

Leaders who transform themselves: from transformational leader to “transforming leader”

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Introduction

This implications for practitioners (IfP) presents practical implications based on the arguments of the articles published in *The Learning Organization*, Volume 33, Issue 3. Many of the articles in that issue address the relationship between building a learning organization (Senge, 1990) and leadership. A notable feature is that the leaders discussed in these articles are all expected to drive transformation. In other words, within rapidly changing societies and organizational environments, leaders are required to be not only “transformational leaders” who change their organizations, but also “transforming leaders” who actively transform themselves. “Leaders’ self-transformation” is likely a topic that has received little attention to date. However, its importance is implied in the articles addressed here. However, in today’s world, it is leaders who are called upon to drive change.

The following subsections present the implications based on the arguments of each paper, and then present the overall implications in the conclusion section, particularly focusing on leaders’ self-transformation.

The interaction between agility and absorptive capacity

In modern society characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), organizational agility or the ability to respond nimbly to the environment and transform oneself, is indispensable. Consequently, research focusing on organizational agility is on the rise (Lee & Song, 2026).

Lee and Song (2026) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature on organizational agility. Its purpose was to examine strategies for enhancing organizational sustainability. The results confirmed that high agility enables organizations to generate and use knowledge, as well as adapt to the environment. It also became clear that adaptive capacity plays a crucial role in this process. Furthermore, the study emphasized that sensing capabilities and agility in forming partnerships are indispensable for exploiting external opportunities. These functions enable organizations to demonstrate their adaptive capacity in the pursuit of long-term strategic goals.

Needless to say, enhancing an organization’s agility and absorptive capacity is a leader’s task. Furthermore, to adapt to the VUCA era, organizations should improve these characteristics through the utilization of transformational leaders. One of the roles of such transformational leaders is to encourage learning among their team members. More specific implications related to this point will be discussed in the following sections.



Introducing practices that go beyond mere formality through knowledge-oriented leadership

Budur, Torlak, and Demirer (2026) examined the functions of knowledge-oriented leadership (KOL) in enhancing knowledge sharing (KS), organizational learning (OL) and performance. Here, KOL refers to leadership that encourages learning and information exchange among members. KOL directs followers' behavior toward achieving organizational goals. In doing so, it combines *transformational* leadership behavior – which emphasizes trust and vision – with *transactional* leadership behavior, which involves exchanging followers' contributions for rewards. According to Budur et al. (2026), KOLs promote organizational learning and improve organizational performance. Given the definition of KOLs, this finding is to be expected.

Interestingly, they found that the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 9001 quality management system (QMS) also promoted OL and improved organizational performance. Although not explicitly stated in Budur et al. (2026) model, it is implied that KOLs and the ISO 9001 QMS generate synergies.

In general, while the implementation of ISO 9001 certification involves significant costs, scholars' opinions are divided regarding its effectiveness (Guler, Guillén, & Macpherson, 2002). In some situations, the ISO 9001 QMS is said to be nothing but a burden that does not lead to actual improvements in practice; in other words, it tends to become a mere formality.

From the findings of Budur et al. (2026), the following can be stated: the role of KOLs is crucial in ensuring that the ISO 9001 QMS is not reduced to a mere formality but is implemented effectively. KOLs ensure that the implementation of a QMS does not remain merely formal or superficial; rather, they help members understand the meaning and purpose of each practice. Only then can the QMS demonstrate its value. KOL's such a role is likely not limited to the context of QMS implementation. KOLs should be crucial in the implementation of any new practice.

Based on the above, the following implication emerges: organizations should use KOLs for introducing and embedding substantive practices, rather than mere *facades* (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). For example, KOLs will play a key role in improving corporate social responsibility (CSR), implementing diversity management and incorporating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).

Learning from failure, risk avoidance and re-challenging

Starting a business does not always lead to success; many ventures fail. For example, in the USA, only 47% of startups survive for five years (Gonzalez, 2017). However, if people give up on trying again simply because of their single failure, society and the economy will not be revitalized. Encouraging people to try again is crucial for revitalizing society through innovation, because failure is a valuable learning opportunity.

Bashir, Nika, and Singh (2026) focused on entrepreneurs' learning from failure. Specifically, they examined the impact of entrepreneurial learning on entrepreneurial intention. They also analyzed the mediating effect of risk aversion resulting from failure within this mechanism. The results are as follows. The more entrepreneurs learn, the more likely they are to attempt to re-start a business even in the face of failure. On the other hand, the aforementioned mechanism is weakened by risk aversion. In other words, learning strengthens risk aversion, thereby weakening the intention to re-start a business. Thus, risk aversion appears to have a negative impact on innovation and the revitalization of society by weakening the intention to re-start a business. From a societal perspective, this is not desirable.

To mitigate the negative effects of such failure experiences, we should take the narrative of *Kozo Ozone*, a former vice president of Sony, to heart. He would often say, “Bury failure in the darkness” ([Ishida, 2008](#)). This means that while it is certainly best to make use of failure experiences, it is pointless if reprimands for failure dampen the motivation of those involved. Rather, it is better to forget about the failure and think about the next move.

Society, too, should be tolerant of failure so that we do not become overly risk-averse. [Arendt \(2005\)](#) argues that the spirit of *forgiveness* is essential to creating a society capable of learning from failure. It is forgiveness that guarantees human’s continued ability to take on challenges ([Arendt, 2005](#)).

Feedback to entrepreneurs and identity formation

[Kurteshi and Almeida \(2026\)](#) exploratorily examined the identity formation and development process within entrepreneurial teams. In particular, they examined the impact of the interaction between individual identity, shared identity and knowledge processes on collaboration, trust and decision-making among members. The study participants were active entrepreneurial team members who had completed the *iLab* Incubation Program at the Central European University (CEU). This program supports students and ventures in transforming into viable startups by providing mentoring, training, networking opportunities, workspace and connections with investors.

The analysis revealed that knowledge sharing, resource exchange and mentorship through active networking help shape teams’ entrepreneurial identity. Furthermore, it was found that trust among members, open communication and feedback further strengthen this entrepreneurial identity by enhancing adaptability, agility and performance.

These results imply the importance of feedback. It is often difficult for managers to obtain feedback. In situations lacking psychological safety ([Edmondson, 2018](#)), subordinates frequently become defensive, fearing punishment and remain silent toward their superiors ([Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003](#)). However, without feedback, leaders miss opportunities to improve adaptability and agility.

Entrepreneurs, and indeed all leaders, should ensure psychological safety in the workplace for their subordinates and proactively create an environment where feedback can be obtained. To that end, executives, managers and leaders should make a point of expressing gratitude for feedback from their subordinates. Furthermore, they should use that feedback to drive their own transformation. Feedback from subordinates and colleagues will provide leaders with guidance on how to transform themselves.

New ways to use feedback for double-loop learning

[Bolar et al.’s \(2026\)](#) viewpoint paper also relates to feedback, but that from customers. [Bolar and Nambiar \(2026\)](#) examined a learning framework for improving customer service in the banking industry by integrating employee training, the 3Cs model of service (courtesy, clarity, consistency) and digital feedback mechanisms. The banking sector is one of the areas undergoing dramatic change through digital transformation (DX). Specifically, banks are introducing mobile apps, chatbots and artificial intelligence (AI) analytics to improve their services ([Bolar & Nambiar, 2026](#)). Furthermore, digital feedback tools such as QR surveys and mobile app forms are used.

[Bolar and Nambiar \(2026\)](#) examined a feedback loop in which digital feedback mechanisms contribute to employee training, thereby improving the 3Cs (courtesy, clarity, consistency) of service and also generating feedback on the service itself. Through this cycle, double-loop learning occurs in addition to single-loop learning. While single-loop learning refers to incremental changes in practical knowledge and skills, double-loop learning refers

to the revision of deeper assumptions and values underlying practices (Argyris & Schön, 1978), which contributes to a higher level of learning.

It is worth noting that the feedback obtained is used not only for single-loop learning but also for double-loop learning, such as the revision of standard operating procedures (SOPs). The application of feedback to double-loop learning can likely be leveraged not only in banking but also in other industries. Customer feedback is the best teaching material. Furthermore, the subjects of double-loop learning – an organization's assumptions and values – are typically defined by its leaders. Given this, we can conclude that customer feedback catalyzes the leaders' self-transformation necessary for double-loop learning.

Stimulate curiosity to enhance creativity

It is natural to view creativity and curiosity as inseparably linked. The study by Raj and Chang (2026) examined the factors that enhance employees' work curiosity and creative behavior. Specifically, Raj and Chang (2026) analyzed the mechanisms through which organizational support for innovation and cognitive problem solving enhance employees' work curiosity and increase their creative behavior, based on a survey of managers and knowledge workers at high-technology manufacturing firms in Taiwan. They also examined the moderating effect of employee motivation on these mechanisms.

Raj and Chang (2026) revealed that curiosity has a positive impact on creative behavior and innovation performance. Interestingly, while organizational support for innovation enhances work curiosity, its effect varies depending on the type of motivation. Specifically, *intrinsic* motivation strengthens the impact of organizational support for innovation on work curiosity, whereas *extrinsic* motivation weakens this relationship.

This finding is not surprising. Intrinsic motivation stems from interest in and passion for the work itself, as well as the joy derived from performing it. The more strongly members felt these emotions, the greater their opportunities to increase work curiosity. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation – such as pay raises, promotions or recognition from others – did not enhance work curiosity. Based on these results, it can be concluded that curiosity and creativity cannot be bought with money.

Therefore, to foster innovation, managers should implement management practices that enhance *intrinsic* motivation. As one strategy to achieve this, Raj and Chang (2026) propose introducing recognition systems that highly value not only the achievement of short-term goals but also long-term learning and knowledge sharing. Furthermore, it can be said that fostering such a learning-oriented culture is a key to generating employee curiosity and innovation. Thus, fostering a culture that highly values learning is one of the goals of a learning organization (Senge, 1990) and a key task for transformational leaders.

Transform your leadership style for sustainable organizational learning

Hariharan and Anand (2026) focused on the distinction between *stock* and *flow* in the learning process. Here, *individual learning stock* refers to competence, individual capability and motivation to carry out required tasks (Hariharan & Anand, 2026). On the other hand, *learning flow* is divided into feed-forward and feedback components. *Feed-forward learning flow* refers to the sharing of learning outcomes within a group and their application to future learning. *Feedback learning flow* refers to the updating and application of knowledge based on learning outcomes. In other words, the former is closely related to double-loop learning, while the latter is closely related to single-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Hariharan and Anand (2026) examined the differing effects of two leadership styles – transformational and transactional – on these learning stocks and flows. Specifically, they examined how inspiring followers to transcend their self-interest (transformational) and

understanding followers' needs and providing rewards in response (transactional) each influence the learning process.

Although the processes revealed by the analysis are complex, their essence is as follows (for details, see [Hariharan & Anand, 2026](#), Figure 1): *Transformational* leadership has a direct effect on individual learning stock and feed-forward learning flows. In other words, transformational leadership enhances individual learning ability while stimulating knowledge-sharing behavior. This can be described as an effect on future-oriented double-loop learning ([Argyris & Schön, 1978](#)). On the other hand, regarding *transactional* leadership, its direct effects were observed only on feedback learning flows. In other words, transactional leadership is effective only for one-time knowledge application, which is single-loop learning.

The implications drawn from these findings are clear: To foster sustainable organizational learning for the future, leaders should strengthen their transformational leadership behavior. Notably, this is a feasible implication for leaders. As [Hariharan and Anand \(2026\)](#) pointed out, the ratio of these two types of leadership behavior exists on a continuum; most leaders engage in transformational behavior, even if only to a small extent. The goal is to gradually increase the proportion of such behavior. Through this process, leaders should transform themselves.

Conclusions

By synthesizing the findings and assertions of the above papers, the following implication emerges: Leaders must transform themselves ([Hariharan & Anand, 2026](#)). More specifically, leaders should strengthen their knowledge orientation ([Budur et al., 2026](#)). Furthermore, leaders should welcome feedback on their own behavior and use it ([Bolar & Nambiar, 2026](#); [Kurteshi & Almeida, 2026](#)).

A leader must be a role model for their team members. Such attitudes and behaviors on the part of leaders seeking to transform themselves will naturally lead to the transformation of members and the organization. In other words, for leaders to transform their organizations, they must first transform themselves. To this end, leaders must use feedback ([Bolar & Nambiar, 2026](#); [Kurteshi & Almeida, 2026](#)) to improve their self-awareness, make commitments, overcome interference and implement the transformation ([Pant, 2023](#)). Such self-transformation is an essential skill for modern leaders ([Pant, 2023](#)).

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Further reading

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