

EPISODE 27

The Technology Fallacy Book Review

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Hi, it's Rob Llewellyn here and welcome to episode twenty-seven of transformation management. Thank you so much for joining me today. As always, I'm going to do my best to help you get better equipped to manage and lead transformation.

New technologies are disrupting organisations of every shape and size, leaving managers scrambling to figure out what nature of transformation will help their organisations survive and thrive in the decade ahead.

The reality is that many of today's companies will have disappeared by then, and only those that embraced legitimate transformation to facilitate the interaction between humans and machines, will be around to indulge in this new way of being in business.

In this episode I'm going to provide a brief overview of a book that arrived with me in May 2019. It's called *The Technology Fallacy - How People Are the Real Key to Digital Transformation* by Gerald Kane, Anh Phillips, Jonathan Copulsky and Garth Andrus.

I'll say up front, that if you don't have a copy yet, in my view it's worth a place in the library of anyone serious about transformation.

The big message from this book is about why an organisation's response to digital disruption should be focused on people and processes and not necessarily on technology.

While messages like that have become a little cliché, that doesn't change the fact that they're true, and the penny still needs to drop for some people.

The book provides managers and leaders with a guide for navigating their way into the digital economy, but if you're looking for a book about technology, this isn't the one for you. On the other hand, if you're looking for a book that addresses transformation management and leadership, it'll be right up your street.

The book is about the organisational changes required to harness the power of technology, and the authors remind those that are yet to be converted, that digital disruption is primarily about people and that effective digital transformation involves changes to organisational dynamics and how work gets done.

It provides a reminder to the overly tech-orientated reader that selecting and implementing the right digital technologies is unlikely to lead to success, and that the best way to respond to digital disruption is by shifting company culture to being more agile, risk tolerant, and experimental.

The authors Gerry, Anh, Jonathan and Garth draw on four years of research, conducted in partnership with MIT Sloan Management Review and Deloitte, surveying more than 16,000 people.

They introduce the concept of digital maturity - the ability to take advantage of opportunities offered by the new technology - and they address the specifics of digital transformation, including cultivating a digital environment, enabling intentional collaboration, and fostering an experimental mindset.

The truth is, we're only at the dawn of digital disruption, and it won't end during my lifetime or yours. One day we'll reminisce about what we see as disruptive now, but it'll likely to all look very old fashioned to our grandchildren.

So, let me give you a brief summary of what I found inside the book.

After an introduction with the analogy of digital disruption being like a cyclone, the book gets split into three sections. Navigating Digital Disruption, Rethinking Leadership and Talent for a Digital Age, and Becoming a Digital Organisation.

The section called "Navigating Digital Disruption" reminds us that disruption isn't a secret any longer, that it's all about people, and that throughout the book, the authors have defined the word digital as an adjective, rather than a noun.

The book first gets into strategy during chapter 4 but I was little disappointed by the reference to digital strategy. Some readers could still be led to believe that a digital strategy should be separate from business strategy, which I'm sure - or at least I hope - wasn't the intention of the authors.

When companies like Google, Facebook and Amazon, or any successful start-up, don't refer to digital strategies, I don't think we should be encouraging traditional organisations to do the opposite.

But I don't want to be unfair on the authors, particularly when many of us - myself included - still use the word digital to communicate with and educate organisations where digital isn't integral to their very existence. Whereas when I speak with digitally native companies, the D-word never even enters the conversation.

The word "digital" has a lot to answer for! But one day it'll eventually disappear from our vocabulary, which won't be a bad thing at all!

So, getting back to chapter 4, the authors explain that developing a digital strategy doesn't necessarily mean a bunch of tech-savvy people sitting in a room thinking up a grand design that then gets implemented. They explain that the development of a digital strategy is a recursive process which involves seeing things differently, thinking differently, doing things differently, then repeating the process.

Chapter 5 takes psychologist James Gibson's concept of "Affordance" to explain that owning and implementing technology isn't enough to create business advantage. The authors use Duct Tape - a product that has many uses - as means to explain that a single technology can bring about many strategic moves. They then move on to describe hidden, progressive and false affordances in the context of transformation.

The book's second section is called "Rethinking Leadership and Talent for a Digital Age". It kicks off with digital leadership addressing what type of leader is needed, the challenges of digital leadership, and then suggests eight core leadership capabilities that are particularly important these days.

While those eight capabilities are well-known, chapter 7 went on to explain what makes digital leadership different, and the authors emphasised that digital leadership is very much in demand. They referred to a survey that revealed 68% of organisations believe they need to find new leaders for their organisation to succeed in the digital age.

While I don't disagree with that number - and I enjoyed chapter 7 because the stats enabled the authors to tell a story - I do wonder how well-informed and experienced in transformation those involved in the survey actually were. Let's face it, anyone can have an opinion on a topic and get surveyed - regardless of their capabilities.

Chapter 8 sets off by explaining how the overuse of the words "our people are our most important asset" have become devoid of significance because of their over-use. I agree with that - and I'll also add that similar clichés such as "it's all about

people" are about as useful as telling people that "a healthy diet is all about good food and exercise".

The focus of this chapter and the next are on talent. On the fact that there's a shortage of the right talent and on the importance of attracting the right talent.

Quite honestly, I found the recommendations made in these two chapters to be among the most helpful in the book. Because from the CEO down, a shortage of the right digital economy talent is what's leading many companies into a world of digital sugar coating and failed attempts to transform. Fix talent shortcomings from the CEO down and those common problems could easily go away for a lot of companies.

Chapter 10 is called *The Future of Work*, which focuses more on the individual than the company they work with, so it's particularly helpful for the reader's personal career. The advice from Tom Davenport and Julia Kirby are especially helpful for those who want to change their own career path in response to the digital economy.

From my perspective, this is the transformation of the individual, and in this goal, each of us become the CEO of our own personal transformation. In the way that some company CEOs will succeed at business transformation, while others will fail, the same can be said for individuals.

Some will remain stuck in the past, relying on what they learned in the past, and do nothing to create a new future for themselves. While others will adopt a transformation mindset, invest in themselves, change the way they work, and thrive in the digital economy.

Section 3 is about *Becoming a Digital Organisation*, which kicks off by emphasising that culture is key to transformation. The authors suggest how you can conduct your own assessment of your current organisational culture and transition from being an organisation that pushes digital transformation to one that pulls it by cultivating a particular culture.

Chapter 12 is about organising for agility and suggests that companies assess how agile their current initiatives are, and if it's needed, select one or two that could be run as agile efforts. Then of course build on those initial pilot efforts with training, and making any changes needed to infrastructure and processes.

Chapter 13 talks about strength, balance, courage and common sense. It uses the Catalan tradition of building human towers to explain how digital organisations

need to be more collaborative, suggesting that a collaboration platform can help them do this.

Chapter 14 is called Test Fast, Learn Fast, Scale Fast. The focus is on innovation and for that reason, I feel that this too, is among the most useful chapters in the book.

Because too many organisations are still focused on creating a better version of the past instead of creating a new future for themselves through innovation. While many places talk about innovation, few have the right people and processes in place to make their good intentions very successful.

I also enjoyed Chapter 15 - Moving Forward, which outlines a three-step process for increasing digital maturity, and how you can assess your organisation's digital maturity based on how it organises, operates and behaves. The authors refer to them as levers that can either help or hinder an organisation's digital maturity.

It continues by introducing 23 traits that are needed by organisations, suggesting that you might consider the top three to five traits that could move the needle for your organisation - if they were a prominent and mature part of your organisation's DNA.

A very useful chapter in my view.

Overall the book provides some helpful insights about how to move forward as a more digitally mature organisation. It encourages transformation leaders to reflect on how their organisations organise, operate and behave, with a series of actions at the end of each chapter, for the reader to consider.

There are still a lot of leaders who are yet to take steps to upgrade their ability to lead in the digital economy. So, reading this book would be one small step in the right direction. It also provides a useful perspective for those that are already on that journey of self-improvement.

I appreciate you listening, and here's a quote to finish off the day from George Bernard Shaw.

“Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”

How will you change the minds of the people around you, to help change the future of the organisation you work with?



The Transformation Management Podcast Transcript

I hope you enjoyed this episode. Thanks for listening - Take care and I'll catch you in the next episode of transformation management. Bye.