

Storytelling That Drives Bold Change

by Frances X. Frei and Anne Morriss

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Mike Tinney & Alex Hammond

Summary. When tackling urgent organizational problems, leaders usually work hard to identify underlying causes, tap a wide range of knowledge, and experiment with solutions. But once they've mapped out a plan, there's one more crucial step they must take: crafting a story... [more](#)

Let's say you're a leader with an urgent organizational problem—anything from a broken culture to a product that no longer fits your market. You've taken several steps toward a solution: You've identified the core issue and surfaced roadblocks to

progress. You've run smart experiments that point the way forward. You've tapped the knowledge and earned the trust of everyone whose help you'll need, including people whose thinking is different from yours. With all that accomplished, you're ready to tackle a critical challenge: crafting a story so clear and compelling that it will harness your organization's energy and direct it toward change.

Research has shown that storytelling has a remarkable ability to connect people and inspire them to take action. "Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories," the anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson has written. Tim O'Brien, who has won acclaim for his books about the Vietnam War, put it this way: "Storytelling is the essential human activity. The harder the situation, the more essential it is." When your organization needs to make a big change, stories will help you convey not only why it needs to transform but also what the future will look like in specific, vivid terms.

In this article we outline an effective way to leverage the power of storytelling, drawing on decades of combined experience helping senior executives lead large-scale change initiatives. There are four key steps: Understand your story so well that you can describe it in simple terms; honor the past; articulate a mandate for change; and lay out a rigorous and optimistic path forward. Let's explore each of them in turn.

Understand Deeply, Describe Simply

This, we've observed in our work advising leaders, is the foundation of persuasive communication. If you understand something but can describe it only in complex or jargony language, you'll reach just the subset of people with expertise in the topic.

Consider T-Mobile's transformation from a company teetering on the edge of irrelevance to the serious player it is today. After he was named CEO, in 2012, John Legere began listening in daily on customer service calls. As was widely reported in the press at the time, the experience led him to a fundamental truth about the wireless industry: People hated it. They resented being trapped in confusing contracts and hit with hidden fees. So he decided to offer clear service plans and transparent charges, among other innovations—in short, to become everything the industry wasn't. Legere understood the story of T-Mobile's change at such a profound level that he could communicate it in a single word: *uncarrier*.

When you think about the change you want to lead, ask yourself this: Can I capture my vision in a page? A paragraph? A word? The French philosopher Blaise Pascal once apologized for writing a long letter, explaining that he hadn't had time to write a short one. Your first task is to craft the equivalent of a short letter—even though it may take you extra time.

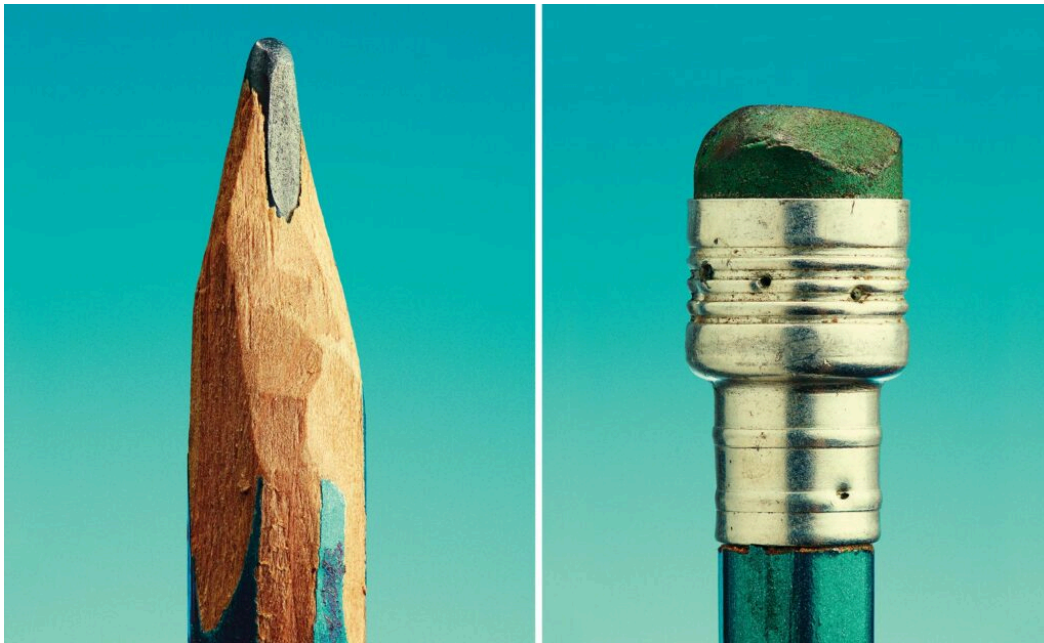
Honor Your Past

Your next step toward creating the future is to revisit the past, counterintuitive though that may seem. The process has two distinct stages.

Acknowledge the good parts of your history. It's easy to become so focused on the things you want to change that you forget to communicate what you *don't* want to. To get everyone on board with your ideas, you need to show that you truly understand the

organization, starting with the good stuff.

There will always be self-appointed gatekeepers who are resistant to change—typically, valuable employees who have long institutional memories, care deeply about the organization, and worry about what might get lost in the transition. To bring them along, make it clear that you intend to preserve what’s best about the company. Even the most logical change initiative can be unsettling and disruptive to those who’ll be affected. Show people that you get it. We suggest having at least one gatekeeper stay close to you throughout the process so that you witness that person’s concerns firsthand, which will make you more likely to respect and account for them.



Photographer Mike Tinney and industrial designer Alex Hammond photographed the writing implements of artists, designers, and photographers as a meditation on the creative process.

In a study of large organizational change initiatives, the University of Amsterdam’s Merlijn Venus and colleagues found that employees commonly feared their soon-to-be-transformed company would no longer be the organization they valued and identified with. The greater the uncertainty around the initiative, the greater the anxiety. Leaders were most effective in building support for change when they also emphasized continuity, the researchers found.

When Dara Khosrowshahi hosted his first town hall meeting as Uber's new CEO, in 2017, it might have been tempting to highlight the firm's missteps and position himself as its savior. Instead he promised to "retain the edge that made Uber a force of nature," a remark met with thunderous applause. (Disclosure: One of us, Frances, is a former Uber employee.)

We were struck by Khosrowshahi's grace in that meeting. Follow his lead and show some sensitivity toward the people who aren't so sure about your plans for change: the skeptics, the resisters, and the simply scared. Honor the past they're holding on to, and they may gradually loosen their grip.

Reckon with the not-so-good parts. If your firm has lost the trust of any stakeholders, you'll need to rebuild it and earn the right to push forward. Spurred on by a courageous blog post by the software engineer Susan Fowler, in which she detailed her experience of harassment at Uber, Khosrowshahi combined his commitment to retain what was best about the company with a pledge to lead cultural change.

If your initiative is to capture employees' hearts and minds, you'll need to confront your organization's history with both optimism and honesty. Optimism means revealing your belief in a better tomorrow. Honesty means taking full responsibility for the things that went wrong and acknowledging the human costs of those mistakes.

For an example of taking clear, unequivocal responsibility for a painful past, we often point to the video game developer Riot Games (a company we've advised). In 2018 the organization issued a plainspoken apology on its website in response to public allegations of a fractured and sexist culture. "To all those we've let down...we're sorry," it began. "We're sorry that Riot hasn't always been—or wasn't—the place we promised you. And we're sorry it took so long for us to hear you."

You don't need to have all the answers to begin addressing the difficult parts of your company's past. You do need to be willing to look at them unflinchingly.

Riot stands in stark contrast to many other companies that are called out for missteps. For instance, when the data engineer and whistleblower Frances Haugen publicly challenged Facebook (now Meta) to work harder to protect its most vulnerable users, the company's first response was to try to undermine her credibility. A tide of public frustration, a drop in the firm's stock price, and an increase in regulatory scrutiny followed. A good-faith attempt to engage with Haugen's rigorously documented charges would probably have yielded better results.

You don't need to have all the answers to begin addressing the difficult parts of your company's past. You do need to be willing to look at them unflinchingly and deal honorably with whatever you find. When Riot included with its apology a pledge to make the company "a place we can all be proud of," it didn't have all the details of its plan worked out. But it was definite about the fact that it needed one.

Provide a Clear and Compelling Mandate for Change

Now that you've honored the past—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and opened your stakeholders' minds at least somewhat to your message, it's time to share your rationale for creating a different future.

Begin by reflecting on the "why" of your plan. What problem are you trying to solve? What's the cost of not solving it? Your answers must be persuasive enough to override the comfort of familiar

beliefs and behaviors. Among the challenges you may encounter is one put forward by Harvard Business School's Rosabeth Moss Kanter in Kanter's Law: *Everything looks like a failure in the middle*. You need to give people solid reasons to press on.

In 2010, faced with slumping sales and an anemic stock price, the new CEO of Domino's, Patrick Doyle, knew that to mount a successful turnaround he'd need to break through the malaise permeating the company culture. The chain was delivering handsomely on its promise to get customers pizza in record time. But as one reporter noted, "You then had to eat it." People had decided the pizza tasted so bad that in consumer tests, they rated the same pies lower when they knew they were from Domino's rather than a competing brand.



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The conventional move would have been to quietly chip away at the problem while downplaying consumers' negative reactions. But Doyle and his team realized that a shock to the system was in order, so they decided to shine a bright light on customers' frustrations. They shared some of the scathing feedback in national ads and on a digital billboard in New York's Times Square. Comments like "worst excuse for pizza I've ever had" and "tastes like cardboard" scrolled in massive letters across its screen.

That bold move fueled fast, transformative change by making the need for it vividly clear. Stakeholders could not escape the fact that Domino's had a problem. Russell Weiner, the CMO at the time (he's now CEO), told *Inc.* magazine, "By saying what we said about the pizza, we blew up the bridge. That's what made it so much more powerful. If it didn't work out, there was no place to retreat to. There was no going back."

By leveling with consumers instead of trying to spin the situation, the company demonstrated its authenticity and engaged its market directly. Customers were given an essential truth-telling role in the campaign—and an excellent reason to pay attention to what happened next. After all, they'd been enlisted to co-create the needed fix—dubbed "Pizza Turnaround," which hit the right deeply/simple notes.

What happened next was good for everyone. The chain's pizzas got a whole lot better, Pizza Turnaround grew same-store sales by more than 10% within a year, and the company's stock price took off.

Describe a Rigorous and Optimistic Way Forward

Your next step is to get into the weeds of your plan. What persuaded you to choose the road ahead? How confident are you that it's passable? In addressing those questions, you want to convey two things: rigor and, again, optimism. Data can help you demonstrate the first to stakeholders. Get comfortable with the numbers and pick just a few to use as plot points in your story. When it comes to data in storytelling, less is more.

When the Danish firm Ørsted set out to transform itself from an old-school power company into a leading provider of renewable energy, its management focused on a single ratio: 85%. The firm had historically generated that share of its energy from fossil fuels. In 2008 the leaders of the company (then called DONG

Energy) decided to work toward flipping that ratio so that 85% would come from sustainable sources such as wind and solar. It labeled the initiative “85/15.”

In communicating the plan the company’s leaders addressed hard truths about its strategic exposures, including climate change and the inevitable depletion of fossil fuel stores, with boldness and rigor. Henrik Poulsen, who was the CEO of Ørsted from 2012 to 2020, used that approach to enlist an initially skeptical workforce. “We set a long-term vision, then translate it into a strategic business ambition with tangible targets to guide it,” he wrote in an online newspaper ad. “Then we roll that back into action items for each employee to focus on over the next year.” Ørsted aimed to reach its goal in 30 years. It did so in a decade.

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Now for the optimism part. Jeff Bezos famously asks his team to make the case for new ideas in structured six-page memos. Less famously, he asks people to pair those memos with hypothetical press releases, in part to test for the presence of genuine enthusiasm. In converting stakeholders to your vision, remember: Optimism is an infectious emotion that can be one of your most effective tools.

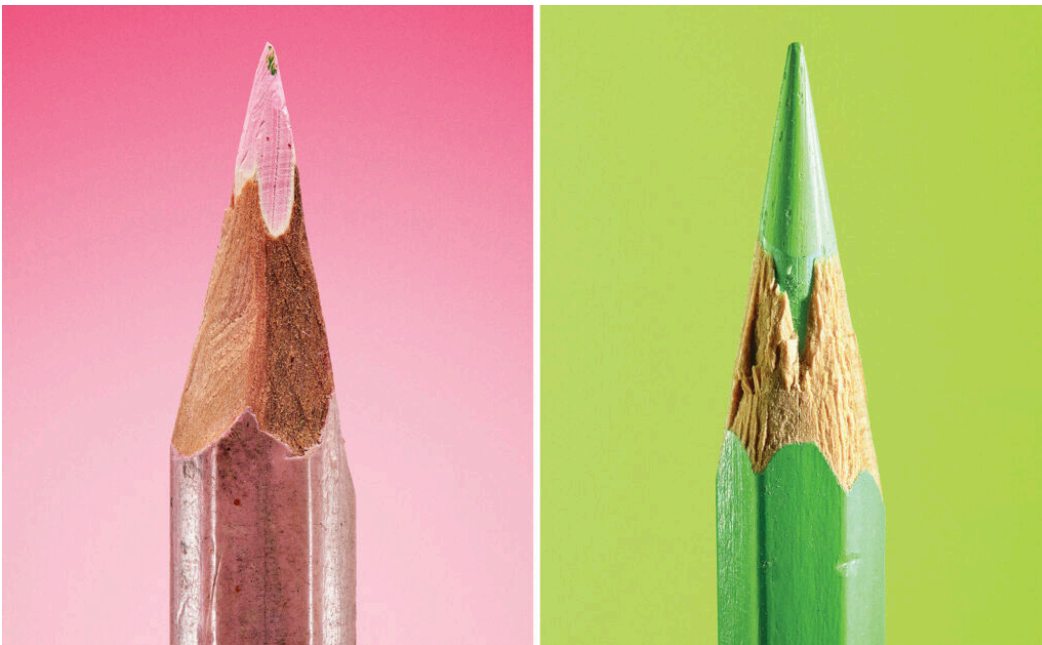
According to Gallup research, just 15% of U.S. employees “strongly agree” that their organization’s leadership makes them enthusiastic about the future. To improve that number in your

own organization, rigorously and optimistically describe your way forward.

Put the Pieces of Your Story Together

Now that you've taken those steps, it's time to combine the elements of your vision into a narrative and get others behind it. Ursula Burns, the CEO of Xerox from 2009 to 2016, who led the company through a major pivot from manufacturing to services, knows how effective that can be. Stories were the chief currency of her leadership. "One of the things I learned," she told the 2021 California Conference for Women, "was that stories matter, communications matter. Putting things in context matters." Burns spent countless hours meeting with stakeholders from around the world and making it clear that massive change was the only way forward—and that there was a better Xerox ahead. "Telling people the reality of what's going on and giving them hope by providing them with the vision...for what it's going to look like when we get through this is fundamental," she told attendees. "It's foundational to having people follow you."

Like Burns, you can assemble a change story that will inspire people to follow you. Use the structure we've discussed: Understand deeply and describe simply, honor the past, lay out the mandate for change, and provide a rigorous and optimistic vision for the future. Put your thoughts down on paper and, if practical, do it with your team. Share what you come up with to test and improve it. And remember that your customers are resources, too. Ask trusted ones for feedback—or take inspiration from Domino's and invite members of the public to add their voices to your story.



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You needn't limit yourself to words (and the occasional number). When Jan Carlzon led the 1980s turnaround of Scandinavian Airlines (SAS), he circulated a small illustrated pamphlet featuring a sad cartoon plane to convey the company's switch to a strategy anchored in delighting business travelers. As Carlzon detailed in his memoir, his fellow executives worried that SAS's cerebral Scandinavian workforce would reject the comic format and dismiss the message. But the pamphlet was widely embraced and helped the firm chart a course through turbulence and change. Carlzon's effort remains one of the most successful turnarounds in business history.

For a more recent example, consider Marguerite Zabar Mariscal, the CEO of the restaurant and retail brand Momofuku. She commissioned a beautifully designed pocket-size guidebook after the company reached a thousand employees—too many for her to continue relying on intimate storytelling. Every new employee gets a copy of it.

Use words, numbers, cartoons, pictures—anything that helps activate your team—to bring your change story to life. Spark joy in the process, and stay open to the unexpected.

Repeat Yourself

Now tell your story wherever the opportunity arises: in speeches, interviews, town hall meetings, team huddles, one-on-ones. Push yourself outside your comfort zone and experiment with different formats. For example, high-quality videos are now easy for anyone with a smartphone to make, and they can be a powerful tool for showing—rather than simply telling—your story of change.

You'll probably need to communicate far more often than you think you should. In our experience, change leaders generally need to double or triple their pace of strategic messaging.

Why? Frequent communication ensures that busy, distracted stakeholders will internalize your story to the point where it reliably informs their actions. A core objective of change leadership is to set others up to succeed in your absence. That's essential to organizational speed because it means you won't become a bottleneck.



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Alan Mulally talked incessantly about his “One Ford” turnaround plan when he was CEO of the car company. He started every meeting by reviewing it, and he had it distributed to every employee on a wallet-sized card. Bryce Hoffman, the author of a book on Mulally’s time at Ford, wrote, “After six months, those of us who followed the company had gotten sick of hearing about [it].” When in one interview Hoffman asked Mulally if he’d be sharing something new, the CEO was incredulous. “We’re still

working on this plan,” he replied. “Until we achieve these goals, why would we need another one?” That relentlessness paid off. In less than four years Mulally pulled Ford back from the brink of bankruptcy and made it one of the most profitable automakers in the world.

Research by Harvard Business School’s Tsedal Neeley and the University of California’s Paul Leonardi validates Mulally’s approach. After studying leaders in six companies for 250-plus hours and recording every communication, the pair discovered that leaders who were intentionally redundant moved their projects forward faster and more smoothly than others. “We’re so bred to believe that clarity is the key to being a better communicator,” Leonardi told HBR. “It’s [actually] about making your presence felt. Employees are getting pulled in many directions and reporting to lots of people and getting tons of communications. So how do you keep your issues top of mind? Redundancy is a way to do that.”

Dharmesh Shah, a cofounder of HubSpot, has written, “It took me 20+ years as an entrepreneur to start to recognize the power of repetition—and even then it’s still uncomfortable.” (Disclosure: HubSpot is a client of the Leadership Consortium, an organization we started.) That sort of discomfort, Shah notes, signals that you’re on the right track. “It’s *natural* for it to feel *unnatural*,” he continued. “Unnatural, but profoundly necessary.” One test of whether you’re communicating your change story often enough: Are you sick of hearing yourself talk? The answer should be yes.

Identify and Use Your Emotions

We’ll close by talking about emotions—an underexplored part of leading change. Evolution has taught us to pay close attention to one another’s feelings, particularly those of people with influence over our security and well-being. That unconscious vigilance can

be both an asset and a liability for executives. It means that a leader's optimism is highly infectious—but so are emotions such as stress and anxiety.

10 Underrated Emotions in Change Narratives

In addition to being powerful tools of persuasion, emotions can ground us and make us more authentic. Here are some that leaders tend to undervalue—in both storytelling for change and beyond.

Wanting to demonstrate the power of gratitude in the workplace, former PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi regularly sent thank-you notes to the *parents* of her senior team members, expressing appreciation for sharing their children with the firm. She wrote more than 400 notes a year. Some of Nooyi's colleagues—high-flying executives with résumés filled with accomplishments—told reporters it was the best thing that had ever happened to them.

Nooyi's notes embody what Daniel Goleman, the psychologist who developed the idea of emotional intelligence, would call *primal leadership*. He has described the phenomenon this way: “The leader's mood is quite literally contagious, spreading quickly and inexorably throughout the business....The same holds true in the office, boardroom, or shop floor; group members inevitably ‘catch’ feelings from one another.” When you're a leader, there's no button to turn off the broadcast feature on your feelings.

Many organizations experienced that reality in the early days of Covid-19. Researchers seeking communication lessons from the crisis surveyed some 800 employees. One finding was that the emotional note leaders hit could make or break an individual's commitment to the firm. "Our leader's reassurances...that the company has our backs are inspiring," one person said. "I even used [them]...on social media to make sure people knew we are still hiring and that this is the sort of company you want to work for when the going gets tough."

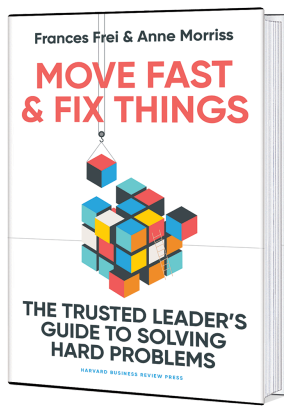
Self-awareness is key to playing the instrument of your emotions and preventing them from sabotaging your change story.

Accepting your feelings and integrating them into your actions also builds trust by reinforcing authenticity.

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You may be familiar with this oft-cited statistic: Depending on the measurement used, up to 70% of organizational change efforts fail. But if you create a compelling narrative, you'll greatly increase your chances of defying those odds. Your story can transform your organization by shaping attitudes and beliefs, starting with your own. The story you tell yourself sets the stage for the organizational change you're envisioning. And when you share it skillfully with others, your story starts to become their reality.

Editor's note: Frances Frei and Anne Morriss are the authors of Move Fast and Fix Things: The Trusted Leader's Guide to Solving Hard Problems (Harvard Business Review Press, 2023), from which this article is adapted.



Bestselling authors and cohosts of the TED podcast *Fixable*, Frances Frei and Anne Morriss reinvent the playbook for how to lead change—with a radical approach that moves fast, builds trust, and accelerates excellence.

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