



TalentOptima

HOW TO GET YOUR TRANSFORMATION OFF THE GROUND AND FLYING ✈️

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Throughout my career, I've spent significant time leading large transformations with global impact across several complex industries (more details on the last bio page of this article).

And in doing so, I've also spent a lot of time on planes (below is SLC, on the move from the US to UK!)



As a huge fan of metaphor, I discovered powerful lessons from aviation that can help supercharge your transformation portfolio...

Getting from A to B takes a village.

When you next take a flight, make a list of all the services, people (roles) and infrastructure that gets you safely from A to B.

Ground staff, gate agents, cabin crew, pilots, baggage handlers. And then there are the people you don't see – for example Air Traffic Controllers and Pilot Training Centers.

This ecosystem operates as a whole, with each playing a key part in getting you (and maybe your luggage) safely to your destination.

So how can we translate the aviation journey into an effective strategic and holistic approach to Transformation?

Let's think of the following ecosystem:



These are some of the key players with each playing a defined role.

Let's look at them one by one and explore how this relates to transformations in large organizations.



The Pilot(s): Transformation Leader(s)

Pilots are of course accountable for flying the plane and taking the lead in safely getting passengers to their final destination. They are highly skilled and communicate intentionally between pilot and co-pilot to ensure it's clear who is flying the plane, and lean on the expertise of others (aircraft engineers, cabin crew, baggage handlers...) to do their job. They use the instrumentation of the cockpit, to ensure the plane is functioning perfectly, and to adapt to the weather conditions ahead. Key to a flight is the flight plan, which is fully prepared before pushing back from the gate.

Transformation Leaders are the pilots of their transformation. They should demonstrate proficiency in similar traits:

- ④ They are highly qualified and experienced in the mindset, skillset and toolset of transformation
- ④ They have a plan, before embarking on a transformation
- ④ They use feedback loops (for example engagement surveys, focus groups, changes in macroeconomic conditions) to adjust the plan based on qualitative and quantitative data
- ④ They proactively and reactively manage risks via contingencies and remain adaptable to the internal and external climate, changing course when and if needed
- ④ They establish clear leadership and accountability when leading a transformation team, and seek specialist support, such as change management, HR, Finance, OD and Digital/AI experts.
- ④ They balance servant leadership to impacted employees (the passengers) but when needed, don't hesitate in taking decisive action for the good of getting everyone to the end state destination on time.



Air Traffic Control: The Transformation Management Office

While pilots fly the plane, they do so with the direction of Air Traffic Control and within the strict rules of the sky (e.g. the FAA). Air Traffic Control manages the system of planes within its airspace.



Did you know that Statista¹ estimates there will be a record volume of 40.1 million flights globally in 2024? In the same way, Accenture's Pulse of Change Index found the rate of change affecting businesses has risen steadily since 2019 – 183% over the past four years².

Or in the words of Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau in his 2018 Davos speech:

“The pace of change has never been this fast, yet it will never be this slow again.”

The Transformation Management Office (TMO) can play a pivotal role in managing the “airspace” of transformation within companies, as increasingly reinvention is not a one hit wonder, but happens through many large scale competing and interconnected shifts in parallel.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/564769/airline-industry-number-of-flights/>

² <https://www.accenture.com/gb-en/insights/consulting/total-enterprise-reinvention>

Analogous to the role of Air Traffic Control, TMOs can add value by:

- ⑨ Managing the overall capacity for change, prioritizing and triaging which major transformation activities should take place. Factors such as organizational/business risk, employee engagement, investment (time, resources, capital), return on investment can be used.
- ⑨ Identifying and managing interdependencies through both intermediation and where necessary by veto (in the same way you don't want a plane landing right as another takes off)
- ⑨ Defining and tracking the health of transformation programs against a set of criteria by independent audit and reporting back to both transformation leaders and executive leadership.
- ⑨ Providing the norms of the transformation "airspace" by defining best practices for executing and reporting transformation and creating an engaged community of transformation leaders.
- ⑨ Setting up engaged and active sponsorship and governance from executive leadership.



Flight School: Transformation Leadership Development

One of course does not simply show up and fly a plane. In addition to a minimum of 18 months training to qualify, they additionally are required to pass medical tests, so must maintain their fitness.

Transformation requires several hats and many disciplines – for example, that of business strategist, program manager, risk manager, change manager, diplomat, coach. Change is hard, both for those being changed, but also leaders of transformation and it's important they have the tools, self-preservation and resilience to maintain their (physical and mental) health to keep the momentum.

“Should an emergency situation occur, you need to put your own oxygen mask on first, before attempting to help those around you.”

Therefore, good development of transformation leaders takes a holistic approach to prepare leaders of transformation with the right mindset, skillset and toolset to manage complex change programs.

However, upskilling should not just be targeted at transformation leaders. It is critical that other stakeholder populations feel able to embrace change, and their specific roles are made clear. Each should be confident and able in their role. Managers play a huge part in the success of any transformation, and Executives have strong sponsorship and leadership roles. Pay special attention to impacted individuals, who are better prepared to grow and adapt if they are equipped to receive and thrive in change (which after all, is the only constant).

If you ascribe to the adult learning theory of 70:20:10 (or as I call it - Experience, Education and Exposure) there are some many effective strategies for developing transformation excellence.

For Education (the 10%), consider how a flight simulator plays a key role in pilot training by removing the risks of real-life flight mistakes. Business simulations are an effective way to learn as they provide no or low-risk exercises allowing for learning through trial and error, without jeopardizing business continuity, operations or, potentially your career.

Transformation expertise can also be developed through Exposure (20%) – by building an engaged community of transformation leaders. Best practices can be shared (steal good ideas with pride!), and coaching and sounding boards provided. Communities increase your sense of belonging, cohesion, innovation, safety and diversity. They hold each other up through adversity. Stronger together.

And lastly, Experience (the 70%). Some things are just learned by doing, by experiencing the highs of success and learning from the lows of failure. No matter the potential, choosing new leaders to head transformation programs should never be setting up someone for failure – mastery of the skills to lead large complex transformations take years (if ever), so steps in responsibility should be carefully judged.

I strongly advocate for linking a company's talent and succession strategies to the appointment of transformation leaders. For a CEO or Executive Committee member to adeptly sponsor transformation initiatives, this provides an invaluable experience.



Cabin & Ground Crew: Transformation specialists

The varied roles in the sky and on the ground complete the full team that gets you to your destination.

Similarly, a transformation team should include a variety of specialist knowledge and skills to lead each aspect of a transformation.

- 🕒 HR brings a broad set of disciplines:
 - ✉ OD practitioners provide services ranging from Operating Model and Organizational Design, Organizational Development & Effectiveness, Change Management.
 - ✉ HR Business Partners often lead the process of reorganizations and reductions in force, while ensuring compliance with Employment & Social Law and employee care.
 - ✉ Increasingly, People Analytics functions can help with lead and lag insights on organizational risk, such as employee engagement, sentiment and feedback loops
- 🕒 Project managers run logistics – managing a rolling plan and risks/issue
- 🕒 Digital partnership is a must-have in transformation programs, especially with the new capabilities provided by emerging AI and data-driven decision-making.
- 🕒 Finance provides ensure the financial benefits materialize, and costs are optimized.
- 🕒 Lastly, Legal provides several invaluable services, such as advising on company structure, M&A activity and employment law.

Summary: Transformation requires a Team with a Diverse set of Superpowers

It takes a diverse team with differentiated skills to get a passenger home.

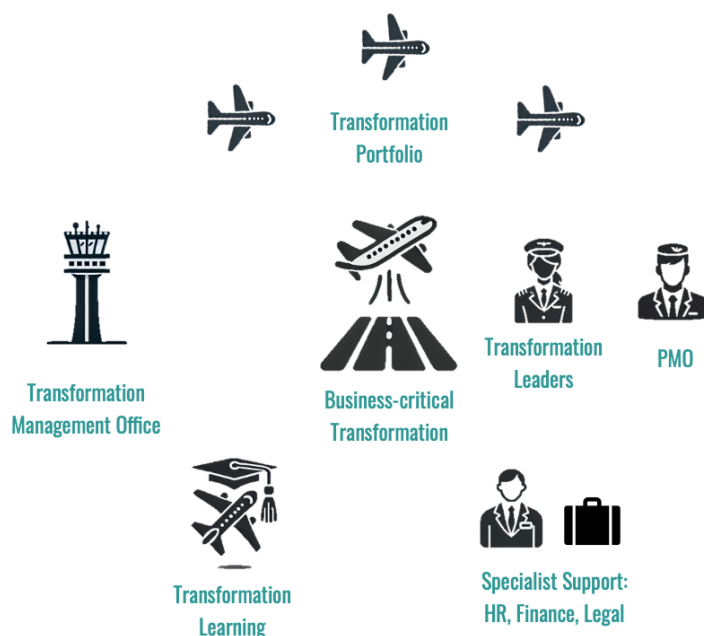
And so, to run transformation well, it takes a similarly broad group to expertly take employees and other stakeholders through change. It's not surprising that four of the of the top 5 HR priorities for 2024³ are critical to enabling human-centered transformation.

1. Leader and manager effectiveness
2. Organizational culture
3. HR technology
4. Change management
5. Career management and internal mobility

Sadly, from my experience too few HR teams are adequately prepared.

We are facing ever increasing internal and external disruptive pressures on companies to reinvent, coupled with demands for increased speed and scale of transformation. As a result, many companies are now seeing transformation risk (on operations and employee engagement) escalate to risk committee oversight, which is why I co-created this holistic approach with the Strategy team.

There is no one silver bullet for transformation done right. You need a system, but fortunately, aviation has given us a lift-off.



Will you ever fly the same again?

³ [Gartner HR trends and priorities report, 2024](#)

About the Author



Andrew Kilshaw

As Founding Partner at TalentOptima in September 2024, Andrew brings 25+ years of proven experience elevating organizational capability and accelerating transformation, with highly evidenced results.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the author

He ignited his passion for helping employees and organizations realize their potential during his MBA studies at IMD (Switzerland). Inspired by his executive education, he then joined IMD's staff, working with faculty on custom programs with several Fortune500 clients. Since then, he has gained 18 years of experience helping raise the game of some of the world's most recognized brands, often leaders in their respective industries - **Nike, BlackRock, Shell and Sanofi**.

Andrew has led transformations on a global scale across several complex industries.

Examples include:



- Creating a 3-year strategy to scale the Jordan Brand and transforming the operating model to operationalize it.



- Partnering with the Chief Digital Officer to create a digital engine to serve consumers and drive e-commerce growth at Nike

BlackRock

- Navigating the merger of Barclays Global Investors with BlackRock through the Global Financial Crisis.



- Reshaping Shell's Downstream business to optimize productivity and organize around end-to-end sectoral decarbonization

sanofi

- Accelerating Sanofi's Play to Win transformation