A lit matchstick is shown on the left, with a bright yellow and orange flame extending towards the right. It is lighting the first of seven unlit matchsticks that are lined up in a row. The matchsticks have blue tips. The background is a dark blue gradient.

A P⁺ositive Transformation project

*begins with a
4S subject!*

Bernard Tollec

Turningpoint Director – Executive Coach

Transformation stories generally get off to a bad start...

It's the beginning that sets the tone!



Paraphrasing a famous song that said "love stories generally end badly", we could almost say: "transformation stories generally begin badly!"

Transformations, regardless of what triggered them (new legislation, technological breakthrough, new consumer habits, etc.) have a failure rate between 60 and 66%, according to the latest studies.

A transformation is a "new long-term relational experience in an ecosystem"
B. Tollec

What is failure in the context of transformation? We'll use Turningpoint's definition of transformation as defined in its Positive Transformation model: transformation is **"the creation of a new long-term relational experience"**. Failure happens when the initiative does not create this type of experience or become permanent. Systems theorists would say it's when the original homeostasis takes over!

We live in a world that is moving so fast that leaders and consultants who manage change are urged to start implementing transformations too quickly, without taking the time to determine the **Subject**, which must not only be **Strategic**, but also **Stimulating** for all the actors of the **ecoSystem** involved: these are the 4S's of transformation.

The 4S's of a successful transformation



It's a **SUBJECT**, not a vision

It sounds strange to say this. And yet, transformations are often formulated as a vision to be achieved, the vision of a leader or of his/her executive committee. And often the modes of implementation have already started to be designed and/or implemented. In this case, how can other stakeholders even hope to join in? Therefore, the subject must be formulated with impact and without any indication on how to get there. It is formulated in the present, as if the transformation had already been achieved with success. It is formulated as the new relational experience that we want to bring to the stakeholders involved in the transformation.

This is a delicate position for leaders because they naturally have clear ideas on how to achieve a vision! And that's a good thing, but in the end, these ideas are their own. If they allowed all the stakeholders to come forth with more ideas, they would be taking a risk: that the stakeholders' ideas would be even more daring and more creative than their own to achieve this transformation.



The Subject is **STRATEGIC**

It responds to a need for change, it corresponds to an existing or anticipated need for the future.

What needs to be transformed in order to continue making this organization sustainable, given the perceived or perceptible changes in the internal and external contexts?

+ ... the Subject is **STIMULATING**

The subject is clear for everyone, it is desirable, arouses curiosity and triggers change immediately. The change is simultaneous with the announcement of the subject of transformation.

In what way is the subject you chose stimulating? What does it stimulate? Who does it stimulate?

+ ... the Subject is stimulating for the entire **ECOSYSTEM**

Stakeholders of the organization (employees, customers, partners, etc.) must be involved. The subject is the responsibility of the stakeholders who are both the actors and the beneficiaries of this transformation.

How did you get the stakeholders involved in choosing this topic of transformation?

A true story...



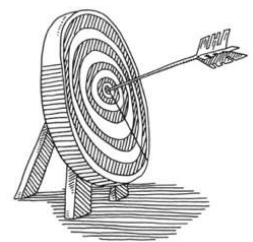
In the US, British Airways was facing a major dilemma: the significant loss of 10% of passenger luggage.

This was dangerously damaging the airline's reputation and was becoming a key issue for the Group to address. For those of you who have already had your luggage lost, you know what an unpleasant and anxiety-ridden experience this can be.

It happened to me once... I was returning from a trip to Shanghai and was waiting for my luggage to be delivered, like all the other passengers on the flight. After 30 minutes, all the other passengers had left with their luggage, but I kept waiting patiently and was beginning to worry until...the baggage carousel stopped. I then went to the airline counter to report my lost bags. The person I had to deal with was probably the airline's least empathetic employee. She proceeded to tell me how ridiculous it was to have left my car keys and house keys in my suitcase. It was not the best idea, but the experience of dealing with her was worse than losing my luggage! I lost my suitcase, but she was making me lose face, and digging me deeper into the hole I was already in... Finally, after 45 minutes, we found my bag. But I still remember the experience 15 years later!

A few potential traps

Several potential traps await leaders and their management teams when it comes to defining the initial subject. Here are a few:



The egocentric subject

The subject is determined through the sole prism of one department, a part of the organization, a person or a group. In one of the transformation projects that we worked on, two of the projects were particularly ego-centric and not very stimulating: that of the Financial Director (to increase the operational margin by 4%) and that of the Supply Chain Director (to improve the logistical reliability by 15%).

Admittedly, given the urgency, these two topics were particularly strategic but in no way stimulating given the lack of enthusiasm felt within organization. These were operational goals rather than stimulating topics of transformation. We encouraged the directors to make them a little more stimulating by practicing the FLIP (see how to do a FLIP on the following pages...)

There are many examples of this nature. For instance, a large international bank launched a transformation plan which aimed to make the bank more agile and bring it closer to its customers. The transformation was launched too quickly and eventually became the “- 30% plan”. When it was finally understood that it meant a 30% staffing cut, the “transformation” started out rather badly and the bank is still in the process of recovery!

How do you define a stimulating subject for the ecoSystem? Quite simply, it begins by identifying all the people who will be impacted by this transformation project and asking yourself which new relational experience they would be thrilled to engage in and move forward with together.

A subject presented in a depreciative way



When transformation is necessary, we should admit that the source is often an anomaly in the system: something doesn't work anymore, something has become or will become obsolete.

Quite often, the issue has become urgent to deal with, and in the rush, we tend to adopt an attitude of "gap correction" or a problem-solving stance. This is a serious mistake, because this stance creates strong resistance from the actors who will feel "corrected" rather than appreciated in their ability to make new contributions.



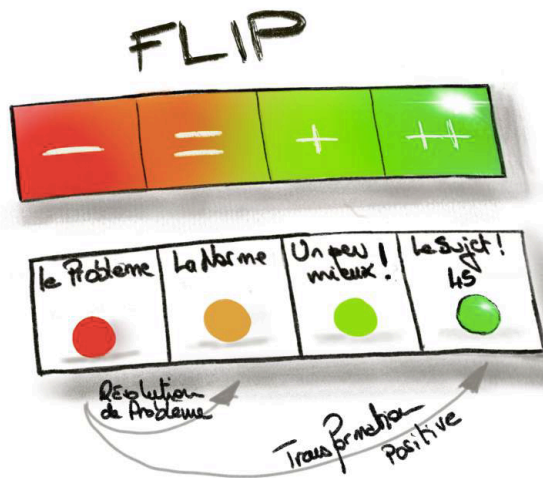
If you use the words: improve, increase, decrease..., you will immediately hear questions about the

past (or not, people will hide them), and a sense of irritation because "it was not good enough before". I experienced this very uncomfortable feeling when I was in charge of HR for a multinational group. The new Vice President had taken the reins of the organization with the great intention of transforming the company culture, given the difficulties that we were encountering. He came to the Executive Committee table and declared in a very assertive and enthusiastic way: "I want to make a clean sweep of the past". I will always remember both my internal reaction, that I didn't show but that I shared with him later, and the looks on my colleagues faces, who felt like they were a part of this past to be swept out!

Take the time to find your 4S subject(s)

Another tip: take your time! The time you think you're saving by not preparing, you will lose later. Before launching a major transformation project with a company, we met four times for two hours with the CEO at first, then with the HR Director. We intentionally left about 10 days between the discussions to allow time for reflection, and we reached a firm YES for the launch of the operation. The CEO did not have the full vision of what the results would look like, but at least he was firm on the intention and subject of the transformation. How do you accomplish this? You FLIP your subject of transformation...

To do a FLIP is to jump straight from the problem to what is deeply desirable



and make it a 4S subject of transformation

So how did British Airways work on this project with huge economic and commercial stakes?

It FLIPPED its major problem, which required a quick and immediate reaction in order to avoid sinking to the bottom of American air transport.



British Airways lost 10% of its baggage upon arrival. This was the **starting problem**.

What would be a **normal situation**? A situation in which all luggage is systematically delivered to passengers upon arrival. The so-called "normal" situation means that the problem resides uniquely with the ground staff who are responsible for baggage. Therefore, we would be reduced to implementing a problem-solving methodology, pointing our fingers at the dysfunctions and the actors themselves. The leaders or consultants at the start of the transformation operations, whether collective or individual, often stop at this stage. Why? Probably because of the strength of habit, the urgency of returning to a normal situation which seems good enough, the impression that by being so far from the norm, going any further would be unrealistic... The Positive Transformation approach encourages the players to ask themselves the following question: "What if the situation was slightly better than that, what would it look like?" It could look like an arrival experience where passengers would be well taken care of, even if their luggage was missing. Because who can imagine that a company which guarantees 100% of their baggage delivered on time? No one can promise zero mistakes!

On the other hand, what British Airways could guarantee was how the passengers would be treated if, by chance, they were faced with this inconvenience.



The subject of transformation finally chosen by British Airways was worded as follows:



An exceptional arrival for all!

The topic is well formulated to include all stakeholders in this project. It includes passengers, air staff, ground staff, baggage handlers, counter personnel, sales, etc. It's interesting to note that the subject is not the luggage but the company's customers.

It's worded in the present tense and makes no reference to the past or the problem to be solved. However, working on the manifestation of this new experience will naturally lead to the initial problem being solved.

It's worded in a stimulating way without giving any ideas on how to get there. It's a subject and not a vision. Each stakeholder will be able to envision this new experience individually and collectively.

What about YOU? As a leader, how can you best serve your organization during its transformation?

The best thing you can offer is creating the conditions most conducive to transformation. The first essential component is the subject, which allows you, your organization, and stakeholders to become visionaries in regard to this subject of transformation.

In terms of the transformation you are currently leading, and in light of this article, what do you think is important to ensure a good start?

For further reading: The Positive Transformation approach

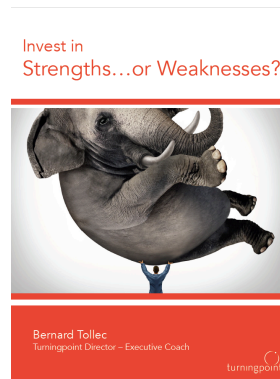
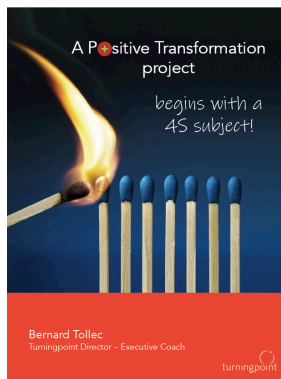
A 50-page document on the Positive Transformation approach that maps out the gateways to Transformation:

An unexpected and disruptive light on organizational transformation and leadership development

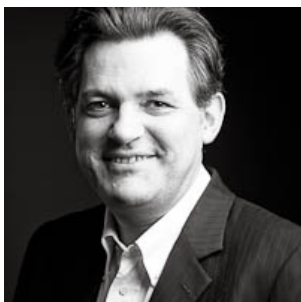
- Positive Leadership
- The Positive Transformation Project
- The Positive Organization



Several articles on Positive Transformation:



To discuss transformation topics, and to make sure that they are positive:



Bernard Tollec is a Director at Turningpoint, in charge of the "Positive Transformation" approach and practice. He is one of the European experts on strengths-based and resource-oriented approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry and Solution Focus. He is an Executive Coach, working in the private and public sectors who want to experience fast and lasting transformations in the world. He guides, trains and supervises leaders, coaches and internal change agents on these new pathways of collective intelligence.

Bernard Tollec - Directeur Transformation Positive - Turningpoint - 58 rue Pierre Charron - 75008 Paris

bernard.tollec@turningpoint-leadership.com - Mob: +33 6 18 45 67 13