

Frame the transformation agenda

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Build mission-critical  
capability

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## Notes on a transformation: One company's journey

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# Soundings

## King's counsel

Should executive coaches think of themselves as filling the same role Merlin did with King Arthur? **Charles E. Smith** would insist on it.

**A**s an executive coach, I'm often asked, "What really makes a difference in creating results-focused organizational behaviour?" Regrettably, few top managers accept the reality that improving their own personal effectiveness is the essential platform for organizational breakthrough. Significant personal change scares most executives. Furthermore, suggesting that they must undergo personal change before they can hope to change their organization implies that they have been inadequate both as a person and as a business leader.

Nonetheless, fundamental and sustained improvement in a business is always a function of fundamental change in the leader's point of view about what is possible. Over time, I've come to believe that executive coaches should work in the same style as the mythical Merlin. You may

recall that Merlin was King Arthur's mentor and teacher; and, in some versions of the tale, Arthur (as Merlin's pupil) was not fully confident that he could make Britain better. The young Arthur didn't fully trust his own leadership skills. But Merlin pushed, cajoled, prodded and persevered – and that's the point. *Merlin is a metaphor for the power of any coach to commit totally to another's success for the sake of an ambitious, worthwhile purpose.*

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team. These 14 Merlin Rules are not guidelines, which only suggest behaviour. They are rules that must be followed in order to focus an

executive's energy on not only becoming more effective personally but also expanding that new effectiveness by building a breakthrough organization. No executive can follow only the rules he's comfortable with. Here's the complete set:

**1. Implement uncharacteristic structures to produce uncharacteristic results.** I have asked top executives and their teams to commit 12 days over six months to education and team-building meetings. This seems like an impossible commitment at first, but it's essential for executives to change their norms or change is simply impossible.

**2. Commit to an extraordinary outcome.** Early on, I ask each top executive to demand of each team member a personal commitment to achieve an extraordinary goal – say, for example, to generate £18 million in additional company sales within six months. Once wedded to such a goal, transformational change becomes something that the executives desire, as opposed to something they resist.

**3. Solve problems in frighteningly large groups.** Many executive teams

are afraid to discuss problems that are affecting the organization. That's why so many senior management meetings are full of small talk and meaningless chatter. I insist that executives put their heads together to solve real problems. Once begun, collective intelligence will prevail.

**4. Turn fears into goals.** Executives are human, thus they all have fears. I make them express them openly. By degrees, the leader's and the group's fears are spoken aloud and turned into goals and activities that move everyone forward. After a while, they see that their fears are the cork in the bottle of their desired future.

**5. Honour your word and require it of others.** Integrity, the practice of honouring your word, is the field of play for causing breakthroughs deliberately. This value must be insisted upon, and any breaches must be fully discussed. After some months, to honour one's word will become a spoken value in the organizational culture and an expected practice. With this comes trust, which provides incredible energy for any top business team.

**6. Revisit rackets.** Every leader has what psychologist Eric Berne called a "racket". A racket is a way of being, taking action, and achieving results which, while successful initially, has the eventual downside of keeping a person playing smaller than they otherwise might, and suppressing their own and others' performance. When a leader comes sensitively and powerfully to grips with the limitations of their personal

racket, there is a miraculous transformation available in organizational behaviour as well, and the possibility of sudden, unexpected, extraordinary business results emerges. Formal leaders have an enormous impact on energy and vitality in a company. All personalities have strengths and limitations. But when somebody has formal power over others, the effect of what they bring into focus, or suppress, ripples throughout the system. Every place people are playing small, feeling bored, won't be coached, avoiding important

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conflict, or are challenged by relationships, it's almost certain that their rackets are running the show. A racket conversation is about identifying and dealing with those personal attitudes and behaviours that have limited one's leadership effectiveness in the past. Once dealt with, there is nothing to hold a person back from exercising newly found capabilities and going beyond perceived limitations. Once freed from the shackles of incremental leadership, most people naturally want to practice new skills in the service of their most important challenges.

**7. Believe in an impossibility and anything might happen.** There's a Latin saying: *ex impossibile quodlibet*. It means that one can create a new possibility where none now exists. It's important to make executives see that, many times, what's "normal" can be changed, what "can't be done" really can. When executives begin to take responsibility for what is "impossible", right now, they are suddenly able to see what they have to do to make it possible. Often, they achieve the impossible more quickly than they ever imagined.

**8. Connect people based on what they deeply care about.** I insist that executives tell others what they care deeply about regarding work projects, the company – even life. This makes relationships stronger; and such candour becomes the platform for great collaborations, proving that relationships, the alignment of values and commitments, are the foundation of accomplishment.

**9. Have an inspired, central message consistent with the consuming obsession of your life.** Ultimately, executives I work with must communicate to hundreds, if not thousands, of employees. It's critical that leaders share a powerful message about what they and the company need to do in order to be successful.

**10. Pay attention to people's energy.** I make sure every executive knows that he or she is an "energy manager". That means, for all the people they are overseeing, it is →

Factor	Definition
Group Alignment	Arrangement in a straight line with a common cause or viewpoint
Resolving Conflict	The act of solving or finding the answer to a conflict, problem, question, etc.
Responsibility for Results	Pledging or engaging oneself, answerability, accountability
Positive Relationships	High-quality contact, communications, etc., among people and groups
Future Orientation	Looking at the time to come, at events that are still to occur
Profound Respect	The state of being honoured, admired or well thought of

Figure 1.

→ *the executive's job* to make sure the right energy level exists throughout the company. Executives must focus the energy of others toward achieving the most important organizational goals. There are some factors that top managers should keep in mind as they engage the

“Ex impossibile quodlibet.”

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energy of others. These human factors, which increase energy and the likelihood of success, are detailed in Figure 1.

**11. Tell the absolute truth about what's not working.** I once worked with a team of executives who, six months from the deadline for a goal, were millions of dollars short. The reasons for this were discussed among the team; but, upon further investigation, not everyone was being fully truthful. I thus asked each executive to share “the awful truth” about the shortfall. This helped everyone re-engage the common goal.

**12. Plan backwards from the future.** Legend has it that Merlin was born in the future and lived backward in time. For executives, that's a good way to think about major goals. I always demand that top team members say exactly where they want to be in a month and then make plans back from that future.

**13. Insist on “being”, “doing”, “having”.** In most companies, measures, rewards and punishment all emphasize action, process and results. How people are “being” with one another is never brought to light.

Yet, *being* is where it all starts. You don't “do” winning; you “are” a winner. You don't “do” collaboration; you “are” collaborative. You don't “do” a relationship; you “are” related. By shifting attention to how executives are “being” with one another (and with customers and colleagues), there can be a remarkable transformation in the power of the group in the company. What's important is to get leaders to align their behaviours with their words.

#### 14. Practice powerful speaking.

Executives must not sound uncertain in public. That's why I make them practice speaking confidently before their peers. With training, the most successful executives grow to speak the most powerfully. This does not mean that they are the loudest; it means that they speak with the greatest sensitivity and thus have the greatest impact on their audience. Executives must come to see their words as tools that can have a measurable impact. Whatever the initiative a top manager is working on, I stress that he must thoroughly examine what he says and how he says it.

Using the Merlin Rules has provided a disciplined and systematic approach to my work with executives and their interactions with others. But keep in mind that each rule reinforces the others; you can't follow one rule and ignore any of the rest. As with Merlin, the charge for an executive coach is to prepare an executive for leadership. Following these rules will help all involved see that such a job is more than magic. ■

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