

# Translating your strategy into a compelling leadership message

By Willie Pietersen

*People will do almost any what if you give them a good why ----  
Nietzsche*

**For a strategy to be supported and acted upon, it has to live in the hearts and minds of employees. We must end the notion that the final product of a strategy is a document.**

Does the following story sound familiar? Some years ago I was asked to help an organization in the specialty chemicals industry with the implementation of its strategy. The CEO emphasized that the strategy had already been clearly defined and communicated. All that was required was for the organization to act on it. "This organization is hopeless at execution, and I'm really getting impatient with the lack of urgency around here," he said. "Please help us get things in motion."

As a first step, I asked if I could conduct some interviews to try to diagnose where the problems lay. This was willingly arranged, and in the following weeks I spoke to a wide range of employees at various levels in the company.

The results were startling. Very few employees could give a simple explanation of the company's strategy. More to the point, when I asked if they could offer a compelling reason why customers should choose to do business with their company, most gave vague, rambling answers; a few even looked surprised by the question. Perhaps most important, no one was clear what the key priorities were for the organization or where their department fitted into that picture. Needless to say, there was not much excitement around the place.

But there was one thing everyone did remember. Some months previously, there had been a global meeting of all key employees. The event featured golf and all manner of other recreational pursuits, which were very enjoyable. And, of course, there was a series of PowerPoint presentations by the executive team, laying out the plans and expectations for the years ahead. It was full of bullet points, exhortations and graphs pointing upwards. Could they remember what was said? "Oh yes," they said. "We must grow faster and improve our bottom line." That was the closest understanding they had of the strategy for the company.

Soon after, I met with the CEO and his executive team to report the findings. Frustrating though it was, the CEO accepted the reality. The source of the "implementation problem" was that the employees simply did

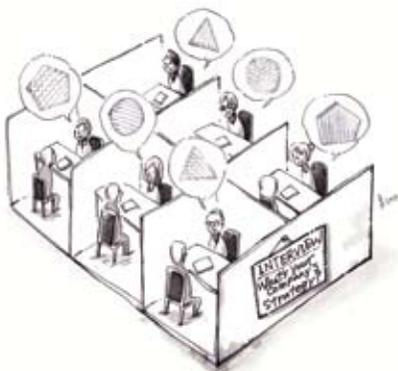
not know what was expected of them. At the big global meeting, all those formal presentations had not clarified the strategy. They had buried it. The CEO and his team immediately got down to the important work. The strategy document would be translated into a simple, compelling leadership message and communicated in a series of meetings and workshops.

The lesson for all of us is this: For a strategy to be supported and acted upon, it has to live in the hearts and minds of employees. We must get rid of the notion that the final product of a strategy is a document. The documentation of a strategy is a vital discipline, but it is the *platform* for strategic leadership, not the end point. Moreover, a sterile PowerPoint presentation of that document is unlikely to move an organization to action. We need to think of a strategy as a leadership story.

## What is leadership?

Effective communication is one of the core tasks of a leader. With that in mind, Howard Gardner in *Five Minds for the Future* offers the best definition of leadership that I have come across: "A leader is someone who is able, through persuasion and personal example, to change the *thoughts, feelings, and behaviors* of those whom he seeks to lead."<sup>1</sup>

Gardner's description of leadership is useful because it identifies the crucial elements



that must work together for leaders to be effective. To begin with, it reminds us that leaders move people to action both through their words and the example they set. Furthermore, effective leaders don't just seek to change the behavior of others; that gets you nothing more than compliance.

It is the combination of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that produces commitment. And the difference between compliance and commitment is the bridge between merely doing something and excelling at it.

Let's take a moment to examine the three crucial elements more fully:

**How people think** This involves leadership as teaching. If we expect our employees to think and function strategically, we need to take the time to give them a clear understanding of important matters, such as the aims of the organization, the nature of the competitive environment, the needs of customers, and the drivers of the firm's economic engine. We must influence the mindset they apply to their daily challenges and decisions.

**How people feel** Leaders are the chief motivation officers of their teams. What they do and say must build trust, commitment, and enthusiasm. Employees have a limited amount of emotional and creative energy to devote to the various aspects of their lives. They need good reasons to bring more of themselves to their work.

**How people behave** To achieve concerted action, the efforts and energies of everyone should be aligned behind the strategic priorities of the organization, in a process of translation from the top level to all the levels below. In addition, it is vital that there is collective adherence to the cultural norms and behaviors of the organization, as the glue that keeps everyone working together.

## Building a cathedral

The following short morality tale illustrates these key principles of leadership. A man walking along the sidewalk comes across three workers toiling away at a construction site. He stops, and asks the first worker, "What are you doing?" The worker answers, "I'm digging a hole." He poses the same question to the second worker, who replies, "I'm laying bricks." Finally, he turns to the third worker, "And what are you doing?" The third worker



answers, "I'm building a cathedral."

The essential task of a leader is to be able to describe "the cathedral"—the cause worth working for. This gives meaning to everyone's role, no matter how humble. It enables the leader to say to the first worker, "You're not just digging a hole. You are helping to create strong foundations for this cathedral, so it will stand for a thousand years." And to the second worker, "You are not just laying bricks. You are helping to create a beautiful façade for this cathedral, so it will be admired by all who see it."

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Leaders should—and can—always evoke a mental picture of the cathedral that will inspire their people and give meaning to mundane tasks. One manager at a company that manufactures, among other things, satellite components tells his teams, "You're not just soldering motherboards. You're an integral

part of our national defense system." To prove that his words aren't just hot air, he regularly brings aerospace and military personnel for tours of the manufacturing facilities, and these people, too, reinforce the message that even the smallest task has significance.

Parents attempting to teach their children courtesy often say, "People will forget what you did. They will forget what you said. But they won't forget the way you made them feel." The same lesson holds true for leaders: Make your people feel that their efforts are valued—and valuable—and they will trust and support your strategy.

## Who are the leaders?

Whose job is it to translate your organization's strategy from a document into a compelling leadership message that will win the hearts and minds of employees? It is everyone's job at every level in the organization.

It is easy to lapse into the comfortable notion that it is the exclusive responsibility of the head of the organization. Then we can simply sit back and ask, "Why don't our leaders do this?" But this is not the way strategically coherent organizations work.

Let me emphasize a crucial point. For an organization to win, leaders at every level must develop a clear line of sight to the organization's overall strategy and priorities and then translate these into aligned

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*George Bernard Shaw*



priorities for their domains of responsibility. Everything that happens at every level in an organization should support the overall priorities of the enterprise. These are the key levers that drive ultimate success. Everything else just adds costs. Nothing is neutral.

Developing a clear line of sight to the organization's overall strategic goals is not straightforward. Clarity will not descend as a gift out of the blue. The prerequisite is for every leader to take personal responsibility for making it happen. It is an inherent obligation of a leader to establish the necessary degree of clarity and simplicity, to describe the “cathedral” that gives meaning to the work of employees. It is no excuse to plead that the top leadership has not made it clear enough. As Shakespeare wrote in *Julius Caesar*, “The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, but in ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

For example, when the various local councils within the Girl Scouts of America create their individual strategies, the essential starting point is the line of sight to the mission for the overall movement: to be the premier leadership experience for girls. From there, the councils translate the mission into local strategies, taking account of local market circumstances, local competitors, and the specific needs of their local customers. Each council then devises a clear set of key priorities that both satisfy its local market and align with the national strategy.

As the Girl Scouts expands among immigrant communities, local councils have had to adapt to ensure their programs are within the context of the newcomers' experience, culture, and faith. Latino families often need to be reassured that camping doesn't mean sending their daughters into the forest all alone. Muslim cultures

need to know that their girls won't be expected to swim in immodest attire. Some troops speak only Spanish, or Vietnamese, or Urdu, and some speak a mixture of English and their mother tongue. The common denominator, though, is the overall Girl Scouts mission: Teaching girls to become leaders in their own lives. That's a goal that transcends all cultural boundaries.

## **The questions on the minds of employees**

George Bernard Shaw once remarked, “The problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred.”<sup>3</sup> We hold fondly to the belief that once we have articulated what we want to say, then everyone has understood it, is convinced by it, and will act on it. But winning hearts and minds is a more demanding job than that.

An essential quality of good communication is being a good listener. This means understanding what is going on in the minds of employees. The ultimate art of good listening is to hear what is *not* being said, but what is nevertheless being felt. This was once described to me as “hearing the music between the words.” As leaders tackle the task of communicating the organization's strategy, the following questions are almost always on the minds of employees, and if they are not answered clearly and credibly, employees will simply tune out.

- What are we aiming to achieve, and why should I care?
- Where does my department fit in, and what is expected of me?
- How will we measure success, and what's in it for me?

In communicating the organization's strategy, each of these issues must be specifically addressed. Motivation happens at the individual level. Employees cannot be expected to excel unless they know what is expected of them and why.

## **Developing your leadership message**

The real question is not just how to communicate effectively in a general sense. It is how to communicate your strategy so that it wins the hearts and minds of your employees. It has been said that the best leaders, almost without exception and at every level, are master users of stories and symbols. Think of Jesus' use of parables, Churchill's resonating phrases, even Steve Jobs' ability to describe, as he puts it, an “insanely great” lifestyle that's attainable with the purchase of just a few key gadgets.

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What does it take to communicate your organization's strategy in an utterly simple way so that you are able to change the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of employees?

All effective communication of a strategy, including the answers to the key questions on the minds of employees, can be boiled down into four headings: Why, What, How, How Much.

**The Why** This consists of a concise summary of the brutal truths from your analysis of the external environment, the needs of your cus-

tomers and your own realities. These insights provide the essential “reason why” for the strategic goals of your enterprise.

**The What** This provides a simple explanation of the strategic focus your organization will pursue, by answering these questions:

- In which markets will we compete?
- What will we offer our chosen customers?
- What is our winning proposition – the compelling reason why customers should choose us?
- What will be our key priorities, which we will all pursue?

**The How** This describes how the strategy will be implemented and what is expected of everyone at every level. It covers:

- How the priorities will be put in motion
- How all the elements of the business system will be aligned behind the strategy
- A clear explanation of roles and responsibilities

**The How Much** This provides a convincing statement of the economic logic of the strategy and lays out the financial and operational targets being aimed at. In other words, it clarifies “the size of the prize.”

It’s not just a question of putting content underneath each of these headings. Effective leaders are able to weave these elements together into an integrated and engaging story. Even the most brilliant strategies will not energize employees unless leaders are able to do this.

Note that I keep emphasizing that your leadership message must be “compelling.” This means developing the skills of good storytelling. It is well established that people learn best through stories. We tend to dismiss this as the way children learn. But it actually applies equally well to adults.

Great stories share some common features. They are simple, not complicated. They capture the imagination through vivid examples, metaphors, and pictures. They involve human beings, not just dry information. They follow a clear story line. The call to action is clearly framed. Last but not least, they are genuine—the storyteller embodies the message. After all, have you ever come across a great leader who is not able to simplify complexity through examples and stories?

Some leaders are “naturals” at storytelling. For others, it is a skill to be learned. Whatever your starting point, it is a skill you can develop through the disciplines of deliberate practice.

## The power of storytelling

There is a popular myth that if you can run a business, then it’s automatic that you can also teach. Having run businesses over a period of 20 years, I readily fell prey to this assumption when I started teaching at Columbia Business School some 15 years ago. I quickly bumped into harsh reality. Teaching is a different skill, one you have to learn over time. And the learning process is never-ending. You are always stretching to the next level of excellence. That’s what makes it so challenging and so rewarding.

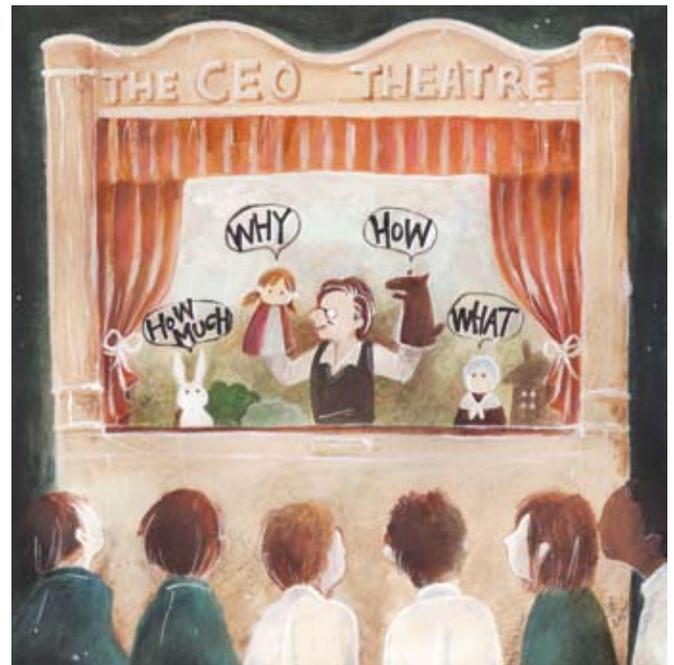
We learn best when the feedback loops from our actions are immediate and truthful. In teaching, the feedback loops are instantaneous and unforgiving. You can sense in real time when participants are not engaged. Energy sags. Eyes glaze. The BlackBerries surrepti-

tiously emerge. There’s no learning going on.

You can also tell right away when those magic “aha” moments occur. Participants sit forward in their chairs. They scribble notes. They raise their hands to get into a discussion, and dig down deeper. The energy level rises palpably. Learning is happening.

When do those magic moments of learning occur? Teachers know they usually happen when we use an example, picture, or metaphor to illustrate a point; hardly ever when we rely on reason by itself. At the end of my seminars, participants go through an exercise to summarize their most valuable insights—those they believe will help them excel back in the workplace. What is striking is how often they will point to stories or examples and the meaning they have extracted from these.

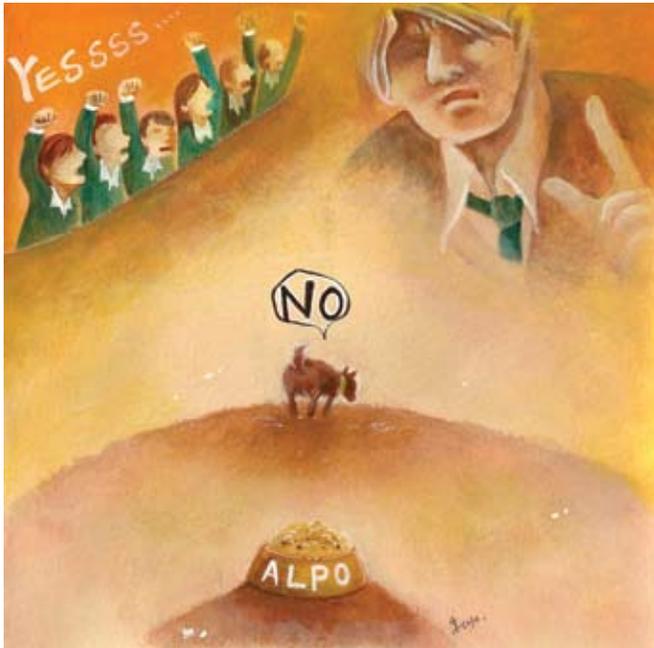
**Great stories are simple. They capture the imagination through vivid examples, metaphors, and pictures. They involve human beings, not just dry information.**



Paradoxically, metaphors are effective precisely because they are seldom complete in themselves. Listeners must use their imagination to complete the picture, and as co-creators they will feel a greater sense of ownership of the underlying insight. Storytelling is powerful because it invites this process of co-creation.

Let me illustrate the point. I often like to emphasize that customers have choices, and therefore to them everything is comparative. Thus, we have to give our customers a compelling reason to choose our offerings over the competing alternatives.

Now let me make the identical point with a story I heard at a management conference a few years back. I can’t vouch for its accuracy,



but I found the story an engaging way of illustrating this very same concept. Here it is:

ALPO dog food is a leading brand in the U.S. pet food market. At a certain point, ALPO was losing market share. The management tried various things to turn around the fortunes of the brand, but nothing seemed to work. The CEO became exasperated and called a meeting of the key executives. He threw down the gauntlet with a series of provocative questions. “We have the most nutritionally advanced product in the industry, right?” “Yes,” came back the reply. “We have most attractive packaging, right?” Again, a chorus of yesses. “And ALPO has the best advertising, retail distribution, and shelf displays, right?” “Yes, it does.” “So, then,” thundered the CEO, “why is our market share going down?” A voice from the back called out, “Because the dogs don’t like it!”

Now, do you have a more memorable way to think about the importance of giving your customers a compelling reason to choose your product?

### The need for repetition

A leadership message is not a one-time event. It’s a campaign. The key is to reinforce the message as often as possible, in both formal and informal settings. The golden rule is to simplify complexity. It is particularly effective to “connect the dots” by showing how everyday activities and challenges tie back to your strategic aims. Good leaders always keep the main thing the main thing.

Of course, in times of crisis or significant change, effective leadership communication counts more than ever. The key is to be a truth-teller; no sugarcoating. When people are left in the dark, they invent their own realities. This is how rumors begin, and once they get underway, they are hard to counteract.

Conveying a compelling leadership message is not a matter of being an extrovert rather than an introvert. The qualities that resonate most strongly are honesty, authenticity, simplicity, and human-

ity. More important than silver-tongued oratory is to be a straight shooter.

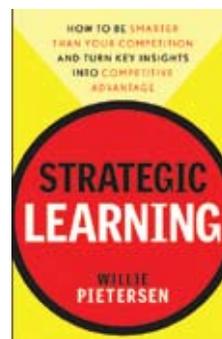
One of the best exemplars I know of this kind of leadership communication is Kathy Cloninger, the CEO of the Girl Scouts of America. The Girl Scouts has undertaken a major transformation, filled with numerous challenges and obstacles. Kathy has repeated her message of change over and over again to audiences throughout the organization. Kathy embodies her message. She is unwavering in her belief that success will be achieved, while being realistic about the barriers that must be overcome. Her message is always simple and readily understandable to everyone. It is tuned exactly to the questions and concerns in the minds of employees. As always happens, there is a human toll involved in this kind of transformation. Kathy’s intense empathy, compassion, and respect for human dignity have bolstered the morale of employees during this journey of change.

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### About the author

**Willie Pietersen** is a Professor of the Practice of Management at Columbia Business School in New York. He specializes in strategy and the leadership of change, and his methods and ideas, especially Strategic Learning, are widely applied within Columbia’s executive education programs, and also in numerous corporations.



Prior to joining Columbia Business School he served as the CEO of multibillion-dollar businesses such as Lever Foods, Seagram USA, Tropicana and Sterling Winthrop’s Consumer Health Group.

Pietersen’s latest book is *Strategic Learning: How to be Smarter than Your Competition and Turn Key Insights into Competitive Advantage*.

His web site is [www.williepietersen.com](http://www.williepietersen.com)

### Notes

1. Howard Gardner, *Five Minds for the Future*, p. 7 (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2006).
2. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act I Scene 2, line 147.
3. George Bernard Shaw as quoted by Marlene Caroselli, *Leadership Skills for Managers*, p. 71 (New York: McGraw Hill Publishers, 2000).