

FROM BURNING PLATFORM TO BURNING AMBITION

HOW LEADERS SUSTAIN CHANGE

There are thousands of books presenting dozens of lists on the attributes of great leaders, so I decided to focus my research on a slightly different question. If I'm an ordinary human being, how do I actually *become* one of the great leaders I read about in these books? In other words, what is the *pathway* to greatness?

Here's what I've learned; leadership effectiveness is not a matter of intention; it's a matter of impact. Why do I say that? I've never met the leader who aspires to destroy shareholder value, irritate customers and alienate staff. Yet often the unintended consequence of our leadership is to do just that.

The bad news is that in studying leaders who have actually bridged this gap between their noble intentions and their impact, my colleagues and I have found no magic formula to guarantee success. It turns out that leadership transformation is extremely context bound. Every leader's journey is unique.

The good news, however, is that there are common threads in the experiences of those who've realized their leadership vision, and achieved a transformation in their organization. Over time, we've come to understand that the best way to share what we've learned is through metaphor.

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About the Author

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THE SEVEN METAPHORS

Metaphors make complex stuff simple. More importantly, unlike lists, steps and formulas, which typically are rigid and don't allow for interpretation and personalization, the nature of metaphors is that they can be unfolded. They allow us to open our thinking, to inspire creativity, and to invite the audience to discover complementary and related meanings.

Ultimately, we uncovered seven distinct, yet interdependent metaphors to describe how leaders transform (see below image); beginning with Fire, which is the focus of this white paper.



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The Fire metaphor describes the motivational forces that start and sustain a transformation effort. The punch line is that leaders must shift from the proverbial *burning platform* to a *burning ambition*, and get underneath *organizational* reasons for change to make the journey very *personal*.

THE PIPER ALPHA OIL RIG TRAGEDY

The metaphor of the burning platform is perhaps one of the most pervasive in business. It comes from the true story of Andy Mochan, a worker on the Piper Alpha oil rig when it exploded in July 1988, tragically killing 167 of his colleagues.

In the story, Mochan is awoken by the explosion. He runs up on deck to see that the platform is on fire. He is now faced with a choice; does he stay on the platform and burn alive, or does he jump more than 150 feet into freezing water? As the flames engulf the platform, he makes the split-second decision to jump. Somehow, he survives the impact and is rescued by a boat before freezing to death. When asked why he jumped he replies “better probable death than certain death.”

This is an amazing story of survival amid tragedy, but it's not particularly helpful for leadership or business transformation. It implies that fear and extreme urgency are not only necessary, but somehow desirable motivators for change; the implication being that in order to change, we all need to have our ass on fire.

Those who espouse the burning platform in a business context often describe it as a metaphor for *commitment*. Unfortunately, the power and danger of metaphors is that they are autonomous and uncontrollable.

The mental picture most people create when they hear this metaphor involves fear and anxiety – not commitment. Anxiety is the single most contagious human emotion. It encourages many physical and psychological consequences, none of which I have found particularly conducive to meaningful and sustainable change.

FROM PANTS ON FIRE TO EARTH HOUR

Consider the case of Tim, one of our original research subjects. At just thirty-three, without a university degree, Tim had still risen to managing director of an iconic advertising agency—it was like something out of a fairy tale.

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After a few short months in the role, however, Tim's fairy tale began to unravel. His new organization lost several important clients. It needed a big shift in commercial performance, and a revitalization of its creative reputation; all of this against the background of an impending sale to a multinational.

Under enormous pressure and scrutiny, it soon became apparent to Tim that he might have reached the limits of his natural toolset. His charisma, street smarts, and creative flair had expedited his trip up the corporate ladder, but they were no longer compensating for his lack of leadership maturity.

Tim developed a story in his mind that he was a victim of his superiors' "erratic behavior" and limited leadership skills. He felt they were placing unreasonable demands on him and he resented their expectations. These negative sentiments soon developed into full-blown paranoia: Tim became convinced that they were plotting to remove him from his role and from the organization altogether.

Despite the story Tim was telling himself under pressure, in lucid moments he reflected on his own failings. He even wondered whether he might be encouraging the very same issues he was having difficulty handling. In one conversation, Tim told me that he was experiencing "professional schizophrenia," fluctuating between strong self-confidence and no confidence at all, between high motivation and complete disinterest.

The turning point in Tim's journey came when he reconnected with his "inner fire" in the form of a personal statement of purpose and aspiration. Tim felt that, since accepting the leadership role, he had been consumed by burning platforms. For contrast, we labeled this statement his personal burning ambition:

"I believe I have been put on this earth to have a big and authentic life; that is to make a meaningful contribution to many different people in many different ways. I'm here to bring out the best in the people around me through the living and evangelizing of my values; integrity, candor, humility, and open-mindedness. And I want to connect the energy of my company to worthy social causes."

Clarity of purpose motivated Tim to raise his standards both professionally and personally. He embraced yoga, and revitalized spiritual practices that helped him to stay calm and centered. He openly addressed the poor impact he was having on his team, and invited them to help him change. He let go of the victim mindset and made a concerted effort to establish productive relationships with his superiors. In the subsequent months, he successfully led his organization through a tumultuous period in its history. Employee commitment, customer satisfaction, and financial performance all rose.

Following the sale of his company, Tim accepted an even bigger job as the CEO of a rival agency. Empowered by his new insights, Tim translated his personal burning ambition for "a big and authentic life" into an ambition for his new organization. Tim became one of three founding directors on a new initiative called Earth Hour. The goal of this initiative was to raise awareness of climate change by getting the residents of Sydney, Australia, to simultaneously turn off their lights for one hour.

In the end, a staggering 2.5 million Sydneysiders participated in the event. The lights were even turned off in the Sydney Opera House and on the Harbour Bridge! In recognition of this extraordinary result, Tim's advertising agency was awarded the Titanium Award, considered the most prestigious advertising award in the world, at the Cannes Advertising Awards.

In the years since Tim helped found Earth Hour, its momentum as a social change initiative has escalated beyond his wildest dreams. Today, more than 7,000 cities from some 150 countries participate in this symbolic fight against climate change, affecting billions of people worldwide.

Tim later reflected "that sense of a burning platform, that the world around me was on fire, was a very dreadful place to be. One of the things I learnt through that process is that I don't want to go through that process again. I've learned that it's much more exciting and motivating to run towards something than away from something. Maybe it was the crisis that got me going, but what sustained me and moved me forward was when I connected with my burning ambition."

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Tim's story illustrates something of a dance around four quadrants of motivation, which are illustrated in the Fire Matrix shown below. The four quadrants are formed by two axes, the first of which is the burning platform versus burning ambition axis. The second of which is the organizational versus personal axis.



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Quadrant 1: Organizational Burning Platform

Typically, leaders are readily able to list the problems and issues that have motivated them to undertake a transformation effort. Time after time, we hear statements like “Our financial trajectory is poor,” “Our competitors are more aggressive,” “Our customers are squeezing us,” or “Our staff engagement is at an all-time low.”

Over the last few years, I have discussed this quadrant with large numbers of executives all around the world. As a result of these discussions, I have come to understand the pervasiveness of the burning platform. Leaders often operate from the belief that nothing significant happens without a crisis. But I've also learned that this quadrant often hides a deeper set of fears and issues.

Quadrant 2: Personal Burning Platform

When I partner with leaders on their quest for more effective leadership, they gradually begin to open up about their personal fears, challenges, and insecurities, represented by the second quadrant of the matrix. For example, they say things such as, “My reputation is on the line—I’ll look really stupid if I can’t build a company of substance,” or “Every day I try out a different approach, but nothing seems to work,” or “I’m physically exhausted; I can’t keep going like this.”

I have learned that this more personal motivation for change is often concealed beneath more obvious organizational forces. In an attempt to live up to pervasive notions of the “heroic leader” and avoid looking weak, senior executives will bury or otherwise disguise their personal motivations for engaging in a transformation effort.

In the earlier stages of my consulting career, I didn’t probe deeply into a leader’s personal fears and concerns, partly because they didn’t offer them up easily, partly because I didn’t want to risk losing the consulting engagement. What I now understand is that respectfully probing into a leader’s personal fears from the very first interaction is actually one of the fastest ways to build trust in the relationship. Perhaps more important, it allows leaders to quickly shift away from hiding what they fear most and toward realizing their deepest personal ambitions.

Quadrant 3: Personal Burning Ambition

It is in the third quadrant, the personal burning ambition, where I have found that a leader’s commitment and personal accountability for change really begin to accelerate. Quadrants 1 and 2 are about running from a fire; quadrant 3 describes a fire that burns inside.

The motivation behind a personal burning ambition is evident in statements like “I want to live a big and authentic life,” “I want to increase my health and happiness,” “I want to align my work with a strong sense of purpose and meaning,” or “I want to fulfill my leadership potential.”

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When leaders shift their focus away from what they want to avoid toward what they want to achieve, they experience a dramatic shift in energy. They move away from insecurity and perennial urgency toward a calmer and more purposeful disposition. This enables us to apply a more deliberate and disciplined effort toward realizing those ambitions.

Quadrant 4: Organizational Burning Ambition

Leaders' personal ambitions are surpassed by the lasting impact they wish to have on their organizations, their customers, their industries, and their communities. Leaders saying things like, "I want to leave a legacy of a growing organization," "I want my successor to be set up for even greater success," "I want to transform our industry," or "I want to revolutionize the customer experience," are all expressions of the motivational forces at play in this quadrant.

We saw this play out on a grand scale with Tim as he connected his desire for "a big and authentic life" to Earth Hour, one of the biggest social movements in recent times.

I have found that burning ambitions provide far greater leverage than burning platforms to keep leaders on track. All of the "transformed" leaders I have worked with faced days when it just felt too hard, where they encountered opposition, or where they were consumed by short-term pressures that demanded immediate attention. Clarity of personal and organizational ambition allows leaders to reorient their focus in spite of these competing pressures, and allows them to accept short-term pain in the pursuit of longer-term gain.

So how can you put the Fire to work for you in your leadership? Here are five provocations to help you shift from burning platform to burning ambition.

I. Ask why before how

Let's imagine we know two twenty-five-year-old women who have both been smoking for five years, and who both want to give up smoking once and for all in ninety days' time – let's call them Mary and Jenny. Our job is to work out which one of them is more likely to achieve her goal.

If we live in the world of business, our first question is likely to be a dumb one; what's your strategy? In other words, we want to know how Mary plans to do it. So, we ask Mary and she says, "I'm going to get a nicotine patch, chew nicotine gum, tear up my cigarettes, and get a quit buddy." Not a bad strategy at all right? We ask Jenny the same question, and her answer is identical. We are none the wiser on who is more likely to succeed. That's because we haven't asked the right question yet.

A much better question is *why* do you want give up smoking, and *why now* after all these years? Mary confesses that the negative advertising has really gotten to her, and she feels it's about time she got fit and healthy. These are sensible motivations, but statistically speaking, Mary has a very small chance of achieving her goal in ninety days' time.

When we ask Jenny the same 'why' question, she leans in closely and whispers "I just found out I'm six weeks pregnant." Intuitively, we understand that Jenny has a much better chance of achieving her goal, and the statistics bear this out too.

In my work, I've found that whenever a leader (or team) articulates a new goal, that's a moment for me to do my best imitation of a four-year-old child and incessantly ask "but why?" I'm listening for some very compelling reasons delivered with real passion. I want to see fire in their eyes. If these things are not present, then I counsel them to choose another goal.

So, before you launch off after the next big goal, stop and ask yourself why it deserves your energy and scarce resources. If you don't feel a fire in your belly, one of two things are probably going on. Either it isn't worth the effort, or you haven't taken the time to establish why this goal is so important. Either way, unless you feel the fire, chances are you won't get it done.

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2. Check your language

A few years back, I was on a flight to Hong Kong with my wife, Kara. I thought we were going to watch the rugby sevens. She thought we were going shopping. Apparently, she was right, but that's another story.

About an hour into our journey, the pilot announced over the intercom "Ladies and gentlemen, you may have noticed we are turning the plane around. That is because we have had a CATOSTROPHIC GENERATOR FAILURE." I didn't hear what he said next for two reasons; the amount of screaming that engulfed the plane, and the severe pain coming from my right forearm where Kara was drawing blood with her nails. What I later found out he said was "That's not a big deal, I'm just not prepared to keep flying in case something else goes wrong."

As a human being, this whole escapade was not a pleasant experience; "CATASTROPHIC" is never a word you want to hear at 30,000 feet. But as a student of leadership, it was fascinating to me how three simple words could send hundreds of otherwise sensible people into various states of panic. It took the full hour until we landed safely for most people on that plane to calm down again.

In my experience, a leader's use of fear inducing language can be as much a sign of limited leadership capability as it is a sign of genuine and urgent crisis. In fact, one reason I believe the burning platform is such a prevalent metaphor in business is that it's much easier to scare the life out of people, than it is to inspire them with a compelling vision of the future.

So, before you light a fire under those you lead, reflect on whether your burning platform is real, or whether you are just taking the easy road. While it is far more challenging to spark a fire inside others, the results are far more powerful and sustainable.

3. Trade your stress for pressure

Imagine a solid plank of wood, one foot wide, one-inch thick resting securely on two platforms twenty feet apart and five feet off the ground. If I was to offer you \$1,000 in exchange for you walking that plank successfully, most of you would opt in. If I asked you whether you would define this situation as one filled with stress or pressure, most of you would say pressure.

Now let's take that same plank of wood up to the top floor of your favorite ten story building and place it from the roof of your building to the one across the street. Now I'll offer you \$100,000 to walk that plank successfully. Would you do it? Probably not. Stress or pressure? Stress.

What if I told you that the other building was on fire, your child or loved one was on the roof, and that walking this plank was the only way to save them – would you do it? Most people say yes without hesitation. Stress or pressure? Most people say pressure. The difference is context.

We talk about stress like it's a noun – such as a chair. It's much more helpful, however, to understand stress as a verb. You have to think or behave in stressful ways in order to experience the thing we call stress. In certain situations, like if you're trying to out-swim a hungry shark, a stress response can be helpful to be sure. Most of the time, however, stress is the opposite of helpful. It speeds up our thinking, clouds our judgment, and shuts down our critical faculties.

The way I encourage leaders to think about this dichotomy is that pressure is an entirely normal part of the leadership role, but stress does not have to be. Most of us have successfully dealt with high pressure situations personally and professionally during our lives; it is these moments that we can anchor back to when the heat is on.

So, reflect on a time in your past where you stepped up and performed under pressure. Visualize it, hear it, feel it, label it. Then every time you are in a high-pressure situation, close your eyes and reconnect with that moment from your past and bring it into your present.

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4. Ask a better question

Reflect on a moment of real challenge or crisis from your past. Now think about the questions you consciously or unconsciously asked of yourself and others at that moment. If you're like most people, your questions probably went something like this: Why did it happen? How did it happen? Who is to blame?

Of course, it's important to learn from a serious problem, but the moment of crisis is not the time to do it. Asking these questions will only exacerbate the problem, and fuel further anxiety. Everyone is focused on covering their back-side, especially if you are their boss. There will be lots of frantic activity, but not much productivity.

Next time you find yourself in that crisis moment, ask this question: what is the best outcome from here? Firstly, those around you will likely go into shock. We are not used to hearing an intelligent, helpful question in a crisis situation.

Once they get over their shock, it will work for three reasons. It assumes that there actually is an outcome. It also focuses everybody on the solution rather than self-protection. Perhaps more importantly, it includes an acceptance of the situation. You may not like where here is, but you don't waste any energy pretending it hasn't happened.

You can follow this question with two more: what are the next steps we can take on our path to the outcome, and what help do you or we need?

5. Inspire hope not fear

Anxiety is the most contagious emotion in the human condition, and insecure and uncertain people generally struggle to achieve or innovate. Our challenge as leaders is to inspire hope, not fear.

The good news is that contrary to popular opinion, hope is not an emotion; it is a process that anyone can master. The theory was first laid down by pioneering psychologist Charles R. Snyder. In short, hope equals goals, plus pathways to reach those goals, times a sense of agency (the belief that my effort makes a difference).

So, if you or your team are feeling anxious and fearful, first check whether you are clear on what success looks like. If this is clear, check whether you see the pathway to get there; or at least the next few steps. If this is also clear, then your likely issue is one of self-belief. In order for us to feel hopeful, we need to see a connection between our effort and the end result. Tell those you lead how much you believe in them, and why they are the people to get it done.

CONCLUSION

After five years of intense research, and two decades of practice, I have come to understand the limitations of the burning platform. Yes, some urgency can help motivate leaders to commence a journey of transformation, but it is not what enables them to sustain their journey over time. What we have found is that aspiration is a far more important motivator; sustainable change requires the fire of a 'burning ambition.'

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