Secrets to the Success of Organizational Transformation [1]

Dr. Prasad S. Kodukula[2]

About the Series

Organizational transformation has become a strategic necessity in an era marked by rapid technological shifts, global competition, and evolving stakeholder expectations. To help leaders navigate this complexity with clarity and discipline, this six-part series introduces a practical framework—captured by the acronym P-L-E-A-S-E—with each letter representing one of the six foundational secrets behind successful transformation. These are the secrets I've uncovered over the past 35 years of my career working with more than 40 Fortune 100 companies; teaching at elite academic institutions like the University of Chicago; and lecturing on project management, leadership, and innovation in nearly 50 countries. Rather than unveiling all the secrets at once, I will reveal one at a time in each article—not necessarily in order of importance. Published every other month, these articles will examine the conceptual grounding, leadership implications, and practical applications of the secrets. Together, the series provides a structured and engaging journey toward understanding what truly enables organizations not only to change, but to transform with purpose and lasting impact.

Secret No. 1: Purpose

A woman enters a cancer research laboratory as a visitor. She notices a group of people in white lab coats focused on their microscopes. She gently taps the shoulder of one of them. As he looks up and turns toward her, she politely says, "Sir, I don't mean to interrupt, but I'm

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curious. What're you working on?" The man, looking somewhat annoyed, replies with a frown, "Don't you see what I'm doing? I'm counting these stupid cultures."

The woman thanks him and then approaches another man in the lab who is doing the same work as the first person and everyone else there, asking the same question: "What're you working on?" The man enthusiastically responds, "Thank you, ma'am, for asking me. You see, I'm part of this team that's working on finding a cure for cancer." With a big smile, he wishes her a good day and then goes back to work.

What differentiates these two men? The answer in one word is Purpose. If you want to transform your organization for the better, a top secret to success is to build an army of cancer curers instead of culture counters.

Organizational transformation—it's not a destination but an endless journey

Organizations must transform in one way or another to survive, let alone thrive, and adapt to change. As change occurs relentlessly, you have no choice but to evolve constantly. Transformation isn't a destination; it's an ongoing journey. Staying competitive means remaining in a continuous state of transformation.

IBM shed its image as "Big Blue," known for selling blue-tinted mainframe computers, and transformed into a massive IT services company in the mid-1990s. In 2010, it decided to change again, becoming a provider of cutting-edge technologies such as AI, cloud, IoT, digital, blockchain, and more.

Corning, a serial innovator and a Fortune 500 company founded in 1871, shifted its focus from making encasements for Thomas Edison's incandescent lamps to developing PYREX® cookware, silicones, cathode ray tubes, TV picture tubes, optical fibers, LCDs, and smartphone glass covers through a series of transformations.

These examples remind us that transformation is neither accidental nor mechanical—it is intentional, anchored, and continually reinforced by a deeper reason for being. Whether an organization is reimagining its business model, modernizing its digital ecosystem, or integrating emerging AI capabilities, the most successful transformations begin with clarity, not complexity. They start with meaning before method.

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With that in mind, let's examine the practical strategies leaders can use to activate the first secret of organizational transformation.

Know your purpose

Let's admit it, every organizational transformation begins as a project. And every project must start with a clearly defined purpose. Project teams and sponsors often concentrate on the 'what' of the project—that is, what the project is supposed to deliver, such as a product, service, or event. However, the most important step is first to understand the 'why,' as it helps us uncover the true purpose.

Digital transformation initiatives are expanding across all sectors, including government, non-profits, NGOs, and more. My experience indicates that many leaders, unfortunately, focus on digitalization (the what) rather than the value it's intended to generate (the why). You shouldn't digitize just because everyone else is.

Today's transformation projects look markedly different from those of past decades. Artificial intelligence, machine learning, digital twins, automation, and data platforms are no longer "support tools"—they are reshaping entire business models, workforce structures, and stakeholder expectations. Yet despite this rapid technological evolution, one truth remains constant: technology is never the purpose; it is only the enabler.
Many organizations mistakenly begin by chasing AI use cases, automation opportunities, or flashy digital capabilities (a technology-first approach) instead of grounding these initiatives in stakeholder value, strategic intent, and purpose-driven outcomes.

Whether deploying machine learning, advanced analytics, or generative AI, the real question is not "What model are we implementing?" but "Why does this matter for our customers, employees, and mission?" Purpose is what distinguishes organizations that merely implement technology from those that truly transform with technology.

Many of today's projects are characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). The rise of AI has accelerated VUCA conditions—especially ambiguity—because leaders often feel pressure to adopt technologies they don't fully understand. Purpose cuts through this noise, anchoring decisions in value rather than hype. In a VUCA world, it's easy to lose direction, but purpose acts as the North Star.

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Leaders like Satya Nadella (Microsoft), Sundar Pichai (Google), and Jensen Huang (NVIDIA) have emphasized purpose-driven transformation to guide their AI strategies—ensuring that advanced technologies enhance human capability rather than replace it.

Think outside-in

You need to think outside-in rather than inside-out to get to the core of your purpose. The purpose is always about creating value for stakeholders. It's often more about your external stakeholders (for example, customers, community, and the planet) than about the internal ones. You must dig deeper and keep asking the question 'why' to identify the actual purpose.

Are you constructing a church or providing a place of worship for the community? Are you building a park or offering a playground for neighborhood children? Are you developing a new medical device or helping to extend and improve people's quality of life? Are you increasing shareholder value through innovative products, or are you reducing the carbon footprint by incorporating sustainability into your processes and products? I can go on.

This outside-in perspective is especially relevant when adopting AI and automation. The question is not just "How can AI improve internal efficiency?" but even more importantly, "How can AI elevate the experience, outcomes, and well-being of the people we serve?"

Keep it simple and make it easy

'Keep it simple and make it easy' has been my mantra for a long time. Consultants seem to make things more complex than is necessary. Maybe because they want to look smart, or perhaps they want to feel like they've earned their money. (I know a little bit about this, because in my previous life I worked for a consulting company.)

A global project management expert and author of the award-winning *Harvard Business Review—Project Management Handbook*, Antonio Neito-Rodriguez, suggests using the term 'purpose' instead of 'mission and vision'. He believes that the differences between these terms are often misunderstood and, although popular, can be confusing, made up of fancy words created by consultants. I agree with him. So, how about keeping it simple and making it easy?

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That's why the story about President Kennedy and the janitor at NASA is so powerful. When Kennedy asked, "Why're you working so late?", the janitor didn't respond with a complicated explanation of tasks. He didn't cite objectives, milestones, or strategy decks. His answer was simple and profound: "I'm helping put a man on the moon." Simplicity clarifies purpose. Clarity creates motivation. Motivation fuels transformation.

Communicate the purpose

Communicating the purpose of your project is essential. Purpose is a vital motivator that inspires the team to perform at a higher level.

Take, for example, the Manhattan Project team in Los Alamos, New Mexico, who built the atomic bomb, euphemistically known as 'the gadget.' Initially, the scientists and engineers were not told what they were working on for security reasons. Their technical leader, Richard Feynman, a Nobel Laureate in Physics, noticed that the work was going rather slowly, especially considering the talent and skills of his team members.

Feynman hypothesized that if his team knew the true purpose of the project, they would be inspired and their productivity would increase. He persuaded the hesitant military leaders that revealing the secret was necessary to boost team performance. And once the team realized they were building the gadget that would stop the war and change the world, everything accelerated—just as Feynman hypothesized. According to his calculation, team productivity increased by 10 times.

As hybrid work and AI continue to reshape the workplace and unintentionally distance employees from meaning, clear and compelling communication of purpose becomes even more crucial. People will embrace AI and change more readily when they understand its deeper purpose.

Build excitement around the purpose

The first rule of building excitement is to be excited yourself. As the leader of the transformation project, you must believe in and be enthusiastic about the purpose. You must passionately communicate the purpose with energy. Steve Jobs at Apple, Louis Gerstner at IBM, and Satya Nadella at Microsoft, who transformed their respective companies in remarkable ways, are experts at this.

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A few years ago, I co-founded a decarbonization company called NeoChloris, Inc. We develop innovative technologies to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. In the early days of the company, I would get up around 4:30 am and be in my office by 6:30 am. My family wondered why I needed to go to work so early when I was my own boss. My answer was, "We're fixing the world. We can't waste time." That's my purpose. It inspires me. It gives me motivation to go to work. It's a great reason to inspire my team. It doesn't matter whether you're a start-up with a small team like mine or a behemoth organization with thousands of employees; leaders must use their voice to communicate the project's purpose and motivate their teams by making them excited about the meaning of their work.

Working from home and putting in long hours with blurred boundaries between work and life, people are recognizing what truly matters in their lives. After COVID, there was a temporary phenomenon in the United States called The Great Resignation. People were quitting their jobs by the millions. It turned out that one main reason was that they felt their work was mundane, with no meaning or purpose. Post-pandemic, purpose has become even more vital.

Make it "a mission from God"

A Roman Catholic orphanage faces closure unless it can raise $5,000 to cover its property taxes. Two brothers raised in the orphanage set out to gather the money, all while being pursued by the police for various traffic violations. This is the core story behind the 1980 classic film "The Blues Brothers," starring the legendary John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd. The purpose of the brothers' project is summed up in their motto: "We're on a mission from God."

If you can make even a simple project seem like a divine mission, you have the potential to become a transformative leader.

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Author's Note: Preliminary versions of the articles in this series were previously published as blog posts on my website (www.kodukula.com). They have been revised and expanded for publication in PMWJ. In preparing the final articles, I used ChatGPT as a support tool for editing, refinement, and language clarity. All ideas, interpretations, conclusions, and final editorial decisions remain my own.

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