

A Journey from the Tender Heart to the Expansive Cosmos

A Review of Becoming a Transformative Leader from the Inside Out

Paul Freedman

E-mail: dancingmonkey@rockisland.com

Received March 2025

Accepted for publication March 2025

Published May 2026

Abstract

This book review discusses *Becoming a Transformative Leader from the Inside Out* by Renee Lee Owen and Christine Mason. The review describes the author's theory of transformative leadership and the importance of this work within the context of the discipline of leadership studies. The book is both theoretical, inspirational, and practical. It draws from systems thinking and holistic learning theories. The book is a much needed contribution to the field.

Keywords: *Transformative Leadership, Systems Thinking, Holistic Leadership*

In their new book, *Becoming a Transformative Leader from the Inside Out*, authors Renee Lee Owen and Christine Mason offer a powerful way of understanding transformative change theory as well as a practical guide towards becoming a transformative educational leader in our VUCA world. They center this development work on a process of focusing on deep interiority, expanding out well beyond the self, into becoming not only an organizational leader but a powerful catalyst for social change.

From the first pages, what comes through clearly is that these two authors are passionate visionaries, knowledgeable scholars, and holistic thinkers. The reader is welcomed with a poem by

May Sarton, "Now I Become Myself," and it is immediately clear that the journey through the chapters will be one of courage, festooned with beauty and wisdom, and with the appropriate depth and subjectivity for such a rich and nuanced exploration. We are guided through an ecology of existing leadership theories: From traits leadership, skills leadership, behavioral leadership, and towards authentic leadership. We are also introduced to the distinctions between transactional, transformational, and transformative leadership theory. Without burdening the reader with a litanic formal literature review, the authors provide more-than-adequate context for their own theory and model. It is clear that this work is grounded in a deep understanding of

contemporary scholarship and research. All the while, the reader is met repeatedly with intimate discourse in inset additions labeled “Our Voices.” It quickly becomes clear that we are on a relationship-based adventure with the authors, two self-identified “heart-centered leaders.” We are not being lectured at, but rather we are graciously guided along with great care, attention, and respect. It is rare to find such a warm and genuine embrace in a scholarly text.

Our guides are inspiring and dedicated. They provide us with the unequivocal reasons and motivations for accepting the invitation to journey together. It is clear that we are educating within a nested set of volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous systems. Old authoritarian styles of leadership are no longer appropriate, and are no longer effective. They make the compelling case that our schools and systems of education desperately need leaders who are in relationship with their stakeholders, and that these relationships are characterized by compassion, stability, hope, and trust.

One of the greatest challenges leaders in education face, is the ubiquity of enormous needs that demand immediate attention and action from every direction. It is common for leaders to be buffeted by the tempest that engulfs them. And there is a pervasive sense that “I must act more quickly, more decisively, and just *more*.” Therefore, it is refreshing that one of the central tenets of this text is to start close-in. We are encouraged to start with our very breath, our interiority, our most intimate and tender sense of self. No meaningful transformative change is possible without tending to the prerequisite inner work.

Another strong theme that emerges in this volume is that transformative change requires time, patience, and constancy. This is not only described but it is beautifully modeled in the

authors’ writing. This is not to say that the book’s pace is slow, rather that it feels inexorable, unyielding, like the slowly rising tide, as individual waves advance and recede, but that all the while, the waters are undeniably rising. Again and again, the authors take the time to remind us of what we have already explored together. Now, let’s look at it from a slightly different angle. Now, let’s reflect on how this concept relates to our lived experience. The content is weighty, and it is given its due and appropriate space to seep deeply in. Just as transformative change is a slow and emergent process, so is the journey towards its understanding. This sense is visceral and palpable. It echoes the words of philosopher Bayo Akomolafé, “The time is urgent. We must slow down.” (Akómoláfé, n.d.)

By the time the Inside Out model of transformative leadership is fully explicated, the reader already has a strong understanding of many of its principles. This is a concentric sphere model, the form of which may be familiar in concept to many readers. It is reminiscent of the wholes-within-wholes conception (holonomic theory) that is central to the pedagogy of holistic education. With careful and precise language, the authors offer us a description of each distinct *and connected* layer of the transformative leadership journey, from the leader’s commitment to exploring and cultivating their own tender interiority with a heart-centered sensitivity, outward through relationship-based leadership that transforms the school community and well beyond.

As the reader accepts the invitation to join in on this transformative journey, in addition to the warm story-telling of our guides and mentors in their “Our Voices” sections, we are offered many practical exercises, prompts, and questions to help guide our reflection. It may be useful for the reader to have a journal or voice recorder by their side, as we are frequently invited to sink into deep

contemplation as we process the personal and professional implications of each chapter. In this way, the book is at the same time thought-provokingly theoretical, spirit-soaringly inspirational, and eminently practical.

The book draws significantly from the outstanding foundational work by Peter Senge and his conception of systems thinking. The authors suggest that in this VUCA world, we must never neglect to consider the nuanced ecological relationships, as we exist simultaneously in multiple living systems. “As the world becomes more interconnected...complex and dynamic... it is no longer sufficient to have one person from the organization... It’s just not possible any longer to ‘figure it out’ from the top.” (Senge, 1990, p.4)

Leadership theorist and renown thought leader Margaret Wheatley is also referenced frequently, as her work reminds us to keep heart-centered relationship at the core of our leadership work. “The perfect storm is here,” Wheatley is cited, “as leaders dedicated to service the causes and people we treasure, confronted by this unrelenting tsunami, what are we to do?” (Wheatley, 2024, p. xi)

A critically important insight offered by this book’s authors is that transformation does not end with the self, the organization, or even the community. The book concludes with essential reminders that transformation is an outwardly expanding concept, and that ultimately transformative leadership has a responsibility to prioritize transforming society and reach towards social justice. The authors illuminate ways in which a leader’s transformative journey, both indirectly and directly, expands social justice in the world. In this way, this book expands beyond some humanistic and holistic leadership models, beyond the self-actualization concepts of psychologists such as Maslow and Rogers. Transforming society to become more equitable

and just must be the result of any meaningful understanding of transformative leadership.

The impact of a transformative leader extends far beyond the boundaries of individual schools. The ability to see the bigger picture, to recognize interconnected systems, and to use our influence all contribute to our ability to make transformative change on a societal level. Embracing this responsibility means understanding that even small efforts can have profound effects when viewed through a systems lens. (Owen & Mason, p. 224)

References

- Akómoláfé, B. (n.d.) “The Times Are Urgent, Let’s Slow Down.” <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/the-times-are-urgent-lets-slow-down>
- Owen, L.O. and Mason C. 2025. *Becoming a Transformative Leader from the Inside Out*. Bloomsbury.
- Senge, P. 1990. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. Doubleday Business.
- Wheatley, M. 2024. *Restoring Sanity: Practices to Awaken Generosity, Creativity, and Kindness in Ourselves and Our Organizations..* Berrett-Koehler Publishing.

Author Bio

Paul Freedman earned his EdD and MEd from Fielding Graduate University, his MA from Goddard College and his BA from Swarthmore College. Paul is a Senior Editor for The Holistic

Education Review. Paul is the founding and current Head of School at Salmonberry School. He serves on the faculty of The Institute for Educational Studies (TIES) where he leads the program in Integrative Learning. He served as President of The SelfDesign Graduate Institute, later The Graduate Institute for Transformative Learning. Paul taught elementary grades in various settings over 28 years. His current research interests include holistic school leadership.