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Preparing Leaders and Organizations for the Global Age™

Communicating Vision in a Change-Battered Organization

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Leaders are taught to stop at nothing in unfolding the vision to the organization. The conventional view is that, regardless of the situation, the vision has to be in front of people. If not, the organization will fail to achieve its goals.

But what about organizations in crisis, who over time have become severely battered by change? Should leaders communicate the vision as before?

Our client experience demonstrates that when an organization is suffering from acute change fatigue, the vision can become non-value added noise. In order to understand why, let's first review what a vision does. Second, let's examine the case of a severely change-battered organization, noting the effects of communicating vision in that context. Finally, we will offer three suggestions for responding to acute change fatigue from a communications standpoint.

What a Vision Does

A vision fills two important functions. One is emotional, the other cognitive.

The primary emotional function of a vision is to motivate. In fact, vision provides the vital performance motive beyond mere maintenance and the survival instinct. It does this by showing people an attractive place to go and reason to go there. It's a portrayal of the future, an aspiration, a direction painted in bold strokes, the grand intention of the enterprise.

A second emotional function of a vision is to provide security. Under conditions of change, vision

compensates for the chill winds of uncertainty. By giving employees something to hold on to, it acts as proxy for the comfort of the status quo when you have to leave it. It provides much-needed continuity to an organization when that organization is deliberately disturbed.

The cognitive function of a vision works differently. It provides information and direction in order to allocate resources and set priorities. As a practical matter, a vision increases an organization's capacity to perform work by creating the coordinated action necessary to produce and deliver goods and services.

Vision and Context

In spite of its power, vision remains highly sensitive to context, especially when the context is a change-battered one.

Consider the case of a large steel fabricator, Titan Manufacturing (pseudonym). In succession, this organization traveled through labor unrest, reductions in force, the installation of a new enterprise system, a severe market downturn, the commissioning of new capital assets, and ultimately Chapter Eleven bankruptcy.

The net effect was catastrophic to morale. Massive amounts of change dried up motivation and froze learning. The organization bore the impress of the accumulated traumas. The total impact weakened organizational resolve, engendered apathy, and cultivated cynicism to an order of magnitude rarely seen.

From a communications standpoint, employees became less receptive to a vision. The blanket directive that you can't over-communicate was not entirely correct.

Acute Change Fatigue

Most organizations have reeled from the rigors of change. When a major change effort succeeds, employees are renewed. When the effort fails, the organization is set back, but organizations are resilient so they usually come to balance again after a while. But what about an organization like Titan that had already attempted transformational change several times? This is a vastly different starting point for leaders whose job it is to summon institutional will in order to reach business goals.

This kind of change fatigue goes beyond normal corporate weariness. When an organization like Titan runs out of catalytic sources, it can become so severely impaired that even serious threats to viability are drowned in a deeper affliction of unrelieved pessimism. The fatigue becomes acute. When an organization travels through a string of false starts, it can simply outrun its emotional resources. It reaches the point of maximum inertia. It becomes almost numb to crisis and draconian measures even though it is nearing business failure.

If psychologists diagnosed organizations the way they do people, Titan's acute change fatigue would be a nearly terminal disorder, a psychology marked by a deep and intractable apathy and a near stock out of change capacity. It's a

crippling condition that severely disables an organization's attempts to respond to a vision.

Of course every company experiences some failure in pursuing its most important objectives, but when this continues over a sustained period of time, the weariness induced in the process deepens. Employees see no new beginning, no reception by happy stakeholders, and no rejuvenating evidence that the future is secured. Ironically, when you're afflicted with acute change fatigue, you find yourself in the worst state of change readiness, yet you're most in need of change.

Vision and Acute Change Fatigue

The case of Titan demonstrates that communicating a vision to a change-battered organization requires a different approach. An organization that attempts major change the first time is putting leadership credibility and its store of social capital at risk. Organizations with acute change fatigue have already done so and paid the price of compounded failure. In this predicament, leaders can further damage their organizations if they subscribe to the common lore of communications theory that has fashioned an almost rote requirement in the pursuit of one-size-fits-all simplicity—"you can never over-communicate."

At a certain point, vision falters. Rather than reach wellsprings of motivation, it can become de-motivating and dull the senses because it seems ever more out of reach.

The leaders at Titan didn't see the impact of acute change fatigue on their organization, so they

proceeded in communicating as if conditions were normal. Their instinct was to communicate the vision more. Yet the recent failures had seared fatigue into the corporate tissue. Employees responded stoically to an emotional call to arms. They turned off to critical strategic issues concerning future market position, new competition coming on-line, evolving technology, and tightening customer demands. They simply could not bring conviction to a new change imperative as a result of new rounds of messaging. They had outrun their emotional resources, so from a vision perspective, no amount of thunder could water the crops.

Unfortunately, we witnessed vision tone-deaf leaders persist in declamatory deliveries and appeals to emotion, thinking it would bring employees around. It didn't work.

The longer an organization experienced suspended results, the more survival becomes the vision. Survival is the only vision message with credibility because the false starts gradually inoculate an organization against any higher aspiration. The power of a vision becomes disabled when it's no longer imaginable. With acute change fatigue, employees once motivated by the magnetic force of vision now become successively amused, bewildered, discussed, and finally sedated with such declarations. When leaders at Titan tried harder to communicate the vision, their desperate attempts rendered jaded employees even more frustrated.

What then can you do if your organization is battered with change and your attempts to communicate a

vision are earning you sneers or howls of protest? Normally, organizations need the power of vision and a new identity to perform their way out. But with acute change fatigue, your organization may not have enough residual social capital to move forward.

Responding to Acute Change Fatigue

If your organization is suffering acute change fatigue, your vision may be non-value-added thunder when you need rain. It may be hurting your efforts to recover performance. In this situation, we suggest three things.

First, recognize the condition

Communications alone can't build momentum. Leaders must acknowledge this fact and respond from this context. You can't force the pace until results restore a measure of credibility—credibility in both leadership and the change effort itself, which are now inextricably linked.

Unfortunately, conventional wisdom still places too much emphasis on communication volume, channels, stylistic variables, and visionary content as if they were a standard prescription. But it's not a matter of tweaking these things as a matter of artistic difference. It's more fundamental.

Second, dim the vision

If an organization is suffering from acute change fatigue, survival is the de facto strategy. That hardly needs to be expressed; everyone gets it.

Unless the organization can pull through the current crisis, the original vision becomes academic. So for this simply reason--that the original vision is no longer the incumbent vision, we suggest a partial dimming of the lights. In other words, focus on the short-term needs. Taken out of context, this suggestion might seem not only counter-intuitive but even suicidal, yet a temporary brownout of vision is usually what the organization needs to allow it to focus. It simply doesn't add value if the organization has made repeated failed attempts to transform itself. Focusing on the long-term vision simply breeds skepticism if the organization hasn't made progress.

In addition to dimming the vision, leaders should also look at the rest of their messages. Other messages that are based in or related to the vision may need to be defrocked as well. Specifically, where messages contain visionary elements, grand intentions, and sweeping goals, they may need to be reduced in emotion and promotion.

This doesn't mean leaders create a void to spawn the rumor mill. Radio silence is just as dangerous. Blackouts force organizations to slip into speculation and even lower productivity. People should never be left to wonder. The focus and energy that normally goes toward communicating strategy needs to be redirected to tactical execution, thus our final suggestion:

Third, focus on tactics

The crisis has already mandated a strategy of survival, so the

leadership imperative is to focus employee effort on measurable improvement. In times of acute change fatigue, employees typically expend enormous amounts of time and energy worrying about the situation. If they can be put on task, the organization stands a higher chance of making progress and performing its way out. This means top leadership has to lower its communication from strategy to tactics. It has to focus on specific, measurable goals. It should communicate in numbers more than it did before as it emphasizes the importance of concrete measures of performance.

In our manufacturing example, senior leadership bumped its communication down to focus almost exclusively on weekly metrics. It honed in on, for instance, the company's on-time delivery performance, which had suffered badly in previous months. While browning out vision, leadership turned the lights up on actual-versus-targeted performance reporting. It wasn't necessarily inspiring, but the employees settled down and began coalescing around this emphasis. It channeled their attention and aligned their efforts.

With unprecedented, almost shop floor level attention, the company achieved a rapid step change improvement in on-time performance and several other operating metrics that allowed it to slowly but steadily climb out of its state of fatigue and poor performance.

Broader Implications

The underlying principle is that it becomes increasingly difficult to lead

with vision when reality isn't changing the way we want. When an organization is sputtering during any long stretch of anemic results, leaders should think about how receptive people are to the vision. If the organization finds itself in a long hard slog, interspersed with extended periods of undetected progress, it's time to examine vision communication. Chances are that leadership needs to dim the vision and focus on tactical communication and concrete measures of performance.