

From:
James MacGregor Burns, *Transforming Leadership*. Pages 166-169.

THE TRANSFORMING VISION

On the face of it, nothing is more mysterious than the sources of creative ideas, unless it is the linkage between those ideas and the process of leadership. In that process, creativity appears as a response to frustrated wants and needs. But if frustration is the spur, its resolution takes many forms. The potential for creativity may be crushed from the start because of despotic parents, powerful pressures for conformity and harmony, religious or ideological fervor that bars independent thinking. Or creative thinking may be nurtured among sympathetic friends and colleagues who, however, weaken or flatten out its force and novelty, whether because of constraints on their own vision or in order to win wider acceptance of new ideas.

Creativity also breaks through restraints, most transformationally, perhaps, in those bursts of inspiration so contrary to conventional thinking that they seem to come from nowhere. Such innovative uncommon sense transcends routine problem solving to address the deep human needs and crises from which it emerges.

Crisis is the prime source of transforming creativity, as when familiar meanings become exhausted or debased or inadequate to account for severe changes or threats of change. Or meanings may have become the preserve of a subgroup or elite who wield them to exclude alternatives that might challenge their dominance. In conditions of what political scientist Peter C. Sederberg has called "explanatory collapse," real, growing wants are ignored or delegitimated, defined out of existence. Values such as liberty and equality are proclaimed while people are neither free nor equal. Forms of justice cloak arbitrary power. Creative leadership in the American Revolution, for example, was spurred by the yawning divide between the professed values of the ruling British—representation in government, say—and their actual treatment of the colonials.

Transformational creativity can flourish amid such tensions. Innovative political theorists, wrote political scientist Sheldon Wolin, were motivated "by a profound belief that the world had become deranged," affording "an opportunity for a theory to reorder" it. Conventional restraints are loosened as new explanations are sought. The unthinkable becomes thinkable, perhaps even imperative.

Sensitivity to deep conflict between accepted meanings and actualities—and frustration at the inability to reconcile the two—is creativity's precondition. Cognitive dissonance, as social psychologist Leon Festinger

found, is a “motivating state” for change. It produces a powerful need to reduce or to eliminate doubt, perplexity, contradiction, incongruity, and other conceptual conflicts through a search for new explanations. Or, as the Czech playwright and, later, president Václav Havel described his struggles as a dissident against a regime of topsy-turvy values, “The deeper the experience of an absence of meaning—in other words, of absurdity—the more energetically meaning is sought.”

As the creative mind breaks down the “institutionalization of hypocrisy,” sociologist Kenneth Keniston wrote in a study of the American New Left and hippies, “the universal gap between principle and practice appears in all of its nakedness.” This recognition is only a beginning. Creative leadership is more than a critique. The “decomposition” of old meanings opens “new spaces and new prospects for action” where the creative mind can roam to find fresh and vital answers to basic questions amid complexity, conflict, and change. The creative insight is, in short, transforming. It might raise a fundamental challenge to an existing paradigm or system, calling for its overthrow and replacement, or it might call for a deep restructuring, or the inclusion of significant excluded elements, or perhaps a revitalization, a new birth of “founding principles.”

So the spark of creative leadership is both destructive and constructive, through a process that analysts of collective action call “framing work.” The frame refers to a value-laden “condensation” of the meanings and assumptions that underlie our sense both of society and of our own place in it. A frame is what we take for granted as we interpret the way things are, as though it were God-given or natural or at least beyond our own making—until we are given strong reason to question it. Creative leadership, then, “re-frames” meanings to close the gap between ideas and actualities.

Creative leadership re-frames values above all, as the highest-order and most potentially transformational “condensations” of our sense of the world and ourselves. Its critique of the gap between wants or values and actualities involves moral judgment, while its remedy—its vision of what might be—is grounded in the fulfillment of a moral purpose, in bringing values to life, and its achievement is measured, finally, by the same standards it has used to condemn the old regime: fulfillment of the principles it professes.

Re-framing means the transformation of values. Thomas Rochon has outlined three ways of values-change: “value conversion,” where the “new valuations” of what is important, just, or legitimate “contradict and replace

the old”; “value connection,” meaning the creation of a “conceptual link between phenomena previously thought to be unconnected”; and “value creation,” as with the emergence of “conservation” as a new value during Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency. Social movement scholar Sidney Tarrow points out that new meanings are not “fabricated out of whole cloth,” but blend “inherited and invented fibers” to create a new frame. But all transforming values, new or old, are deeply and freshly dyed in fundamental human wants.

The *philosophes* of the Enlightenment gave new meaning to “equality,” at once condemning the institutional inequalities of the ancien régime and opening vast new possibilities for change. The French revolutionaries elevated “fraternity” to the status of a supreme value, thus transforming the meaning of community and nation. “Happiness” apart, perhaps, the American revolutionaries did not innovate values so much as they revitalized those that were their inheritance, infusing with fresh power the transforming civic values the British had tarnished and overturned.

For creativity to become leadership, however, conceptual transformation is not enough. As scientists must go beyond “revolutions on paper” and put their ideas to the test in a struggle to win acceptance by their peers, all the more so must creative leadership. Leadership is a social phenomenon, and leaders are “intimately tied to other people and the effects of their actions on them.” According to Wolin, the groundbreaking political theorists were motivated by “the ideal of an order subject to human control and one that could be transfigured through a combination of thought and action.” They intended “not simply to alter the way men look at the world, but to alter the world.” Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Marx—all considered their new ideas to be guides to healing their sick societies. They meant to *lead*.

So the ultimate test of creative leadership lies not only in having a new idea but in bringing it to life, accomplishing the real-world change it promises. To do so, the would-be leader must reach out to others for help. But would-be followers will respond only if the new frame articulated by creative leadership speaks directly to them, to their underlying wants, discontents, and hopes. They, too, as Sederberg noted, must “experience something of an explanatory collapse.” They, too, must know the “aha!” moment of realization, grasp the urgency of the need for change, see its possibility, and envision its direction. They are transformed in a way closely parallel to the earlier experience of the emergent leader. But transform-

ing leadership mobilizes only those who are, if latently, ready to be mobilized, and then only if the frame is true to their wants.

The "truth" of a transforming frame is in its potency, its ability to strike a deep chord. A resonant frame can liberate a person from the isolation of frustrated, unacknowledged wants, into the realm of new and shared meanings, to become a "reflective participant" in what creativity scholar Robert Paul Weiner described as a collective effort to shape and reshape those meanings "as they grow and change through the interaction of the participants and in the crucible of theory and praxis."

At their best, creative thought and action engender, for leaders and followers together, the conviction that the reality of their situation is not, in the words of the great Brazilian educator and theorist of liberation Paulo Freire, "a closed world from which there is no exit," but "a limiting situation which they can transform," a mobilizing and empowering faith in the collaborative struggle for real change.