Transformational thinking:
The first step on the journey of change

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Congratulations! You have just been appointed the Director of Continuous Improvement for a $1billion company. The CEO believes that you have the capability to bring great process improvements that will help the company reach their goal of $100m in profit. You have a history of business success - having made significant improvements in each of your prior jobs, helping you to arrive at this point in your career. You are aware that implementing process improvement initiatives in larger companies can be a huge challenge – over 70% of these change efforts fail. And yet, you are familiar with several stories of successful transformational change where the operations manager turned the company around by effectively engaging the workforce. You want to follow in his footsteps, make the CEO proud, achieve the profit target, and ultimately create a better environment for learning. Where do you begin?

This situation is common. A senior leader reaches out to a successful person, charging them with the responsibility for changing and improving the operations of the business. Many enter these jobs confident that they can control the situation to extract the outcomes they want. Ultimately, the change efforts stagnate or fail. Then blame is placed on the employees, the leaders, the economy, the customers, etc. The organizations in which we work are so complex, that we (the authors) do not believe that we can blame any given factor for a failed change effort. This is too simplistic, and suggests that changing only one variable will ultimately fix the problem you are trying to solve. In contrast, we believe that companies can overcome their challenges by building a workforce that engages in Transformational Thinking.

What is Transformational Thinking?

Transformational Thinking recognizes the complexity of human behavior, and uses it as an asset to address the issues that arise in our complicated business environment.

Transformational Thinking engages you and your people in continuous learning cycles in order to improve business results. It is the *missing piece* that is required for organizations to *sustain* and *internalize* changes.

Transformational Thinking enacts change through the social system. It requires breaking through any existing limitations: changing mindsets that currently prevent organizations from achieving extraordinary performance improvements. It pushes you beyond your current assumptions and challenges you to think in terms of continuous improvement.

Transformational Thinking engages your workforce to address the complexity of the system in which they work. Instead of applying quick response, "blanket solutions," Transformational Thinking will encourage you to identify true challenges to the business and constantly work towards satisfying your customer.

Transformational Thinking expects you to model leadership behaviors that demonstrate application of the new mindset to achieve extraordinary people engagement and business results.

Transformational Thinking changes how we conduct business.

How do you begin?

Your role is to be the agent for enabling Transformational Thinking so that you can achieve your delegated goals. You do not need to have the title of Director of Continuous Improvement to do so. A change agent can be anyone in the firm: anyone willing to challenge their assumptions and lead the change by demonstrating the behaviors you want to see. As the agent of change, you will need to start by recognizing your own self-imposed limitations,

understanding the cultural assumptions that are limiting you and your organization, and beginning a process of experimenting and learning through deep reflection. You will need to slow down your mind, take time to think carefully about the complexity of the system, and create small incremental changes for learning. You will need to learn how to give up control, engage others in problem solving, and learn how to change your habits through conscious effort. You must model the thinking and actions that will be copied by those whose thinking you would like to influence, including your CEO.

Be the change you want to see

By now, you probably realize that this will take a personal commitment to step outside your normal comfort zone. It requires you to not only challenge your own assumptions, but also confront the organizational assumptions. You must be ready to take the risk and have the confidence that you are creating something larger than yourself and critical for your company's survival in the new world.

We will provide additional articles each month to help you through this journey. Some topics covered include:

- Learning-based problem solving

- Designing Value Streams to enable continuous improvement

- Developmental Leadership; changing the fundamental relationship between supervisor and employee

- Enabling and managing organic change

- Developing personal habits of transformational leadership

- The framework for thinking about transformational change

As Ghandi said, "you must be the change you want to see in the world." Transformational Thinking starts within each of us. We invite you to join us on our personal and professional journey to change the world.