

Leadership as Human Art

A Humanist Approach to Transformational Practice

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ABSTRACT

This essay outlines a humanist philosophy of leadership in organizational transformation. Drawing primarily on Abraham Zaleznik's Hedgehogs and Foxes and selected organizational literature, it argues that leadership in periods of significant change should be understood not merely as the direction of execution, the alignment of stakeholders, or the management of communication, but as a distinctly human practice of judgment, imagination, and command. In this view, leadership is not an expressive layer added to change. It shapes the conditions under which change becomes intelligible, believable, and durable. Transformation depends not only on plans and structures, but on leaders who can give form to uncertainty, exercise authority with gravity, and hold open the space in which others commit to a future not yet fully realized.

Introduction

Transformation requires movement toward a reality that does not yet fully exist. Leaders must act before outcomes are certain, shape structures that remain provisional, and ask others to commit before the future can be verified in experience. Under such conditions, leadership cannot be reduced to method alone.

This essay argues that leadership in transformation should be understood as a human art. The phrase does not refer to style, sentiment, or self-expression. It refers to a more demanding practice: leadership grounded in character, imagination, interpretive judgment, and command.³

The argument draws primarily on Abraham Zaleznik's account of leadership, especially his treatment of the humanist dimensions of command.³ His work suggests that leadership in serious settings has more in common with interpretation and imagination than with administration alone. That claim matters in transformation, where leaders must do more than coordinate activity. They must give weight, coherence, and meaning to conditions that resist full control.^{2 3}

This essay is a practitioner position paper. Its purpose is to clarify the philosophical basis of a humanist approach to transformational leadership and to explain why, in complex change, leadership remains irreducibly a matter of human judgment.

Leadership Begins with Character

A humanist philosophy of leadership begins with character. Zaleznik understood that in serious organizational settings leadership cannot be reduced to competence, role, or technique. It depends on the quality of the person exercising authority: self-knowledge, emotional steadiness, moral seriousness, and the capacity to act under consequence.³

Major change creates uncertainty not only about outcomes, but about meaning. Roles shift. Established structures lose stability. Decisions carry visible consequence. Under such conditions, organizations do not respond to plans alone. They also register the quality of the leadership behind them: whether authority feels weighty, whether judgment appears proportionate, and whether leadership can hold its ground under pressure.^{2 3}

Character here should not be confused with private virtue alone. It is an operating condition of leadership. A leader who cannot absorb anxiety will transmit it. A leader who clings too tightly to certainty will suppress candor and narrow interpretation. A leader who lacks seriousness may continue to direct activity while weakening trust.

The question is not whether leadership appears decisive. It is whether authority proves credible in use.

That is why character belongs near the center of transformational leadership. Programs, structures, and communication may support

leadership, but they cannot replace the burden carried by the person exercising command.³ In conditions of change, responsibility does not dissolve into process.

Leadership as Imagination

Leadership in transformation is an act of imagination – not in the decorative sense, but in the serious sense of giving form to what does not yet fully exist. Its task is to make an unrealized future thinkable and actionable before it can be confirmed in experience.^{1 3}

Transformation does not confront leaders with fixed realities that can simply be managed more efficiently. It confronts them with ambiguity, incompleteness, contradiction, and unrealized possibility. A leader must do more than respond to what is already clear. He or she must grasp what is emerging and articulate direction in a way that opens the possibility of coordinated action.

This is one point at which leadership begins to resemble the work of the humanist. The humanist works with materials that resist reduction: texts, contexts, conflicting meanings. So does the leader in transformation. The task is not to invent reality, but to discern significance, establish emphasis, and give provisional form to what is still taking shape.³

A future state may be strategically defined and still remain unreal to the people expected to move toward it. An imaginative leader does more than describe objectives. He or she gives the future enough form to become organizationally plausible.^{2 3}

Imagination in leadership is not confined to narrative or symbolism. It also has a formative function. Leaders help shape the structures, rhythms, and decision environments through which a future becomes easier to grasp and more possible to act on.¹

Leadership as Interpretation

Leadership in transformation is interpretive because organizations do not simply receive change as instructed. They read it through the meanings they attach to decisions, structures, behavior, and events. Formal authority alone does not settle those meanings.²

This is often underestimated. A governance structure may be well designed and still be read as politically weak. A decision may be formally clear and still feel provisional because surrounding behavior suggests hesitation. A communication effort may be coherent in content and still fail because the organization reads it against a background of inconsistent action. In each case, the formal act is not enough. What matters is how it is understood in experience.²

A humanist approach to leadership takes this seriously. It recognizes that authority is exercised through more than formal direction. Conduct, timing, language, and the willingness to bear consequence all shape how an organization reads the change effort. Leaders influence that interpretive field whether they intend to or not.^{2 3}

This does not mean that meaning can be engineered. It cannot. Nor does it mean that leadership should become vague or over-accommodating. Interpretation matters more, not less, under strain, because ambiguity expands and confidence becomes more fragile.² The task is not to eliminate interpretation, but to work within it: to create enough coherence for coordinated action without pretending uncertainty has disappeared.

This is why transformation depends on more than technical management. Method can organize action. It cannot determine meaning. Leadership remains necessary because authority must be exercised not only administratively, but interpretively.²

Leadership as Command

The humanist understanding of leadership does not end with character, imagination, or interpretation. It also requires command. This matters because transformation eventually confronts leaders with the need to decide, define direction, and bear the consequences of what they set in motion.³

Command should not be confused with domination. It is the disciplined exercise of authority under conditions where tensions cannot be fully resolved in advance. Leaders must decide without complete certainty, hold direction under pressure, and act knowing that every serious choice excludes alternatives and carries consequence.³

This burden cannot be removed by process design or stakeholder alignment. Such mechanisms may improve the conditions of leadership, but they do not remove the fact that someone must finally exercise judgment.^{1 3} In this respect, transformation tests the seriousness of leadership more sharply than routine administration does.

Command also gives practical force to the earlier themes. Character without command becomes passive seriousness. Imagination without command becomes vision without consequence. Interpretation without command becomes commentary. Leadership as human art requires all three to culminate in action.

That is why command remains central to any serious philosophy of leadership. Not because transformation should become authoritarian, but because leadership that cannot decide, hold form, and bear consequence will not sustain trust for long.³

Leadership and the Human Conditions of Change

If leadership in transformation involves character, imagination, interpretation, and command, its practical significance becomes clear. Leadership helps shape the human conditions under which change is accepted, tested, and sustained.^{2 3}

Organizations do not encounter transformation only through strategy documents or program plans. They encounter it through the lived quality of authority: whether governance matters in practice, whether decisions hold, whether roles are clear enough to support action, and whether the overall direction is coherent enough to justify effort. These are not only structural questions. They are questions of human confidence.²

For that reason, leadership is not an accessory to transformation. It is one of the conditions that makes transformation workable. A technically

well-designed change effort may still weaken if authority appears inconsistent, evasive, or hollow. Conversely, even imperfect structures may gain traction when leadership gives them enough weight and coherence to become believable in practice.^{2 3}

From this perspective, governance arrangements, leadership forums, decision rhythms, escalation paths, and symbolic interventions are more than administrative mechanisms. They are part of the medium through which authority becomes visible and recognizable in practice.^{1 2}

In practical terms, this means such structures should be understood in human as well as functional terms. Their purpose is not simply to coordinate action, but to help make the direction, seriousness, and believability of the transformation easier to recognize.

Division Group's Practice

This philosophy informs Division Group's approach to transformation. The firm's role is not simply to support execution or introduce managerial frameworks. It is to help create conditions in which organizational change becomes coherent in structure and credible in practice.

That may involve shaping governance arrangements, leadership forums, decision rhythms, escalation discipline, role clarifications, and other parts of the transformation environment. These are not treated as neutral mechanics. They are understood as part of the way leadership becomes visible, legible, and effective in practice.

Conclusion

This view does not deny the value of governance, planning, or structure. It places them within a fuller account of what transformation requires. Change depends not only on what is designed, communicated, or formally directed, but on the quality of judgment exercising authority through it.^{1 3}

That is what is meant here by leadership as human art: not leadership as style or sentiment, but leadership as the disciplined human work of giving form, meaning, and consequence to change under conditions that resist full control.^{2 3}

Transformation becomes more credible when authority is not merely asserted, but embodied with seriousness, interpreted through consistent action, and carried through to decision. Where that is absent, structures weaken. Where it is present, even imperfect arrangements can begin to hold.^{2 3}

Leadership as human art is therefore not an ornament of transformation. It is one of the conditions that allows serious change to take hold under uncertainty.

KEYWORDS

humanist leadership · leadership in transformation · character · imagination · interpretation · command · organizational transformation · Division Group

REFERENCES

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