

Leadership and ‘Tipping’ in Workplace Transformation: A Critical Review

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Abstract

The purpose of this is to critically appraise the idea of the “tipping point” from the perspectives of leadership in workplace transformation. It is argued that the desirability of any workplace transformations requires that we clearly understand the nature of the expected changes and the relationship between leadership and change. It is also argued that the sustenance of the regressive character of such transformation might be attributed to its “tipping” in the negative sense in contrast to Gladwell’s positive prescription of the “tipping point” in workplace transformation. It is concluded that the “tipping point” in workplace transformation should be a reflection of the performance indices based on the set objectives for the changes and the timescales and output measures ascribed to them.

Keywords: Workplace transformation; Leadership; Transformation process; Tipping point.

1. Introduction

In today’s competitive business environment in which firms are increasingly faced with the need to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery, the role of leadership in transforming the firm’s workplace towards meeting this need has become increasingly challenging and stressful. Introduction of changes that can lead to an improvement in corporate performance and increase in productivity are paramount issues for all leaders, and their success depend more and more on the people they lead. At the same time, individuals being led in today’s organizational-world of multiple responsibilities, commitments and demands are faced with the tremendous challenge of making a meaningful and significant contribution to their organization without neglecting other important areas of their lives. Consequently, employees today are growing more and more demanding. They have realized that their overall quality of life is largely determined by their work, and they feel that their careers should be a source of financial and personal satisfaction.

In their attempts to fulfill their various needs, it goes without a shred of doubt that many employees in most organizations harbor the feeling that their lives are out of control and out of balance. As such, most tend to be dissatisfied with their careers and lives. By taking into account the fact that we are now in an era where corporate success depends on resilient, motivated and productive employees, these pressures are creating exactly the opposite effect, such as high stress, low morale, decreased effectiveness, and reduced loyalty and contribution in most organizations. The possible consequences that can result from this kind of scenario, in my opinion, can be a high level of staff turnover, minimal productive output and operating under potential budget deficits and increased operational losses. Any organization that finds itself enmeshed in this kind of scenario, in my view, will need to be transformed if it is to avoid liquidation. In the sections that will follow, I will look at the broad notion of leadership as a concept and then move on to narrow it to fit the perspective of transformational leadership theory. I will then proceed to critically reflect on the idea of “tipping point” as interpreted within the context of a transformation processes in organizations.

2. Leadership in Organizations

As Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) have noted, an organization implies structuring and integrating activities (i.e., people working or cooperating together in interdependent relationships) in which knowledge and techniques are used in the accomplishment of tasks. Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) posited that since the notion of interrelatedness suggests a social system, organizations can be broadly viewed to consist of Goal-oriented arrangements (containing people with a purpose), psychosocial systems (with people interacting in groups), technological systems (with people using knowledge and techniques), and an integration of structured activities (with people working together in patterned relationships). I view this description of an organization to be of relevance, and hence applicable to my basic definition of an “organization” in this paper. Therefore, in the event of an organization getting earmarked for transformation, an issue of interest that might arise, in my opinion, may relate to the question of leadership.

In this respect, I perceive the questions that can immediately come to mind to be as follows; (i) What type of leadership is to be required? (ii) Who are the leaders and what should be their characteristics? (iii) By their actions and approaches, are the leaders going to expect the workplace transformation to “tip” along the process? Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) viewed leadership as an interactive process that develops over time. Therefore, people with a positive balance of influence emerge as leaders in unstructured situations, while formal leaders are appointed to positions of authority in organizations. Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) noted that the power to influence the behaviours of others depends on a number of factors (e.g. the zone of acceptance), and continuing effectiveness depends on the processes of social exchange between leaders and followers. The relationship between leaders and followers is classified as being reciprocal and develop by virtue of interpersonal transactions.

Positive relationships allow such development in both ways at appropriate times. The leadership process is also affected by teamwork and organizational performance, which depend on effective exchange, attribution, followership, and self-management. On the issue of the constituent of a good leader, Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) noted the following as six things that people want and expect from leaders; credible communication (i.e. providing accurate information on matters essential to their well-being), association with workers (i.e. being willing to get their hands dirty), fairness in sanctions (i.e. mankind disciplinary decisions being justly, and not punishing the group for the infractions of individuals), ability to take initiative (i.e. anticipating significant problems and consequences and taking appropriate action in good time), ability to delegate (i.e. allowing those closest to a particular task to make the routine decisions about it by allowing little vetoing and overruling), and ability to command respect, or external confirmation (i.e. having a reputation for success inside and/or outside the organization, and also a clout in planning and budgeting matters).

Thus by fulfilling these expectations, I foresee leaders as standing to increase the probability that their influence attempts on transformation processes will succeed. Based on this perspective, I perceive leadership as a process that requires a higher degree of innovativeness, confidence and brevity. In my opinion, this may dictate, to a certain extent, the degree to which a person or group of persons functioning as leaders and operating in a transformation-bonded environment can strive over difficult situations, with the ability to inspire, encourage and motivate those being led as well as instill discipline without prejudice with the capability to have a fair ear to all the people the lead.

3. Critiquing Leadership and “Tipping Point” in Workplace Transformation

By looking at the leadership attributes I have outlined in the section 2 above, it is obvious that such attribution relates to what one should expect to see of leaders in a changing organizational environment. By inference, I mean an expectation for a kind of transformational leadership qualities. As Bass (1990) observed, transformational leadership occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group. Based on this observation, Yukl (1998) described transformational leadership as a process of building commitment to organizational objectives and then empowering followers to accomplish those objectives. The consequence of such leadership style (at least in theory) as agreed by both Yukl (1998) and Burns (1998), is that it leads to the enhancement of followers’ performances. Yukl (2002) also viewed the transformational leader as someone who articulates a vision in a clear and appealing manner, explains how to attain the vision, acts confidently and optimistically, expresses confidence in followers, emphasizes values with symbolic actions, and leads by example, and empowers followers to achieve the vision.

The question that I raise in this regard is; does such attribution easily reflect in a change process? The answer to this question may possibly vary depending on a respondent’s experiential interaction with a workplace transformation process, especially in an organization. This is because, as human entities, employees have variously developed the tendencies to observe changes that take place in our workplace environments. Also in bids to satisfy the inquisitive elements of our human characteristics, employees tend to comment on these changes either formally or informally, and even loudly or in whispers. Employees also experience the impacts of such changes either as victims or as beneficiaries. Yet, what I perceive to be of interest in this respect is the fact that, as humans, we also participate in those scenarios that can normally lead to the creation of conditions which may necessitate the need change (either consciously or unconsciously), and mostly with little understanding of the implications that go with the change process itself. At this junction, it is imperative to pose the following three questions; (i) why do organizations think of transformation in the first place? (ii) Are all workplace transformations desirable just for the sake of it? (iii) Does it mean that any transformation process will necessarily require a tipping point? If I am to answer to these questions, my simple responses to the first two questions may probably be “no”.

I argue here that not all workplace transformations can be deemed as desirable. Such desirability will require that all persons associated with an organization that is earmarked for transformation are clearly informed and their understanding on the nature of the expected changes and the relationship between leadership and change also sought. Otherwise, any progress in such transformation will encounter unlimited constraints and may even regress. Even though considerable effort might be expended on such transformation, the result will be very little with the desired future success becoming elusive. In the event of such a scenario taking place, one may argue that the sustenance of the regressive character of such transformation might be attributed to its “tipping” in the negative sense in contrast to Gladwell’s (2000) positive prescription of the “tipping point” in workplace transformation. According to Gladwell (2000), there are three rules that can be used to provide direction on how to go about reaching a “tipping point” and which offer a way of making sense of epidemics. These are what he termed as the law of the few, the stickiness factor, and the power of context. In his description of these three traits of epidemic which he presumed to be applicable to social change, Gladwell (2000) perceived change to be contagious, just like a virus.

In this sense, he argued that very small causes could have dramatic and disproportionate effects, such that when change becomes manifest, it tends to happen suddenly rather than gradually. Even though I find the analogy between the spread of an epidemic and actions that are generated within a workplace transformation process quite interesting, the sense underlined by the two processes is not easily comprehensible. For example, it is obvious that a specific contagious epidemic might contain viruses that might have secretly gone through varieties of nurturing cycle before getting fully transformed into infectious entities. In this respect, those being infected are in a way serving as the platform for the viruses to reveal their transformed selves, and their capability to demonstrate this by becoming contagious. In this sense, I presume the “tipping point” for such viruses to be the stage of their transformed capability as contagious viruses to spread and attack potential victims. I also presume that the “tipping point” in workplace transformation should be a reflection of the performance indices based on the set objectives for the changes and the timescales and output measures ascribed to them.

This analogy might quietly appear to contrast those of Gladwell, but by relating it to changes that take place in organizations, this position will be more evident. Gladwell (2000) used several epidemics of disease to illustrate how a very small number of transmitters play a crucial role in spreading the infection, and proceeds on to observe that social epidemics also work in exactly the same way. He argued that such social epidemics are also driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people who are set apart by virtue of how sociable, or energetic or knowledgeable or influential they are among their peers. Gladwell (2000) called this “law of the few”, and described the characteristics of “the few” and the role they play in change. Gladwell (2000) seemed to refer to changes in the broader and unbounded societal context which is obviously an open system. This therefore raises the question of the interpretability of this law within the bounded context of an organization. Even though Gladwell’s law might seem to be plausible, I perceive his idea of selecting “the few” in the organization and focusing the workplace transformation on them to be problematic and hence a contentious issue.

This is due to the fact that the character of society inside organizations is highly influenced by variety of factors which goes on to shape the character of the social groups that emerges within it. The rationale for this is traceable from the fact organization behavior is directed toward objectives that are more or less understood by members of the group (Kast and Rosenzweig, 1985). In this respect, the significance and influence of both individual and group identities cannot be simply overridden. As an example, it is evident that in most workplace transformation, especially in the developing countries, the strong dominance of group identities (Sanda, 2006) makes it easier for the identification of “the few” as argued by Gladwell (2000). But these “few” are group leaders representing the interest of their peers inside an organization and whose action in the event of a workplace transformation could tip either positively or negatively. This therefore justifies the notion that the success or otherwise of a workplace transformation is often linked with personal and collective capability and commitment.

Firstly, some decisions around these have to do with how far employees feel ready to join the change process, especially in relation to their past experiences with other (similar) initiatives, present expectations, values, ambitions and future options. Secondly, the decision must also have to do with the willingness of employees to become part of the change process based on their perceptions of how the process aligned their personal values to that of the organization. Thirdly, the decision must also have to do with the employees’ really wanting to be part of the process from as a result of their self-preferences (both personal and professional), the organization’s policy and/or the market imperative. Fourthly, the decision must also have to do with the degree to which the employees feel that the change process is needed.

All the four decisional issues need to be assessed collectively prior to any workplace transformation. In this circumstance, the idea of the “tipping point” can be nurtured if the decision to go ahead with the workplace transformation does not receive the “blessing” of all in the organization. A reflection of such scenario may point to the management of an organization as seeing all the good things that may come from a transformation as against the staff, especially if unionized, who may consciously take an opposing stance against it.

4. Prerequisite for “Tipping” in Workplace Transformation

Transformation might be usefully regarded as an intentional pursuit of a particular course of action. Such a pursuit can be viewed as a relationship between trying things out and then reflecting on the consequences, not in a haphazard and arbitrary manner, but a systematic rule-guided step-by-step one (Espedal, 2007). As Ghaye (2005) argued, transformation of one kind or another, within complex organizations, have a better chance of success if they are fuelled by more than one source (internal and external to the organization, from within individuals and work groups) and type of energy. This point is subject to debate since the transformational challenges to be faced by an organization from the external environment with its wide range of factors such as political and economic instabilities, as well as the complications of competition and the like, might possibly be beyond the transformational control of the organization. I view that a better chance of successful transformation may be predictable if it is to be understood as being fuelled by sources internal to the organization (of which the individuals and work groups are key components) in reaction to a possible external factor. Thus in sharp contrast to Gladwell’s (2000) analogy of the epidemics whose virus source are nurtured in complete anonymity and only become visible in their contagious form,

I argue here that any transformation taking place in any workplace must have a visible justification before it gets started. My point of view in this regard is that any transformation that gets started with an element of surprise to those inside the workplace may likely face resistance. In the event of such a scenario arising, any on-going transformation process in an organization may be likened to an epidemic whose impact can only be felt if it “tips” by becoming contagious, either positive or negative. In line to the presumption I have made above, I perceive as interesting the argument by Ghaye (2005) to the effect that workplace transformation can be perceived as essentially requiring four types of energy that need to come from all staff and not just (formally designated) leaders. The understanding here is that all the people associated with a transformation-bounded organization must be adequately informed of the problems associated with their workplace and the justification for the transformation for which their energy is required.

The following four types of energies are exemplified by Ghaye (2005) as standing to provide a ‘frame’ for understanding the workplace transformation processes; (i) Emotional energy, which relates to how employees feel about taking on the challenges associated with particular workplace transformation. (ii) Physical energy, which relates to how much physical energy employees have to devote to the process of transformation, given that workers are often juggling numerous commitments. (iii) Mental energy, which relates to how far employees can find the mental energy to stay focused, for long enough, on the transformation process without distraction from other commitments, and (iv) spiritual energy, which relates to how far employees’ own values are aligned with those advocating the transformation, as value alignment is a source of enduring motivation).

These transformation energies are indicative of the conscious elements that may be acquired and cemented by all and sundry associated with the organization prior to the embarkation of a “success-projected” workplace transformation. If such conscious elements are to be nurtured and showered onto a change process from the onset, then it might probably not be all that essential for transformational leaders to go out searching for the “tipping point”. In this regard, I argue that the success or otherwise of transformations at the workplace should be defined by the ability and capability of those leading it to make visible the positive impacts being derived from the collective energies they are harnessing from all those providing them. I view this argument as putting into sharp focus Ghaye’s (2005) observation there are two ways in which those recognized as leaders can either inspire or demoralize their followers in any transformation process. Firstly, these leaders can inspire or demoralize others base on how they manage their own types of energy. Secondly, they can inspire or demoralize others depending on how well they mobilize, focus, invest and renew the collective energy of their colleagues and those they lead.

5. Conclusion

In this paper workplace transformation was viewed as a critical action which requires a look at the way history, identity construction, power, politics and different discourses, within and between organizations affect the way employees feel, think and act in particular settings. The need for self-reflection as well as critical thought and action are viewed as important and inevitable parts of the transformation process. The timing of the critical action may also influence the decision on whether it is imperative (or not) to go on searching for the “tipping point” in the transformation process. As such, if the leaders in organizations are to have a critical disposition and an optimistic outlook, the right time for them to do so may be prior to the start of the workplace transformation process, and not during its course. It is therefore concluded that the “tipping point” in workplace transformation should be a reflection of the performance indices based on the set objectives for the changes and the timescales and output measures ascribed to them. In this respect, the probability of a transformation being a success or not may be easily assessed right from the onset and entrenched position that may possibly emanate from employees could be addressed. This may enhance employees’ understanding of the need-state and the significance of the workplace transformation right from the onset, thus delineating the necessity of searching for the “tipping point” along the process.

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