



# Never the Same:

## How to Create Transformational Experiences

Hello. Let's Change the World Together. *continued* ▶

by Charles Halton

You can change someone forever with just a few words. We're all creating transformational experiences everyday—at work, at home, with friends, or at school. The only question is—do you leave people the same or do you change them forever?

Here are 18 characteristics that are essential for creating transformational experiences. While most of the illustrations used with these characteristics relate to formal teaching, the principles still apply to any experience that is aimed at changing someone, whether a corporate presentation, a quick conversation, or a semester-long class.

The process of writing this manifesto has certainly changed me. It has caused me to re-evaluate how I teach and interact with others and I hope that this manifesto will also cause you to re-think things as well. Hopefully, we will both be changed forever through this experience.

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## **Transformation.**

**Caterpillar to butterfly.**

## **Experience.**

**An event or occurrence that leaves an impression on someone.<sup>1</sup>**

In order to be changed, you must have an open mind. Some things in this manifesto may seem silly, over-the-top, completely obvious, or really helpful. The point is to make you think about how you can more effectively change people (and yourself in the process). If I have to be silly, over-the-top, or completely obvious in order to do that—I'm not above humbling myself to help you.

But, to be honest, this is the easy part. There is a huge difference between knowing what to do and actually doing it. While knowing might be half the battle, the other half—execution—takes diligence, practice, and hard work. I can't really help you too much with this (I can hopefully help a little as you'll see). Either you desire to be great at creating transformational experiences so that you think about it and work at it, or you don't.

Even though it takes hard work to create incredibly great transformational experiences, I know you're up to it. You've already shown your interest by reading this far. The really great things of life aren't cheap. Creating value takes smart thinking and hard work—but it's worth it all. Just think about all the things in your life that you cherish. My guess is that they were not acquired and maintained effortlessly. So, let's re-think things together and look at really obvious stuff from a different angle and then go out and change the world for the better!

## 1 Inspire Passion or Go Home

Yea, you read that right. If you're half-hearted about inspiring passion then close up the laptop and do something else—reading this manifesto won't help you.

That sounded harsh, but it's 100% true.

### **Wanted: people with infectious passion.**

Passion is where it all starts and ends. To truly change someone, you have to change them on an emotional level. Someone can be convinced of a fact, but just not want to live out the implications of this fact in their lives. To make a true change, you have to reach down and stir their inner being; in other words, you have to inspire a passion for whatever you're teaching.

Hopefully, once you've inspired passion in someone and given them enough tools to get started, they can then take what you've taught them and use it to help their dreams flourish. The passion that you've instilled in them will carry them forward through difficult times and cause their transformational experience to be meaningful and lasting. If you motivate through fear, you'll get minimum compliance in order to avoid negative consequences. If you motivate through passion and love, you'll get people who will walk to the ends of the earth with bare feet in order to accomplish their dreams.

In order to inspire passion in others, you yourself must be passionate about two things: the stuff you're teaching, and the people you're teaching it to. If you don't love the stuff you're teaching, why are you wasting your time with it and why should the person you're teaching waste their time on it? If you don't love the people you're trying to change, why are you working so hard to change them? People are smart. They can tell when they're being used, played with, or manipulated. You're not going to inspire passion if you're a phony.

Think back to all your professors who dully read from a book during class or all the presentations you've sat through in which the presenter just read the tiny and densely packed words on the PowerPoint slide. No emotion. No passion. You probably skipped class and slept through the presentation. And you probably didn't miss much either. Since the teacher wasn't passionate you didn't even give their ideas a proper hearing and if ideas don't even get a hearing they can hardly effect change. Don't be like all the others that put you to sleep, wake up your audience and stir their emotions with your passion. Put them on the edge of their seat wanting more—not reaching for their coffee cup fighting just to stay awake.

Furthermore, creating transformational experiences isn't easy. Not only do you have to sustain your audience's attention, but you have to sustain your own attention as well. If you're not passionate about the subject you're talking about, you'll have a tough time persevering through obstacles and frustrations and you'll likely fizzle out fairly quickly or you'll be miserable as you doggedly trudge forward.

## 2 Create Controversy

Controversy causes people to think. If people start thinking, they might change. Status quo leaves people where they are—unmoved and the same.

Creating controversy is not being a shock jock or a wild-eyed wacko—it's about creating dissonance in someone's mind. Controversy is presenting new information (or old information in a new way) that will cause someone to reflect upon it.

Here are some examples of how to create controversy in your opening remarks of a conversation, a presentation, or a lecture: Create a seeming paradox that relates to what you are teaching and then unwind it. Open with a penetrating rhetorical question. Hold up an example of an aphorism that everyone believes and then demonstrate its absurdity. Drop a bombastic statement and then calmly unpack it. Paint vivid and slightly obscure word pictures, analogies, and illustrations. Repackage information in new and quirky ways so that people are forced to reprocess it.

The goal of creating controversy is to begin a conversation in your audience's head. You want them to start throwing your ideas around, looking at them from all directions, weighing the pros and cons, wrestling with themselves, and then coming to a positive conclusion. If they go through all these mental gymnastics, they probably won't forget what you taught them.

### 3 Be Different

We live a loud and noisy world. If you just blend in and are the same as the faceless mob, you're not going to get a hearing and you're not going to cause people to think and change.

**Instead of looking at a glass of water to see if it's half full or half empty—knock the glass back with big, deep gulps.**

Most often, change means going against the current. Going against the current causes you to stand out and provides a contrast with the surrounding world. In short, it causes you to be different.

**The majority is wrong. Avoid normalcy at all costs.**

How many opinion polls have you seen in which you totally disagree with the majority of respondents and you think to yourself, "How can there be this many brain dead people running around?" The idea of "collective wisdom" is a lot more collective than it is wise. I've noticed an interesting phenomenon. When I talk with people about a serious medical procedure that they, or their loved one has gone through, they always say the same thing: "Dr X. is the best heart surgeon in the city." It's funny how many heart surgeons are all simultaneously the "best in town." Furthermore, people never say, "I took my mom to see a slightly below average neurosurgeon for her delicate operation." People intrinsically know that when it comes to really important stuff (and what you're teaching better be really important, if not, re-read characteristic 01) normal just doesn't cut it.

## 4 Be a Social Butterfly

To create transformational experiences you need to approach things from new angles. You need to pack old information in new and compelling packages. You need to think up new solutions to old problems. In order to do this our minds need to be trained to think creatively. When we were young we naturally were creative. We drew outside the lines, we daydreamed like crazy, and we had imaginary friends. As we grew up these tendencies were mercilessly beaten out of us and we were jammed into one-size-fits-all moulds. It's time to break out of those moulds and rediscover your childhood creativity.

Expose yourself to new ways of thinking and new experiences. Travel. Avoid the hotel chains and stay in bed and breakfasts and talk with the other guests and the owners. Visit small towns and villages as well as the big cities. Meet new people from different walks of life. If you're conservative, read some thoughtful liberals. If you're liberal, read some thoughtful conservatives. If you are a middle of the road, faceless mob person, it's time to engage with the fringes. Go ahead, explore that bell curve and expand your mind and unleash your creativity.

As you expose yourself to different points of view, do so actively. Wrestle with ideas and flesh out their consequences. Expose their flaws and discover their strengths. When you meet new people, don't judge by appearances or first reactions. Often these snap judgments will just hinder us from understanding valuable aspects of our new friends. You can learn something from everyone. Yes, sometimes you will learn what not to do, but most times you can learn at least one positive thing from someone.

**Bonus:** As well as expanding your creativity, new experiences will also give you material for illustrations.

## 5 Repetition is the Mother of All Learning

A large part of the learning curriculum of ancient peoples was the memorization of lists, phrases, and stories. They realized that people don't normally remember things the first time they hear it. You've heard the phrase: Tell people what you're going to say, say it, tell them what you said. You've heard this for a reason—it works. For information to stick in people's mind, they need to be exposed to it several times, preferably in slightly different ways each time.

## 6 Humans are the Same

Deep down we all want the same things—happiness, contentment, love, a sense of belonging, friendship, security, fun, excitement, forgiveness, purpose.... Speak to the universal human desires. Therefore, you won't have to care about who your audience is. Whether you're speaking to a group of airport workers in Uzbekistan or your best friend from kindergarten, you'll still be speaking their language. All great things in life speak to humanity's deep desires. If you relate your teaching to these things, you'll speak to everyone.

## 7 Humans are Different

Humans are individuals. Individuals. People. Not numbers. Not statistics. People. Individuals.

Even though humans have the same fundamental desires, these desires manifest themselves in different ways. This means you have to flush your cookie cutter presentations and your formulaic pieces of advice down the toilet. What works for Aunt Mildred is not going to work with your teenage son and it's certainly not going to work with your type A, all hyped up on caffeine and no sleep boss.

Think about coaching an NBA basketball team. You have a group of very highly paid and ego-centric men trying (or not) to play together as a team. As a coach, you have to find a way to motivate each individual on that team. Some players will probably have all the money they ever need so doling out fines or granting bonuses is probably not going to help that much. But, a \$10,000 fine for a second or third string player might get their attention. Some players might respond to screaming in their face while others might react by choking you. When you attempt to change someone or a group of people, try to understand what they care about, what will best motivate them. This takes more work than trotting out your one-size-fits-all presentation, but taking a little more time and customizing your teaching will have a much better chance at effecting change.

Also, don't expect people to conform to what you want them to be. Since people are different, your teaching will change different people in slightly (or not so slightly) different ways. Instead of forcing people into a preset mould, connect with them on your shared deep desires and give them tools so that their desires can flourish in their own unique way.

## 8 Embrace Paradoxes

We live in a paradoxical world. Get used to it. Embrace it.

Paradoxes are not always (probably only seldomly) contradictions. Rather, paradoxes explore different sides to the same reality. Something might initially strike you as a contradiction and upon further reflection you might realize that a seeming paradox accurately explains the world. Don't be afraid to hold things in tension with one another. Furthermore, paradoxes are great ways to get people to pay attention to your ideas.

## 9 Repetition is the Mother of All Learning

Do you have a photographic memory? I didn't think so, but neither do I. So, you and I have to compensate for our lack of a photographic memory by reminding ourselves of important things. If we have to do this for ourselves, chances are, we also need to do this in our teaching to help other people remember things as well. Now that you have seen characteristic #05 in a slightly different way, go back and re-read the fifth characteristic. After all, repetition is the mother of all learning.

## 10 Pass Along Methodologies

If you think you're a gate keeper, just passing along information to be regurgitated on the next pop quiz or quarterly review, I have news for you: There is no gate keeper and Google has just outsourced your job. At one time teachers might have been able to get away with merely passing along bits of data for students to memorize and blindly accept, but that day is long gone.

Anyone can access as much information as they want with a keystroke. But, that's the problem. We have too much information and now we need people to help us navigate through it. That's where you come in. As you teach people, you should help your audience develop the skills they need so that they can navigate through the rushing torrent of information. This does not mean that they should never come back to you for help, but your goal should be to help your students become independent.

In order to do this, you need to teach (among other things) methodologies. You've probably heard the Chinese proverb, but it's worth repeating, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." If you want your teaching to impact people forever, feed them for a lifetime.

## 11 Don't Be a Slave to Fashion

A few thousand years ago an ancient writer said, “Whatever is has already been, and what will be has already been before.”<sup>2</sup> These words are as true now as they were when they were penned. Some companies (I won't name names but you probably know who I'm talking about anyway) have tried every new management initiative that consultants and business writers have ever generated. Every couple years they try a new strategy that will “shake everything up.” Some of these companies are now fighting for their very survival.

If you're out to change someone or something, make sure it is substantive change that will truly make a lasting difference. Most of the change-mongers are merely propagating fads that will come and go about as fast as the next boy-band. The same ancient writer as above also said, “There is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>c</sup> Meditate on it. Use this phrase to provide some balance to the “new” and “innovative” techniques and theories that swirl around you.

## 12 Be Inefficient

Our culture prizes many things, but the holy grail might be “efficiency.” We live in a world that relentlessly pushes us to do things more quickly and more inexpensively. If you’re going to provide outstanding transformational experiences, you’re going to have to get off this bus.

### **Inefficiency is the key to change.**

You can’t churn out great ideas and great experiences in 15 minutes of sitting at your desk. It’s just not going to happen. You can get a spark of an idea in 15 minutes, but great ideas take time to flesh out and properly implement.

### **Inefficiency takes preparation.**

If you’re working on a key presentation you might consider getting out of the office and taking a walk and just let your ideas about the presentation bounce around your head. If you’re a professor, instead of thinking about your lecture as you walk to class, you should be thinking of how you’re going to present next week’s lectures and how to structure courses that you will teach a year from now.

Ideas are like seeds. They must be planted, watered, fertilized, and given time in order for them to bloom. This process might fly in the face of the exalted “efficiency,” but the results will be mighty impressive.

## 13 Produce a lot

Throw your ideas out there and see what sticks. You'll be wrong sometimes, but who cares? There are worse things in life than being wrong. Throwing your ideas out there doesn't always mean publishing them on the front page of the *New York Times*. It might mean spending a little more time working out the implications or asking a friend what they think of your idea. Sometimes it does mean broadcasting your idea for all to see.

If you think your ideas have to be perfect before you release them, your ideas will never change anyone because you will never share them. Humans aren't perfect. Neither are their ideas. Get over the idea of having to have a perfect batting average. Hitting a .400 is incredible for a professional baseball player. If 75% of your ideas are truly awesome, you will effect a huge amount of change. Who cares if people snicker about the 25%? They probably aren't changing anyone anyway. It's much easier to criticize than it is to build something great.

Producing a lot also means that you should make yourself into a question factory. Start questioning everything. Remember when you were a kid and your favorite word was, Why? Start asking "why" again and don't settle for easy answers. If you ask a lot of questions, you'll force yourself to think about things in different ways as you hunt down answers.

## 14 Humiliate Yourself

No one's perfect. The sooner you realize this, the greater you will be. Sometimes you will make mistakes. Sometimes you will be wrong. Sometimes you will be wrong in front of a crowd of people. All of this is okay. Know what it makes you? Human.

In order to change people you're going to have to motivate people when they are unmotivated. Sometimes doing this will make you look like a fool to your audience. Sometimes no matter how hard you try, the audience just won't engage with you. Sometimes you'll have a great new idea that will fall flat on its face. But you'll never know until you try it out.

Being willing to put yourself on the line and opening up to possible humiliation if you fail is a sign that you love the people you're trying to change. People will see that and respect you even if you fail. Being willing to humiliate yourself will also give you tremendous freedom. If you're afraid of failure you probably won't take the risks that are required to enact real change. Moving from the status quo is always a risk because we don't have perfect knowledge of what will happen if we change. Embracing humility will give you freedom from this risk-crushing fear and will open you up to the wonderful vistas of creativity and change.

## 15 **Cultivate an Atmosphere of Trust and Safety**

Now that you are perfectly willing to humiliate yourself, create an environment in which your audience is willing to humiliate themselves as well. An atmosphere in which they trust that you won't ridicule them or put a spotlight on their mistakes will free your audience to venture out and attempt change. Let them know that it's okay fail and that even if they do, you will still accept them. Give positive feedback when someone does something right and hold up accomplishments for all to see.

### **Boundaries create freedom.**

Creating an atmosphere of trust and safety does not mean that you create an atmosphere of chaos and limitless freedom. In order for your audience to be truly safe, you must protect people from danger. This involves gentle correction, steering people away from destructive ideas or actions, and setting up ground rules of common behavior (you can't have an atmosphere of trust if class members are tearing each other apart). So, give people room to roam (and fail) while at the same time creating constructive boundaries.

## **16 Stop Thinking You Know Everything**

You don't—know everything, that is. Neither do I. That's why we have to constantly learn and teach ourselves new things. In order to teach or to change someone or something, you have to have something new to say, do, or repackage. You can't milk one idea forever; you need to keep generating new ones in order to sustain your audience. Furthermore, even if you have one really great idea that can sustain change for an extended period of time, you probably can always make this idea even better by adding small changes here and a couple of tweaks there.

## **17 Be a Master of Surprise**

Surprise keeps people on their toes. It is easy to be lulled into a spirit of complacency, but surprise will help combat this. Surprise sustains attention and helps your audience avoid boredom. Also, surprise helps people remember things. Therefore, reserve your surprises for things that are particularly important and that you especially want your audience to remember.

## 18 Make it Clear

When creating transformational experiences, your job is not to make everyone think you're the smartest person in the room. Your job is to help people change their lives for the better, for life. To do this, your audience must understand you. I know this sounds simple, but how many presentations or lectures have you sat through in which you felt that the person speaking was really smart but you had no idea what they were saying? The mark of a truly intelligent person is an ability to make complex things simple. Complexity is just one more barrier and excuse for people not to change. Make your ideas as clear and concise as possible.

**Bonus:** When you run out of things to say, quit talking.

### ENDNOTES

1 Oxford American Dictionary

2 Ecclesiastes 3:15

3 Ecclesiastes 1:9

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Charles Halton was born and raised in Austin, Texas and is a graduate of the Mays Business School at Texas A&M University and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Charles is currently a Bible and Ancient Near East PhD student at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. While he is not studying tiny wedges impressed into 4,000 year old clay tablets, Charles edits awilum.com and enjoys spending time with his incredible wife Lori.

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