

Strategic Narrative



I. How do you develop a strategic narrative?

1.1. Through co-creation

Leaders are far more likely to co-own the narrative if they have had an opportunity to contribute to its creation. Identify the key leaders that need to own the narrative and involve them from the start - ideally through individual interviews. Then at draft stage bring them together as a plenary group to interrogate the narrative and agree on the key themes and ideas. The strength of the narrative is often determined by the quality of the conversation used to create it.

1.2. Using a narrative framework

A good strategic narrative should answer the key questions about the journey the business is on. It is useful therefore to start with these questions (see section two). Storytelling is an art, but like all art forms it has an underlying structure. A good example is the 'hero's journey' developed by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. If this framework is too complicated try starting with the simple questions where are we now? where do we want to get to? and how will we get there?

1.3. With brevity

Blaise Pascal (in a quotation often misattributed to Mark Twain) wrote "I have made this letter longer than usual, only because I have not had time to make it shorter". A good strategic narrative needs to be clear and simple in order to focus the business on the key messages and the core strategic argument. The challenge is often not what you put into the narrative, but what you leave out. Set yourself a limit for the number and length of messages within the narrative; it will make for a sharper story.

1.4. By enabling leaders to personalise the narrative

A strategic narrative will contain some non-negotiable elements. However, leaders and managers are more likely to adopt it if they are able to bring the narrative to life in a way that they feel is authentic to them and will resonate with their teams. Using the narrative framework, share the story with leaders and managers and then facilitate a conversation that enables them to personalise the messages. Encourage them to use their own illustrative stories (see below)

1.5. By keeping the narrative alive

Employees are more likely to focus their energy on the narrative if they believe it has longevity and is not just another short term initiative. Reinforce key messages from the narrative via ongoing internal communications. Encourage leaders to reference the narrative in their interactions with employees, connecting business decisions and initiatives back to the story. Challenge leaders to plan how they will 'live' the story through their own actions and decisions. Recognise employees' contributions to the narrative, showing how their actions are contributing to its success. After twelve to eighteen months, update the narrative, highlighting the parts that remain the same, and the parts that have now moved on.



2. What should a strategic narrative include?

2.1. **A purpose and vision**

In their book *Built to last*, James Collins and Jerry Porras identified that companies which enjoy enduring success have a clear purpose and envisioned future. The purpose helps employees to reaffirm why they should be part of this organisation. The envisioned future should inspire them with what they can achieve together, and the benefits that this behaviour will create for the business, its shareholders, customers, employees and communities.

2.2. **An authentic current reality**

Almost all strategic narratives will demand some kind of change from the organisation. John Kotter in his book *Leading Change* identifies the need to establish a sense of urgency for the change required, by authentically setting out the current reality of where the business is and the challenges it faces. This current reality also provides the dramatic tension the narrative needs in order to capture its audience's attention. Don't restrict the narrative to just good news.

2.3. **A clear strategic argument**

A good strategic narrative should link together why the business is - or needs to go - on a journey, what the direction and destination of that journey is, and how it is going to get there. This link should make logical sense. In fact human beings are hard-wired to think in narrative structures. Therefore the logic of the strategy (or lack thereof) can often be exposed when structured as a narrative.

2.4. **A role for employees**

Leaders may set the direction and destination of the narrative, but it will take the engagement and energy of the employees to get them there. To really engage in the narrative the employees need to see a clear role they can play; a role that they can relate to their everyday working lives. In a good strategic narrative, the employees should be positioned as the heroes of the story.

2.5. **A narrative structure**

A narrative links together different events into a continuous journey. It should have a start, middle and end, and ideally some dramatic tension, or challenge that drives the interest. A strategic narrative should play on these characteristics. For example, using linking words at the start of each section, like 'but' 'so' etc. Include an elevator speech as part of your narrative: four to six headlines that summarise your story.

2.6. **A human and emotional dimension**

Our choices and decisions are primarily driven by our beliefs and feelings. It is therefore important that the strategic narrative engages the hearts as well as the minds of employees. In constructing the narrative try and reflect the emotional journey that the business is on as well as the strategy. Don't be afraid to empathise as well as challenge. Illustrating the core narrative with real life stories about the way the business effects peoples lives, will also give it a powerful emotional pull.

3. What is the value of a strategic narrative?

3.1. To unite people behind a common purpose and direction

Stories have been used throughout time to unite societies and give them a common purpose and direction. A strategic narrative can do the same for business organisations, leading to greater commitment, discretionary effort, alignment and focus.

3.2. To create a context for change

Employees are more likely to engage in change if they believe in why it needs to happen and the benefits it will create. A strategic narrative can set the change within a clear and inspiring journey, helping employees to understand this context and relate it to their own experiences.

3.3. To link together and make sense of multiple initiatives

Many organisations have a multiplicity of different corporate messages: purpose, missions, strategic priorities, values, competencies, visions etc., which can be confusing to employees. A strategic narrative can link these together as part of the story of the business journey, improving clarity and understanding.

3.4. To align leaders so they demonstrate strength and unity

Employees are far more likely to engage in the business journey, if they have faith in its leaders and believe they are united behind it. A strategic narrative, including the why, what and how of the journey, can be a powerful framework around which to demonstrate this unity.

3.5. To inspire people, creating pride and camaraderie

Research in the US has shown that employees are more likely to be engaged at work if they have pride in the organisation they work for and camaraderie with their colleagues. A strategic narrative, and the way it can be brought to life through real life illustrative stories can stimulate these emotions.

3.6. To create a personal connection to the strategy

Again research has shown that employees are more likely to be engaged if they can see a connection between their own work and the business strategy. Every story needs a hero or heroes. The strategic narrative, and the conversation it provokes, can help employees make sense of their roles as the heroes of the business journey.

3.7. To challenge and change peoples beliefs and behaviours

Human beings make sense of the world using stories and narrative. If organisations want to change their people beliefs about the business and 'the way they do things around here', then a narrative is a natural starting place.

3.8. To keep the strategy alive

A strategy describes a plan of action at a fixed point in time. A strategic narrative describes a journey the business is on. The journey allows for, and actually encourages, learning and adaptation over time, whilst still staying true to the overall direction and desired destination. This in turn makes it more sustainable, especially within a fast changing environment.