

What is Transformational Change?

By Robert Gass

Robert Gass has been known for leading edge work in human consciousness and organizational change for over 30 years. Holding a doctorate in Clinical Psychology and Organizational Development from Harvard University, his work synthesizes an unusually diverse background in social change, humanistic psychology, organizational behavior, music and spiritual studies.

Robert's current work focuses on leadership development and movement building for progressive social change. Co-founder of the Rockwood Leadership Institute and chief designer of their programs, he has trained social justice, environmental, and human rights leaders across North America in the inner and outer arts of leadership. Robert was the former Board Chair of Greenpeace USA, and currently consults to non-profits and leaders from organizations such as NAACP, the Sierra Club, the MS Foundation, Green for All, Reform Immigration for America coalition (RIFA), Rainforest Action Network, Asian-American Justice Center, Center for Community Change (CCC), MoveOn.org, and U.S. Senate Chiefs of Staff.

Robert was the former President of ARC International, a global consulting and training company specializing in transformational change with Fortune 500 companies. Robert has for many years served as executive coach to well-known business, non-profit, political and spiritual leaders.

Co-creator of the Opening the Heart workshops, Robert has offered seminars to over 100,000 individuals on leadership, relationships (with his wife, Judith) and spirituality at universities, educational centers and conferences around the world including the Conference Board, the American Academy of Psychotherapy, the Institute of Cultural Affairs (China), Omega Institute, Brown University, Auroville (India), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.N. Peace University in Costa Rica.

Also a highly-regarded composer, performer and recording artist, Robert has released over 20 albums of music to uplift the human spirit with his renowned singing group, On Wings of Song.

Robert lives in Boulder, Co, and has raised three children with his life partner of 40 years, Judith Ansara.

WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE?

In recent years, many social change activists have been exposed to principles, tools and practices loosely referred to as “transformational.” Numbers of trainers, facilitators, consultants, coaches and other intermediaries use the word in their work, and there is a growing field of “social transformation.” This term and field actually encompass a wide range of approaches, and there is as yet no agreement about what is and what is not “transformation.”

This brief paper is an attempt to initiate conversation about what our various efforts might have in common.

It is useful to think of transformational change as profound, fundamental and irreversible. It is a metamorphosis, a radical change from one form to another.

Transformation is an approach, a philosophy and a methodology. The following is an initial attempt to articulate some of the key principles that seem to underlie much of the work being done in this field.

Transformational change is holistic

Transformational change is a systems approach, deriving its power by attending equally to hearts & minds (the inner life of human beings), human behavior, and the social systems and structures in which they exist. It therefore tends to be multi-disciplinary, integrating a range of approaches and methodologies. By dealing holistically with all elements of human systems, transformational change aims to be irreversible and enduring.

Transformational change involves breakthroughs

Albert Einstein said that “problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.” Transformational change is distinguished by radical breakthroughs in paradigms, beliefs and behavior. In transformational change, what was seen as obstacles may morph into opportunities, apparently irreconcilable opposites may come to be seen as creative tension, and change that seemed improbable or requiring long development may quickly come into being.

Transformation is about “Being the Change”

Many practitioners of social transformation embrace the quote of Gandhi: “We must be the change we want to see happen in the world.” The process of transformational change must always mirror what it seeks to create. While honoring the lessons of the past and planning for the future, transformational change has a strong focus on what’s happening right now, in the present. For example, in individual change processes, while appreciating the impact of our past and establishing goals for the future, the power of transformational change is in actually becoming the fullness of who we are right here, right now. Or if we intend to create an organization culture with greater ownership by stakeholders, we must “be the change” right now by initiating an inclusive process of change.

Transformational change accentuates the positive

While honoring the importance of squarely naming and facing what’s wrong, what’s not working, and in need of change; transformational change is grounded in the power of a positive vision and focusing on what we want to create. While acknowledging the importance of critical thinking, transformational change balances critique with the power generated by an appreciation and honoring of what is already good and useful, and the hope inspired by focusing on what’s possible.

Transformational change balances control with letting go

In most change models, we create a picture of what we think should be, then work hard to make reality fit the picture. In transformational change, we activate the power of vision, yet we are also willing to be humble in the face of the mystery that is life. We understand that the only constant is change. It is less an attempt to dominate life, and much more a dance of dynamic interaction with life around us. We learn to temper control with letting go of what we cannot control. While we cultivate the discipline of good planning, we also understand change to be an emergent phenomenon. The art of transformation lies in deep attention to what is, and in skillfully working in harmony with what is alive and moving in the world.

Transformational change relies on collaboration

Because of its systemic and interdisciplinary nature, transformational work requires from its practitioners a high level of commitment and skill in collaboration. We can do nothing by ourselves. Transformational change is all about appreciating interdependence and working in partnership—with other people and organizations, with social trends, and unseen forces sometimes called energy, the arc of history, or Spirit.

Transformational change engages the heart

Progressive social change has often over-relied on trying to engage and mobilize people through facts, analysis, and critical thinking. While embracing the importance of intellect, transformational change equally engages the heart: our deepest aspirations, what we care most deeply about, what we love. In working with groups, transformational change activates not only the power of collective purpose, but also helps lower the barriers that keep us separate from each other, inviting us to greater compassion, trust and care for each other.

Transformational change happens at all levels

Many practitioners, for reasons of experience and/or inclination may tend to focus more on change in individuals, in organizations, or in society. This is fine, as all are worthy of attention. Yet the real changes we seek in the world ask that we collectively engage and apply the principles and practices of transformational change to all of this: our work with individuals, with organizations, with coalitions and networks, with social change movements and with society.

The Social Transformation Movement is in a phase of emergence, of discovery, of invention. A thousand flowers are blooming. Hopefully, the principles outlined here may be of some use in furthering our collective dialogues and understanding of “what is transformation?”

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