



# Transformational Leadership: Creating “Road to Damascus” Moments

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

## The Scene.

I expected a productive day, certainly. A client invited me to watch her and other leaders in her organization in action on the

Yesterday, I had an unexpectedly extraordinary day.

mainstage of large annual managerial gathering. What I didn't expect was to come away deeply affected by that observation experience.

I had a road to Damascus moment.

## The Players.

Multiple acts of good leadership occurred during that forum. I watched as my client and her direct reports took turns providing information on the future of the Fortune 25 company they serve. They reinforced the corporate and functional goals with which the managers should align. Most powerfully, the leaders engaged the minds and hearts in that room on questions around why they do the work they do and how to do it more intentionally.

But that isn't the experience that is motivating me to put words on paper right now. The transformative moments came in the form of two guest speakers who took the stage several hours apart from each other, unwittingly providing a one-two punch to knock out some of this blogger's comfortable ways of being in this world.

## Guest Speaker One.

Glen Hiemstra ([www.futurist.com](http://www.futurist.com)) was the warm up act. He spoke of his work as a futurist who regularly peers 100-years in the future on behalf of client companies and those who follow his work. This profession brings him into frequent contact with leaders of all types (e.g. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos), allowing him to catalogue the characteristics of those leaders who help their organizations, not to *react* to the future, but instead, to *shape* it. Those characteristics include:

- Future-oriented
- Vision-driven
- Strategic
- Collaborative

In a compelling build, he engaged the room in a sequence of questioning and table exercises that brought his model to life – challenging the leaders to think beyond the short view in ways that were both vision-driven and strategic. As he explained, “Most planning is a search for a more efficient past, rather than a search for a new future.” Heads nodded along as he continued, “how many leadership teams do some sort of creativity exercise to begin a planning process, but then promptly forget that (as they engage in the actual work of the session)?”

He challenged the managers to define the long-range view such that it is a “magnet pulling us forward.” Evocative stuff.

One of the most useful tips he gave was to work with the following types of vision: the possible, the probable, and the preferred. In his model, the last type fits the true

**Most strategic planning is a search for a more efficient past. It ought to be a search for a new future.**

meaning of the word “vision.” Bill Gates’ vision of putting a computer on every desk, now ancient history in ways that have perhaps desensitized us to its ambitiousness, was cited. As was Elon Musk’s more recent proclamation that he will create self-sustaining civilization on Mars as a step to an interplanetary civilization.

## **Leaders who shape the future do not do so alone. They ask the question: how do we involve more people in the accomplishment of strategic activities?**

Last, Hiemstra emphasized that leaders who shape the future do not do so alone. They ask the question: “how do we involve **more** people in the accomplishment of the *buckets of activities we need to pursue in the next 1, 2 or 3 years?*” In my experience, if leadership has done the hard work to define a vision that embodies that magnetic quality mentioned earlier (engaging both head and heart, per the [elephant and the rider metaphor](#)) AND that vision is accompanied by strategies that outline the

path forward, the collaboration of others becomes much easier.

Cool stuff – not rocket science but a compelling set of concepts to answer a question those of us who work with many different leaders and organizations are frequently asked in one form or another: “how do we (as a company, an institution, a field, you name it) not just create change but transform the future?” Exit Guest Speaker One. Hang on for what follows.

### **Guest Speaker**

#### **Two.**

I had noticed a second guest speaker listed on the agenda for the afternoon: Paul Hawken, environmentalist. That interest area aligns with the formal responsibilities of the leaders I was there to observe, so I wasn’t surprised. I also wasn’t particularly intrigued. I have watched and read the various news stories about Global Warming and, quite frankly, had grown rather pessimistic about the odds involved in turning the ominous predictions in a different direction.

Then Paul Hawken took the stage. And at the risk of ruining a potential dramatic reveal as an ending for this blog, he pulled off a remarkable act of transformational leadership...in one hour.

Here’s my breakdown of what he accomplished, using the characteristics of Hiemstra’s leaders who shape the future:

- **Future-Oriented:** Several years ago, Hawken and a collection of great minds took on an act of looking forward in service of humanity. They gazed long and hard at the future of our planet, modeling various scenarios related to the causes and effects of global warming. (You can find much more about their Project Drawdown [here](#). Also, for convenience, I will cite Paul Hawken as the source of this work through the remainder of this article but please know that the project he represents is the output of a prestigious collective.)

Now this act of gazing into the future, in and of itself, does not *transform* the future, as Hiemstra suggests. Rather, Hawken and his colleagues engaged in methods of looking forward that challenged the premise that the future will be defined by the past AND even challenged **the basis** for, or the mindset behind, the way we've been asking the questions about the future.

In other words, he feels we've been asking the question wrong.

Most notably, we have conjectured about how to *slow down* global warming, as if its presence is a given. Hawken took this way of looking into the future as deeply flawed - one that creates apathy and, worse, a sense of helplessness in the very people, all of us, who need to be engaged. As he

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put it, "asking how to slow global warming is like driving a car more slowly toward a cliff."

One of Hawken's first acts of transformational leadership then was to re-define the question into the following: how do we *reverse* global warming?

- **Vision-driven:** Reverse global warming? REVERSE GLOBAL WARMING? Now *there's* a vision!

That vision engages, enlivens, and gives hope. Who wouldn't want to hold that picture as not only a *possible* future but as the *preferred* future? As Hawken pointed out in the session, "naming a goal that is this inspiring opens up the best creative and innovative thinking," which is what attracted the brilliant collaborators who volunteered their time over a two-plus year period. And what also attracted the creative juices in that room yesterday, the folks who are tasked with shaping environmental strategy for a major corporation.

## **A vision, well-crafted and truly forward looking, has a magnetic quality of its own. When combined with strategies that make it seem achievable to those touched by it, collaborative magic is born.**

The magnetic energy of that single vision statement far outstripped the physical presence of Paul Hawken, standing on the stage. It became a palpable force in the room.

- **Strategic:** The work done by Hawken and his collaborators will be published in [book form](#) on April 18. He gave the audience a glimpse of the *buckets of activities* that would need to be pursued to reverse global warming. There are 100 solutions – all of which already exist somewhere in the world. Those solutions range from educational to energy-based to technological. I don't have permission to share any of them so I won't. My point is this: not only did he show the way with a compelling vision, but he also provided a potential path forward that calls for expanding on good practices that *already exist*.
- **Collaborative:** As already stated, a vision, well-crafted and truly forward looking, has a magnetic quality of its own. When combined with strategies that make it

seem achievable to those touched by it, collaborative magic is born. As Hawken stated: "It's not 'what can I do?' It's 'what can we do?' The problem has been the pronoun."

I overheard numerous conversations among experts in the environmental sciences after that session, discussing how they might contribute to the effort Hawken described - both through their professional roles in a major corporation, that itself could be a significant force for good, and through their personal practices.

I left asking myself the same question: what can I do? Different ideas are percolating, fueled by a sense of hope, even optimism, that I hadn't felt prior to this session. Perhaps one small act was accomplished by writing this blog and expanding it to my collective, the "we" I inhabit.

### **Closing Thoughts.**

We have yet to see what act of co-creation we, as a society, will produce as a result of the upcoming publication of

Hawken's book. But one thing I do know: yesterday, I witnessed an act of transformational leadership across two seemingly unconnected leaders. One who threw the tennis ball up in the air by introducing a leadership model to use in shaping the future, and the other who

served it right down the line by demonstrating how he is doing just that – engaging in a spectacular bid to shape our collective future.



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