Preparing to Lead with a Compelling Narrative

If You Don't Frame the Narrative, Someone Else Will

The narrative determines how we perceive the credibility and authenticity of leaders and organizations. The concept of the narrative may be familiar, but there lacks an understanding of how this can be leveraged to achieve an organization's vision and aspirations. The proliferation of information sources, the speed of transmitting the narrative, and the number of visible competing narratives presents a limited time for leaders to frame their narrative. Compressed news cycles feed on quick responses. To dominate the narrative, a nation-state, company, or emerging political movement requires flexibility to adjust its narrative without losing sight of its aspirations and goals. Narratives reflect the values of movements, and successful leaders become part of the storyline in a narrative. The narrative is a collection of compelling stories that represent the cultures, history, and purpose of individuals, organizations, and nations. A narrative continuously flows, like a current in a stream, determined by the actions and inactions of the the parties involved. The narrative is an emergent property from within the cacophony of different ideas, opinions, facts, and information sources.

Given the historical events in the Middle East in early 2011, we first address the complexities facing leaders who want to communicate a compelling narrative. Next, we provide illustrative narratives to reinforce what has worked and what has failed. Finally, we build on the points these narrative examples reinforce to list core factors required to frame a successful narrative.

The Middle East Revolutions and Competing US Narratives

The US narrative is represented by some powerful personal stories. At the founding of America, John and Abigail Adams symbolized part of the revolutionary American narrative. Joseph J. Ellis writes in his newest release, *The First Family*, "Recovering their experience as a couple quite literally forces a focus on the fusion of intimate psychological and emotional experience with the larger political narrative" (p. x). Narratives are personal

and national at the same time. At its roots the American narrative embraces freedom to choose. Aligning the American narrative of freedom and choice with the national security stability objective has become cumbersome for American policymakers.

In early 2011, US officials reflected this awkwardness in their public statements. The wave of protests, accelerated by social media, that began sweeping across the Middle East in December 2010 and continued into 2011 raises a serious narrative dilemma for the US government. The United States is keen to be seen as championing democracy and freedom. But Washington faced the challenge of how it could maintain this narrative against the national security desires to see pro-Western governments remain in Tunisia, Bahrain, Egypt, and other parts of the Middle East. How can the United States reinforce the narrative of freedom and democracy while implicitly conveying support for authoritarian rule? Each ruler (Egypt's President Mubarak, King Hamad of Bahrain, and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia) has proven to be an ally and asset in supporting US national security goals. Bahrain's hosting the US Fifth Fleet provides Washington with a critical naval presence in the region, for example. Since President Mubarak was forced to resign, will other Middle East leaders meet the same fate? From Syria's President Assad to Libya's President Gaddafi, Middle East leaders will be looking at Egypt and Tunisia, asking themselves how they can manage to strike narratives that resonate with their populace. Similarly, the United States is questioning how this wave of democracy will take shape and how US past and current actions may influence the prospect of the next crop of leaders and their supporters becoming pro-Western and supportive of US strategic goals.

Even the Iranians felt compelled to link the fall of Mubarak on 11 February 2011 with their historical narrative. That date marked the 32nd anniversary of the toppling of the Shah of Iran. However, from Tehran's perspective, Egypt's revolution echoed the people's challenge to their rule following the disputed presidential elections in 2009 and the threat this posed to their grip on power. Regardless of the outcome, the events which began in early 2011 will have profound effects on the Middle East region and will frame the US narrative for years to come. For the United States to reinforce its narrative during these uncertain times, it is important for Washington to fully engage and support the fledgling democracies—countries that lack experience in developing and managing stable and open multiparty politics. Emerging democracies face

several common problems, including developing a system that maintains political engagement with its populace beyond elections, choosing leaders and legislators who are not perceived as corrupt and self-serving, and establishing robust institutions that serve as checks and balances. Aspiring politicians require advice on how to run campaigns and, once elected, on how to maintain links with their constituencies not to become out of touch.

The events of early 2011 created the prospect of democracy and freedom in every regime across the Middle East. The United States and its allies face a unique opportunity to assist nascent democracies by sharing best practices without dictating policy. Given the founding principles of the United States and its role as a successful model of democracy, it is imperative that it reinforce this narrative through thought, word, and deed. Possible options may include funding nongovernmental organizations, like the Carter Center that has offered to assist running Egypt's elections, or involve collaborative partners like the UN, African Union, or European Union to assist in creating democratic governance programs. The narrative surrounding how the elections will be organized (in short, the guidance supplied by democratic nations) may influence how Egypt's next government views the United States and its allies.

The narrative plays an integral role in the viability of public and private organizations. It is imperative that leaders of domestic and international organizations understand the narratives operating within their decision-making frame. All too often individuals and organizations are operating in competing narratives and struggle to define a compelling narrative that dominates the attention of those they lead and serve. For example, Mubarak's use of F-16 aircraft flying low over protestors in Tahrir Square to intimidate a rally was symbolic of the narrative going off-message—American-made equipment used to intimidate peaceful protests focused on obtaining democracy. Some protestors clearly showed their displeasure with Mubarak's close ties with the United States by spray painting on American fast-food chain KFC, "Mubarak collaborates with America." Meanwhile, the Egyptian military sought to maintain its narrative of modernity and heroism since the overthrow of King Farouk's rule in 1952 in a military coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Despite its support in training and equipment from the US military, the Egyptian military was not seen as "collaborating."

The Importance of Defining a Narrative and Values

Failure to define a compelling narrative can lead to considerable difficulties when leading, particularly in the face of crisis. How an organization or a government handles a crisis can very much determine how it is defined by its stakeholders—for better or for worse. Understanding the narrative's ripple effects is vital. For a narrative to be effective, an organization must first identify what its values and aspirations are. Having defined these, the narratives can then support, define, and enable the achievements. The narrative becomes an essential tool for an organization to be consistent with its deeply held values and aspirations.

The narrative goes beyond public relations and communicating risk; if managed correctly, it should reflect and serve as a tool for achieving the aspirations and vision of an organization. Individuals and organizations cannot choose to opt out of a narrative—we are all in narratives just as we breathe air. Communications teams are only one of many groups who assist leaders in framing the narrative. Narratives are like a river—they flow, and people get swept up in the stories. How narratives flow can be influenced by leaders. And like a torrent of water rushing through a river, how leaders and their organizations prepare their environment will determine how that torrent will flow in a crisis.

If leaders ignore dominating the narrative, then others will frame the narrative for them. Leaders then run the risk of being in a continuous reactionary mode. Reacting to someone else's narrative rather than framing and communicating their own narratives poses two risks for leaders: undermining support for their organizations' objectives to create the future they aspire for their company, community, or nation; and being perceived as opposing their own narratives and being framed as "against" rather than "for" what their organizations represent.

The narrative cannot be controlled. But leaders can dominate the narrative by continually filling the frame with their own narratives, making it difficult for others to erode what they are attempting to convey. Below are some narratives that worked, followed by narratives that are currently faltering.

Where the Narrative Worked

Nelson Mandela. The Anti Apartheid Movement (AAM) in South Africa represented one of the most powerful narratives, with Nelson Mandela emerging as the symbol for freedom and justice. Even though Mandela was imprisoned for 30 years, when he was released from prison, he championed

reconciliation. No one could question that he had suffered and was justified in wanting revenge. He became the symbol for reconciliation and healing. The narrative he promoted was best represented by the story of the man who suffered under the apartheid regime. Yet Mandela knew that to build a powerful future for South Africa required reconciliation and forgiveness for the past to move into the future successfully.

Solidarity and Lech Walesa. The Polish trade union movement Solidarity, founded at Gdansk in the 1980s and led by Lech Walesa, represented a compelling narrative for the Poles to bring democracy to Poland. Walesa represented a powerful narrative—support for worker concerns. Educated as an electrician, he became active in a trade union at a Gdansk shipyard. He suffered because of his beliefs. The communist regime arrested him, and eventually he was fired as a result of his activism. He persisted and negotiated a landmark agreement between striking workers and the communist government. Walesa rose to be elected as prime minister of Poland with the narrative that workers deserved a say and that democracy could unleash the path to prosperity and opportunity in Poland.

Faltering Narratives

If actions are not consistent with the stated narrative, the competing or alternative narratives can undermine trust and confidence in your leadership and strategy. Below are examples where the narrative has faltered, and how in some cases, it can undermine public health and well-being.

MMR Vaccine Scare. Fifteen years ago Andrew Wakefield published the now discredited paper in the *Lancet* medical journal that sought to establish a connection between children receiving the mumps, measles, and rubella (MMR) vaccine and the onset of autism. Public health authorities missed the need to develop a narrative that was easily understood by the public. They found themselves battling with this belief (supported by the *Lancet* article) to win the narrative with parents of newborns. Unfortunately, because the medical community cannot explain a likely cause for the rise in autism in children, unfounded claims like Wakefield's feed the narrative that it could be the vaccine (even though the established medical community discredits such a connection). Public health officials want parents to believe that the MMR vaccine is safe and integral to the health of children. Despite numerous studies and communications from public health officials in the United Kingdom and United States, the MMR vaccine lacks comprehensive trust among parents. Consequently,

the herd immunity rate—the ratio of those vaccinated versus those not vaccinated to prevent the outbreak of MMR—has dropped below the threshold of 80 percent receiving the vaccine necessary to keep these diseases at bay. Children are now contracting what were once rare illnesses, causing long-term physical damage and, in some cases, death.

Afghanistan and President Karzai. Afghanistan provides a great example of how a personal story can undermine the narrative. While the United States and its allies have sought to establish an effective governance and rule of law, Hamid Karzai's government, since first winning office, has been besieged with accusations of corruption. While Karzai has faced the unenviable task of tackling corruption within his government, he has not been seen as the symbol for good governance. The anticorruption narrative framed by the United States is undermined by Karzai's own brother who, prior to his assassination, was accused of embezzling millions, possibly billions, of dollars in property deals in Dubai financed with money from Kabul Bank. One consequence was Kabul Bank losing the confidence of its customers in the latter part of 2010, with depositors withdrawing their money thereby threatening the downfall of Afghanistan's banking system.

Current Narratives

The narrative theater is by no means limited to national and local governments. The private sector, too, faces narrative challenges. In January 2011, British Petroleum (BP) agreed with the Russian state-owned oil firm Rosneft to sell 5 percent of its shares in return for access to drilling and exploration rights in Antarctica. Following the 2010 Gulf oil spill, BP was looking for prime investment opportunities after unexpected expenses forced a sell-off of several billion dollars' worth of assets to pay for the clean-up operation. BP realized the opportunity for greater exploration in American waters was limited. While the deal with Rosneft makes business sense, how might this deal affect BP's narrative? How will this move be perceived, particularly by those who harbor concerns of what a partially Russian-controlled energy firm may mean for US national security?

The deal with Rosneft was consummated on the heels of the Gulf oil spill—thus, a prickly narrative was already operating between the United States and BP *before* the deal with the Russian state-owned oil firm was announced. BP's uneasy relationship with the United States is compounded by how the firm's senior leadership communicated its response during the Gulf oil spill, contributing to the company's lasting reputational damage.

How CEO Tony Hayward's actions and attitude were perceived by the American public came to define BP's narrative and the US response to the oil spill. BP corrected this path, recognizing they needed an American from the region, and appointed Bob Dudley CEO. Dudley's knowledge of the region and his accent embodied the narrative BP wanted to communicate. However, his attempts at reframing the narrative were still constrained by how the company's values and aspirations were defined and perceived—a company driven not by engineering excellence, but by revenue generation at the expense of safety and effective contingency planning. No matter how successful an organization might be in framing the narrative, if it is out of sync with its values, creating and sustaining a narrative will be ineffective.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama communicated hope for a better tomorrow in his speeches and through his personal story. He was a living example of opportunity through education in America and was a symbol for "yes we can." However, the low approval ratings, defeats in the 2010 midterm elections, and increased unemployment illustrate how Obama has struggled to define a working narrative in office that can transcend partisan lines to advance and to sustain what was a compelling narrative during the election campaign.

Another example of misalignment concerns to what degree actions can reinforce or unravel an organization's narrative. Google and Yahoo—built on American ingenuity and freedom of thought—constricted access and free speech to cement deals with China. After succumbing to a customized and sanitized search, Google eventually decided to move its servers to Hong Kong, allowing users unfettered access to its content. Yahoo released the e-mail addresses and details of prodemocracy supporters to the Chinese authorities. This undermined their trust with users and brought into question the company's role in supporting the whims of the government. Following this major stray from its narrative, Yahoo had a difficult time rebuilding that trust.

Factors to Consider when Framing the Narrative

There are six essential considerations when framing the narrative.

Why Is the Narrative Important?

Public perception of risk influences the narrative and serves as one of the indicators in the narrative's "taking hold." Outlining why the narrative is important links to the higher purpose of a movement—its clearly

defined values and aspirations. Why are we forging this path and what do we stand for and want to achieve? Why does this story need to be voiced? Why this story? Why now?

A universal narrative is the umbrella for competing narratives. A narrative broad enough to encompass competing narratives but narrow enough to communicate a tangible path has a good chance of winning the day. The key is striking the balance between broad and narrow. If the narrative is too broad it sounds like a platitude and will not be compelling. If it is too narrow it will not resonate with enough people to gain momentum. Thus, balance is the key.

What Is the Narrative? Do People Resonate with the Story?

At the personal level, people need to identify with the story, understand the story, and be able to "link" their personal narrative to the broader narrative. Successful narratives have a "face" and are simple and elegant.

How Do You Tell the Narrative? *How* Do You Reinforce the Narrative?

Discipline within organizations is essential to staying on message. All too often organizations become distracted by events. It is important to focus on the entities' priorities and not be lured away by quick news-cycle distractions. Leaders and staffs need to remain true to their core message and look at daily events within the context of a long-term view.

Crises are framed within the narrative; crises do not define the narrative. Organizations too frequently allow the crisis of the day to define their narrative. It is important to focus on how the crisis fits within the narrative and not allow the crisis to trump the narrative.

Sustaining the narrative requires reinforcing and reinventing the story as events change. Over time the narrative will need refreshing. The purpose remains, but the stories that communicate that purpose should be renewed to continually engage and reengage the public. It is the leader's role to link ongoing actions to outcomes. The leader provides context and direction as perceptions shift. Through the narrative the leader is able to engage the public and make it meaningful for their lives.

Who Communicates the Narrative?

For the messenger to be seen as authoritative and credible, those communicating the narrative need to understand the personal stories. A compelling narrative is powerful if the person communicating the story is seen

as a symbol that reflects and represents a microcosm of the story and if that person is authentic. Genuineness and authenticity play a role in communicating a compelling narrative. If the communicator's personal narrative is not aligned with the overarching narrative, it will be weakened. Or the personal story may be so counter to the narrative that by this person outlining this direction, the narrative gains momentum. For example, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's commitment to Israel was unquestioned. He fought in 1948 to protect the newly formed Jewish state. When he signed the Oslo Peace Accords it was a powerful statement—a powerful narrative—that it was time to live in peace. Rabin had experienced war, and he could not be called a "dove." His personal story assisted him in persuading the Israeli people to embrace the peace narrative.

What Backdrop Supports the Narrative?

The place where the message is delivered needs to support the narrative, whether virtual (e.g., Internet) or real world. Location helps to define the message; a symbolic backdrop reinforces the message. President Reagan's speech at the Berlin Wall demanding, "tear down this wall"; Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech with the Lincoln Memorial in the background; Boris Yeltsin defying the August 1991 coup on top of a tank outside the Russian parliament, condemning coup leaders as the "junta." These powerful images broadcast around the world greatly defined their moment and strengthened the reputation of these leaders. But it can also be the ordinary citizens of the country that capture the narrative. For example, the image of the man standing in front of a line of tanks during the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising defined the struggle for freedom among China's people in the face of an entrenched one-party system. And in Tahrir (Liberation) Square in early 2011 the Egyptian people demonstrated tenacity and commitment to freedom with weeks of continued demonstrations in opposition to the now fallen 30-year regime.

When Is the Narrative Communicated?

In addition to knowing where to plant seeds, it is important to know when to plant. Innovative ideas are accepted if the timing is right. Innovative ideas need to be relevant given the current events of the day. Openness to change depends on multiple factors. The chaos of the sixties in the United States allowed multiple movements to anchor their narratives and to proceed to make progress in the seventies. It is important to find fertile

"idea soil" where the seeds of change will be nourished and protected to allow the seedling idea to gain strength.

To be on par with, or on top of, the narrative flow requires framing and mapping the boundaries. You need to frame the debate and the narrative before everyone else. Allowing others to define your narrative is like riding a runaway train—you are never quite sure of the destination, and it could derail. If you do not take control of your narrative, another narrative will fill the void. We find ourselves in a sea of narratives every day. The compelling narratives appeal to the individual, are timed appropriately, and are delivered by a credible messenger.

Early warning indicators that the narrative is out of sync or "off rhythm" include:

- Lack of trust surrounding the competency of the individual(s) or organization(s) in carrying out the intended strategies. A compelling narrative can be lost by losing the trust of one's stakeholders. Trust is difficult to win but easy to lose.
- Uncertainty concerning the risk or issue being communicated. For example, the lack of definitive scientific data or ambiguity of an organization's intent.
- Emergence of competing and compelling narratives, such as changing public attitudes or other organizations becoming successful in crafting and communicating their competing narratives.
- Preexisting counternarratives that flow against the preferred narratives. For example, new political leaders taking office in a highly charged partisan or low-trust environment seeking to enact their own policies. Or competing narratives emerging in one's own organization.
- Narratives that are not "crisis proof." A narrative must be robust and enduring enough to serve as a reference point during a crisis for all responders to frame their responses, given the umbrella narrative. For example, a company's response to a high-profile industrial accident or safety scare requires a response couched in an enduring narrative on how the organization wants to be viewed.

If not appropriately addressed, a leader's narrative can be challenged, distorted, and undermined, thus complicating an organization's ability to enact its strategic goals and gain the support required.

Common causes of losing the narrative include not developing a compelling narrative and failing to respond to early warning indicators that the narrative is "out of sync." Much like risk communication, developing and maintaining a compelling narrative is an ongoing process that first requires understanding how the target audience perceives one's narrative to frame a narrative that appeals to that audience.

Leading is *not* following public opinion polls and taking a risk-averse approach but understanding what your core narrative is and making decisions that support your core principles. Chilean president Sebastián Piñera, for example, was willing to take on the reputational risk of becoming personally involved in the October 2010 miner rescue. He could have distanced himself and allowed the mining company to take the blame if something went wrong. Some of his advisors warned against broadcasting the rescue live and greeting each rescued miner personally, should there be a hostile or unpredictable response when a miner surfaced. In addition to engaging fully, he asked the world for help. Piñera wanted the best minds in the world to apply creative problem-solving techniques to this crisis. He was willing to ask for outside assistance and in doing so demonstrated leadership, not weakness. He recognized it was important to get out in front and to lead the country in support of the trapped miners.

To sustain the narrative, it is important to understand the changing pace and frame of the times. These are the current questions that organizations must address to sustain their narrative. Developing and maintaining a compelling narrative provides a rigorous foundation to encompass an organization's short- and long-term strategic goals, communication policy, and position vis-à-vis its stakeholders. The narrative is not about "spinning" an issue or getting the communication right. But rather, it is the public symbol of the heart and soul of the organization.

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