

BIG IDEA: FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

The Power of a Clear Leadership Narrative

To find your own personal leadership narrative, figure out and share what great leadership means to you.

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Great leaders build amazing communities. They do so in a variety of ways and over an extended period of time. One of the most effective tools to accomplish that is to shape and articulate powerful narratives of what's possible. Effective



leaders share stories about what great leadership looks and feels like when individuals come together as teams, and teams come together as communities, with a unifying sense of purpose and collective ambition.

This insight has emerged from both survey data and dozens of C-suite-level interviews as part of a major global study, [Future of Leadership in the Digital Economy](#), that *MIT Sloan Management*

Review is conducting with Cognizant. In this new world of work, where being connected and resilient are of paramount importance, 82% of our global survey respondents and virtually all of those interviewed indicated that an individual in the digital world would need a certain level of digital savviness to be an effective leader. Yet, when asked what skill or behavior was the *most* important to leadership effectiveness, the answer was being able to articulate a clear sense of purpose, vision, and strategy. What at first seems old is new again: Clarity of communication in a hyper-speed world is a key difference maker in the eyes of current managers and leaders from around the world.

To gain a better feeling of the texture that forms the fabric of this insight, consider this comment from Susan Sobbott, former president of American Express Global Commercial Services: “In the digital economy, physical presence can’t be mandatory to be an effective leader. You have to be able to lead people from many different cultures, in many different locations, and often with imperfect information because things are moving so fast,” she says. Her simple and elegant solution to this decades-old challenge reflects the power of a clear leadership narrative. “You have to be able to see a story emerging and to articulate that story in a way that has meaning and inspiration for a wide range of people. You have to convey your passion and beliefs through a powerful narrative.”

Why Finding Your Leadership Narrative Is Important

We analyzed our survey responses from more than 120 countries and conducted a sentiment analysis and heat-mapping exercise to identify the most important leadership behaviors in this new economy. The traits that emerged were authenticity, transparency, trust, inspiration, the ability to connect and invest in others, analytical capability, curiosity, and courage, among others. Few

would argue that these behaviors and attributes are necessary, yet by themselves, standing independently, without the context needed to create meaning or catalyze change, they run the risk of being considered buzzwords. Stories help prevent that from happening, and that's where the power of creating your leadership narrative comes into play. Developing a powerful narrative demands that you, the leader, take a stand on what you believe in, what you are about, and what impact you hope to create as you set out to form teams and build communities. The leader behaviors and attributes listed earlier become your means of communicating to others who you are, as well as your expectations for others concerning how you will lead together in your organization. It's about finding and sharing your voice.

In a [recent interview](#) with CNN's Anderson Cooper, late-night comedian Stephen Colbert talked about his search to "find his show." For months his show struggled in the ratings, not because it lacked comedic appeal or impact, but because it had no thesis or arc that held it together. Once he and his writing team took a stand on what they believed in and followed through on those beliefs transparently, authentically, and courageously, Colbert believes they found their show, and since then he has commanded the No. 1 slot in the ratings. To find your personal leadership narrative, you need to figure out what great leadership means to you. David Schmittlein, dean of MIT's Sloan School of Management, made a similar point while being interviewed for this study. "A great leader must be willing and able to display the courage it sometimes takes to stand by well-founded convictions — to take a stand on a decision that may be unpopular," Schmittlein states. "It is about finding your narrative — what you believe in — and not being a willow in the wind. A well-thought-out leadership narrative helps create meaning and motivation for others."

Getting Started: Finding Your Leadership Narrative

I spend a good deal of my time coaching senior executives to shape and tell their leadership stories in leader-led development initiatives around the world. When crafted well, and integrated with important conceptual content, engaging senior leaders to share their perspectives can be a powerful learning experience. Years ago, I was coaching a vice-chairman of a large global financial services company to share his story on what it meant to be a great leader in a changing world. He looked at me, almost with a sense of embarrassment, and said, "I've been in leadership roles for 35 years, and this is the first time I have ever been asked to share what I actually believe to be the essential ingredients of great leadership." My response: "Well then, let's get started!"

Follow these simple steps to find your leadership narrative:

- 1.** No matter how busy you are, how many deadlines you are facing, or how many people are vying for your time, give yourself permission to reflect on what being a great leader means to you. Don't think about it for five minutes and consider the job done. Take a day or chunks of several days away from the office to seriously reflect on this. After you do that, write those thoughts down as a draft narrative. It might start out as a series of bullet points, and that's completely fine to get you started. But make sure it begins to take shape as a story.
- 2.** Share your draft narrative with one person, or several people, you trust. By trust, I mean that you trust that they will be honest with you concerning how authentic your narrative feels. Does the narrative describe you? Have they seen you behave this way over time? Have they witnessed you trying to cultivate those behaviors in others? You are trying to discover whether you are an authentic role model for your own narrative.
- 3.** When your narrative is refined enough, try it out. Tell your story transparently and with authenticity. Your leadership narrative should not be seen as a war story, simply recounting something you did. Work on it so that others can learn from it. At the right time and with

the right people, seek feedback on the impact your narrative is having and ask how your story can have greater impact.

How we work is changing, but why we work and what we hope to achieve through our work remain largely the same. We want to be part of something larger, something special, something that helps make this world we live in a better place. Your leadership narrative can motivate others in important ways. Finding your narrative — one that expresses authentically, transparently, and courageously what you believe in as a leader, what you are about, and indeed what you are willing to fight for — will let you begin to unite individuals into teams, and teams into amazing communities.

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