LOWER LIGHT LEADERSHIP

Leaders Who Want Transformation Need to Stop Managing Symptoms

Clel Zeigler

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I recently listened to an episode of The Curiosity Shop with Brené Brown and Adam Grant. This particular episode features Simon Sinek, an optimist and world-renowned leadership thinker. The episode is called The Highest Performance Strategy is Caring About People ft. Simon Sinek, and I would recommend it to anyone interested in leadership, current organizational challenges, and even the role AI is beginning to play in the workforce.

There is a lot in the conversation worth sitting with, and I may end up writing more than one article from it. What stood out most to me, though, was the discussion around transformation in organizations. Brené Brown makes a point in the latter half of the episode that transformation is not the same thing as adaptive change or incremental change. That immediately caught my attention because I think there is an important difference between improving something, adapting to something, and transforming something.

Incremental change is improving something that already exists. Adaptive change is adjusting to new realities. Evolutionary change is gradual development over time. Transformation is different. Transformation is a deeper change in form, structure, identity, systems, and ways of working.

In a nutshell, change is more like making course corrections as you move along. Transformation is when you realize the road, the vehicle, the assumptions, the systems, and maybe even the destination have to be reconsidered. That is a much bigger ask.

Brené referenced poet David Whyte’s description of transformation as hitting a wall at full velocity and watching things break apart at impact. That definition landed with me because it makes clear that transformation is radical, painful, and requires the old system to break in order for something new to emerge.

That is not clean. That is not comfortable. That is not a polished strategic initiative with a nice title and a few updated values on the wall. It is not a leadership retreat where everyone agrees to “communicate better” and then returns to the same habits on Monday.

Transformation means something has to break.

And I think that is why many organizations avoid it while still claiming they want it.

In unhealthy cultures, the surface-level problems are usually easy to see. Gossip. Drama. Backbiting. Silos. Scapegoating. Strong personalities creating friction. Employees protecting themselves. Departments blaming other departments. People acting from self-interest and self-preservation instead of shared purpose.

The easy thing for leadership to do is blame it by calling it an “employee problem.”

And sometimes, employees are absolutely part of the problem. There are people who gossip, undermine, manipulate, blame, or create unnecessary drama. There are people who may be excellent at the technical part of their job while still damaging the culture around them. There are people who should not remain in an organization if they are unwilling to operate by the standards required for a healthy team.

But leadership needs to be honest here. Toxic culture is rarely just an employee problem. If the same kinds of dysfunction keep showing up, surviving, and spreading, then leaders have to stop only asking, “Who is causing this?” and start asking, “What are we tolerating, protecting, rewarding, avoiding, or failing to clarify that allows this to continue?”

That is where accountability starts.

Leadership establishes culture. Not by slogans. Not by job titles. Not by values printed on a wall. Leaders establish culture by what they consistently model, permit, protect, reward, correct, and remove. If gossip survives, leadership has allowed it to survive. If silos become the norm, leadership has allowed them to become the norm. If toxic high performers are protected because they are useful, leadership has made a statement about what matters most. If different teams are allowed to operate by different behavioral standards, leadership has communicated that unity is optional.

That may sound direct, but I think leaders need to hear it directly. Caring about people does not mean avoiding accountability. In fact, avoiding accountability is often one of the least caring things a leader can do because it leaves everyone else to absorb the cost of dysfunction.

That was one of the reasons I appreciated the tone of the podcast. Brené, Adam, and Simon were not talking about care as some soft, sentimental leadership accessory. They were talking about care as a serious leadership responsibility and a real performance strategy. Caring about people means caring about all people, not just the people we like, favor, depend on, or personally relate to. It means caring about the employee being harmed by the toxic high performer. It means caring about the team that is exhausted from drama. It means caring about the manager trying to enforce standards without support. It means caring about the customer or patient who eventually feels the effects of internal dysfunction.

This is where transformation becomes different from ordinary change. A company can make changes without transforming. It can replace a manager, update a policy, hold a training, clarify a workflow, create a committee, or ask people to be nicer. Those things

may help, but if the deeper system remains untouched, the same culture usually finds a way to reproduce itself.

If leaders are not aligned around shared values, shared standards, shared behaviors, shared purpose, and shared accountability, then culture becomes a collection of personal preferences. One leader tolerates what another leader would correct. One department protects what another department resents. One team plays by one set of rules while another team plays by another. Eventually, people stop trusting the stated standard because they know the real standard is whatever leadership allows in the moment.

Employees have responsibility for their behavior. That needs to be said clearly. But leaders carry responsibility for the environment those behaviors are allowed to live in. If an organization wants real transformation, leaders have to be willing to examine their own mental models, their own incentives, their own patterns of avoidance, and their own role in sustaining the current reality. They have to be willing to let go of old structures that may have worked at one stage of the organization but cannot carry it into the next. They have to be willing to stop protecting what is familiar simply because it is profitable, comfortable, or personally convenient.

And yes, sometimes transformation means people leave. Sometimes people are unwilling to conform to the new standard. Sometimes people have benefited from the old dysfunction and will resist anything that threatens it. Sometimes the most caring decision for the whole organization is to remove someone who continues to harm the culture.

But even then, termination is not the transformation. It is one possible consequence of transformation. The deeper transformation is the leadership alignment, the shared standard, the clarified values, the new behaviors, and the willingness to enforce those standards consistently, even when it is uncomfortable.

I think many organizations want the benefits of transformation without the cost of transformation. They want a better culture without confronting what created the current one. They want accountability, but hesitate when accountability requires consequence. They want trust, but tolerate inconsistency. They want healthier teams, but avoid the leadership ownership required to make those teams possible.

Transformation does not work that way.

Transformation is messy. It is costly. It is uncomfortable. It requires leaders to stop hiding behind symptoms and start owning the system. It requires the courage to look honestly at present reality, hit it directly, and allow what cannot carry the future to break apart.

Only then does something better have a real chance to emerge.