therefore face a period of consolidation (see Figure 2), during which we develop the skills and competencies necessary to meet the challenges of

Dissatisfaction

Here, our life is no longer working as well. Goals and aspirations that motivated us a few years earlier have been realised and no longer hold the appeal they used to. We feel trapped by our situation, and that we have exhausted the possibilities in our current way of living. What was once meaningful is increasingly meaningless. This is an uncomfortable place to be, so our immediate response may be to ignore the invitation to change concealed within this breaking down and return to the consolidation stage. We may do this by taking on new responsibilities or projects to try to rekindle the enthusiasm and sense of challenge we previously felt, or by seeking other ways of trying to deal with the

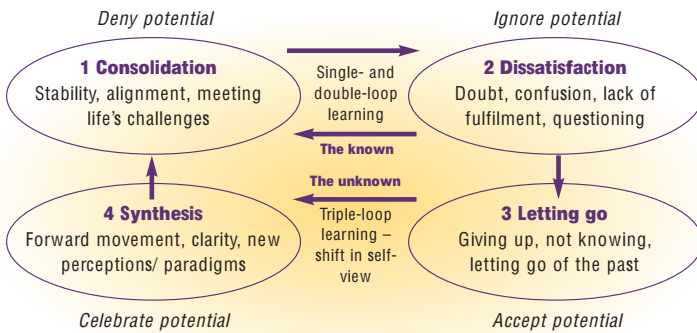


Fig. 2: Transformational learning – the four stages

problems we face. This has the attraction of taking us back to a simpler, less complex place where we know how to operate and know who we are. But, sooner or later, the dissatisfaction is likely to return. This time we may move jobs or have an affair, but we still find only temporary relief from our doubt and confusion.

We may find ourselves moved out of the consolidation phase involuntarily – not because we have changed in some way, but because our environment has. For example, a promotion, an organisational change or changing market conditions may lead to our current ways of meeting life challenges no longer being adequate. And here, too, we may try to regain our former sense of competence and control by developing our existing skills further, but find – to our frustration – that, however skilful we become, we are still not able to deal with the challenges we face.

We can find ourselves trapped in what appears to be an endless oscillation between consolidation and dissatisfaction. However, there is a way out of the trap. That is to let go.

Letting go

When we finally accept that our old way of operating is no longer sustainable, and that making

incremental changes and trying to paper over the cracks is not sufficient, then we begin the process of letting go of the beliefs and attachments that no longer serve us. We realise that there is no turning back – but we also fear that there may be no way forward.

This is a time when we feel demoralised, frustrated, angry and despairing, but it is also a time of opportunity and new possibilities. As the old ways of being and doing begin to fall apart, so the possibility of new ways of thinking, acting and leading emerge. Often, it is when we finally, in despair, give up on the old ways that the new can emerge. This only happens when we let go of our expectations, preconceptions and ideologies, and of our need to feel in control. In effect, we have to let a part of our ego die so that we can become more of who we are.

Synthesis

It is at this time, when all seems darkest and most difficult and when we are ready to give up, that something shifts and we find ourselves emerging from the emptiness of having let go into a new place of possibilities, resolution and excitement – synthesis. We feel empowered; we have a new sense of who we are and what we can achieve. We see the world from a new, enlarged perspective.

We must now recross the threshold, bringing the gift of our expanded sense of our selves back into our everyday life and work. In one sense, we are back where we started consolidating and developing our skills. The difference is that we have stepped up to a new level of consciousness and leadership, and the skills we are developing and using are more sophisticated, complex and global than those we were using before. There will come a time when these skills, in their turn, will eventually lack sufficient depth and meaning. Once again, we will hear the call to make the journey to our fuller selves and greater leadership potential.

Incompetence and transformational learning

Transformational learning is not for the faint-hearted. It is risky and it can be frightening. It involves letting go of familiar conceptions of ourselves and of the world, of comfortable beliefs and of habitual ways of thinking, feeling and being. It can be a challenging and difficult journey since, to let go of the known and travel into the unknown, we have to be willing to be, or even choose to be, incompetent. Competency implies consistency, predictability and repeatability – all these are the antithesis of transformational learning.

If we are too attached to being competent, then we may become adequate coaches, managers or whatever. But, if we want to become great coaches or managers and to fulfil our human potential, then we need to be willing to feel and be incompetent, to go into uncharted territory, to risk getting things very wrong – and to expose ourselves to the possibility of transformation.

Maps of the transformational journey

While the paths we can take to transformation are many and varied, many explorers of consciousness have noted the predictable stages of the transformational journey and mapped the territory. Other useful frameworks include Spiral Dynamics,¹ Wilber's Stages² and Whitmore's Need, Greed or Freedom.³

Transformational coaching

Using the tools introduced here, there are a number of ways in which coaches, mentors and other professionals can help others make the journey:

- Be a guide on the journey: One thing that makes transformational learning difficult is that we are travelling into the unknown. However, others have travelled there before us, and the maps they have drawn can at least give us some idea of what to expect, even if we each have to make our own unique journey. It is helpful to know that this impulse to set off into the unknown is not the fantasy of a mad person, but a well-trodden path to the future.
- Be present: In supporting someone, one of the most powerful things we can do is to be with them as they make the learning journey and to be fully present for them. Presence involves being with someone in such a way that that person comes to know themselves better. When we are fully present to someone, we create a space where they are able to bring and express more of who they are, and to have the experience of being valued not for what they do but for who they are. To do

this, we need to be able to bring the fullness of who we are to the relationship.

- Encourage critical reflection: We are often unaware of the assumptions and presuppositions we hold, particularly about ourselves. By challenging someone to become aware of how these assumptions and presuppositions constrain the way in which they perceive, understand and feel about the world, the opportunity arises to reformulate these assumptions to permit a more inclusive and integrative perspective.
- Evoke new stories: The stories we tell about who we are shape, limit and define our way of being. We can help people tell more generative stories about themselves, stories which lead them into the future rather than keep them in the past. By helping people realise that they are the authors of their stories, they are enabled to choose to tell stories that open up new possibilities for themselves and support them in fulfilling their potential.
- Map values: Use instruments like Bristol's LJMap,⁴ Hall's Values Management Inventory⁵ and other, less formal methods to identify those of your values which are pulling you into the future. Then seek ways to embody and realise those values more fully, identify those values that are keeping you stuck in the past and unhook yourself from them.
- Identify travelling styles: We can help someone look back over their life and reflect on those earlier times when they have made the transformation journey. What caused them to embark on the transition? How did they navigate it? What can they learn from these earlier transitions to guide them now?
- Follow in others' footsteps: We can be inspired by and learn from others who have made the journey – friends, colleagues and the famous (Mandela, Gandhi) – as well as from stories, myths and fairy tales; films (*Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*); and, like my teenage son, by epic video games (*Metal Gear Solid*, *Zone of the Enders*).

References

1. Don Beck and Chris Cowan, *Spiral Dynamics*, Blackwell, 1996.
2. Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*, Gateway, 2000.
3. John Whitmore, *Need, Greed or Freedom*, Element Books Limited, 1997.
4. Scott Bristol, *Life Journey Map*, www.ljmap.com, 2004.
5. Brian Hall, *Values Shift*, Twin Lights, 1994.

Mike Munro Turner is a leading executive coach and mentor. He has over ten years' experience of improving individual and organisational performance through working with senior executives to increase their leadership effectiveness, improve their personal and business performance and accelerate the achievement of the organisation's vision. He also works with the Centre for Creative Leadership in Brussels on their leadership development programmes and is on the faculty of the School of Coaching, where he trains coaches. As 'Mike the Mentor', he publishes a highly rated newsletter on mentoring and coaching.

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