

Successful leadership in a transformation: The Toolkit

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DWF's Rachita Maker and Bhavesh Dattani contributed at two transformation focused panels with Criticaleye, a DWF Partner.

Business leaders can use this toolkit as a checklist to ensure they have considered all of the fundamental learnings at each stage of their transformation journey, it includes four parts:

Part One: Strategy

1. During an economic recession, the knee jerk impulse can be to focus on core activities. But determining what is 'core' could have important ramifications for your team, your function, and your organisation.
2. When thinking about transformation see it as a series of sprints or a series of short marathons. Most transformations are never just one thing. Make sure this mindset is part of your planning and communication to your team.
3. Be aware that external events may change your transformation strategy. You may not be able to prepare for these – Covid-19 for example! But having a crisis management plan and a leadership team who understands agility and teamwork will help.
4. There will be an imperative to cut costs. This is the time to get comfortable with understanding financial concepts and being able to apply these to your function. It will also help you to use these ideas when speaking to your leaders and other executives.
5. Spending time setting metrics with Objective Key Results and Key Performance Indicators around the department's activities over the next 12 months will help bring clarity and focus. It will also identify where budget, especially if limited, may best be deployed.
6. You will have been taught to be reactive. This impulse to 'busyness' may kick in when times are uncertain. But as a leader it is more vital than ever that you schedule regular time to be strategic. Many of the best CEOs do this and it's also important to role-model this to your team. Not least for the fact that a time of uncertainty may cause them to try to increase seeming busy to seem necessary. However, multiple studies have shown that this mindset generally leads to less productivity and greater employee burnout.
7. Take time to revisit strategy at regular intervals and focus on one or two things that are really going to move the needle. Don't try to do everything at once.

Part Two: People

Your people are your main asset but will also be your biggest challenge during times of transformation. Do you have the right people on the bus with you?

1. Considering your talent strategy is generally the best starting point in a transformation exercise. When thinking about this use the metric of building the team you need in a crisis.
2. Focus on high performers and keeping them motivated. It's tempting to cut costs across the function, but people focused costs such as talent development and DEI efforts are not generally the right place to start as keeping your best talent motivated will be central to your success. Cutting DEI initiatives, particularly those that are focused, and data driven will send a message that your commitment is merely performative.
3. If you do have to cut budgets on talent development, are there initiatives and tactics you can bring in that will help create results and show commitment without external spend? For example, creating internal project teams to evaluate team culture or promotion pathways. Leadership of these projects can be a development opportunity but ensure there is resource to action any recommendations.
4. Looking to suppliers such as law firms to provide creative partnering and collaboration on talent development and DEI can also be a way to keep momentum going whilst leaning on external resources if your own are more limited.
5. Transformations, even if they are positive, will be draining on your people. You need to make sure you build in time to have fun and bond as a team. This can often be more effective if you get away from your usual work location so it's a literal break from the normal.
6. Uncertainty and fear will be rife during transformation and as a leader you need empathy for your people.
7. Take the time to evaluate your existing team. There is still a place for team members who are 'lifers' (those who do not want to progress and are happy being an individual contributor) and they may be a valuable resource for institutional knowledge.
8. However, evaluate which lifers are harmless versus toxic. Those who are having a toxic effect on your leadership and transformation strategy probably need to go.

Part three: Executive communication with your team

1. Executive communication will be one of the biggest skills you need to draw on at this time. Ensure you give this the time and prioritisation it deserves.
2. You may not have all the answers, but it is better to communicate that and show you are thinking about people and keeping dialogue open than be silent.
3. When you need to communicate, think about how you are doing this and make humanity and connection with your audience, even if they are virtual your touchpoints should still be creating a sense of connectivity.
4. Refer to notes if you need to but do not read from a script to sound authentic, not like a newsreader.
5. Explain the why and refer to the big picture so the rationale for changes and transformation is clear.
6. Do not overpromise or focus on a silver lining, particularly if you do not have all the information yet. Giving a positive spin may be easier for you delivering the message but ultimately it may suggest a lack of empathy and understanding of your team's feelings.

7. Don't focus on YOUR challenges as a leader! That will come across as tone deaf.
8. Be concise and focused in messaging. Your team will need time to process and reflect. But do emphasise your commitment to clarity and communication. Make sure you live up to this if team members need to talk or need more information.
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Part four: Keep curious

1. In the onslaught of never-ending change, it's easy for leaders to freeze and focus on survival. Don't freeze. Seize the chance to turn today's ambiguity into tomorrow's opportunity.
2. It can be tempting to not try new things or sideline innovation during periods of uncertainty, but a downturn or time of uncertainty may be exactly the time that new ideas and ways of working are called for. Showing that you are actively engaging in thinking about innovation will show you are thinking about the future and help morale within the team.
3. Lawyers are often overcautious about risk resulting in their team being sidelined in key decision making and reversing gains they have made as business partners. It's important that you as a leader emphasise the importance of maintaining your roles as business partners and being aligned to the company's strategy.
4. Failure becomes more fraught for team members during times of transformation. But being too fearful of getting things wrong can also lead to catastrophic consequences. It's important to get your team over the fear of getting things wrong via communication and role modelling by you as a leader.
5. During a time of transformation, it's useful to get your team to focus on the additional skills they have outside of the 'day job'. This will help your team feel more centred in the business and not a silo'd function.
6. Constraints can be reframed as opportunities for problem solving and thinking differently. This can also help keep your top talent engaged in projects that are of strategic importance to your team and the organisation.

You as a leader

- Put your own oxygen mask on first!
- Ensure you are role modelling behaviours that will help you and your team have the resilience for your transformation journey.

Remember the SHED method:

- Sleep
- Hydration
- Exercise
- Diet

More about DWF Brave New Law

This toolkit was originally part of our Brave New Law series. As part of our programme we convened 20 General Counsel level in-house leaders in London to discuss practical ideas and learnings from transformation journeys that they and their legal teams have undergone – this toolkit is a collection of the insights from this session.

Brave New Law is DWF's interactive programme for in-house lawyers exploring practical ideas to help with delivering the future of law. We have a range of on-demand resources, webinars and roundtables for in-house legal people at every stage of their career.

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Rachita Maker
Global Head of Legal Operations

Rachita.Maker@dwf.law
M: +44 (0)7511 210916



Bhavesh Dattani
Partner

Bhavesh.Dattani@dwf.law
M: +971588498244