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How leaders can use powerful narratives as change catalysts

Stephen Denning

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How can leaders create an organization that is comfortable with change and thrives on innovation, one where people embrace with gusto the chance to do things differently? How can top executives help leaders throughout an organization see the necessity for that? And how do you ensure that these leaders are able to communicate their enthusiasm to others in their role as a leader?

Experience working with a number of organizations to achieve these goals indicates that over time, a number of managerial practices will have their effect:

1. Identify and explain the irresistible forces of change.
2. Establish a larger purpose for the organization.
3. Recognize that innovation is everyone's job.
4. Create the innovation capability across the organization.
5. Take structural steps to support innovation.

But these management practices will create an organization that is comfortable with change only if leadership effectively inspires enthusiasm for change. To set the stage for adaptive innovation, what matters at the outset is what leaders say and whether it motivates the required risk taking – or the opposite.

Inspiring enthusiasm for change requires a distinct shift from the traditional mode of communication, in which the leader states the problem to be dealt with, followed by an analysis of the options, and a recommended conclusion.

Define problem >> analyze problem >> recommend solution

This is the “normal”, the “common sense”, the “rational” way of communicating and it is pervasive in organizations. It's an appeal to reason. And it works well enough when the aim is merely to pass on information to people who want to hear it.

But when you're trying to get human beings to change what they are doing and act in some fundamentally new way with sustained energy and enthusiasm, it has two serious problems. One, it doesn't work. And two, it often makes the situation worse.[1]

Successful leaders inspire enthusiasm for change through communication that is fundamentally differently from the traditional, abstract approach. They communicate by first, getting attention; then stimulating desire and only then reinforcing with reasons.

Get attention >> stimulate desire >> reinforce with reasons

When the language of leadership is deployed in this sequence, it can inspire enduring enthusiasm for a cause and spark action to start implementing it. Moreover successful leaders don't stop with a one-time communication. As implementation proceeds, it is



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inevitable that the cause they are pursuing will evolve. While that is happening, leaders and their followers stay in communication and co-create the future by continuing the conversation.

Let's look in more detail at each of the three key steps of the language of leadership (Exhibit 1).

Step #1: getting the audience's attention

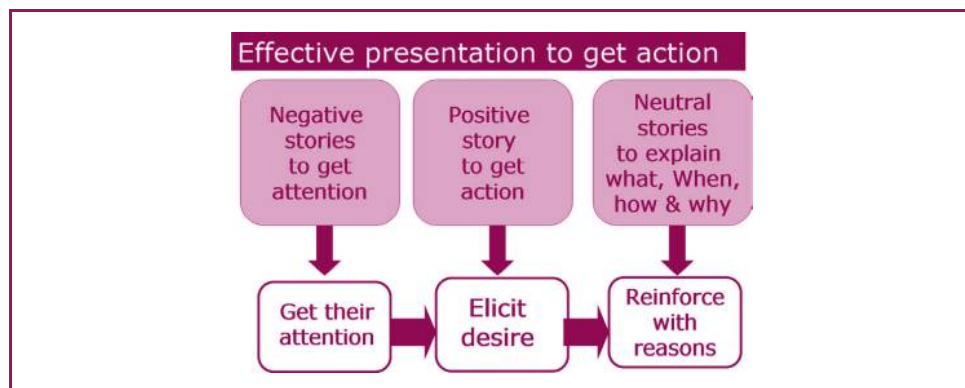
If leaders don't get people's attention, what's the point in even trying to communicate? If people aren't listening, speakers are simply wasting their breath. And in most settings today people simply aren't listening in any attentive way. They are mentally doing emails, preparing for their next meeting, reminiscing about what happened at last night's party, planning lunch or whatever. They may be aware in a vague, background way that someone is talking, and even conscious of the subject under discussion. The first step in communicating is to get their urgent, rapt attention.

How do you get people's attention? A couple of years ago, authors Tom Davenport and John Beck conducted an experiment with sixty executives to see what got their attention over a one-week period. Their conclusion: "Overall, the factors most highly associated with getting attention in rank order, were: the message was personalized, it evoked an emotional response, it came from a trustworthy source or respected sender and it was concise. The messages that both evoked emotion and were personalized were more than twice as likely to be attended to as the messages without these attributes." [2]

Social scientists have also shown that negative messages are more attention-getting than positive messages. Among the more effective ways to get the audience's attention are:

- Stories about the audience's problems.
- Stories about the likely trajectory of the audience's problems.
- An unexpected question or warning.

Exhibit 1



“The kinds of stories that are effective for leaders in stimulating desire for change are very different from what most people expect.”

Step #2: eliciting desire for a different future

Failing to distinguish between getting attention and stimulating desire can have disastrous results. That's because what gets people's attention typically doesn't stimulate a desire to act. Whereas getting attention is generally done more effectively by negative content, getting people to want to do something different needs to accentuate the positive. Negative stories, questions or challenges wake us up. They activate the reptilian brain, suggesting fight or flight. They start us thinking, but they also generate worry, anxiety, and caution. They don't stimulate enthusiastic action.

Nor does the traditional practice of using a comprehensive set of analyses of the reasons for change generate enthusiastic action. For one thing, it's too slow. By the time the traditional presenter has reached the conclusion, sadly the audience has already made up its mind – largely on emotional grounds. For another, it's addressed to the wrong organ of the body. To gain enthusiastic buy-in, leaders need to appeal to the heart as well as the mind. The audience has to want to change. To be effective, a leader needs to establish an emotional connection and stimulate desire for a different future. Without the emotional connection, nothing happens. And stimulating desire is key, because decisions are made almost instantly, or as Malcolm Gladwell might say, in a blink.[3]

The task here isn't about imposing the leader's will on an audience, which, in any event, is impossible. It's about enabling the audience to see possibilities that they have hitherto missed. It means creating the capability in the audience to see for themselves the world and their relations with others in a new and more truthful light. It occurs generally through the use of a story.

The idea that storytelling might be important for leadership has been gaining recognition in recent years. But the kinds of stories that are effective for leaders in stimulating desire for change are very different from what most people expect. Some of the most effective stories are not big, flamboyant, theatrical epics – well-told stories with the sights and sounds and smells of the context all faithfully evoked. Stories told with a bullhorn usually don't elicit desire for change.

What is often counterintuitive to leaders is that the most effective stories are often the smallest and the least pretentious. It's precisely because they are small and unpretentious that they work their magic. It's a question of understanding the right form of story to elicit desire: generally, it's a positive story about the past where the change, or an analogous change, has already happened and the story is told in a simple, minimalist manner.

Thus when in 2002 in Melbourne Australia, Craig Dunn, managing director of AMP's financial services, faced a hostile audience at a time of crisis; following a failed merger, he inspired enthusiasm for change through a simple story. He told them about a family in Adelaide that had bought one of AMP's insurance policies:

“The guy was still quite young, still in his early thirties, and he had a couple of kids. But he had contracted multiple sclerosis. He was just moving to the stage where he would be in a wheelchair. He had an income protection policy with us, and in that instance we went beyond what we were required to do legally. One of our claim managers had traveled over to Adelaide. He went through the house that we had just renovated for the family, and agreed to put in a new bathroom so that they could access it in a wheelchair, and to lower the kitchen benches.”

In telling them what AMP had done for that family, Dunn was reminding them what the firm was all about, and the value that it added to people's lives. He showed them that this was an organization worth fighting for.

Three years later, when AMP had not only survived the crisis but was back on the road to profitability, Dunn said: "What I came to see was that the communication is more emotional than logical: we had to draw upon people's emotional connection to the organization, to draw on that piggy bank of good will to the firm and use that as the way forward."

Such simple narratives can be astoundingly powerful by sparking a new story in the mind of the listener. It's this new story that the listeners generate for themselves that connects at an emotional level and leads to action. In the new story, listeners begin to imagine a new future.

Quickly stimulating desire for a different state of affairs is the most important part of the communication: without it, the leadership communication goes nowhere. It's also the piece that is most consistently missing in the communications of aspiring leaders. And it's the trickiest facet of leadership, because it involves inducing people to want to do something different. The key insight is that if the listeners are to own the change idea, they have to discover it for themselves in the form of a new story.

And it's not "just" a story. What's generated becomes a new narrative to live by, a story that is both credible, because it makes sense of their lives as they understand them, and capable of being put into practice. The newly emerging narrative is constructed both from the ongoing stories of the people and their organization, and the new story put forward by the leader. It is born in the listeners' minds as a more compelling version of their ongoing life stories. The listeners themselves create the story. Since it's their own story, they tend to embrace it. What the leader says is mere scaffolding, a catalyst to a creative process going on inside the listener.



Step #3: reinforcing with reasons

An emotional connection by itself isn't enough. Reasons are still relevant. The desire for change may wane unless it is supported and reinforced by compelling reasons why the change makes sense and should be sustained. But where the reasons are placed in a presentation is crucial.

When we encounter strange new ideas, psychological studies show that we seek to preserve our existing viewpoint. We stubbornly ignore, discredit or reinterpret information that is contrary to views we already hold, to avoid the dissonance of being wrong. By contrast, when we have made a decision to explore change, we actively look for elements that confirm the decision we've already made.

So if reasons are given before the emotional connection is established, they are likely to be heard as so much noise. Worse – if the audience is skeptical, cynical or even hostile – the reasons tend to flip and now are seen as ammunition for the opposite point of view. By contrast, if the reasons come after an emotional connection has been established with the change idea, then the reasons can reinforce it, because now listeners are actively searching for reasons to support a decision they have in principle already taken.

Giving people reasons at a time when they are ready to receive them is one of the keys to communication that leads to action. Reasons are put at a different position in the flow from the Western intellectual tradition. They come, not at the beginning or middle, but at the end.

These three steps – one, getting attention, two, stimulating desire for change, and three, reinforcing the desire for change with reasons, are the same whatever the leadership setting. Of the three steps, the middle step – stimulating desire for change – is the most important, because it generates desire for change. Without desire for change, there is no energy or enthusiasm. Indeed without desire for change, there is hardly any point in getting the audience's attention. And without desire for change, there is nothing for reason to reinforce. It's desire for change that drives the change process. So if transformational leaders do only one thing, they should make sure that stimulate desire for change.

“If the listeners are to own the change idea, they have to discover it for themselves in the form of a new story.”

Create that capability across the organization

If change is to be pervasive throughout the organization, then it's not enough for top management to be able to inspire enthusiasm for innovation. Many leaders will be needed throughout the organization, and they in turn need to have the capability to create new champions in their audiences. An ability to spark enthusiasm for change thus becomes an essential competence for all leaders in the organization.

As this competence usually requires a fundamental rethinking of the way communications are conducted in the firm, to acquire it, most firms will need (1) to establish training programs for all leaders in the firm; (2) to appoint mentors to support the development of appropriate capability and (3) to incorporate an ability to spark change in career planning for leaders.

Notes

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3. M. Gladwell: *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little Brown, 2005).

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