"Imagination is everything. It is the preview
of life's forthcoming attractions."
— *Albert Einstein*

No Going Back

magine transformation. You can do it. Our human brain is uniquely wired to imagine. You might think of the change from day to night, or more likely the amazing journey of the caterpillar to butterfly. It is a fascinating thing, this journey of transformation. In nature, it's all around us; it happens in the simple flow of things and is part of a subconscious path of existence. But in business, it is a conscious journey, embarked upon by a strategy.

We recently were engaged by a client to design a series of meetings to launch its 2007 strategic initiative of "transformation." We love these types of challenges for their creative dare. Can you make, from the material provided, a journey that challenges and involves participants to help them create an actual transformational process, to ignite the way we think, to inspire action?

Before we begin, we always issue this warning: Once you begin designing a meeting to become an experience, once you connect meeting as part of the process, there is no going back. This is similar to an intellectual shot across a cultural bow. Once your team or employees attends and participates in this unique type of meeting, they will expect the same experience each time. To go from a multimedia "show" to a standard podium/power will be disastrous to your transformation process. A meeting should be a step in a process that leads to real, substantive and measurable action. We view this meeting not simply as a jump start, but as part of the real strategy.

Once you see enrollment from a client in this style, you begin the real process of due diligence. You open the door to the core of the initiative, what is driving the need or desire to transform. Transformation is substantially larger than change. Change can occur in an organic way, over time, while transformation is like a sun going supernova. It's a big deal. It is a conscious decision. This strategy must reflect the path chosen by the organization.

Transformation is pretty much a one-way street. It is about the commitment to move in a new direction, a decision that our current reality no longer will serve our core purpose of who and what we are. Like pushing off to catch a wave, once you have paddled hard with the incoming swell and the energy grabs your board, there is only one way to go, down the face of that roaring force of nature. The same is true with embarking on the transformation process. As with the wave, the end result is an unknown. For an organization to embark on the unknown is not a natural form of management; it takes real leadership courage.

It is much easier to simply stay the course, to make small adjustments to market conditions and cruise along. The transformation process is disruptive and takes a level of

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individual and organizational commitment. For most, the market does not reward the status quo. The reason? The status quo is never really the status quo. Thanks to the chaos of today's changing markets, transformation might be the only thing to keep a company on the cutting edge.

The cutting edge of industry is being redefined every day, and those setting the bar almost always are in the transformation business. It might be subtle, such as if a new player on the field attacks an industry from a new perspective or an existing player is different in his approach, product placement or service strategy. All are transformations.

We are blessed to be involved in the transformation of many of our clients. We can recognize the behavior. Here are three aspects:

1. Alignment. A company begins to gather common forces around an idea.

2. Harness energy. The company involves as many people as possible in the process.

3. People placement. The group recognizes what people "do" and creates a system of accountability. The right people are put in the right places at the right time.

Michael Stanford, CEO of First State Banccorporation in New Mexico, knows all about transformation. He is a casual, easy-talking professional with no real banking experience. He came from humble beginnings. His father is a welder. He had no intention of becoming a bank president.

But an opportunity arose to buy a bank in Taos. He saw a chance, a risk that looked like an opportunity. He had no money for the investment, but he was able to talk a friend into a loan.

He started in 1988 with four branches, $41 million in assets and 31 employees. Today, he has 20 offices throughout New Mexico with $700 million in assets and 301 employees. The transformation was incredible.

Stanford brought a different view of banking and wanted to transform the traditional industry with a focus on employees. If he could engage his people in his new way of doing business, he knew their energy alone would drive the transformation he needed to take his sleepy ski-resort bank to a new level.

Stanford followed the same basic transformation process mentioned earlier:

Involve. Many decisions are made in a transformation process, so the more people

involved, the greater the penetration of ideas.

Empower. When applying transformational ideas, when taking something from the white board to the front lines, you must trust your people. They have to know and align around a mission. You must give them the power that makes the endeavor a reality. You must take the mistakes with the victories. It is the only way change occurs.

Respect. No matter what, this will be a time of difficulty for everyone. It is uncomfortable, and people will have a healthy level of fear and skepticism. Put the right people in the right place, and respect their decisions.

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For our client, we designed a dynamic full-day meeting, offered at its West Coast, Central and East Coast centers, to introduce the plan to a large employee base located throughout the country. We created a process that began with a "drip campaign." Short, creative notices were sent via mail and e-mail, setting the table for the meetings, creating a sense of excitement and anticipation, and putting the mission in front of everyone's eyes.

Each meeting was a full day, with a dynamic opening multimedia starting point. Break-out sessions isolated key elements within each division. The final piece of the day showed what the future of a transformed company would look like.

But that did not end the process. We connected the entire idea on a separate Web site, with regular postings on the progress and custom newsletters devoted to work done at each meeting.

At the end, they had a true process, a path that followed, supported and nurtured the transformation process.

The caterpillar never retreats from the cocoon, and the surfer never pulls back from a good wave. ○➞○

Steve Harvill is principal of Creative Ventures. He can be reached at steveharvill@ businessleader.com or by visiting www. creativeventures.com.