

## BREAKFAST BRIEFING

# Leading Organizational Transformation: The View from the Top

As companies of all types and sizes are battered by the waves of changing technology, customer demands, and threats from potential disruptors, how can executives successfully transform their organizations?

## The Panel

**Tim Collins**, CEO of EBSCO Information Services (EIS), **Maria Flynn**, CEO of JFF (Jobs for the Future), and **Travis York**, CEO of GYK Antler, spoke of the challenges and critical success factors they've encountered in leading organizational transformations. The event, held in Waltham, MA, was hosted by MDA Leadership chair and founder **Sandra Davis**, an expert on organizational change.



**Sandra Davis**  
MDA Leadership



**Tim Collins**  
EBSCO  
Information  
Services



**Maria Flynn**  
JFF  
(Jobs for the  
Future)



**Travis York**  
GYK Antler

Organizational transformation can be daunting, but readily attainable, through strong leadership and solid change management practices, according to a panel of highly respected CEOs at the recent MDA Leadership Breakfast Briefing, *Leading Organizational Transformation: The View from the Top*.

## Leaders Drive Transformative Change

As Davis noted in her opening remarks, each year, U.S. businesses spend billions of dollars on organizational transformation, yet most of these efforts produce disappointing results. A 2018 Bain study of 426 companies executing major changes found 68% settled for “dilution of value and mediocre results;” 20% failed to deliver, producing less than 50% of expected results; and just 12% achieved or exceeded expectations. However, those who met or exceeded their targets said skillful leadership of risk accounted for 80% of their success.

Each of the three CEO panelists addressed the changing contexts that have compelled them to initiate transformation. Collins spoke of how EIS has become the leading provider of research databases, e-journals, magazine subscriptions, e-books and discovery service to libraries, universities and point of care providers. Flynn detailed how Boston-based JFF, a national nonprofit, drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. And York discussed the award-winning work and staff of GYK Antler, a full-service marketing firm based in New Hampshire. Yet despite their successes, each shared major external pressures necessitating organizational transformations, including changing market dynamics and customer/end user demands, profound technology changes, and the threat of disruptors like Amazon.





MDA Leadership's Breakfast Briefing on *Leading Organizational Transformation: The View from the Top* featured these experts: Tim Collins, CEO of EBSCO Information Services (EIS); Sandra Davis, Founder and Chair of MDA Leadership; Jim Laughlin, Vice President of Consulting at MDA Leadership; Maria Flynn, CEO of JFF (Jobs for the Future); and Travis York, CEO of GYK Antler.

## Organizational Success Factors in Driving Transformations

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Davis quoted John Dewey in reminding us that “We don’t learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.”

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All three CEOs demonstrated their careful reflection on key ingredients in their transformations. Despite major differences in their size, status (for profit and nonprofit), products, services, and customers, they reached strong agreement on several essential success factors.

### 1. Design for Success

All three leaders recognized that organizational design was foundational and changed their structures to accomplish their transformations. In each case, the move was away from more traditional, hierarchical structures that had enabled earlier successes in more stable times to more fluid, matrixed, cross-functional structures and agile, empowered teams. These newer arrangements were designed to defeat silos, insularity, and unhealthy localized incentives in favor of increased collaboration, innovation, speed of decision making, and the unleashing of hidden value.

For example, to improve the development and delivery of software, EIS has restructured its entire product development capability, adopting Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe®), an agile approach that minimizes management layers and maximizes small team empowerment. “Teams recommend technical debt reduction work to be done,” said Collins, “and cross-departmental program teams make decisions on what gets worked on when—not senior management.”

Similarly, GYK Antler has formed cross-functional “pillar teams” to address critical initiatives. And in addition to restructuring in its traditional core areas, JFF has created JFF Labs, a new strategy and innovation arm to focus on work-based learning innovators and disruptors through unique partnerships. “We created JFF Labs,” Flynn emphasized, “as an innovative incubator so that we could reposition the core while building the new.”

### 2. Win with Talent

“We embraced coaching and talent development more aggressively through our transformation,” York shared, and Collins and Flynn concurred. Transformations entail an increased emphasis on talent identification, assessment, and development. All three CEOs give considerable strategic attention to assessing their talent, addressing underperformance, and ensuring they have the right person in the right role (and as York noted, “the right people on the bus”).

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Transformations excite and energize some, while others may not demonstrate the resilience and growth mindset needed to remain with the organization. Collins revealed his increased focus on coaching, teaching, and team building during these times of great change. “The team may have been built for a particular task initially,” he says, “but now we work far more on team development, so we can accomplish much more together.”

### 3. Overcommunicate

A common theme is the intense emphasis these CEOs place on overcommunicating the transformation. As Flynn stated, “I find myself constantly sharing what we are doing and why, and sharing how I am spending my time, so there is a deeper understanding” of the transformation journey underway. York stressed the importance of honesty and transparency during a transformation journey that is filled with uncertainty.

Leaders, he said, need to let employees “know where we are going and what we are doing, and what we haven’t quite figured out yet. The transparency really helps.” Collins reminded us that “people are not afraid of change...most want to see improvements in the organization, but they fear the uncertainty associated with change. The solution is to overcommunicate, providing as much clarity as you can during the change, speaking openly about where uncertainties lie and how and when they will be addressed.”

While all three discussed leveraging many different communication vehicles, including technology-enabled channels such as Yammer, Jabber and Facebook for Companies, York reminded the audience that “it’s less about communication tactics and tools and more about helping people to listen well, to know where to access

information, and to know that communication is a two-way street.” To that end, all three CEOs stressed the value of establishing employee feedback loops early in the transformation process.

### 4. Shift Ownership

The panel emphasized the value of creating momentum and transferring change ownership to a broader group of stakeholders. While top leaders may initially shape the vision and mobilize for action, that work needs to shift to others deeper in the organization if transformation is to be successful. York notes that at GYK Antler, going beyond the normal communication channels to “identify and tap the real influencers” among employee groups accelerates acceptance and implementation.

At JFF, Flynn has created “guiding coalitions to create greater ownership” which consist of people at all levels. Her phrase reminds us of the critical second stage of John Kotter’s classic eight-step change process. After senior leaders create a sense of urgency in the organization, it is critical to gain the cooperation of affected stakeholders including employees and lower-level managers. Creating change oversight teams can be a powerful way to achieve broader acceptance, minimize resistance, and accelerate transformation.

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Sandra Davis, Founder and Chair of MDA Leadership, discusses success factors in driving transformation with Tim Collins, CEO of EBSCO Information Services (EIS); Maria Flynn, CEO of JFF (Jobs for the Future); and Travis York, CEO of GYK Antler.

# Personal Success Factors in Driving Transformations

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Davis guided the panel to a fascinating exploration of their personal journeys as leaders during these processes of organizational transformation. What did it require of them personally? What, she wondered, had they learned or relearned?

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Their personal leadership lessons were conveyed not only in their direct answers to this question, but in their rapport.

## 1. Put One Foot in the Future

All three leaders demonstrated a boldness of vision, an ambitiousness for their organizations needed to overcome the timidity that can come with success. All began transformations at a time when their businesses were doing ostensibly well. Yet they looked ahead and read the signs that the landscape was shifting and that organizational renewal was necessary. While “pivot” is a buzzword, it accurately describes how these leaders needed to keep one foot anchored on their enduring values and core capabilities, while boldly stepping the other foot into uncharted territories.

“It can be lonely,” York admitted, “looking far ahead while everyone else is in the trenches. Am I getting it right or wrong? And at what pace? Do I risk pushing too soon or waiting too long?” Collins emphasized no special pride of ownership: “Share your vision or idea and then let them improve your concept.” Scanning the horizon, visioning, and helping the organization confront new realities that require substantial changes are essential acts of leadership courage and discernment.

## 2. Have the Hard Conversations

Flynn noted that “the ability to have hard conversations is critical. I was not initially good at them, but I am getting better.” Collins and York agreed. Where there are likely to be disagreements and hard choices to make on the road ahead, it is highly likely that one or both parties will avoid the fray.

Top leaders need skill in holding challenging conversations with a wide variety of individuals and stakeholder groups. Effective leaders build their networks, forge trusted relationships, and stay informed about their stakeholders’ worlds, so that they earn the right to respectfully challenge,

to question, to disagree, and to influence effectively. Great influencers take a disciplined approach to these conversations, listen as much as talk, and focus on overarching goals and mutually beneficial solutions.

## 3. Embrace Your Own Growth

Davis quoted Marshall Goldsmith, who reminds us that “What got you here won’t get you there.” This is as true for individuals as it is for organizations. Organizational transformation is likely to require personal transformation—or at least a commitment to personal growth and development.

Our CEO panel demonstrated their heightened self-awareness, their humility in acknowledging failures and gaps, and an ability to listen and rethink their positions as the conversation unfolded. Two of the three CEOs have invested in executive coaching for themselves and key senior leaders, recognizing that this critical transformational moment is the right time to gain increased feedback, obtain new tools and practices, seek additional counsel, and reflect deeply on what it will take to lead successfully in a new context. Of course, top leader commitment to personal development also provides a powerful example to the entire organization to embrace improvement and renewal.

## 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 e-mail at [info@mdaleadership.com](mailto:info@mdaleadership.com).

