It’s old news that charities aren’t moving as fast as the digital revolution. Whilst COVID-19 has pushed us all further out into the digital seas, and for many organisations it’s accelerated transformation, we’re still not where we need to be.

When lockdown ends and things start to find their new-normal, we’ll need to keep up the change momentum, despite the new challenges we’ll face.

Here I explore the thoughts of four inspirational transformation leaders on what makes transformation work and how we can all have a better chance of success on the other side.

We don’t have to know everything, to know enough

It takes confidence to lead transformation. Some people are put off of data and technology because they don’t understand it.

But, none of us should expect to understand it all.

What sets the good digital leaders apart, is that they’re comfortable with not knowing.

Julie Dodd, Transformation Director for Parkinson’s UK, said “We need people that recognise and feel ok with the fact everyone can’t be on top of everything, because it’s changing so fast. We all need to put trust in the people that do know. We don’t have to understand it all, and that is a very different way of being.”

“I can’t predict everything, and I definitely need to be able to read the change and move with it, but I still have a plan of where I am trying to get to. It’s about being reactive, and able to pivot” Lara Burns, Chief Digital Officer, The Scouts.

What’s digital got to do with it?

We still band around the terms digital transformation and data transformation, because it’s hard not to. You can’t have one without the other, and they’re central to the changes we need to make.

Imagine taking the data out of Facebook. Or the digital out of online banking. It's like trying to cook without heat!

But, the D words can be misleading.

Yas, from Great Ormond Street Hospital's Children's Charity (GOSH), said that part of their success has been to demystify digital across all teams. Whilst Julie eventually dropped the D work altogether for the transformation at Parkinson's.

Organisations are made of people, ideals, culture, habits, hierarchies, behaviours and processes, and stories. And these are the things we really need to transform.

So we need to drop the DD and instead focus on:

- Creating a **culture** that will drive us further into the unknown with confidence.
- Being **audience-driven** from all angles. Understanding the needs of staff, beneficiaries and supporters before creating solutions.
- Work out what **capabilities** you need togrow and where you need to lean on external support.
- **Think big**. None of us are going to catch up if we remain tied up in what changes we need to make to legacy systems.
- Be brave enough to move to leaner, truly collaborative **ways of working**.
- Invest in a passionate, skilled and **enthusiastic team** and let their enthusiasm infect others.
- Build **authentic relationships** with agencies to move from 'supplier and client' to a genuine partnership.

"Our agency, William Joseph, designed us a bespoke maturity assessment and we agreed that if we focused on building skills across the organisation, and culture, the rest would follow. And they have. We also co-facilitated activities with William Joseph, building our capabilities and raising the profile of my team." Yasmin Georgiou, GOSH Charity

"Becoming digital is about changing the mindset of everyone to let go of hold habits and build new, progressive, behaviours that move us from a place of bureaucracy and stagnation to a place of constant evolution." Linda McBain, Save the Children UK

"It's really easy for the behavioural and cultural change to slip down the list or

become something that you'll just deal with later. But as the transformation lead, you need to retain momentum." Yasmin Georgiou, GOSH Charity

Digital isn't the centre of the universe

Technology empowers us to deliver services and experiences that we couldn't have dreamed of having in the past

However, it doesn't necessarily replace the insights, knowledge and relationships that we've built up until this point. It's about enhancing, and transforming, over duplicating or replacing.



So when a digital team comes along and thinks that it knows the answers to everything and leaves others behind, that's a recipe for failure. It needs to be a

dance, not a race.

At Parkinson’s UK they have embedded digital experts across the organisation, so there’s no longer a separate ‘digital’ team. And at GOSH Charity they’re focused on building a centralised capability whilst ensuring that their fundraising teams are building their own digital capabilities, with their support.

“We need to recognise and draw on expertise across and beyond the digital team. Everyone has unique expertise and we can learn from each other. ” Yasmin Georgiou, GOSH Charity

“We’ve gone from an assembly-line approach between different discipline-based teams which saw an eight-week data turnaround, to turning things around in a day because we have data experts embedded in multi-disciplinary agile marketing squads. By understanding the problem statement together, in cross-functional teams, experts can challenge one another and arrive at the right solution far more quickly.” Linda McBain, Save the Children UK

“We brought the service people in to co-locate with the digital team. We did journey mapping and a lot of early prototype testing with people at the front line so that it worked for staff and end users.” Lara Burns, The Scouts

“Decentralise yourself. It’s highly likely you could have more impact if you embed with others, in fundraising or service delivery, so consider putting your experts with teams and become part of the bigger picture.” Julie Dodd, Parkinsons

Create a vision that invokes passion.

Parkinson’s UK created a video that, for me, really brought to life what setting a compelling vision is all about. I LOVE IT. You will too.

For many people, digital and data transformations starts with climbing out of the hole we’ve found ourselves in as the world has overtaken. That can be exhausting. So, a vision of a better brighter further is essential in keeping the energy up.

The vision needs to be compelling, it needs to make people want to be part of the journey, and it needs to illustrate delivering value for beneficiaries, supporters and

staff.

“You have to know where you’re headed and be willing to try new ideas. When nothing is broken it can be big hurdle to start with and you need a vision that drives people forwards.” Yasmin Georgiou, GOSH Charity

“Digital doesn’t fix broader challenges such as alignment on a strategy – you need a strategy and a vision that excites or you will run into challenges later.” Linda McBain, Save the Children UK

“Persuading people to do something in a totally different way, when it might not feel necessary to everyone is really hard and needs a strong vision to guide the way” Lara Burns, The Scouts

Seek out your friends, and your enemies

There are two groups of people that are important to you if you’re out to change things: the people who you want on your side and the people that are going to make your life hard.

Getting under the skin of everyone’s motivations will help you to see where your commonalities and differences lie.

Consider:

- Building your **personal support network** of open minded people that you want by your side through the transformation. Drink coffee. Do Zoom.
- **Finding your allies** amongst the decision makers.
- Doing your classic stakeholder mapping and taking extra care to identify the people won’t like what’s coming. Try to **listen without judgement** and keep them close.

“Even if someone’s onboard at some stage, there’s always room for them not to be later. This is a really difficult journey, especially when there are entrenched processes and ways of working internally and so people need your support.” Yasmin Georgiou, GOSH Charity

“My transformation leaders are all high energy people with natural curiosity for how new things work. It’s infectious and really helps us bring people along for the

ride.” Julie Dodd, Parkinson’s UK

“If you don’t spend enough time convincing that one difficult director of the worth of a project, you will lose that time down the line trying to clean up after the fall out.” Lara Burns, The Scouts

Be prepared to give others the credit

To lead transformation successfully, you can’t be attached to the accolade.

Equally, if you’re a leader, or a member of a team that’s going through a transformation, or has been transformed, you have to be prepared to share the gold with others. Or indeed give it over completely. Which is a very new way of being.

Yas said it was important that we don’t do it alone or take the lead role. “I very quickly realised that this was going to fail as a project if I tried to spearhead it myself and I partnered with HR, as well as building a cross-functional network.”

“Going from command and control, autonomous teams is a big shift for people in leadership roles. I see one of my roles as promoting and lobbying for a new kind of leadership – that of the servant leader who sets a vision but then gets the hell out of the way as much as possible.” Linda, Save the Children UK

“It’s easy as the figurehead of a transformation to get the ego fed, especially when things are going right. But it is so important that we don’t see things as being about us. We’re all cogs in wheels, and to let those wheels turn smoothly, we need to let go.” Julie said.

Find your champions and your leaders

A passionate cross-organisational driving force for change that brings together different skills and ideas is priceless and always worth the effort.

- Find **champions** that are passionate about driving change. Mix it up with representatives across teams.
- Create a **transformation leadership** groupthat is representative of the organisation.

“Our champions group is sponsored by the HR director and made up of

representatives from across the charity. It’s a ground-up driver of culture change and skills development.” Yas, GOSH

“Our transformation leadership group helps ensure the rest of the organisation is getting the same message, and that it’s coming from someone who’s in their patch.” Julie Dodd, Parkinson’s

Ride the wave

You need to be able to pivot and change. You’re going to have to use your skills to ride the crest of the wave, to not get swallowed under.

This takes bravery, patience and tenacity. When shit gets hard, the support network you’ve built will become invaluable, and so will your willingness to change, shift, and adapt. Consider what other support you might need, such as a mentor or coach for when things get hard. Because they will.

This is a great opportunity to practice resilience and build comfort with ambiguity. There is no point in creating a detailed plan that promises to deliver us to 2023 unharmed.

COVID-19 has taught us how quickly we can change when push comes to shove.

Lara: “We’ve got 165,000 volunteers. We have a huge range of people who are different ages, different backgrounds, they want to run scout groups that teach how to go out and do campfires! So, there are some big cultural barriers, but they’ve had no choice but to get creative. They’re running their scout groups through Zoom. It’s not perfect – you can’t build a campfire very well via zoom! But they’re trying and it opens new doors to kids that can’t get out of a house very easily.”

Julie: “We’ve started running a fortnightly insights session tracking how the needs from people with Parkinson’s are changing, and using that to direct our work in a much more responsive way than ever before. That model of rapid insight-driven decision making is something we’ll carry on with beyond the crisis. We’re progressing our online service-delivery models like video appointments at a faster pace, and we’re already exploring what we could do with our office space if it was utilised less.”

Linda: Our “Squads” were set up for working remotely, and they have the trust and

relationships they need to make it work, as well as the tools and technology. There's no way we could have turned around what we did at the pace we did in the face of COVID if we hadn't done our transformation. The future is unclear, but there is no doubt that we all need to be able to pivot, support one another, ask for help and be creative. This is a great opportunity to practice letting go of control and finding comfort in ambiguity.

"This could be the tipping point in the digital revolution, we all need to think about how where digital can take us." Lara Burns, The Scouts

A little more about the contributors:

Lara Burns is the Chief Digital Officer at the Scouts, running IT alongside digital. She's been in digital longer it's been called digital. New Media, e-publishing. The successes that we discussed included an overly successful app to match volunteers and older people at Age UK, and seen an unprecedented transformation during her tenure at the Scouts with COVID-19 seeing the first digital Scout meetings.

Julie Dodd, is of Parkinson's UK and they have gone through a full digital transformation across people, data, ways of working, culture and infrastructure. They've transformed their services and ways of working, meaning that people can engage with Parkinson's UK during lockdown and they can continue to deliver life changing support.

Yasmin Georgiou is the Head of Digital Engagement for Great Ormond Street Hospital's Children's Charity. They have made a step change in their digital ways of working, through a digital and HR partnership they have increased digital skills across the organisation and created a culture where teams are able to work collaboratively on digital campaigns, regardless of whether they are in the office or at home.

Linda McBain is Director of Marketing Delivery at Save the Children UK, leading a department of marketing, digital and agile experts. She oversees four multi-disciplinary squads which plan, deliver and optimise the charity's engagement with the UK public. Prior to this role, she was the organisation's Director of Digital and has a 16-year career in digital marketing.