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Images of Leadership Development

(through Transformations)

Elaine Herdman-Barker

Authors:
Elaine Herdman-Barker is Co-founder & Partner for Mutual Growth at GLA and co-creator (with Professor Bill Torbert) of the GLP. She has worked in partnership with Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) and Bill to develop the Transformations™ deck.

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Introduction

I have been in conversation with the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) for years on the value of using images in leadership development. Everything we are working on now, with the Transformations[tm] card deck, is informed by our discussions on the power of art and symbols to evoke new ideas and stimulate unexpected conversations about leadership. Our overriding aim has been to pave the way for individuals and teams to have out-of-the-ordinary insights into their leadership; their decision-making; personal journeys; triumphs and growth edges. And, for this insight to be borne of a simple process; choosing between images; matching personal experience to artistic representations and then having the room to tell a meaningful story. We've always intended that the process be enlivening, practical, humane; engaging people in leadership in a way that comes naturally rather than squeezing individuals into arduous, impersonal, tasks.

On one level, pictures simplify. We all know how to select an image that makes sense to us; that resonates with personal experience; that we find appealing or repugnant because we each hold images in our hearts and minds about the nature of our world. Making and sharing stories through art is part of our common humanity. The Transformations[tm] deck brings this inner world of pictures forward, connecting with our shared understandings, surfacing our personal stories and, importantly, revealing the worlds of others. As one delegate said,

"this process is simple. I can tell my story and hear the stories of others. Yet, the insights run deep. We are understanding more about our past and now see the future, together, differently. I wish we'd been able to use the Transformations[tm] card deck years ago."

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Over the past 20 years I've used images and symbols in personal and group development programs; teasing out with participants, across our world, parts of our human journey; highlighting evidence of excellence, growth, hope, vulnerability, decline and beauty. Groups from all industry and market sectors, have picked cards, drawn symbols, laughed and fallen silent as they hear their colleagues' stories.

Its fair to say, when first introduced to the concept of visuals, many leaders are initially hesitant; isn't art for children? Where are the statistical trends, the case studies and bullet-point-overviews? This is a different approach. Not what we normally get... One of my own colleagues jokingly noted; I can't believe you are hired to share pictures! Yet people do not find working with the Transformations[tm] card deck child-play. Participants, be they at Board or Supervisory level, in the Financial sector, Manufacturing, Universities or an NGO, report the experience as being helpful, respectful; with individuals responding at their natural pace, sharing what they choose. Such discussions are adult-to-adult, mutual, engaging; often a surprising lift in the process of learning how to lead ever more effectively. Freedom to choose is central. It sits at the heart of the Transformations[tm] deck and at the very centre of the work with Vertical Development1; people choose what they say, what they inquire into and work on.

Development discussions do not need to be hard. We sometimes make them so with our complex terms and theories; our use of too many words to explain growth and rest; our reliance on a complex array of tools; a battery of tests. The art, I suggest, lies in offering an inviting, humane and timely approach to developmental inquiry, supporting adults where they are, as they learn more about themselves and their world. In short, we practice "action inquiry," the kind of behavior that supports developmental transformation (See Torbert, Action Inquiry, 2004).

At **GLOBAL LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATES** we combine visuals of leadership with other prompts-to-inquiry. The Transformations[tm] card deck, for example, is one part of a suite that includes the Global Leadership Profile assessment and the GLP Self-Estimate. They are designed to work together, generating feedback and inquiry, leading the participant to make fresh their leadership style. The creative skill, for practitioners, lies in blending the approaches in ways that support participants to release their imagination and then integrate their new and precious insights.

1 For a discussion on the, often under-represented, fluidity of "Vertical" change both within individuals and groups see Herdman-Barker & Wallis; Imperfect Beauty

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Using Images in (GLP) Vertical Development Programs

Vertical Leadership Development programs, like the GLP, invite us to test our edges. What assumptions partially blind us? What types of decision-making cost us, or earn us others' commitment? What combination of persuasiveness and inquiry generates trust and practical outcomes? The exercises and real-time experiments we enter into on behalf of transforming our leadership approach can be exciting and fulfilling as we learn more about others, our world and ourselves.

Vertical Development can also be challenging. Contesting what we 'know' to be true, looking for new perspectives and novel ways of leading can feel uncomfortable. We often need an imaginative nudge to get us involved in our growth; a nudge that is welcome yet surprising. Then, inspired and in good spirits, in the company of others, we can press forward with our development.

Images are Gold

The Transformations[tm] card deck, with its myriad images, is a breakthrough in vertical development. Life affirming, fun and honoring of each individual, as he or she chooses which ones best illustrate a past leadership practice or a future aspiration. Carefully thought out images capture key moments of development, based on leading edge research in adult development. The cards invite discussion about where each person is in their leadership journey.

Through a range of images, people are able to tell their own story, in their own words. Rather than a leadership theory being imposed on them, the cards really help people to have a personal experience of vertical development, creating an opening that leads people to reflect afresh on their leadership and their situation.

Gold for others

The Transformations[tm] card deck brings development alive not just for the story-teller but for those listening. When individuals tell their development story, revealing personal truths about their life journey and their style of leadership, they affect others. Those listening to their story feel what people are saying, they see the images and learn why those cards are selected. They come to better understand what development might look like in colleagues and where growth edges may lie.

The images are non-threatening; they invite reflection, discussion, compassion, insight and laughter.

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Example: A Not-for-profit Leadership Workshop

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Twelve leaders from not-for-profit organizations were introduced to the idea of vertical development through the Transformations[tm] card deck. We laid out the full deck of cards around the room, randomly placing cards from the Opportunist leadership orientation, through Diplomat, Expert, Achiever, Redefining and Transforming to Alchemical. There was no pattern to the arrangement. Cards from across the action- logics were placed haphazardly. Walking along the path you could find an Alchemist card next to an Achiever, an Opportunist next to an Expert or a Diplomat alongside a Transforming card (although the participants at that point new nothing about these categories anyway).

The participants took some time to meander along the line of cards, looking at the images, seeing what caught their eye. Without making any selections they returned to the group.

Then together we discussed adult development; exploring how we each approach life events from our current, centre-of-gravity developmental action-logic; interpreting problems, relationships, roles, careers and leadership from that perspective. We also spoke about fallback (the posture we rely on when leading reactively; e.g. under stress) and about emergent moments (when we act from a perspective that is only just beginning to open up for us; our growth edge).

Following this introduction, the participants were invited to select 3 or 4 cards by walking back along the snaking path of randomly placed images, selecting cards that captured a) their typical leadership style, b) their fallback tendencies, and c) their emergent possibilities.

One participant, Isabel, selected Change Agent as her typical leadership style, explaining she saw herself as a transformer of organizations; a catalyst for change; deft at making connections and gaining sponsorship across the system. Her fallback card was Good Soldier because, when in the boardroom, dealing with figures of power, she fell back into the Diplomat approach, conforming, wanting to fit in, to be viewed as the good player on the team. This reaction would override her ability to be an agent of change in those moments. The card she chose for her emergent position was Serve Seven Generations, representing an Alchemical perspective, where, in moments of inspiration, she sensed the possibility that the work she was creating with others would produce ripples beyond her lifetime.

good soldier

serve seven generations

Telling her story, using the cards to explore different aspects of her leadership, was for Isabel truly liberating. For the group, listening to her story, a realization dawned that, however experienced and senior the leader, there are growth possibilities. They began to see the complexity of Isabel's leadership approach; in some moments she worked at her edge; in others she withdrew and was vulnerable. They recognized this as part of her individuality and it helped them to better understand the complexity of, and degree of choice they could exercise day-to-day on their own development path.

Images helped to bring Isabel's story alive, for others to connect with her journey and better understand her leadership. The story told was a human story, like no other.

Some members from this workshop decided to follow up this Transformations[tm] card deck exercise by completing a GLP assessment. They chose to deepen their personal inquiries by getting feedback from the sentence completion form; combining their 1st & 2nd person inquiries (self–reflections and discussions with colleagues) with the 3rd person feedback (from the GLP). Just as they had projected their stories of self and organization onto the Transformations[tm] cards, now they projected their interpretation of matters, through writing, onto the sentence completion form.

Isabel, was part of this group. The experience, in the round, she reflected was:

illuminating, confidence boosting and challenging....I now need time to reflect, find my truth and choose my way forward.

Closing

The success of active-inquiry into Vertical Development depends on it being in harmony with what suits the person and the context. Having options for how this developmental inquiry is introduced is vital. As a starting point, the Transformations[tm] card deck images afford many the opportunity to ease into developmental inquiry and then, select, if they wish, to deepen their personal and group explorations with GLP assessments and coaching support.

I close with some words from Isabel:

the images helped us all to talk together, come together as closer colleagues, developing trust and understanding. During my GLP discussion I let go of some falsehoods....in our team debrief we saw some concerning patterns in our leadership culture ...and some hope.....there's a way to go yet...

Elaine Herdman-Barker is Co-founder & Partner for Mutual Growth...and the search for the common good at **GLOBAL LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATES.**

Elaine co-created the Global Leadership Profile and MyWorldview and is a leading authority on leadership action-logic assessment and change. She consults across multiple sectors, with a worldwide coaching practice, specializing in the development of high potential leaders and senior executives.

Elaine is a leading world authority on assessing and profiling action logics/leadership paradigms and supports consultants and organizations to apply this practice to transform leadership effectiveness.

Elaine also hosts the ever popular Leading for Good podcast series, gathering people who are transforming leadership and aiming to stretch the concept of "a leader's footprint". Can leaders tip the world towards the good and contribute in ways that both feel good and are profitable? Alongside strategic thinkers from organizations worldwide, she investigates what "Leading for Good" entails.

Elaine may be reached through www.gla.global