

The new age transformational leader: Richard Branson

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Abstract

The present time demand creating a high-performance team. To gain success, these teams normally follow a high performance culture. Also, business leaders are constantly engaged in inspiring team members so that they can go an extra mile. These days meeting customer's and client's expectations is not enough but to exceed it. As a result, new concepts of leadership have emerged and transformational leadership is one of them. With an aim to focus on the change management in the necessary areas, this article puts light on the transformational leadership style as a solution in this new age for transforming today's leaders. Moreover, taking Sir Richard Branson as a living example, of such a leadership style, this research discusses his style and sees him as the transformational leader. No one has attempted to do this, so far. Branson, often regarded as a dynamic yet colourful entrepreneur is on everyone's mind in some way or the other. Some look to him for the lavish life that comes with big money, few speak of his candid behaviour and witty comments whilst others adore him for the success of his brand, Virgin. But, this article sees him as the game changer; the leader who can inspire others to become transformational leader.

The fast growing group, with the passage of time, today encompasses a variety of businesses from airlines to bridal wear from mobile phones to pension plans and this also include music. In fact, probably, it is the only brand in the world that transcends such a vast array of products and services. The Virgin group, with its varied businesses, has become stronger with diversification rather than being diluted. The brand is known as an innovative and cool alternative as against the big players. Today, more than just a successful businessman, Sir Richard Branson is the symbolic leader for new entrepreneurs.

Sir Richard Branson with his creative spirit, vibrant advertising ideas and innovative methods to attract the people stands out like a corporate hero with popularity not less than any Oscar award winner. It is certain that Branson has met failures many times but his attempt, to come out of it, has always grabbed people's attention. From those events, his up and downfalls while establishing Virgin, we can learn his leadership style. Moreover, it does not matter how many times you fall, it matters if you rise every time you fall. While other entrepreneurs may get involved in corporate quarrels, Richard Branson thinks business challenges as a campaign. He prides himself in taking on big companies to offer customers better value for money. For instance, when Virgin entered the market, customers already had a sense that they weren't being treated fairly. Branson's better value offerings placed it firmly on the customers' side. While some entrepreneurs might look at the power of the market leaders and think better of the challenge, Branson believes in taking on the big players and winning.

Branson's informal style and unconventional attitude has earned him fame. His affinity to the hippie movement, particularly of the sixties, simply reflects his knack for being in tune with the feeling of the times. This is one of Branson's greatest business attributes. This allows him to project the Virgin brand as a "cool" alternative. Besides, Branson is not motivated by money. Money may be a measure of his success, but for him the excitement is in the challenge. Virgin staffs are often paid a little less than market rates yet they are happy to work for Virgin because they enjoy being in the team. In this regard, I now draw your attention to the fact that employee retention has become a major issue for HR and organizations today. It is sad that many reputed companies pay less attention to this problem; as a result they lose skilled employees and keep spending on training new ones. I have observed that majority of the people today change jobs within a span of two years. However, Branson's style of leadership doesn't regard money as a measure to retain employees but the work culture; that everyone feels proud to be the part of the Virgin family, which stops them from moving to other jobs even though it may provide them some salary hike. Branson believes business should be fun. His own appetite for work and the success of his business ventures rests on this belief. Going to the office at Virgin isn't the same that one usually thinks of. It is rather an excitement and similar to play one's favourite sport; that does has challenges but the desire to win is more important than the pains. In this sense, Branson inspires people, creates an exciting work culture that motivates people and makes them want to deliver their best. His adventurous spirit and confidence that no mountain is too high is infectious. The sense of fun, excitement and challenge keeps Virgin employees happy. Leading with self-example, Branson inspires his staff. Virgin sales and profit levels are far above the industry standards. Branson wants and expects his people to do their best to achieve the goals he sets for them. Doing "the impossible, possible" is rooted in the Virgin culture. For Branson, the Virgin experience has been a magical mystery tour. That is the reason people can't resist joining the Virgin adventure. It is a way of life than a job.

Branson's leadership style is transformational but it is focused on reputational branding rather than service branding. In this sense, the Virgin brand is mainly known for such qualities like creativity, value for money, quality, reliability, innovation, return on investment, fun at work and adventure. The Virgin group did have ups and downs like other companies but it continues to be the cool player in the game as well as the trend-setter and game changer for global businesses. Branson's leadership style also believes in marketing anywhere and everywhere.

Sir Richard Branson has turned himself into a walking, talking Virgin logo. Every time as he appears on TV, in the newspaper or a magazine, he promotes the Virgin brand. Branson is as popular as any Hollywood star. This is a deliberate and very wise marketing strategy. Besides, public relations are Branson's backbone of business. With the launch of Virgin Atlantic, Branson discovered a new trick. For example, whilst major airlines spent millions of dollars on advertising, Branson came up with generating free media to stay in the race. He began with a series of daredevil escapades. So, instead of spending millions on advertising, Branson mastered the art of generating column inches for free. In this sense, Branson delivers something much more valuable news rather employing PR firms to manage the media events. To publicize the launch of his airline, he appeared at the press conference dressed like "Biggles" in a brown leather aviator helmet. The press loved it. They splashed Branson's image all over their newspapers and Virgin didn't even need to advertise its first flights. Branson made the decision to challenge for the Blue Riband – the prize for the fastest Atlantic crossing – when he discovered he couldn't afford the rates to promote his airline on the New York television. Besides, Branson's (transformational) leadership style puts the company's interest first even if it means portraying himself as a fool; whether it is playing the flight attendant, dressing up in a pirate costume or risking his life in a hot-air balloon, Branson doesn't shy away from the spotlight. In fact, he knows just how to snatch attention. Branson's leadership style is also found in his speeches at various occasions. Instead of formal serious speeches, he comes with motivating one that one could speak while addressing a party. This not only inspires people but makes them feel at home, as the members of virgin household. In one of public meetings, Branson addressed, "Life is an adventure...life is fun."

One of the important qualities of Branson's leadership style that I observe is not expecting people to blindly follow or obey him instead he gives them liberty to think and freedom to create. He allows them space to create mistake but that encourages his team to be innovative and discover new ways of promoting and expanding business. He dominates the team by being the most enthusiastic like a party animal. Thus, challenged and exhilarated by the Virgin philosophy, people are moved as well as motivated. In contrast to that rather than letting Virgin companies expand indefinitely he believes in keeping it manageable. When a company in the Virgin Group reaches a certain size, Sir Richard Branson will take the assistant managers aside and tell them that they are now in charge of a new company. The policy of promoting talent from within encourages Virgin employees to give their all in the hope that they will be given the opportunity to really shine and when everything is in place, he takes a back seat. The most important point I observe, on transformational leadership style of Branson is that he does not take the credit instead makes employees feel their worth but when things go wrong he takes it on himself and stands for the loss. Thus, I see Branson's leadership towards his team as an art more similar to an orchestra than an army. In this sense, one of Branson's greatest attributes in my view is that he initiates, then steps aside and allows people to get on with it. He is a silent captain allowing his team to play the game but intervenes when necessary and motivates them from time to time.

With up to 200 companies in the Virgin group, it would be impossible to be a hands-on leader of every company. But there is another aspect to the Branson leadership phenomenon. When an opportunity strikes, Branson moves at record-breaking speed and makes full use of it. Management gurus are simply amazed at the speed at which his huge organisation is able to act. Virgin Atlantic Airways was just five months after the idea was first floated. Virgin Direct, the financial services company, was also up and running after only five months. For other companies, normally, it would have taken at least two to three years to reach a decision and implement the ideas. Branson relies on his business instincts and doesn't waste valuable time trying to convince the bunch of managers that his newest brainwave is an idea worth doing rather he begins and creates a wave in itself by implementing it and thus justifies it. Branson somehow always manages to be the man of the moment.

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Conclusion

Business environment in the present times is surrounded by uncertainty, global turbulence and organizational instability. This calls for a new age leadership with an aim to triumph at all levels for the organization. The organization and its people need to change and transform to the changing scenario. 'Transformational Leadership' is the answer. It is a key to success and a pathway to supersede business challenges. Transformational leaders demonstrate high levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. They show the organizational citizenship behaviours and feel accountable not just for their work but for their organization like a patriot thinks for his nation. Sir Richard Branson is one such living example especially when we talk about his brand, Virgin. Also, one can easily identify him as the transformational leader by having a close look at the history of Virgin and observing his leadership style and concern for his team.

The Virgin Empire has over the years grown organically. This is due to Branson's leadership style. It speaks of setting up new companies for expansion. While most of the corporate world may be obsessed with the size of the organisations, Branson prefers to keep it small. The Virgin group retains its unique energy and speed because it maximises the entrepreneurial spirit of its staff whilst minimising the bureaucracy of its systems. Branson, the human dynamo at the centre of the Virgin phenomenon, is constantly sparking off new ideas. At any given point the virgin people will have about four new projects under review. But as soon as the project is discussed, it can hit the ground in few months. Branson says that he usually immerses himself in a new venture for the first three months, then he backs off and keeps in touch every six months or so. The only exception to this is Virgin Atlantic Airways.

Above and beyond, Sir Richard Branson's leadership style emphasizes on touching people's lives. About once a week he takes a flight. He always talks to the other passengers during the flight. We know he is famous for dressing up in a stewardess uniform and using lipstick to serve drinks to customers and crew but he is also known for the one to break silence and talk to people, asking them what they think of the airline and how the service could be improved. When he began Virgin Atlantic Airways, Branson had a policy of personally phoning 50 customers a month to ask about the service. This was unlike other airline directors who had a status quo for opening discussions to the economy class customers. This change in Richard Branson's leadership style as compared to other business tycoons is very inspiring. He treats people decently and listens to what they have to say. In fact, leadership is all about listening than just speaking. Branson represents excitement, success, hard work and adventure. All of this instigates great learning for the new age leaders, and also for the old leaders who need to change with time and transform their leadership style, to sustain their businesses.

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