

What's *Your* Story?

Create a compelling change narrative to successfully transform your organization. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



Tony O'Driscoll is a professor at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and a research fellow at Duke Corporate Education. He studies how organizations build the leadership system capabilities required to survive and thrive in an increasingly complex world.

In this unforgiving era of digital Darwinism, organizations that cannot adapt to increasingly dynamic and unpredictable environmental circumstances are going extinct. Since 2000, at least half of the names of companies on the Fortune 500 list have disappeared. To make matters worse, research reveals that while more than 90 percent of organizations today are implementing some form of transformation initiative, less than 30 percent of them are successful in changing the beliefs, behaviors, or practices of their people.

The inconvenient truth is that the failure rate in implementing organizational change initiatives is too high and too costly to be sustained. PMI pegs the cost of impotent transformation efforts at approximately \$2 trillion per year. Said differently, more than \$1 million every 20 seconds—or the GDP of Brazil every year—is being squandered on transformation efforts that change nothing. If organizations want to survive, they must change the way they change.

Change is nothing new to human beings. A key factor that has enabled our species to survive while others have perished is our ability to communicate. Stories shared around the communal campfire transferred beliefs, behaviors, and practices from one generation to the next.

Over time, the written word expanded humanity's ability to communicate across time and space. Today, mobile devices put the wisdom of the world in the palm of human hands, allowing us to connect, coordinate, collaborate, and take collective action on an unprecedented scale. This uniquely human capability allows our species not only to respond to change, but also to create it.

HE DIDN'T SAY, "I HAVE A PLAN"

In examining collective human efforts that have changed the world, some clear patterns emerge. Most important among them is the recognition that successful transformation efforts invariably begin with a clear and compelling change narrative.

For instance, on that profoundly transformative day in August 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King did *not* say, "I have a plan."

Since transformation efforts require a change in the status quo, and since people are inherently biased to adhere to the status quo, communicating

a compelling narrative that makes a purposeful, passionate, and emotionally resonant case for the change is critical to motivate people to let go of the past and reach for the future.

Daniel Goleman's research has shown that there is a key emotional dimension to leadership where a leader's primary task is to articulate a message that resonates with followers' emotional reality, with their sense of purpose, to move them in a new positive direction.

Organizations don't change unless their people change. Charlene Li's research has shown people first must believe that the achievement of a shared aspiration is possible and worthy of their effort before they are willing to change their behavior and adopt next practices to make it happen.

Creating and communicating a credible and compelling image of a desired future that people can create together motivates this change. Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" narrative did just that...and it changed the world.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

In order to communicate a clear, concise, consistent, and compelling narrative that makes a purposeful, passionate, and emotionally resonant case for change, leaders must create a narrative that emphasizes:

- The Shared Aspiration over the Required Action
- The Possible Future over the Problematic Present
- The Purposeful "Why" over the Actionable "What" and "How"

More than 1,500 years ago, Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu shared the proverbial wisdom that "a journey of a thousand miles starts beneath one's feet." Mahatma Gandhi took the first step on a 240-mile Salt March that freed his country from British rule. John F. Kennedy urged the United States to ratify the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty when he said, "Let history record that we, in this land, at this time, took the first step."

Research from McKinsey shows that senior leadership teams that align their change story and share it with the organization can improve the odds of their transformation's success six times over. Isn't it time for you to take the first step in successfully transforming your organization by creating and sharing your clear and compelling change narrative? **1**