

Review

The heart of transformative operations: How to sustain institutional change

Allan D. M. Bukusi

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ashesi University, Berekuso, Ghana.

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This paper distills the heart of transformative operations into four core values, essential for sustaining institutional change over the long term. With reference to institutions in Africa, an overview of the transformation achieved since the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 was provided. The researcher then observes that while transformational leadership facilitated the establishment of modern nations in the relatively stable 20th century, transformative leaders are at the forefront of the change agenda in the relentless, complex, and unstable global conditions of the 21st century. Nonetheless, there is an urgent need for institutions to establish transforming cultures to intrinsically drive sustainable change. Selected historical literature, academic journals, and empirical studies underpinning emergent transformative leadership theory were used to explore the heart of operations that support institutional survival, business sustainability, and long-term success. It is recommended that institutions should deploy transformative leaders at every level, employ transformative operations to harness latent human resource reserves, and embed the core values of a transforming culture to sustain institutional change initiatives. The paper invites a debate among scholars and practitioners in organization and business development, political science, human resource management, and sociology to review the foundations, framework, and focus of long-term sustainable institutional development on the continent.

Key words: Transformative operations, institutional change, transforming culture, sustainability, human resources management, organization, apex leaders, political transition.

INTRODUCTION

Many global authors writing about the state of Africa focus on poverty, war, disease, political instability, and leadership failure (Meredith, 2006; Dowden, 2010) and fail to capture its transforming character. But even less attention is given to those who speak from the heart of the African people (Djorbua et al., 2021). Yet, over the

last century, the continent has experienced significant transformation since the notorious Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, dubbed the "Scramble for Africa" (Pakenham, 1991). However, the long-term perspective of transformation achieved through institutional change is critical to the continent's future survival and success.

E-mail: allanbukusi@gmail.com.

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Nonetheless, the 20th century saw transformational leaders launch 53 modern states (Davidson, 2007; Mandela, 2002). While transformation to nationhood has been largely achieved, institutional change and supportive infrastructure are needed to anchor desired transformation (Taylor, 2014). Much work in institutions needs to be done to establish the continent's emerging market status (Andreasson, 2011). Nonetheless, there remains a need for capable leaders to drive and establish transformative change within business institutions across the continent in the 21st century (Awuah, 2007; Eke et al., 2020; Maathai, 2008). Transformative operations invest institutions with competencies to drive change and proactively respond to disruptive environmental turbulence. However, at the heart of these operations lies an organization-wide transforming culture (Figure 1). For institutions to sustain change beyond the term of transformative apex leaders, they need to embrace the core values of a transforming culture (Figure 2). While transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978), characterized by “idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration” (Bass and Avolio, 1993), informed the development of apex leaders in the 20th century, transformative leaders use four dominant styles to drive change, namely; renewing institutions, sacrificial service, advocacy, and empowering others (Bukusi, 2020b). Nonetheless, while transformative operations harness human capital; innovation, creativity, integrity, and resilience to navigate turbulent conditions over the short term, the question is how institutional change can be sustained over the long term.

Problem statement

Institutions must maintain a strategic state of readiness at all times in anticipation of the next change in their operating ecosystem that may spell doom for their existence (Price and Chahal, 2006). Apart from the traditional approaches of carefully evaluating and remaining alert to business risks in the ecosystem, organizational leaders need to develop and maintain institutional cultures that ensure the business remains open, ready, and responsive to the need for change as a prerequisite for its survival (Schoemaker and Day, 2021). This suggests that maintaining a culture of readiness supported by a set of core values is perhaps a better guarantee of long-term institutional success than investment in the capacity of a single apex leader to drive change over the short term. Despite the complexity of the continental business environment, the reduction in the terms of service of business leaders poses an institutional continuity and operational challenge (Mdluli and Makhube, 2017). The crisis in apex leader transition often plays out negatively in political regime changes that disrupt national development plans, policy, and

development focus (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020). At the same time, the dearth of transformative leaders graduating from education pipelines to run institutions poses a threat to the continuity and sustainability of institutions across the continent (Odell et al., 2019). This study aims to resolve the problem of a) how to sustain institutional change beyond the term of apex, political, and transformative leaders, and b) how to infuse an institution with a transforming culture to sustain change in turbulent operating environments.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper draws on a qualitative thematic review of academic, authoritative references, and empirical literature addressing the emergent theme of transformative leadership as a suitable approach for leaders to address and overcome the challenges of the turbulent 21st-century environment (Hanine and Dinar, 2022). It focuses on transformative operations as a working model to distill the study findings using an interpretivist philosophy and logical ontology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformative operations are anchored in transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978) and Kurt Lewin's theory of change and organizational renewal (Burnes, 2004). However, adaptive leadership theories are reflected in the need for transformative leaders to respond to environmental change through mobilizing creativity and adaptive organizational work to successfully address situational challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Global transformative leadership thinking has emerged as a suitable approach to address the complexity of socio-economic, technological, and volatile environmental conditions around the world since the turn of the century (Caldwell et al., 2012; Montuori, 2010; Montuori and Donnelly, 2017). Transformative leadership has also been defined in advocacy and social advancement literature as “the process of consciously accelerating the evolution of global society” (Jacobs et al., 2020). However, a study evaluating the performance of 37 transformative CEOs illustrates that apex leaders can help institutions post a superior return on investment (ROI) in volatile, depressed, and unstable conditions (Bukusi, 2020a). Nonetheless, transformative change is defined by the Cleveland Consulting Group as “a philosophical, practical, and strategic process to effect revolutionary change within an organization, i.e., cultural transformation”. This author goes on to demystify it as a systems approach to broad-based change, catalyzing shifts in mental constructs inhibiting solutions to complex problems, discovering and integrating personal and organizational development at all levels, completely shifting the equilibrium of the organization to create a new culture (Cleveland Consulting Group, 2024). This

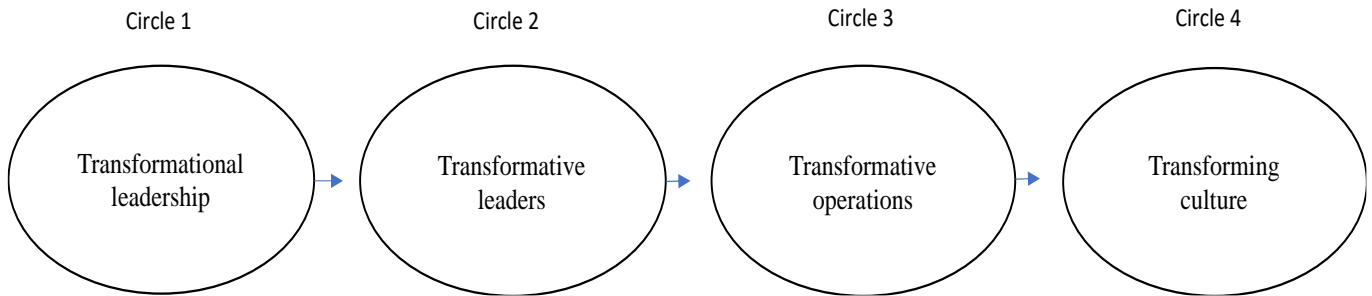


Figure 1. Sustaining institutional change.

Personal integrity & group ethics	Inclusion & participation	Engaging the environment	Embracing change, challenge & complexity
	Quadrant 1 Harnessing human capital	Quadrant 2 Remaining environmentally relevant	
Creative inquiry & innovation	Quadrant 3 Sustained technical proficiency	Quadrant 4 Advancing ethical aspirational tomorrows	Transformation: pursuing aspirational goals
	Excellence, mastery & high ideals	Courageous visioning: Transcendent leadership	

Figure 2. The heart of transformative operations.

suggests that securing sustainable institutional change involves the engagement of a transforming culture at the core of a business.

Nonetheless, empirical studies suggest that transformative organizations adapt to evolving environmental conditions and social change (Shields and Hesbol, 2020). When situations demand change, transformative leaders mobilize collaborative vision and ambition to resolve organizational challenges (Grin et al.,

2018). Employees subject to transformative leadership have been known to feel secure and energized to participate in institutional change initiatives (Sondaité and Keidonaité, 2020). However, transformative leadership is also associated with power and politics in society. It is associated with the positive elements of leadership vision and institutional behavior change (Jahan, 2000). Nonetheless, digital companies call on transformative leaders to inspire the core values of embracing digital

transformation and continuous development to secure value creation (Schiuma et al., 2022). At least two broad schools of thought exist with respect to transformative leadership. One school emphasizes the individual leader's responsibility as the driver of change, characterized by elements that include vision, communication and alignment, persistence, consistency and focus, empowerment and organizational learning, ethical stewardship and service (Bennis, 2004; Caldwell et al., 2014). The other school embraces a wider, participative, and collective responsibility for institutional success amongst organization members. In the cultural context, ubuntu has served as an inclusive transformative philosophy that emphasizes modeling the way, communal enterprise, embracing change and transformation, interdependency, collectivism, and continuous integrated development, creation of synergies, teamwork, and harnessing community competitive advantage (Ncube, 2010; Khomba and Kangaude-Ulaya, 2013). While there may be argument on which approach (school) works better, transformative operations offer a wide scope of initiatives covering both schools of thought, namely: Inclusion and participation; Creative inquiry and innovation; Engaging the environment; Personal integrity and group ethics; Transformation: pursuing aspirational goals; Excellence, mastery, and high ideals; Courageous visioning; Transcendent leadership; and Embracing change, challenge, and complexity (Bukusi, 2021). These human-powered operations suggest that social intelligence alongside physical infrastructure and technology are critical to sustaining institutional change. In this paper, we appraise the eight operations to distill the core values at the heart of a transforming culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of institutional leadership on the continent over the last one hundred years. The transformational leadership paradigm (circle 1) drove visionary leaders in the 20th century to found nations and national institutions as agencies of transformative change in relatively stable environments. However, the dynamic operating environment of the 21st century calls for transformative leaders (circle 2) to help institutions successfully navigate global VUCA conditions and skillfully accomplish corporate goals and programmatic assignments. Nonetheless, institutions need to develop transformative operations (circle 3) to establish institutional change. The next challenge is to create institutions with integral transforming cultures to drive change independent of apex leaders (circle 4). Figure 1 also helps one appreciate that while a small number of transformational leaders may create an institution, there is a need for a larger number of transformative leaders to drive institutional change, and an organization-wide culture (of leaders) to sustain that change. This one-to-

many mapping, creating transformative leaders at every level, is critical to anchoring institutional change. Even though the apex leader may have done a good job, the institution will be left in a crisis unless it has developed a culture that can sustain institutional change when the apex leader leaves.

Figure 2 arranges the eight operations in a relational structure that associates those that draw from similar organizational energy and human reserves into quadrants. Quadrant 1 groups' personality, integrity, and group ethics alongside inclusion and participation, drawing on the internal human capital reserves available in the institution. Quadrant 2 associates engaging the environment with embracing change, challenge, and complexity which can emerge from within or from without. The emerging core value ensures the institution remains environmentally relevant while keeping pace with engaging dynamic change. Quadrant 3 merges the elements of creative inquiry and innovation with excellence mastery and high ideals enabling an institution to sustain the technical and mental proficiency to embrace and take advantage of opportunities change provides. This value constantly challenges the institution not to settle into a comfort zone but to investigate and push the boundaries of achievement as a way of life; constantly honing its survival competence through cutting-edge innovations. Finally, Quadrant 4 maps courageous visioning and transcendent leadership onto transformational aspirational goals to power the institution's future development and growth. The heart of an institution is about its people, its culture, and internal organization. While leaders are charged with governance and administration, there is a need to keep in touch with the heart and ensure that the institution remains inspired, energized, hopeful, and engaged in the pursuit of its goals.

Quadrant 1: Harnessing human capital

This quadrant focuses on harnessing the human capital available in the institution. This goes beyond merely collecting personnel statistics in databases; it involves the harvesting and engagement of latent skills and unquantified or unappreciated capital with the capacity to drive change. Institutions need to conduct careful introspection to identify, harness, and make available this energy to sustain transformative change.

Quadrant 2: Remaining environmentally relevant

Quadrant two ensures that the organization maintains an external sensitivity or extrospection to what is happening around it. Keeping an eye on the environment helps institutions remain relevant and responsive to changing conditions in, and affecting, its operating ecosystem.

However, this core value also ensures that the institution maintains a positive proactive outlook in embracing external challenges as a way of life and opportune available path to its future.

Quadrant 3: Sustained technical proficiency

Sustained technical proficiency maintains the capacity to operate at optimum levels at all times and not just when sudden negative turbulence hit the business. Continuous capacity building, internal standards of excellence and maintaining external quality are critical to operational efficacy, competitiveness and cutting-edge performance. This core value ensures that the institution stands out in its environment and keeps it constantly learning.

Quadrant 4: Advancing an ethical aspirational view of tomorrow

This quadrant keeps a business alert to its vision and pursuit of its mission, always looking to and for a better tomorrow, and contributing to the creation of that tomorrow rather than dwelling on past successes or failures. This value ensures that the institution does not become ingrown but rather maintains a trailblazing, pioneering outlook to its existence as necessary for a better transcendent future for everyone in the ecosystem.

Each quadrant, rather than representing a specific value, relates to core values that fit in that quadrant. For example, values that fall into quadrant 1 include teamwork, training, and diversity, among others. The left hemisphere (quadrants 1 and 3) focuses on internal institution competencies, while the right hemisphere (quadrants 2 and 4) focuses on institutional engagement with the external environment. Similarly, the upper hemisphere emphasizes a relationship outlining how efficiently the (internal) capacity of the institution services its (external) market, while the lower hemisphere equates the institution's technical capacity to service its long-term aspirations in its market (environment). If the tensions between these quadrants get out of balance, it may indicate that the business is unable to keep pace with change in its environment. Nonetheless, while these core values are not the specific values that institutions must have, it may be important that their core ethos be incorporated into whatever values the institution adopts to infuse the energy of transformative change into institutional performance.

Conclusion

Even though institutional change is inspired by a transformative leader, it can only be sustained by the installation of a transforming culture. A key benefit of

adopting the core values of harnessing human capital, remaining environmentally relevant, sustaining technical proficiency, and advancing an ethical aspirational tomorrow is their power to drive transformative change well beyond the term of apex, political, or transformative leaders when they leave office and sustain institutional change over the long term. The heart of transformative operations injects a culture of dynamism that enables organization leaders and business managers to harness and sustain vibrant, ethical long-term institutional transformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With reference to the aims of this study to resolve the problem of: a) how to sustain institutional change beyond the term of apex, political, and transformative leaders; and b) how to infuse an institution with a transforming culture to sustain change in turbulent operating environments, the author recommend the following:

1. Regarding (a), institutional leaders at all levels should adopt the practice of transformative operations as a modus operandi to maintain and sustain the momentum and benefits of institutional change over the medium term.
2. Regarding (b), institutions should examine their core values with a view to aligning them with the core values of a transforming organizational culture to sustain institutional change over the long term.
3. In addition, institutions should deploy transformative leaders at every level of the organization, employ transformative operations to harness latent human resource reserves, and embed the core values of a transforming culture to entrench sustainable institutional change for as long as the organization exists.
4. Nonetheless, the paper invites a debate among scholars and practitioners of organization and business development, political science, human resource management, and sociology to review the foundations, framework, and focus of sustainable institutional development on the continent into the future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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