

Trade-Up! 5 Steps for Redesigning Your Leadership and Life from the Inside Out

By Rayona Sharpnack

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Fundamentally, leaders are in the context-shifting business. Context is the pre-established belief system you use to interpret and move through every situation you encounter. It ignites the automatic reaction you have when you don't have the option of making your response a conscious one. Why should you care about what context or set of conclusions make up your reality? We care because context is what determines our actions and behaviors.

There are ten thousand books on Amazon.com that tell you what you need to experience, know, and do in order to lead more effectively. But it takes more than skill development to influence others and make change happen. In Rayona Sharpnack's new book, "Trade Up: 5 Steps for Redesigning Your Leadership and Life from the Inside Out," she asserts that it is more important to work on revealing who you are being—because who you are being is a force that influences and affects everything around you. Once you discover who you are being at the deepest levels, in other words what contexts you are operating from,, you will be prepared to trade up to become a more authentic leader in order to impact the world.

For example: "I'll never get anywhere in life without my nose to the grindstone" was a deeply embedded conclusion I had inherited from my parents. In my world, that meant if you didn't work hard on everything, you didn't get anywhere. It wasn't until I was able to surface that context that I could see that not everyone shared my view of reality. My desire to shift out of that context arose because I was unhappy with the impact my unintended behaviors were causing in my life and in the lives of people around me.

Now, let's look at how a trade-up in context affected my behavior and impact. When I came up with the conclusion, "It all turns out with grace and ease," I recognized an environment my body and spirit could settle into. That doesn't mean it was easy to develop my new behaviors. I needed to rely on the discipline of practice, the support of others, and an openness to feedback in order to make it. But having established the right environment or context for my new behaviors, I was able to help them grow and ultimately flourish.

Step 1. Reveal Your Prevailing Context: Leaders Create Fields of Influence

As a leader, your job is to illuminate all the conscious or unconscious beliefs, myths, assumptions, and preconceptions that form your own conclusions and the conclusions of the people around you. From there, your job is to jettison conclusions that are limiting, and see that new contexts take root that will allow you and your group, organization, or community to grow. Your ability to see and invent conclusions that empower yourself, your team, or your organization determines what kind of future becomes available. If that ability is limited, it will limit the scope of what can be achieved, putting a lid on the creativity, energy, and enthusiasm of others. When that ability has been honed and exercised, it can be inspiring in ways even the leader can't anticipate.

What's below the surface of your complex life? Reveali answers the questions, what is shaping or limiting who you are, what you do, and how you learn? That examination can take place at the individual level or in an organization of many thousands of people. What emerges from such an investigation is the choice to achieve new purpose, a new self-awareness about how you operate and why. If it were possible to fundamentally shift your context, what opportunities would become available? Why do those opportunities matter to you? What different results could you, your team, or your organization produce? Our automatic responses to life are based on the system that we are firmly embedded in. We can choose a different reaction once that pattern is revealed.

Step 2. Own Your Context: Take Responsibility for Your Context and Be Accountable for Changing It

Once your context has been revealed in Step 1, the most important thing is to “own” it before moving on. Unfortunately, the idea of owning the context you currently operate within is also a bit of a paradox. How can you own something you inherited, that may even feel as though it had been forced upon you? Your context is a mishmash of overwhelming influences. You’ve got your parents, and their parents, some of your relatives and teachers, the other kids you grew up around, the culture you were surrounded by, including whatever church, community, school, or political system you found yourself immersed in, not to mention the tenor of the times. Conduct an upside-downside analysis of your context.how has it served you? How has it hindered you as a leader?

Step 3. Design a New Context: Trade Up to the Life You Want

When you come to the realization that the context you’ve long operated from is a conclusion about life that was one you didn’t choose, a natural question arises: If I were in charge of my own life, what context would I invent to create the future I want? We call this choice point the “trade up.”

The third step of Trading Up, known as “design,” is both freeing and paralyzing. Often I ask people, “If you were really the author of your own life story, what story would you write?” Of course, the question is a trick. You are the author of your life story, the page is before you, the screen is blank: it’s time to start writing. Intimidated? You bet. Very few of us ever have to confront the power of authorship. It is up to you to author your life for the next ten, twenty, or fifty years. Such an act is not for the faint of heart. Create a context that will open up new horizons for your leadership.

Step 4. Sustain Your New Context

Designing a new context is an exciting and exhilarating experience, but if you don’t operationalize it, the changes won’t stick. Absent any practices for sustaining your new context, it’s folly to expect it to stick. By practices I mean securing reliable feedback on how you are impacting others; creating a visual display that tracks and rewards new behaviors; communicating your new context so that other people will hold you accountable; and any number of things that will create sustainability.

What motivates us to want to trade up? The only thing that really inspires change is pain—the desire to stop doing something that is causing suffering through unintended consequences, or the frustration of not accomplishing something we desperately want. No matter where your pain point comes from, you can work backward from it to understand how to shift your context, and then forward again to learn how to adopt supportive new practices.

Step 5. Engage: Identify and Enlist Others

All the work of revealing, owning, designing and sustaining a new context will go by the wayside unless you engage others in the journey. The next step, then, is to enlist your own support team. This can be done through creating a ground breaking project that can only be accomplished by living from your new context and engaging a community of support.

Determine whose support you will need to sustain your new context. When I ask people such a question, the answers are usually self-evident. Frequently, there is a spouse or partner who comes to mind immediately. Next, there is often a close friend, or a group of close friends, who can be trusted. More creatively, there are usually a number of key figures in a person's life whose support is necessary in a variety of ways. Many of the top executives I've worked with have enlisted a key direct report or an administrative assistant. Often, such a person is able to provide a watchful eye and a helping hand in innumerable ways, from helping to shape a schedule that permits the openness and space needed for context shifting to letting the leader know how the impact of his work is registering—positively or negatively.

A final group, however, comprises those people whom you may not find it easy to approach or to solicit in your cause, but whose support would raise the quality of your environment and generate greater sense of possibility and creativity. Offhand, I can think of colleagues, peers, direct reports, and even customers who may be in competition with you for resources or status in your organization. There may be people in your family who fit that bill, too; or other relatives, neighbors, or friends; or people who serve or work with you at religious, school, or nonprofit organizations.

Trade Up is a way of life. If you practice and master the 5 skills of Trade Up you are likely to find yourself with the biggest challenge of all, which is confronting how good you are really willing to be as a leader.

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