



Following on from our research-based article on the Four X-factors of an Exceptional Leader, we shall be focusing on each trait in more detail over the coming months. In part two of the series, Mentor, Dennis Kerslake, looks at the trait: “They simplify complexity and operationalise it”.

I DIDN'T HAVE TIME to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead”. This quote, often attributed to Mark Twain, but probably first used by Blaise Pascal in 1657, sums up to me the importance of the clarity of thought and efficiency of communication essential to effective leadership.

The effort and skill needed to turn vast quantities of information into concise, coherent, memorable guidelines is not to be under-estimated. Much easier to share all the information at one's disposal and hope that others make sense of it for themselves. Regrettably not everyone makes the same sense of the data and individual interpretations can be widely varying.

The damage can be enormous. In-fighting, breakdown of trust, decision paralysis, weaker engagement, patchy commitment to action – all of these and more become apparent in organisations that fail to do the hard yards.

How many times have you sat in a meeting room being bombarded by Powerpoint slides that purport to share important information only to leave feeling more confused than ever? The abundance of data that is available in this modern world is serving only to demonstrate how complex and inter-connected everything is. It is doing little to assist clarity of thought. Being able to see the wood from the trees is getting harder. But surely this is a critical role

of leadership – to identify what's important rather than just noisy, to provide clarity, to set priorities, to allocate resources.

“Simple ideas are easier to understand. Ideas that are simple to understand are repeatable. Ideas that are repeated change the world”

Sense-making is surely the first priority of leadership. Making sense of the messiness and complexity is the first step towards developing strategy. Karl Wieck defined

sense-making as “how we structure the unknown so as to be able to act in it”. It is a pre-cursor to other key activities such as visioning, relating and inventing and it provides a “springboard into action”.

Simon Sinek, one of our most interesting thinkers about leadership, was asked about simplifying ideas in order to teach them. His response was interesting – he simplifies them because in his words “I'm an idiot”. He goes on “I ask a lot of questions so that I can understand, and only then can I communicate ideas that are simple, memorable and useful”. He concludes “Simple ideas are easier to understand. Ideas that are simple to understand are repeatable. Ideas that are repeated change the world”.

The process of gathering data is only useful if it helps to create understanding. The role of the leader is not to share everything he/she knows but to clear away what is unimportant and provide simple guidelines for everyone to follow. In the words of Hans Hofmann “The ability to simplify means to eliminate what is unnecessary so that the necessary can speak”.

The role of the leader is not to have all the answers either. In an increasingly complex and fast-moving business environment it is doubtful that any answer will be right for long. The pace of technological advance ensures that new challenges arise every day, many of them we could not have conceived of even 5 years ago. Think data privacy, media platforms having to

think of themselves as editors or even publishers, Amazon not just as an online retailer but as a competitor to everyone. We cannot expect our leaders to know what will happen and have answers prepared.

So, what can we expect of them?

Surely, we would expect them to have a deep understanding of the forces at play – the things that could exert influence over the future prospects. We would want them to have a strong sense of the core capabilities of the organisation – the things that would enable the organisation to be successful. We would certainly want them to have a clear sense of what success looks like and the critical areas of priority and attention.

And we would hope that they could turn all of this into a simple narrative that guides action, behaviour and coherence across the organisation. It is this narrative that provides a secure base from which the complexity and uncertainty can be managed. It is the one point of reference that can provide a filter for decision-making, a beacon for the values and behaviours that lie at the core of the organisation, and common language that drives effective execution of the strategy.

So, what is the essence of such a narrative?

- It makes sense of the world and the organisation's place in it.
- It uses simple language.
- It brings information to life by using analogies that resonate with the real world.
- It supports a decision-making environment that is understood at all levels of the organisation allowing for speed and agility.
- It is based on real issues, not theory, and acknowledges the current reality as well as looking to the future.
- It provides a roadmap that is clear to all and it creates a simple methodology to check whether a particular course of action or decision is helping the organisation to make progress along its path to win

Why is such a narrative so important?

Constant change, and change at an unprecedented pace, is the new norm but change is deeply uncomfortable for many. Some fixed points of reference are necessary for us to maintain perspective and make good decisions. An effective narrative maintains a strong link between the longer term aims of the organisation and the work that needs to be done today.

Resources are limited and we are all being asked to do more with less. Success is dependent upon effective alignment of resources pulling in a common direction. Only real clarity allows us to focus resources on what is important and eliminate waste and duplication.

A clear narrative provides everyone with a shared direction and makes clear when the organisation is on course or whether the course needs to be corrected.

An effective narrative should create strong bonds, build alignment and provide inspiration.

Simplifying complexity is a critical leadership skill – communicating concisely and coherently is essential to turn this into effective execution.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

DENNIS KERSLAKE has been a small company entrepreneur, a business leader in publicly quoted international groups, and is now a mentor, consultant and non-executive director. With a career spent mainly in the communications industry, Dennis has a natural affinity for organisational purpose, employee alignment and customer engagement. He is heavily involved in how companies react to the digital revolution and the pressure that is exerted on existing business models.