

Driving Business Transformation Through Better Leadership

In today's world, the ability to lead change has become the ultimate competitive advantage. Those organizations that align talent strategies with business needs, invest in their leaders, and embrace the ambiguity of transformation will be the ones that emerge stronger, ready to seize the next opportunity.

The Panel



JP Patterson
VP, Talent COE
Macy's, Inc.



Val Johnson
SVP, Human Resources
Marvin



Carrie Guthrie
VP, Global Talent
Polaris



Kelly A. Baker
EVP, Chief Human Resources Officer
Thrivent

Business transformation is no longer optional—it is a necessity. Yet the success of these transformations often depends on having the right leadership in place. Companies that effectively align their leaders with evolving business needs prepare them for future challenges and create sustainable growth.

Organizational transformation can succeed through strong leadership and solid change management practices, according to a panel of highly respected HR executives at the recent PEER 150 Regional Dinner in Minneapolis sponsored by MDA Leadership. The panel discussed the importance of identifying, developing, and accelerating leaders who can navigate the complexities of today's business environment and inspire others to follow.

“As the world changed, we needed to change too. Our technology investments require a different skillset and thinking about our business in new ways. We must prepare our leaders and talent to bring us into the future.”

- Kelly A. Baker, EVP, Chief Human Resources Officer, Thrivent

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The panel recommended these best practices based on their experiences, offering valuable insights for others embarking on similar journeys:



1 Align Leadership with Business Strategy

A mismatch between leadership capabilities and business objectives can slow down or derail transformation efforts. Leaders must be equipped to thrive in roles that require greater scale, complexity, or cross-functional collaboration than they may have experienced before. As Carrie Guthrie, VP, Global Talent, Polaris, noted, “Stratospheric growth outpaced our leadership pipeline in some cases,” revealing the need for recalibrated expectations and development programs aligned with the demands of a rapidly expanding business.

Best practices:

- **Redefine leadership competencies** based on the future direction of the business.
- **Regularly review leadership roles and expectations** as the organization evolves.
- **Provide leaders with exposure to broader responsibilities**, such as managing profit-and-loss units, to build adaptability and readiness.

“Humans are educated by doing. We said we’re going to manufacture opportunities for growth and we’re going to cause good intention—and it worked.”

- JP Patterson, VP, Talent COE, Macy’s, Inc.

2 Accelerate Leadership Readiness

Developing future-ready leaders requires intentional efforts to identify high-potential talent across leadership levels and immerse them in real-world scenarios. JP Patterson, VP, Talent COE, Macy’s, Inc. successfully accelerated leadership growth at the executive level by assessing rising stars and pairing them with board members for cross-mentoring opportunities and increased visibility for these leaders.

Simultaneously, Macy’s launched a program for mid-career high potentials. Through a structured rotation program, managers gained diverse experiences and mentoring from senior leaders, resulting in all participants being promoted to director-level positions within two years. “Humans are educated by doing. We said we’re going to manufacture opportunities for growth and we’re going to cause good intention—and it worked,” Patterson said.

Best practices:

- **Leverage assessments** to identify high potentials at all levels and focus your development efforts.
- **Incorporate experiential learning** such as executive shadowing, rotations or action learning programs to immerse leaders in real business challenges.
- **Use clear success metrics** to measure development progress and promotion readiness.

PEER 150 and MDA Leadership’s panel on *Driving Business Transformation Through Better Leadership* featured these experts: Sharon Sackett, Ph.D., Senior Vice President, MDA Leadership; JP Patterson, VP, Talent COE, Macy’s, Inc.; Carrie Guthrie, VP, Global Talent, Polaris; Val Johnson, SVP, Human Resources, Marvin; and Kelly A. Baker, EVP, Chief Human Resources Officer, Thrivent.



3 Build Talent Internally While Balancing External Hires

Organizations facing major transformations must strike a balance between developing talent internally and bringing in fresh perspectives through external hires. Thrivent reset its leadership expectations after realizing that their transformation required new competencies not yet present within the organization, said Kelly A. Baker, EVP, Chief Human Resources Officer. Partnering with MDA Leadership, they built a framework that aligned their talent strategy with business needs, enabling better hiring, placement, and development decisions. “The foundation work around competencies has powered all of our leadership development work.”

Best practices:

- **Develop leadership frameworks** that clarify the skills needed to succeed in key roles.
- **Promote internal development** by offering clear career paths and individual growth plans.
- **Balance external hires with internal promotions** to infuse new ideas while maintaining continuity.

4 Cultivate Agility, Empathy, and Authenticity in Leadership

Leaders today must navigate not only internal complexity but also external factors, including economic shifts, industry trends, and evolving expectations around diversity and inclusion. Val Johnson, SVP, Human Resources, Marvin, emphasized that leadership now requires greater agility and external awareness to manage change effectively. Patterson added that empathy and authenticity have become essential traits in modern leadership, creating environments where it is safe to ask questions, acknowledge challenges, and seek support.

When asked about workforce optimization, Johnson believes that starts with the culture at the top. “It’s important to focus on leadership behaviors. You need to build culture with training and education, so that leaders can earn buy in with their teams.”

Best practices:

- **Foster emotional intelligence** by encouraging leaders to embrace empathy and active listening.
- **Equip leaders with tools** to handle ambiguity and make decisions without all the answers.
- **Promote psychological safety** by cultivating an environment where learning from failure is accepted and expected.

5 Create a Leadership Culture that Drives Long-Term Success

Developing individual leaders is important, but building a leadership culture across the organization ensures long-term success. Patterson’s team built a sense of community among emerging leaders by forming cohorts, enabling them to support each other and overcome challenges together.

Guthrie explained how Polaris uses comprehensive assessments to identify leadership strengths and address potential derailers before they can impact performance at higher levels. Meanwhile, Johnson spoke to the value of talent reviews and assessments not only to inform succession planning but also to identify opportunities for individual and collective growth. By focusing on development, Marvin is building a leadership pipeline that aligns with its evolving needs. “We are preparing our leaders for roles that might not exist yet,” she adds, underscoring the forward-thinking nature of their talent strategy.

Best practices:

- **Invest in assessments** to identify strengths to lean into, surface potential derailers, and track leadership development over time.
- **Create peer networks or cohorts** where leaders can share experiences and build resilience together.
- **Demonstrate career growth opportunities** to retain talent and sustain motivation.

“The work has become more complex, so leaders who can help people navigate matrixed organizations and build alignment across teams are even more important in today’s environment.”

– Carrie Guthrie, VP, Global Talent, Polaris



Conclusion

Business transformation is not just a challenge of operations, processes, or technology—it is fundamentally a leadership challenge. Organizations that align leadership strategies with business goals, accelerate leadership readiness, and cultivate emotional intelligence will build resilient leadership pipelines. This journey requires fostering a leadership growth culture that embraces continuous learning and psychological safety.

By embedding these best practices into their talent strategies, organizations can not only navigate transformation more effectively but also position themselves for long-term success. The companies that thrive in today's complex environment will be those that invest in leaders who inspire followership, operate with agility, and build teams capable of seizing tomorrow's opportunities.

“Marvin is undergoing a massive transformation that impacts all areas of the business, so we are doubling down on growth plans to support these strategic initiatives. With the future of the organization guiding our decision-making, our growth is focused on setting up Marvin leaders for long-term success with teams that will be ready to support what's next and able to help us co-create what is yet to come.”

- Val Johnson, SVP, Human Resources, Marvin

Let's Connect

To learn more how MDA Leadership's proven experience and expertise in organizational transformation and change management can benefit your company, please contact us at +1 (612) 332-8182 or by email at info@mdaleadership.com.



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