

Transformational Leadership at the Pivot of History¹

Duane Elgin
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We Live in Transformational Times

Is the world moving into a uniquely demanding time? After all, the human family has always confronted enormous difficulties throughout history—why should we assume that the current period is any different? Is it possible that we are moving through an extremely rare period in human history—a moment between major epochs, a time of transition as great as the shift from the agrarian revolution to the industrial revolution? The ten examples below reveal how we have truly entered an era of radically new human circumstances, one that calls for transformational leadership.

1. **Weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, biological, and chemical)**—For the first time in human history humanity has developed innumerable weapons of mass destruction that are so powerful that they dare not be used; and yet they are becoming available to people and groups that feel otherwise powerless and hopeless. For the first time, human knowledge has created the unprecedented ability for a handful of people to cause vast harm to millions of others and to the planet.
2. **Global climate change**—For the first time in history human activity has begun to seriously disrupt the global climate. Already humanity has generated carbon dioxide levels that are higher than they have been for 20 million years.² There is every likelihood that this will soon produce climate fluctuations and changes of a scope and speed that are completely outside our range of experience and that will require us to cooperate in unprecedented ways to cope with coastal flooding, a greater number of storms that are more intense, drought in key food-growing regions (such as the U.S. Midwest), the spread of tropical diseases, and stress to all ecosystems and habitats.
3. **Growing population**—For the first time in human history our numbers have grown so large that we have already occupied all of the land favorable for human habitation. Without dramatic changes in our manner of living and consuming the human family will have grown too large for the Earth to sustain. Furthermore, for the first time, a majority of the human family is living in urban settings, and this percentage will continue to increase rapidly as more and more people in developing countries move into huge megalopolises.

4. **Resource depletion**—For the first time in human experience, fresh water is becoming a scarce resource at a global scale. By the 2020s, the World Watch Institute estimates that 40 percent of the people on the Earth will not have enough water to be self-sufficient in growing their own food and will therefore become increasingly dependent on non-local food sources.³ Within this same time frame, there is also the prospect of dwindling supplies of cheap oil.⁴ The end of inexpensive oil will not only impact global transportation, it will also make it more expensive to maintain the productivity of a global agriculture that relies heavily upon petroleum based pesticides and fertilizers.
5. **Species extinction**—Human activities are causing a rapid, massive, and worldwide extinction of both plant and animal species that is completely unprecedented in human history. A group of natural scientists polled by the Museum of Natural History of New York estimated that within 30 years 20% of all plant and animal species would be extinct.⁵ Another estimate developed by *National Geographic* concluded that half of the world's plant and animal species could be extinct within a hundred years.⁶
6. **Warning of world's scientists**—For the first time humanity is being collectively warned by a large community of its most senior scientists that our current forms of economic growth are endangering the very life-support systems of the planet. In the historic 1992 *Warning to Humanity* published by the Union of Concerned Scientists, a majority of the world's living Nobel laureates in the sciences, as well as 1,600 other scientists, signed a cautionary statement declaring that “human beings and the natural world are on a collision course...a great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated.”⁷
7. **Poverty and disparities of wealth**—The human family continues to increase the disparities between those who have wealth and material well-being and those who do not. In terms of real income, it is estimated by the United Nations that a majority of people on the Earth (approximately 60 percent) live on the equivalent of \$3 a day or less, which means they are effectively shut out from participating in the global economy that is advertised each day on television.⁸
8. **Communications revolution**—In a change without precedent, the entire human family is being connected through a transparent system of communication where anything happening anywhere can be known virtually everywhere almost instantly. Not only is the speed and scope of communication accelerating exponentially, the quantity of information being communicated is also growing at a rate completely outside any previous human experience.
9. **Human genome project**—For the first time, the human species is decoding the genetic instructions of life and learning how to manipulate them to do far more than simply cope with inherited diseases. Scientists are now exploring how to create new forms of life. With the ability to deliberately alter the makeup of the human being, humanity has entered an unprecedented, new era of choice, responsibility, and risk.

10. **Gender revolution**—For the first time in roughly five thousand years, women around the world are challenging the legitimacy of patriarchal structures that have diminished their rights and limited their opportunities. As half of the human race becomes an empowered, coequal partner in all aspects of life, this change will have an enormous impact on humanity's future.

Considering just this limited list, it is clear that the human family is truly moving into a singular moment in human history—a pivot point on which the future of the entire species may turn. Although human societies have confronted major hurdles throughout history, the challenges of our era are genuinely unique. Never before in human history have so many people been called upon to make such sweeping changes in so little time. We have truly entered a situation that calls for transformational leadership.

The human species is going through a birth process. As such, we are challenged to become both hospice workers to a dying era and midwives to a new era being born. Importantly, as we approach this pivot point, we will experience both the breakdown of many existing institutions and systems, and the breakthrough of new systems. Our social and environmental systems have been driven far from their historical equilibrium conditions. When this type of state occurs, chaos theory tells us that higher levels of creativity may simultaneously emerge that enable systems to reshape themselves into new and more sustainable forms. Furthermore, systems theory tells us that *it is this "in-between" time that is most inviting of our creativity and innovation.*

Transformational leaders may have a disproportionate effect by enabling systems to reach beneath the surface chaos and discover potentials for collective understanding and communication that were always present, but required the demanding circumstances of this species rite of passage to draw them out. Current conditions of creative ferment are ripe for transformational leaders. This degree of freeing-up and reframing of the human journey is extremely rare in human history and completely unique on a global scale. However, given the urgencies of the time, this period of radical openness will likely close quickly around what seem to be the viable pathways into the future. Therefore, it is important to recognize the great value of this brief window of opportunity as the human family enters our time of collective initiation in the next several decades.

We Need Transformational Leadership

More than three-dozen persons at the forefront of change contributed to the following nine properties of transformational responses and leadership.⁹ While these nine principles or properties do not exhaust the descriptions for transformational leaders, they are helpful criteria for identifying them and understanding them.

1) Recognize that we have entered a time of global change and a historical window of opportunity—Transformational leaders recognize the actual dynamics of the world situation. Within this generation, we face the possibility of either an evolutionary crash or an evolutionary bounce. We live in a rare time of global transition when old institutions are breaking down and new ones are emerging. There is a freeing up of old ways of thinking and a new receptivity to alternative approaches.

2) Take a whole-systems, integral perspective—Einstein said that a problem cannot be solved at the same level at which it is being created. Transformational leaders tend to stand back and look at the big picture to see the most productive approach to change. Such approaches recognize that many problems extend beyond national borders and are truly of global concern (e.g., ozone depletion and the buildup of greenhouse gases). Taking a whole-systems perspective means looking at not only the larger context but also the dynamics of change happening within and around the system.

3) Build strength by actively embracing diversity—These leaders recognize the importance and power of including people from all walks of life. By embracing the very differences that often divide us (e.g., race, gender, wealth, and geography), we can discover the creativity, wisdom, and power needed to respond authentically to our challenging circumstances.

4) Tell a bigger story about the nature and purpose of life—The “mental model” or paradigm that is expressed in any system can be as limiting as any physical structure. Transformational leaders can bring a new vision of life or a new world view. At the deepest level, a transformational leader can, for example, embody an enlarged sense of identity (e.g., we are

beings of both biological and cosmic dimension), reality (e.g., the cosmos is a living system of which we are an integral part), and society (e.g., with a spirit of mutually assured development, we can all thrive).

5) Bring a reflective consciousness into the functioning of systems—Enabling systems (e.g., social groups or organizations) to “see themselves” and examine their own functionality brings forth a new level of accountability, efficiency, and ethicality. Transformational leaders recognize that bringing a reflective capacity into systems is a powerful way to set into motion a self-transforming process. Therefore, a core challenge is to support the awakening of a self-reflective capacity for a system so that its participants can collectively communicate and come to a conscious understanding of the ways in which they embody the system’s sentiments and intentions.

6) Foster self-organization at the grass-roots scale—Transformational leaders often foster citizen empowerment. They release the leadership potential of individuals to take actions in their personal lives that support realization of a new vision of maturity and sustainability, trusting that millions of others can do likewise. In voluntarily working for the well-being of a larger community, there can be a great sense of satisfaction and reward that feeds back upon itself in a self-reinforcing manner. With reinforcing feedback, such initiatives become contagious and transportable.

7) Provide leadership that ignites a belief in transformational change—While transformational leaders often seek to create new systems whose workings do not depend upon a charismatic leader, at the outset the commitment and perseverance of a strong leader or group who sees a clear possibility for change is a vital ingredient. An inspired leader and/or small team of co-leaders combined with an inspired approach to change can catalyze a community and ignite its belief that large-scale change can happen and that its members can make a difference.

8) Approach change in transformational ways—Rather than trying to redirect a system through brute force from the outside, these leaders generally bring new feedback loops into the steering or guiding process on the inside that, in turn, redirect the system in a healthier direction.

By providing feedback that was previously either missing or ineffectual, transformational leaders can enable system participants to consciously guide systems toward a healthy future.

9) Recognize and appreciate multiple ways of knowing—A system can be no more reflective and conscious than the individuals who comprise it; therefore, in systems/institutions of growing consciousness, there will be an appreciation of the importance of both the personal and the collective consciousness of the community. These are highly practical capacities. For example, “intuitive reasoning” (or common sense) and an “intuitive appreciation of relationships” (or compassion) are important knowing capacities for building a community life supportive of a sustainable, inclusive, and meaningful future.

In conclusion, we do live in unprecedented times: Never before has the entire human family been entrusted with the task of working together to imagine and then consciously build a sustainable, just, and compassionate future. Never before has the entire Earth confronted challenges that are so urgent and of our own making. Clearly, new approaches to leadership are being called forth to meet the unique demands and opportunities of this moment in history.

¹ Adapted from the report: *Transformational Philanthropy: An Exploratory Report*, Principal authors Duane Elgin and Elizabeth Share, San Francisco, California, February 2002. Available online for free at the website for “Changemakers.” See: <http://www.changemakersfund.org/pdf/philanthropy.pdf>

² Paul Pearson and Martin Palmer, “Atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations over the past 60 million years,” in *Nature*, Vol. 406, August 17, 2000, p., 695.

³ Sandra Postel, “Water for Food Production: Will There Be Enough in 2025?,” *BioScience*, Vol. 48, No. 8, August 1998.

⁴ L. F. Ivanhoe, “Get Ready for Another Oil Shock!,” *The Futurist*, January-February 1997.

⁵ Joby Warrick, “A Warning of Mass Extinction,” *Washington Post*, April 21, 1998.

⁶ Virginia Morell, “The Sixth Extinction,” *National Geographic*, Washington, D.C., February 1999, p. 46.

⁷ The 1992 “Warning to Humanity” was sponsored by the Union of Concerned Scientists, 26 Church St., Cambridge, MA 02238.

⁸ UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 1992.

⁹ See the full report on transformational initiatives in philanthropy at the website: <http://www.changemakersfund.org/pdf/philanthropy.pdf>