

The Secret Language of Leadership

Nine Ways To Elicit Desire for Change

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Nine Ways To Elicit Desire For Change

Ok, so you've got people's attention. Now what?

You want to change the world. It might be a change you're seeking within your organization. Or you might be trying to stimulate interest in a new product or service you are introducing in the marketplace. Or it might be a change in your community. Or your family – maybe your teenage son disappeared into his room a couple of years ago, and hasn't been seen since. Or maybe it's your country – which used to be at peace and have balanced budgets. Or your planet – maybe it's global warming or world poverty. Whatever it is, big change or small change, you think you have a good idea that would make the world a better place.

Your audience's interest has been stirred. And if they are not exactly sitting on the edge of their seats and breathless to hear what you're going to say, at least they're ready to listen. Now what do you say?

Remember: you have only moments to make your case for the great new idea that you have and get them to commit to a different future, perhaps a radically different future. You know that they will be making their initial decision rapidly on based on intuitive, effortless processes, which are difficult to control or modify and largely based on feelings.¹ They will make their decision long before you can complete any set of rational arguments in favor of whatever you're proposing.

How can you get people to accept your arguments and win them over to your way of thinking and buy into a new future *even before* you have had a chance to present your arguments? How can you *reason* with people who are making decisions on *emotional* grounds? How can you convince people of something new, something strange, something possibly disruptive, in just seconds? At first glance, the problem seems insoluble.

The audience may have good reasons not to change

And it gets worse. The audience may well have solid, rational reasons for this negative attitude. The audience may have had negative experiences with you or your organization or your idea before. Or they may already be committed to moving in a different direction. Or they may be concerned that what you are proposing will have negative consequences for them. Maybe they have a different idea about how to approach the problem. Maybe they have never done this kind of thing before.

Such an audience will likely include skeptics, cynics and people who are hostile to your change idea. Yet these are the very people who need to be brought on board. You've got their attention and so they are listening to you. But if you present arguments to such people, they will be looking at your arguments through the lens of their negative attitude,

and silently answering every argument with a rejoinder, all the time finding reasons why what you are saying doesn't make sense.

When you're arguing with such people, then for every argument that you put forward to do something, the unsympathetic segment of any audience is not only listening to you but also to "the little voice in the head", which is silently providing counter-arguments to every point that you make.

In effect, the audience will be mentally fencing with you. There is an unspoken sequence in which you say, "This is so," while the little voice in the mind of the listener is saying, "No, it isn't." You offer a new argument, and again the little voice in the mind of the listener is countering that with, "No, but what about this?" And so on. There is no winner in such an adversarial contest. The more strenuously you argue for your point of view, the more the listeners are digging in deeper to defend their own entrenched positions.

Change is harder than we often imagine

But wait, there's more. Leaders typically tend to underestimate the difficulty of what they are asking people to do in transformational innovation.

- **IBM:** In 1993, when Lou Gerstner took over IBM, the quintessential computer hardware firm, and told them that in future they were going to make a good part of their profits from services, that involved a whole lot of people acting very, very differently. If you'd been working in IBM for a long time, your very identity was bound up in working for a hardware firm. So when Gerstner comes and starts telling you now you're working for a services firm, he's asking you, not just to do a different job, but also to assume a new role, in effect take on a new identity. That's a helluva thing to ask. Who is Lou Gerstner to be telling these people what their identity is going to be?
- **World Bank:** Or in 1996 when Jim Wolfensohn asked people in the World Bank to go from being a lending organization to become a Knowledge Bank, he was asking people to shift from what they knew and loved doing, i.e.. lending, to doing something completely different. He was asking them to take on new roles, become different kinds of people. That's quite something for anyone to ask.
- **GE:** Same thing with Jeff Immelt. In 2001, he comes to GE, the quintessential process-driven organization, and tells them now they're part of an organization that puts "imagination to work." Very different role. Very different identities. That's an awful lot to be asking of people.

Leadership means creating new identities

The fact is that most people don't like being told suddenly to acquire new identities. Yet that's what leadership is about. Leadership is about getting people to do what they basically don't want to do, to take on new identities, to become new people.

If people wanted to change, you would just say, "balance the budget" and or "change the organization" or tell your teenage son to "grow up" and the budget would be balanced, or the organization would change and your teenage son would suddenly come out of his room where he has been holed up for the last couple of years and grow up and say, "Gee, dad, I'd forgotten to grow up. thanks for reminding me!"

In reality, when you make those simple suggestions, the organization doesn't change, or the budget doesn't get balanced and your teenage son doesn't come out of his room, just because you say so. That's because these people don't *want* those things to happen right now. They have other wants that are more important to them at the time.

When we ask people to take on new work, and adopt new roles, it's not simply a matter of getting action. It's a matter of assimilation. Ultimately a transformational change that succeeds does so, not because people do something differently, but because they begin to create a new identity. The key to transformation is not the action plan: the key is the identity shift. Until we can begin to shift identity, the change doesn't really take root.

Leadership is about getting people to want to do something that they don't want to do. It's elementary, but it's often overlooked.

- **You** want them to do something.
- **They** don't want to do it.
- You want them to shift from "**not wanting it**" to "**wanting it.**"

Little wonder, then, that few presentations ever really change people's minds about anything significant.

The key task: eliciting desire

The key step in the process is eliciting the audience's desire for a new course of action in which they acquire new identities and become new people. Once the audience is paying attention, there is a need to make an emotional connection with the audience and stimulate positive desire towards whatever course of action you are advocating, so that they want to become the kind of people you are describing. Without such positive desire, anything you say about change risks being interpreted in a negative light. And the positive desire must be elicited in the first few seconds, not in minutes or hours. In this segment, you are seeking to win at least a preliminary decision in favor of what you are proposing.

This is the heavy lifting of persuasion, and it's usually the fatal, step – eliciting the audience's desire for a different state of affairs. This is where most presentations urging change come to grief.

1. Arguments and reasons don't work

In a conventional approach, in which you present arguments to the listener, you say this is the way things are and this is what you have to do. You're launching abstract arguments at the listeners. But the listeners are sitting there thinking, "This guy is saying it is so, but I'm not so sure."

And you come on with more arguments: "That's what you should do!"

And the listener is sitting there thinking: "No, it isn't"

And you say, "And let me give more reasons why we have to do this."

And the listener thinks: "No, the arguments don't show that at all."

In effect, you're having a mental argument with the listener. It's adversarial in nature. You're fencing with the listener. The assertion of abstract propositions inevitably leads to this adversarial kind of relationship.

Look at the very early examples of this traditional approach of persuasion by argument: Plato's dialogues. In an intellectual sense, in every one of the dialogues, Plato's protagonist, Socrates, thoroughly whips his interlocutors. On the surface, Socrates "wins" the argument. Plato implies that the interlocutor lies in a crumpled intellectual heap on the ground. But in reality, this is not what happens. In reality, there is no winner in an argument. The participants retreat to the respective camps, still alive, still convinced of their positions, perhaps vanquished in this particular encounter, but, alas, ready to fight another day.

So a direct approach of telling the listener what to do doesn't elicit desire for a different future. It ends in an argument, and a continuing adversarial relationship.

2. Springboard storytelling

By contrast, narrative can take you inside the imaginations of your listeners and inspire them to create new roles, new identities, new futures. You can use narrative to inspire people to want a different kind of future, and to acquire new identities within that future.

A springboard story: A springboard story is a story about an example where the change is already happening. If you can find a story that resonates with the audience, it will connect with them at an emotional level and generate a new story in their own minds that leads to action. An example is one that I used in 1996 to help communicate the idea of knowledge management to the World Bank:

In June of last year, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia went to the Web site of the Centers for Disease Control and got the answer to a question about the treatment of malaria. Remember that this in Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world, and it took place in a tiny place 600 kilometers from the capital city. But the most striking thing about this picture, at least for us, is that the World Bank isn't in it. Despite our know-how on all kinds of poverty-related issues, that knowledge isn't available to the millions of people who could use it. Imagine if it were. Think what an organization we could become.

This simple, apparently bland story stimulated listeners to imagine a different future for themselves and for the organization, and contributed to a strategic shift in the World Bank to become “the knowledge bank”.

Inviting the audience to dream

The springboard story works as a kind of a metaphor for the future idea: it encourages the listener to imagine a similar story of their own in which they successfully implement the change idea. It is one of the most few effective ways to elicit desire in the minds of the audience for a different future. It's a story that is about an example or incident or anecdote where the change idea that you are presenting actually happened and ended successfully.

In effect, you don't *tell* the audience to implement your change idea, because that would lead to an argument. Instead, you *invite* the audience to dream, by eliciting a new story in the mind of the listener, by inducing the audience to imagine a new story of which they are the hero. I'm telling them a story about someone in Zambia in order to promote, say, knowledge sharing, and the audience doesn't work in Zambia: what I'm trying to do is to get them to imagine a story in which they are the hero, sharing their knowledge, in their own context. I'm trying to induce them to imagine, “Yes, what a neat idea! I could do that! I could make this happen in my world!”

The metaphor works most effectively when the *story is told in a minimalist fashion*. You tell the story in this particular way so that the listener starts to imagine a new story, in which they are the hero and in which moreover they are already implementing the idea of sharing knowledge. This dream, this future story that they are imagining, happens as a result of the particular way in which you tell the story.

Thus the metaphor is unlikely to work if you tell a story in the Aristotelian mode where you invoke the sights and the sounds and the smells and all the details of what it was like in Zambia. That way of telling a story won't leave enough mental space for the listener to imagine a new story.

But when you tell the story in a different way, in this minimalist, skeletal and bland fashion, there's plenty of mental space for the listener to imagine a new story. In one part of their mind, they're listening to you tell your story. But in another part of their mind they're imagining a new story. They're the hero. And for them it's a new idea. They've just had a wonderful idea. And because it's their own idea, they love that idea. "What a great idea! I've just had a great idea!"

If you're a novelist, you're trying to occupy that mental space of your readers totally, 100%, so that they are totally absorbed in your novel, and time stands still, and the listener's world vanishes. If you're a leader trying to inspire change in an audience, your object is quite different. Your objective is to occupy the mind only 30% and leave 70% of the mental space of the listener available to imagine a new story in their own context. So you're trying deliberately not to fill up the mind of the listener.

Thus our minds are not unlimited. Our minds have only a finite amount of space to do mental work. It's a matter of bandwidth. If you give the listener too much to think about, their minds will be overwhelmed. They may follow what you are saying. But there is no mental space left to imagine their own story.

So it's a very delicate balance between giving the listener enough but not too much. It recalls the famous Peter Brook quote that

"Nothing really amazing ever happens unless you create an empty space for it."

You have to create an empty space in the mind of the listener.

And some people say, "Well, that's very dangerous! They might be using that empty space for something else other than your message!" What those critics don't realize is that they are using that mental space for something else anyway. You're talking to them about knowledge sharing in Zambia and they may be mentally doing their emails or thinking about what happened at the party last night.

"But," the critics often say, "this is horrible! You're out of control!" And of course what they don't realize is that you were never in control of the mental space of the listener in the first place. You don't control the listeners' mental space and what's more, you can't control it.

What you're doing is trying to tell a story of sufficient interest and excitement for the listener that get connected to that story, but leave enough mental space so that they can imagine a new story – their own story, a story in which they are the hero, and in which they are implementing your idea.

The essence is trust

So you have to trust the listener. You have to have confidence in the listener to use the empty mental space for constructive purposes. Trust is the essence of it.

And trust grows out of the collaborative nature of narrative. Whereas an argument is naturally adversarial, narrative is a naturally collaborative mode of interacting. When you offer a narrative about, say, Zambia, you're offering an invitation to make a mental visit to Zambia. The listeners don't have to accept the invitation. And if they accept, it doesn't lead to an argument. But if they do accept the invitation, then you and the listeners are going down the same path, arm in arm, imagining what it was like in Zambia. It's a naturally collaborative activity.

The story must be positive

Springboard stories are about examples or anecdotes where the leader's idea was successfully implemented. They are in effect stories with a happy ending. This is something that springboard stories share with Hollywood. But there are two further requirements of happy endings of springboard stories:

- ***The happy ending must be credible:*** If the story appears on the surface to end happily, but the audience is sitting there thinking, "It couldn't have happened that way," then you won't get the springboard effect.

Suppose you're trying to win support for a corporate acquisition and you tell a springboard story about another example where a corporate acquisition was successful. The risk is that because the listeners may know that studies show that some 75% corporate acquisitions are unsuccessful, and lose value for the acquiring company, the listeners may be thinking: this is incredible. So you have to give enough detail to show why this acquisition was unexpectedly successful, and different from all the other failed acquisitions.

- ***The ending must be happy for the audience:*** It's not enough for the story to have a happy ending in a generic sense. The story has to be positive for the audience.

Thus many leaders in the corporate world tell stories about success for the company, without realizing that the audience is sitting their thinking: "That's fine for the company, and maybe fine for the CEO, but what about the workers who were laid off? What about the managers who lost their jobs? What's in it for me?"

It's vital therefore the story be one in which the audience can see why the story will have a happy ending for them.

What about the “burning platform” story?

In leadership writing, there’s a big emphasis on the need for “a burning platform”. This term derives from a situation when the oil platform Piper Alpha in the North Sea caught fire, a worker was trapped by the fire on the edge of the platform. Rather than certain death in the fire, he chose probable death by jumping 100 feet into the freezing sea.

The term 'burning platform' is now used to describe a situation where people are forced to act by dint of the alternative being somewhat worse. The crisis may already exist and just needs to be highlighted. The idea is to show how staying where you are is not an option, and that doing nothing will result in disaster.

It is also used to describe the practice of finding and highlighting a crisis in your organization, or even to the practice of engineering a crisis so as to force change. e.g. A company floats off a slow backwater division, forcing it to compete without the shelter of the parent company.²

There is thus much talk in business circles of the need for a “burning platform” to create the sense of urgency that will catalyze change. For instance in 1993, IBM was going through a “near death” experience, this obviously made it easier for the new CEO, Lou Gerstner, to make the case that change was needed. But it is a mistake to imagine that a negative story will spark itself change. Negative stories get people’s attention but they don’t spark action. The action comes from a positive story that shows the way forward.

Creating fear in your audience with negative stories, combined with hierarchical sanctions, may provoke grudging compliance but not the enthusiastic, all-the-stops-out hell-for-leather implementation that transformational change requires. So use negative stories to convey the message that the situation is indeed grim, and so get people’s attention, but follow it with the positive springboard story that shows how to solve the problem.

Springboard storytelling is simple but not easy

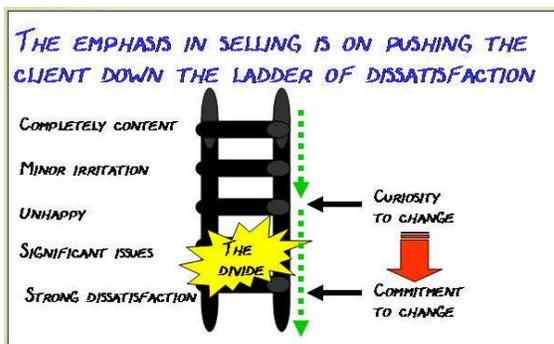
While it may be simple to tell a springboard story, it isn’t necessarily easy. Storytelling requires effort and discipline because the forces that work in the modern world against our inherently narrative natures, namely, the systems, the machine-like tendencies in our culture, the pressures to go along with whatever corporate mantra happens to be dominant, the drive to talk in abstractions, the replacement of science with scientism, are incredibly tenacious. Our stories are so much out of the mainstream that a certain kind of work is necessary to keep up our efforts to communicate with other human beings in their native language of narrative. But it is intrinsically satisfying work, because it puts us in touch with many aspects of our lives that are habitually overlooked and undervalued in the modern world.

It is also enlightening and energizing work. It is enlightening because it enables us to see more clearly, and so come to understand more deeply, areas in our lives with which we are out of touch or that we are reluctant to look at. It is energizing because it puts us in touch not only with our own inner self, but because it connects meaningfully with other human beings. Storytelling puts us in touch with our emotions, such as grief, sadness, hope, anger and fear, that we might not ordinarily allow ourselves to think or talk about in public. It can also help us appreciate feelings of joy and awe and wonder which often flash by fleetingly without any recognition. And it leads to new ways of being in our own skin and in the world which can free us from the ruts we may have fallen into. It is empowering because it opens up reservoirs of creativity, and intelligence, imagination, and clarity.³

3. “Selling” by creating dissatisfaction

Leading and marketing and selling have much in common. They all involve getting people to do things without hierarchical power: the leader can’t compel people to change, any more than the seller can compel the buyer to buy the product or service on offer. Both work by persuasion. “Selling” has acquired a pejorative sense that has not yet attached to “leadership”, and so leaders and writers on leadership are often at pains to distinguish themselves from mere sellers. But the activities have much in common, as shown in the pervasive organizational use of the term, “getting buy-in”. In fact leaders have much learn from what has been learned in marketing and selling, in terms of both what to do and what *not* to do.

An area of particular interest for leadership concerns the selling of high-value items, which involves a considerable element of leadership. Often such sales involve not merely purchase of the item but significant organizational changes to make effective use of the purchase, and there are significant risks that something will go amiss in the process of making those changes. Selling in such situations requires leadership: the salesperson must become in effect a change agent within the customer’s firm.



There’s increasing recognition, for instance in an interesting recent book, *Selling Is Dead*, by Marc Miller and Jason M. Sinkovitz, that the traditional approach of selling to put emphasis on making the customers dissatisfied with their current lot doesn’t work in this situation. Thus, the famous approach of “*Spin Selling*” involves asking a series of carefully crafted

questions that is meant to push the customer down a ladder of satisfaction, so that people

who are initially content or feeling only minor irritation with the current situation, end up realizing that there are serious issues and they feel to strong dissatisfaction so that they are ready to the seller's product.

But merely being strongly dissatisfied with the current situation won't be enough to push the organization to incur the expense and run the risk of making a major change involved in a disruptive innovation unless they believe in the positive value of making the change. Unless they believe in a dream of a better future, they will muddle along with their current situation, with all its attendant problems and dissatisfactions, all the while hoping that the problems will go away, if they just work a little harder or faster. They won't take the risk of making the leap to do things differently until they believe in a different kind of future.

The fact is that the devices used to push the customer down the ladder of satisfaction are useful for getting attention, but they are not very well suited to eliciting desire for the future that you are proposing. These are good devices for getting the interaction started but typically they lack the substantive content needed to elicit desire for the course of action you are proposing.

When you are dealing with a sale involving a major change, unseen decision-makers must review how the offering helps to further their strategic agenda. Simply removing tactical or departmental problems will not be enough to gain the type of momentum throughout the decision-base necessary to counter the extremely high cost of change for a new application.⁴

To be successful in getting disruptive change, you must appeal to the other side of the influence equation: achievement and accomplishment. In effect, focus on dissatisfaction, but simultaneously demonstrate an opportunity i.e. that you can make "the current situation demonstrably better." How? By accelerating or streamlining the goal achievement process, or enabling even more attractive goals to be set and reached.⁵

4. An enticing word-picture of the future

Another direct approach to elicit desire to offer a enticing word-picture of the future.

This is what was done in the famous examples of Winston Churchill's "We shall fight them on the beaches" in 1940, or Martin Luther King's "I have a dream speech," in 1963, or John F. Kennedy's promise to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

It is sometimes said that these are compelling future stories. Nonsense!

If you read these speeches, which are quoted at length in *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, you will see that they are not stories at all. They are compelling, but they are not stories. They don't have the central characteristics of a story, namely, a set of events

held together by causal connection. They are effective, but not because they are compelling future stories.

They are, rather, brilliant *word pictures of a future state*.

And they allude to *stories of who we are*. Winston Churchill called on the British nation to pull together to defeat the Nazis. And Martin Luther King invited America to pull together to become one nation where race discrimination had been eliminated. And John F. Kennedy called on America to pull together to put a man on a moon. All three were great collaborative challenges.

But compelling stories in themselves, these famous examples are not.

5. Compelling stories of the future

Some writers like Noel Tichy say that the main function of a leader is to “offer compelling stories of the future.”

The problem with this is that I have never been able to find any compelling stories about the future. I’ve found compelling stories but they are not about the future. And I’ve found future stories, but they are exactly compelling, because the future is unpredictable and hence difficult to telling a convincing story about. Even if it is momentarily convincing at the time, the future changes unexpectedly, so that the story becomes unbelievable.

So “compelling future stories” are rather like witches and unicorns. People often talk about them, but no one has ever seen them.

6. An image of the future:

If the change idea is a very simple one (buy this handbag or purchase this hamburger), it may be possible to find an image that can make the emotional connection directly. A woman may see a photo of a handbag and instantly conclude, like a character in *Sex and the City*, that it “has her name written on it.” Or a person who enjoys hamburgers may have his longing for this food stimulated by a artfully contrived photo that shows inherently unpalatable, unhealthy food presented in an astonishingly attractive light, and so the photo makes the sale, without more.

But when it comes to the more difficult challenges of leadership, and getting people to buy into complex ideas, it isn’t easy to find single images that epitomize the idea that you are talking about. What is the image for knowledge management? I was never able to find on. Or reform of social security? The Bush administration was never able to find one.

So images may be effective in simple tasks, but not for the heavy lifting of getting people to dream a new future.

With these more complex ideas, an image may become associated with a story, (in the way the photos of Abu Ghraib became associated with the stories of that prison and the abuses that occurred there.) The photos may become emblematic of the idea through the story, but it's the story that's doing the heavy lifting of persuasion, not the image.

When using images, it's important to consider whether the image is genuinely enticing. Thus when you open any business magazine, you'll see many pages of advertising, put there at a vast expense, with some of the most boring pictures in the world – pictures of computers and equipment and buildings that are tedious in the extreme. Why are these companies spending these vast sums of money on images that do little or nothing to enhance desire for the products or services in question? I'm tempted to conclude that these companies are wasting their money like this because other companies are doing the same thing. The managers hear that “a picture is worth a thousand words” and so they use pictures, without ever asking themselves whether what works for a Kate Spade handbag is really going to work with a commodity like a computer. These managers and their advertising agencies have to stop wasting money and start – to think!

7. The story of who we are

If man is a social animal, then one way to elicit a desire for a different future is to draw on humanity's desire to be part of a group that is moving into the future.

For instance, to get the company on his side, former GE chairman and CEO Jack Welch successfully energized the company for the tasks ahead, by creating a vision for the future, he told three kinds of stories:

- ***The story of who I am***, i.e. Jack Welch, a person who revels in competing and winning.
- ***The story of who we are at GE***, a firm comprising people who also enjoy competing and winning.
- ***The story of who we are going to be***, a company that will be the most competitive company on earth.

The focus was less on what is the purpose of the competing and the winning, and more on being a group of people who just enjoy competing and winning.⁶

The problem of course is that this may work for a while, but once people start to stop and think and ask themselves about the purpose of all this competing and winning, what is the social value of such activity on such a large scale over a long period of time, merely pursuing teamwork for teamwork's sake may start to ring hollow.

It also tends to overlook that not everyone is going to buy into those kinds of goals. An organization like GE comprises many different kinds of people. Some may have

genuinely shared Jack Welch's huge enthusiasm for competing and winning. But others probably joined GE for different reasons, e.g. they wanted an interesting job, or they wanted the good pay to raise a family, or whatever. Several decades ago, it may have been impolitic to surface such different viewpoints, and there may have been enough cheerleading going on by the macho competitive leaders, for these different viewpoints to go unnoticed. But by the early 21st Century, diversity has become a much more explicit concern: failure to address different viewpoints and establish goals that are meaningful for all the different people who make up an organization.

Similarly, William Shakespeare used the story of who we are in his play, *Henry V*, in the famous speech in which Henry exhorts his soldiers into battle. He has Henry first offer to those who don't want to fight a safe passage home. But for those who stay, he offers eternal glory for "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers."

WESTMORELAND. O that we now had here
But one ten thousand of those men in England
That do no work to-day!
KING. What's he that wishes so?
My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin;
If we are mark'd to die, we are enow
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.
By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,
Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;
It yearns me not if men my garments wear;
Such outward things dwell not in my desires.
But if it be a sin to covet honour,
I am the most offending soul alive.
No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England.
God's peace! I would not lose so great an honour
As one man more methinks would share from me
For the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!
Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,
**That he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart; his passport shall be made,
And crowns for convoy put into his purse;
We would not die in that man's company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.
This day is call'd the feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,**

**Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
 And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian.'
 Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
 And say 'These wounds I had on Crispian's day.'
 Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
 But he'll remember, with advantages,
 What feats he did that day.** Then shall our names,
 Familiar in his mouth as household words-
 Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
 Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester-
 Be in their flowing cups freshly rememb'ed.
 This story shall the good man teach his son;
 And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
 From this day to the ending of the world,
 But we in it shall be remembered-
**We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
 For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
 Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
 This day shall gentle his condition;
 And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
 Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
 And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
 That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.**

The focus of the speech is less on the purpose of why are we here in this muddy field, far from home, fighting this battle against people we don't know much about, and more on the group as a group – “these few, these happy few, this happy band of brothers.” It is magical, linguistic sleight of hand on the part of Shakespeare, and it may work for a battle, or even several battles. But the danger in real life is =that it may not be sustainable. It unravels when people begin to question: what's the point?

Perhaps even more so today, when the justification of war is a often a matter of serious debate and question, the US Army finds that the soldier's will to fight and kill stems mainly from the soldiers' interest in surviving and having their buddies survive, rather than in any belief in the purpose of the war. The story of who we are as a fighting unit is more powerful than: what on earth are we doing here, shooting and killing people?

8. An extraordinary offer

If you have been able to summarize what you offer in a concise but surprising statement, this in itself might serve as the attention grabber, and even elicit desire for a different future. The problem lies in coming up with something that is genuinely and sustainably extraordinary.

From the commercial world, examples are said to include:

“Be all you can be” (US Army)

“We are going to become the most competitive company on earth,” (Jack Welch at GE)

“Your pizza in thirty minutes or it’s free.” (Domino’s)

But even if you manage to come up with an offer that is perceived as extraordinary, the competition is likely to match it, so that offer quickly becomes ordinary.

Thus timely of delivery of pizza becomes the norm, rather than the exception, so that Domino’s offer is merely ordinary now, not extraordinary.

Back in the 1980s, it may have been seen as extraordinary to imagine becoming “the most competitive company on earth.” It is written that Jack Welch successfully used this as a catchphrase around which everyone in the company congregated. Welch used the phrase often in speeches and interviews, whenever he wanted to encapsulate what he was trying to do at GE. It had the virtue of being succinct and serving as a rallying cry.⁷

But after thousands of CEOs have copied Jack Welch, and told stories about how their firm was going to become “best in the world” or “best in the sector”, the idea ceases to be extraordinary and becomes another business cliché.

And the downsides of the extraordinary offer may become problematic. Thus the US Army may enable you to “be all you can be,” but they may also get you killed or maimed in a senseless foreign war, so that offer appears less than fully frank and recruiting becomes problematic.

And in the internal organizational world, it’s even more difficult to come up with a credible extraordinary offer. So this approach is wonderful if you can pull it off, but it’s going to be fairly rare phenomenon, and it may not last too long.

9. A “common memory” story:

This is a story that draws on the audience’s common memory of a regularly recurring phenomenon. If the speaker can tell a story that reminds the audience of a time when they had positive feelings towards the course of action proposed, or something analogous to it, this may be enough to stimulate positive emotion towards to the course of action offered.

President Reagan was adept at drawing on stories that elicited common memories and so was able to get many people to believe that it was once again “morning in America.” The stories delved into a past world that was simpler and more intelligible than the more complex environment of the 1980s, but no matter: the stories were effective in getting people to dream that they could recapture that simplicity and intelligibility.

Conclusions:

A. The communication vehicle vs the quality of the content

I've been discussing in this chapter the different communication vehicles that can be used in an effort to elicit desire for a different future.

The more effective vehicles include springboard stories, stories of who we are, common memory stories and word pictures of the future.

A issue that has appeared throughout the discussion has been a counterpoint between the kind of vehicle being used to communicate the idea and the underlying quality of the idea being communicated.

A lousy idea is going to have trouble eliciting sustained desire for a different future, no matter how it is communicated. The use of a powerful communication technique may win some short-term gains for it, but if you want sustained change, you have to be promoting a fundamentally good idea.

At the same time, many genuinely good ideas never see actual implementation because they never communicated effectively. What this chapter has done is show the array of communication techniques that are available to enhance the chances of acceptance and implementation.

B. Dramatically enhancing the productivity of communications

I've surveyed in this article techniques that are – or are not – effective in eliciting a desire in a new and different future. The more effective techniques are generally stories, and the less effective techniques are the standard communication practices of the modern corporation.

What is implied here of course is that there needs to be *massive shift in those organizational practices*.

The reason is that narrative represents a *massive advance in the productivity of communications*. Imagine you are speaking to a group of 50 people and trying to persuade them to change. Each of those 50 people are in different situations. If you adopt the conventional approach to communications, it would take you a couple of years, just trying to understand those situations. It would probably take you another couple of years crafting action plans for each of those 50 different situations. And it would take you a further couple of years persuading those 50 people to implement the change. So it would take you *a total of ten years to implement the change just for those 50 people*.

When narrative is working at its best, the 50 people are sitting there, and as they listen to you, they are mentally crafting action plans, perfectly adapted to each of these 50

different situations. And what's more, because the action plans are their own action plans, they believe in them. They own them. They are already figuring out how to implement them. You have *achieved in ten minutes what might otherwise take you ten years* – a truly massive leap forwards in the terms of the productivity of communications.

What's next

Of course eliciting desire isn't enough to make persuasion sustainable. Otherwise the listener may have second thoughts and wonder whether it was just a dream. So you need to follow up with rational reasons why the seed of the new idea that you have sown does indeed make sense.

We'll see next month how to do this, not just with grinding, abstract arguments, but with compelling narratives.

February 2006: The Secret Language of Leadership

Read at:

<http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/LearnTheSecretLanguageOfLeadership.pdf>

March 2006: How to Get People's Attention

Read at: <http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/GettingPeoplesAttention.pdf>

This month: Eliciting the Audience's Desire

Read at: <http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/ElicitingDesire.pdf>

Next month: Turning Any Argument Into A Story

June 2006: Structuring A Whole Presentation

July 2006: Wow them with PowerPoint (really!)

This material will in due course appear in a book to be published by Jossey-Bass in September 2007.

You can read advance segments here and send comments as it is being written.

Comments welcome! Send to steve@steddenning.com

Steve Denning

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**UTILITY OF THE VARIOUS COMMUNICATION DEVICES
FOR ELICITING DESIRE**

COMMUNICATION DEVICE	EXAMPLE	VALUE IN ELICITING DESIRE
NON-NARRATIVE DEVICES		
Facts, data, analyses.	The XYZ Corporation has 41,000 employees and sales of over \$1 billion	Low
A surprising question or a question with a surprising answer.	“Do you know how many US women the XYZ Corporation routinely reaches?”	Low
An image	A photo of a fashion accessory that you are selling may elicit desire for the product, e.g. a Kate Spade handbag. A photo of a computer is boring and usually achieves nothing.	Moderate (provided that the image is <i>genuinely</i> enticing)
A word-picture of the future	Winston Churchill’s “We shall fight them on the beaches” in 1940, or Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream speech,” in 1963, or John F. Kennedy’s promise to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. These word-pictures require a high degree of linguistic skill.	High (provided the word picture is genuinely compelling)
A framing statement	<i>US Comptroller General</i> : “The US is facing a retirement tsunami that will never recede.” ⁸	Low
An extraordinary offer:	<i>US Army</i> : Be all you can be: <i>Domino’s</i> : Your pizza in thirty minutes or it’s free.	High
A surprise	A surprise – an unexpected announcement, some startling piece of news, an unanticipated prop	Low
Have the audience do something unexpected.	Ask them to tackle an unexpected exercise...	Low
A challenge	“What I am about to tell you is a bit frightening. Sometimes seminar attendees walk out on me as I deliver this material because they’re disturbed by what they hear.... “	Low
A metaphor	“We are facing a retirement tsunami that will never recede.”	Low

**UTILITY OF THE VARIOUS COMMUNICATION DEVICES
FOR ELICITING DESIRE**

COMMUNICATION DEVICE	EXAMPLE	VALUE IN ELICITING DESIRE
NARRATIVE DEVICES		
The story of the audience's problems:	"I know you are worried about the ... situation. But let me tell you. It's worse than you think it is..."	Low
The story of an opportunity for the audience	"Imagine that it's two years from now. Imagine that your organization has reached its goal of being..."	Moderate
A future story	There are future stories that are compelling, and compelling stories about the past. I have not been able to find any compelling stories about the future. Future stories tend to be low in credibility.	Low
A joke	"Did you hear the one about the..."	Low
A springboard story	It is a story about an example where the change is already happening	High
A "common memory" story	It draws on the audience's common memory of a regularly recurring phenomenon: "Do you remember the last time that you had to ... If it was anything like some of my experiences, it was a nightmare ..."	High
A story of who we are	"We few, we happy few, this band of brothers..."	High
The story of who you are	A concise story about how you dealt with a turning point in your life, that is some way related to the subject under discussion. "Let me tell you how I got into this situation..."	Low
The story of who your company is	Speakers often begin with information about the company they work for, but it lacks inspiration.	Low

¹ Klein, G.: *Sources of Power*, (1996, Princeton); Kahneman, D.: *Maps of bounded rationality: A perspective on intuitive judgment and choice*, Prize Lecture, December 8, 2002; Princeton University, Department of Psychology, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA. Gladwell, M.: *Blink: The Power Of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005, Little Brown).

² http://changingminds.org/disciplines/change_management/creating_change/burning_platform.htm

³ *Wherever You Go, There You Are* Jon Kabat-Zinn, (Hyperion, 1994, page 8

⁴ (*Selling*, page 174)

⁵ *Selling Is Dead*, page 173, by Marc T. Miller and Jason M. Sinkovitz, (Wiley 2005).

⁶ Tichy, N., *The Leadership Engine: Building Leaders at Every Level*. 1998, NY: HarperBusiness.

⁷ <http://www.phptr.com/articles/article.asp?p=100665&rl=1>

⁸ January 4, 2006