Mythology, Leaders and Leadership

By Tony Quinlan

Chief Storyteller, Narrate

narrate

"There may be born leaders, but there are too few for us to count on"

PETER DRUCKER

Leadership. Three syllables – nice, straightforward concept. Right? Wrong. What I perceive as a good leader will be different to what you perceive as a good leader. And different again for the person sitting across from you, down the hall, in the next building, in the regional office, etc.

But in recent years, many of us have found ourselves getting involved with communicating around "leadership". It's an area fraught with difficulties and pitfalls – in part because of the simplistic way it gets talked about. With that in mind, this is a short thought-provoker piece, with some tools to start you off.

Myth-perception

Let's get some of the misperceptions out of the way first.

"WE ALL KNOW WHAT A LEADER LOOKS LIKE."

Possibly, but we all have very different ideas about it, and it changes anyway depending on the situation – in a storm, a leader might impose control, dictate actions and cut through waffle and discussion. The same behaviour in calmer moments betrays a dictator, not a leader.

It also varies tremendously by organisational culture. Hard, argumentative styles work in some organisations, while others need softer, more consensual approaches.[1.]

1. An organisation, in this context, could be a company, a division, a department or even a team – essentially just a group of people working together. Each may have different cultures.

"A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be."

ROSALYNN CARTER

And often there is no common factor or principle - other than the fact that people follow (or obey, depending on the style). There are reams of research and popular books on leadership – and all have different takes to greater or lesser degrees. Some of the leaders depicted in them wouldn't recognise each other in an empty room.

"HERE'S OUR LEADERSHIP MODEL."

Less a misperception, more a warning bell. In my experience it's either one flavour (generally male, English-speaking, western, rational, white and aged 40-50) or, on those rare occasions when the idea of diverse leadership styles have been taken into account, it's been made so abstract that it encompasses all the different styles and hence is so generic it loses its relevance.

As communication tools, most leadership models stink.

Most leadership models are useful as starting points for debate or as the output for individuals' thinking – but as communications tools they stink.[2.]

2. McKinsey Quarterly recently talked about leadership "orienting strategy around an organizational model that nurtures knowledge and talent". There's more meaning there than in many similar pronouncements, but it still could have come from the mouth of Dilbert's manager – a sure warning sign. N.B. – nothing about numbers, measurement or results.

Too often, the result – after much careful thought – is a list of principles or values. It's flawed for two reasons. Firstly, these tend to be abstract ideas (usually nouns) where leadership is about actions (verbs). Simply holding those principles to be important isn't enough, leaders need to act on them.

Values and principles are personal choices – voluntarily taken on.

Secondly, it's impossible to force people to take on certain values and act from them. Even persuading them is only a temporary measure. Values and principles are personal choices – voluntarily taken on. And bear in mind that, even when we wholeheartedly hold a value to be important, as human beings we don't always act accordingly.

"WE WANT EVERYONE IN THE ORGANISATION TO BE A LEADER."

No you don't. There are a fair number of people that you want to do their job as set out in the quality processes and do it without arguing. You don't want them to be leaders, you want them to be efficient and obedient. (Loyal, enthusiastic, etc would also be good, but efficient and obedient are actually the ones many managers want first and foremost.)

"The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why."

WARREN BENNIS

And just because someone exemplifies the organisational values or behaviours doesn't make them a leader – they may just be following what they perceive as authority. Exemplars are not necessarily leaders, but leaders are always exemplars. You want some of your people to be leaders, but talking about its applying universally just devalues it.

Please note, I'm all in favour of us all being leaders at the personal level – in fact I think that's one of the ways we best fulfil ourselves as individuals and change the world we live in. One of my most profound learning experiences was on a course in Leadership back in 2000. But personal leadership and organisational leadership are different things.

Exemplars are not necessarily leaders, but leaders are always exemplars

If, within the organisation, people are adamant that they do want everyone to be leaders, then too often it's either just devalued lip service alongside "our people are our greatest assets" or their idea of a leader is not ambitious enough, but the classic "manager-plus".[3.]

3. "Manager-plus" is the version of leadership that some organisations call for – greater effectiveness (and efficiency) and innovation and customer service, but it implicitly rejects greater risk-taking or dissent. It calls for greater results but still within rigorous processes and quality control. It wants more, but without threatening the status quo or the hierarchy. Not leadership in my book.

"The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say "I." And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say "I." They don't think "I." They think "we"; they think "team." They understand their job to be to make the team function. They accept responsibility and don't sidestep it, but "we" gets the credit.... This is what creates trust, what enables you to get the task done."

PETER DRUCKER

Leadership and culture

"Leadership" is defined in many different ways. For a subject to which so many dead trees have been devoted, there's still a phenomenal diversity of opinion on what it actually entails. It's less helpful for communications, change and organisational development professionals to be too specific – with one important exception.

Leaders and culture are strongly intertwined and critical to our work. Culture expert Edgar Schein talks about leaders being one of the three major levers of organisational culture (Schein 2004). (If they're a founder, that makes them two of the three, but that's an organisation-specific situation.)

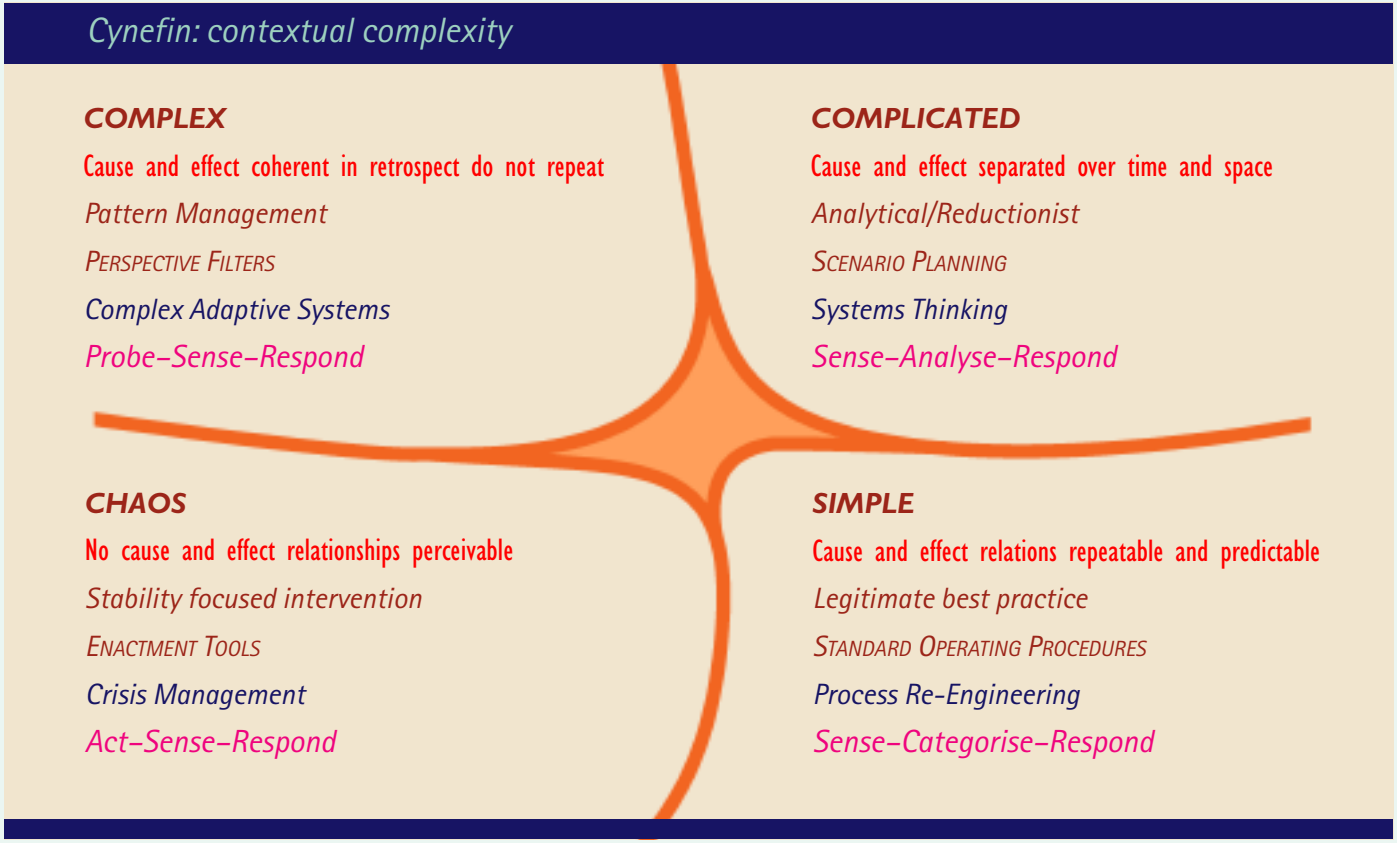
Yet leaders are also shaped or rejected by organisational cultures. Outsiders can find that they miss major assumptions and ultimately fail, while insiders may be so inculcated in a mindset that they are unable to grasp the need – or perceive the leverage points – for successful culture change.

Which still leaves the fact that leaders are one of the most powerful influences of organisational culture – making them crucial to us.

Why leadership is not Manager-plus

One of the most useful and powerful tools in Narrate's work is the Cynefin framework, created by Dave Snowden, and the concepts behind it. It's applicable in many different areas, but helps to distinguish key areas within the organisation and the recommended approaches to them.

THE CYNEFIN FRAMEWORK:



"The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and the will to carry on."

WALTER LIPPMAN

In a vastly simplified description, culture falls into the Complex domain – where causality is blurred, where many different elements combine to create overall effects and where results will never repeat exactly. In this domain, control is impossible, influence essential. It also requires different actions – trying elements, waiting to perceive the results and then acting to reinforce the emerging patterns or disrupt them if they are negative. It can be about creating boundaries and attractors, by reinforcing desirable behaviours and disrupting undesirable ones.

By contrast, the Complicated domain does have repeatable cause-and-effect chains, although these may be extended through various stages. Here, we can analyse or get expert help to identify how results are created and impose processes to repeat them. This is the realm of big thinkers, strategic planning departments and theoreticians.

Managers aim for efficiency.
Leaders aim for effectiveness.

Given the vagaries of human behaviour and belief, I believe organisational culture sits squarely in the complex domain. I suggest therefore that management – based in process, measurement and hierarchy – is more inclined to sit in the complicated domain.

Managers aim for efficiency – focussing on process. Leaders aim for effectiveness – focussing on results and people.

Collaborating on "leadership" programmes

Recent years have seen an increase of programmes rolled out from Human Resources or training and development departments aimed at increasing leadership skills within the organisation.

One of the critical elements Narrate recently worked on in a large government department was establishing common ground between different ideas of "leadership". In a questionnaire (after the "leadership model" had been published and promoted as the way forward) one of the critical pieces of feedback was "we need pen pictures of examples of leadership." Everyone understood the language but not how it translated into action.

Using a technique from the **Cognitive Edge** network, Narrate brought key decision-makers together in a facilitated exercise solely to relate and share examples of tough decision-making, positive changes, mistakes made, etc. For participants, it was a powerful social exercise in sense-making – it left them all with a clear, common understanding of what was (and wasn't) good leadership.

Having recorded the sessions, we then had audio and video material to feed into various communications vehicles – all giving the requested "pen pictures" of leadership in real, authentic examples that people could recognise, internalise and then act on themselves.

"There's nothing more demoralizing than a leader who can't clearly articulate why we're doing what we're doing."

JAMES KOUZES & BARRY POSNER

Similar exercises at lower levels of an organisation and among customers and customer-facing staff produce material that, when replayed to executives, can dramatically shift perceptions and highlight major problems – but in ways that are less threatening to the messenger and more likely to bring about a change in executive mindset.

Organisational legends and heroes

In every culture, certain events and individuals stand out – becoming legendary in their re-telling. And each story will reinforce some value within the organisation – but not always the one that we think it's telling.

Narratives coalesce around particular leaders and significant times

In particular, organisational narratives coalesce around particular leaders and around times of particular significance – moments of threat and risk, examples of great success or, crucially, the point where the old order changed.

It's only possible, however, to understand what might be significant by listening and reviewing what stories are already in common usage. New inductees will be told the most crucial stories for their area within the first few weeks of starting – those that indicate how things are really done around here. Recognising and collecting those stories about past leaders can give you huge insight into what is expected of a leader in your specific organisational culture.

Helping leaders to communicate

A crucial role for many communications professionals is helping a leader to communicate – and thus engage/inspire/transform the workforce. I've already talked about different leadership styles, each obviously implies different communications styles to match.[4.] Ergo, not all leaders have to be loud, superconfident, alpha-male communicators. Their communications should be natural and fit their personal style.

One factor that identifies good leaders is that they know what they are good at (and do that) and know what they are not good at (and find someone else to do that). Some leaders are simply not communicators. As soon as we become aware of this, it's critical to find colleagues that the leader trusts to fill this role. In cases where there are varied environments reporting to a single leader, multiple communications styles may well be needed – a tougher style for masculine departments, intellectual for research, etc.

The traditional way of communicating for senior managers has been "problem-analysis-solution-let's go!" Which rarely convinces, far less inspires or engages.

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4. It also presupposes that leaders want to engage/inspire/transform the workforce – if they don't then, again, they're managing not leading.

A leader seeking to influencing the organisation does so in other, more fuzzy ways, including:

- What they choose to measure and pay attention to
- How they react to incidents and crises
- Role-modelling, teaching and coaching
- The rituals and habits they create
- Which metaphors they use in communicating
- What stories they tell of past events and people
- What they tolerate
- Formal statements of philosophy, creed and values

The greatest sin of a leader is hypocrisy

Role modelling

A leader should, first and foremost, be role-modelling the behaviours expected elsewhere. The greatest sin of a leader is hypocrisy (not fallibility, as is often assumed) and if he/she is not visibly trying to exemplify the corporate values, the whole thing is doomed. Stories of hypocrisy circulate faster than any other and have a massive impact on staff morale and management credibility.

Some of the toughest conversations I've had with leaders in organisations have, over an hour, moved from the change needed in the organisation to the change needed in the staff in the organisation. The tough part comes in bringing those comments closer to home.

> *"So if that's the change you need them to make, what change do you need to make?"*
>
> *"No, you don't understand, they need to change, not me."*
>
> *"I understand you want them to change, but they will watch you – if you change, they will. If you don't, they won't. So what change are you going to make?"*

Handled properly (something I didn't always do in the early days), these conversations also become some of the most productive and helpful to the change effort.

Personal stories

As communications professionals, we need to support leaders in being more personal, authentic and fallible than they may have been in the past. One of the keys is to talk about personal experiences.

As part of a major change programme in a merging organisation, Narrate associates coached and challenged senior board members to talk about their personal experiences in the organisation when they presented or appeared at internal conferences and events. They talked about their early days and perceptions, the difficult times when reorganisations threatened them and the tough (and on occasion wrong) decisions they'd had to make along the way.

Staff are looking for ways to 'see' the leader's thought processes

It wasn't about generating sympathy for them, but building human connections instead – breaking the false image of the imperious, unemotional manager at the top. Crucially, it also gave people context in which to see decisions and behaviours, allowing them to draw lessons from what they heard without having to make them explicit and risk them being rejected as being "command-and-control"

Helping staff to mind-read

One of the pieces of feedback we regularly hear from front-line staff is that they "want the chief executive to be more visible." They do, but visibility of the leader is not enough. What they are looking for are ways to be see the leader's thought processes – through open questions, through examples of tough decisions made, through what they comment on and through what stories they tell.

In a geographically spread organisation, this is one of the places that blogs and social media can be very powerful. Some leaders find that blogs are their best communication tools – they may not be expert face-to-face communicators – while others are more natural talking on a podcast.

Regardless of whether a leader feels able to use such communications vehicles, there is one area of thinking that will have a strong effect on the culture and can be communicated relatively simply through standard channels: what the organisation will stop doing.

At least as important as what the leader decides must be done is what will not – what projects to finish, what markets to come out of and what activities to stop. Typically these are announcements that we make quietly and with as little fuss and information as possible, fearing that the implicit message is that it was wrong to be doing these things. But by providing enough context on the environment and the decisions involved – both at the beginning and now at the end – it will instead give people more insight into leaders' thinking and, where appropriate, the confidence that decisions can be revisited in the light of new information.

Battling old heroes and legends

When leaders want to signal a major shift in the organisation, it helps to understand what organisational myths are reinforcing the old behaviours. Then, rather than trying to convince or persuade or even tell a counter-story, it's usually possible to take some authentic action that devalues the stories and begins the process of creating new ones.

"Leadership can be thought of as a capacity to define oneself to others in a way that clarifies and expands a vision of the future."

EDWIN H. FRIEDMAN

I worked at an IBM manufacturing facility in the 1990s, where site directors for years only descended to the manufacturing lines on rare occasions, usually accompanied by a cadre of senior managers, and only spoke to line managers. Until a new site director in 1996 turned up alone at the ThinkPad line on his third day to be met by the line manager – more than a little nervous at this unscheduled visit.

"Can I help you?"
"Sure. Have you got a white coat I can borrow?"
"Uh-huh. Can I help?"
"Don't worry – you get back to what you need to do. I'm going to work on the line."

Which he did for the entire shift. The story was round the two mile site within the hour – and suddenly people knew that here was a different kind of site director. It's essential that these are authentic actions and stem from the individual leader's own convictions, and that they are not accompanied by photographs or standard internal comms tools – instead they're done visibly and allowed to circulate around the organisation on the informal networks.

In addition to creating new legends in the organisation, they need to pick and choose carefully those stories from the past that they retell and emphasise. Frequently reframing a story slightly can demonstrate that values are not new, but have always been part of the culture. However, a leader's immersion in the culture may make them myopic to what message the story actually conveys.

"Pity the leader caught between unloving critics and uncritical lovers."

JOHN GARDNER

One United States IT services company encouraged its employees to emulate the "Sooners" – people who were determined to get the good plots of land when Oklahoma was opened up to settlers. The Sooners, however, stopped at nothing – illegally grabbing land ahead of the official start date. The risk (reality in some cases) was that a general "get the results, regardless of costs or means" attitude spread through the organisation.

Immersed within the culture, the story of the Sooners was seen as a powerful motivator and the subtler drawbacks to the message weren't seen. One role of communicators is to remain sensitive to the nuances of communications and stories and provide valuable feedback to leaders.

Mountain-climbers or battle strategists?

Another subtlety of leadership communication is the language and metaphors they use. Metaphors permeate our language and have strong influencing effects – talk about capturing new customers, winning market share, beating the competition sets up a win-lose, us-against-them mindset, which may or may not be appropriate.

In the early -1990s, PC manufacturer Compaq declared that it intended to be the market leader in PCs worldwide. The language surrounding the subsequent changes in the company were heavily based on military metaphors – staff were "troops"; strategies included "meeting clones head-on", "capturing imagination", "firing the first salvo in a price war", "pre-emptive cost reduction" (this was in reality 1,000 employee lay-offs). It worked for Compaq in the short term, but long-term created an environment built on the idea of conflict.

THE NARRATE GUIDE FOR SUCCESSFUL CHANGE LEADERS

1. Own the change.
2. Recognise the change required of themselves
3. Role-model the change/principles in action
4. Share personal experience of change and discomfort
5. Make tough decisions visible
6. Clear staff headspace
7. Take symbolic actions
8. Retell old legends
9. Choose language and metaphor carefully

Once the company was market leader (a goal reached in remarkably short time) there was no clear "enemy" for a workforce embedded in the idea that every action was predicated on conflict. One of the results was greater internal conflict between departments and, ultimately, Compaq's takeover by Hewlett-Packard.Equally, some metaphors that come naturally to leaders may actively deter their audiences. Recent examples we've seen include describing a change project as like climbing a mountain, complete with guides, base camps, interim peaks as targets. (Overheard at the back of the room was the aside that "it's cold, wet, uphill all the way and what happens when we get to the top? We've got to come all the way back down again.")

Supporting leaders

Leaders can feel lonely and isolated. Recent research has shown that a number can be depressed – too many people looking to them for decisions; being surrounded by colleagues who, depending on the culture, tend to fall into two camps: unchallenging followers or conflicting rivals. There is also a strong risk of becoming so strongly set in one way of seeing the world that warning signs or alternatives viewpoints get screened out.

Depending on our own leadership and influence skills, we may be able to take on the role of adviser and, to a degree, offer challenges to help clarify thinking. If it's not a role that we can play, respected outside experts can be used. Many leaders have academic colleagues in whom they confide.

"Leaders are more powerful role models when they learn than when they teach."

ROSABETH MOSS KANTOR

One critical element of this is to help leaders to view situations with different perceptions – either by direct action ourselves or by introducing external influences to do it for us. This can be done by introducing direct feedback from other stakeholders like customers, partners or legislators.

Alternatively, there are powerful facilitated exercises, such as the chair game, that create unusual perspectives from which to reflect on personal behaviours and organisational issues. These, often revolving around some form of social sense-making, can be both powerful team-building exercises and valuable perception-shifting tools.

Leadership is also a matter of consistency. Inconsistent behaviour – or tolerating breeches of values in favour of, for instance, high revenue – will undermine months of work in short order. Yet leaders are often so passionate and so driving that they become immune to such things, not doing them deliberately but simply failing to spot them. And, having cultivated an image of a thoughtful, rational approach to issues, a leader will be perceived to have done so deliberately rather than simply made a mistake.

Finding tactful but effective means of pointing out such inconsistencies is an essential role in the organisation. Close associates of leaders are unlikely to do so – being either blind to the problems themselves or too concerned about organisation politics to risk commenting. If this is the case, a quiet word with a trusted external adviser can bolster their value to the leader while addressing the issue.

Finally

A critical factor for any leader is where to draw the line. It's great to talk about what we aspire to as a way of lifting the culture and people upwards, but one of the things about leadership is also visibly changing what we will no longer tolerate. A great recent example was Mark Thompson, Director-General of the BBC, responding to the recent deceptions in interactive quizzes and phone-ins. Talk about what the BBC aspires to is one thing, but emphasising that anyone who slips below certain standards will be shown the door is critical – and the same goes for leadership.

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Appendix

The core Narrate questions for any leader to answer:

- *What will you personally be doing differently?*
- *What similar change have you experienced previously? What happened? How did you feel?*
- *What tough decisions have you taken as part of this change? Why did you decide what you did?*
- *What will the organisation stop doing now?*
- *What will you personally stop doing?*

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5. This ebook was conceived when Melcrum asked me to contribute a 700-word article on leadership and communication to Strategic Communication Management magazine. As I started to write the article, I realised there was much that I wanted to say – and far too much to fit into 700 words.

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Tony Quinlan is a consultant, writer and speaker specialising in creating more effective, healthier organisational cultures and communications. He is passionate about breaking out of rigid, purely rational communications to create real cultural and behavioural change, always exploring new ideas and practices, looking at current business practices from a different perspective. If you want 12 step models and the same old, same old then talk to someone else.

A frequent keynote speaker and conference chair, Tony writes on communications, branding and culture for international publications. He also blogs semi-regularly at www.thenarrateblog.com on communications, complexity, narrative and culture. He is currently working on three bookprojects: one on branding, one on communications and one on culture change. Today he is a writer, keynote speaker, communications coach, Masterclass presenter and international consultant. But he's also been a radio presenter, actor, software programmer, TV tuner, dishwasher, lift attendant, radar designer and presented roadshows to 8,000 people at a time in Battersea Park. Needless to say, he's got stories about all of them.

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