

BRING THEM WITH YOU

The ability to inspire others is a vital attribute for leaders, but most overestimate their ability to do so.

STORY: MEHUL JOSHI

If you're a leader, you may be less inspiring than you think. In a study of leadership excellence, my colleagues and I asked 630 senior leaders to rank 16 leadership competencies in order of importance for their role. At the top of the list was the ability to inspire others.

Other highly ranked qualities included the ability to communicate strongly, building relationships, displaying integrity and honesty, and driving for results.

Then we asked these leaders' direct reports to rank their bosses according to how effective they were at each of the 16 competencies. In those rankings, the leaders' ability to inspire others was second from bottom on the list.

It's a common blind spot. Leaders understand the importance of inspiring others, yet tend to overestimate their ability to do it. There are many reasons leaders fail to inspire. Let's interrogate three key reasons, and what to do about them.

PURPOSE

During a visit to the NASA Space Centre in 1962, President John F. Kennedy noticed a man carrying a broom. He walked over to the man and said: "Hi, I'm Jack Kennedy. What are you doing?"

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was widely praised for her response to the Christchurch terrorist attack.



"Well, Mr President," the cleaner responded, "I'm helping to put a man on the moon."

This "man on the moon" story is one of inspiration through purpose and vision. It's also about inspiring leadership. For the cleaner to be truly inspired, he needed to be clear about how cleaning the floors and toilets at the NASA facility contributed to the goal of winning the space race.

For a leader to inspire through vision and purpose, he or she needs to provide a "man or woman on the moon" goal that everyone understands and truly aspires to. Importantly, they also need to demonstrate how each individual contributes to that vision. Research shows that when leaders get this right, discretionary effort more than doubles.

CHEMICAL REACTION

Scientists have demonstrated that stories inspire when they "hit the mark" in a specific part of the brain, triggering the release of the chemicals cortisol, dopamine and oxytocin. Cortisol assists with memory formation, dopamine regulates our emotional responses and keeps us engaged, and oxytocin is the "empathy" hormone that helps build relationships and a willingness to act.

When we relate deeply to a story, we feel inspired. But not every story is relatable to every audience. I once opened a keynote speech at a conference in New York with a mother-in-law story. It had the audience rolling with laughter and visibly moved. Shortly afterwards, I told the same story at a conference in India and it had a very different effect. You could hear crickets.

Stories miss the mark and fail to trigger a chemical reaction when they don't relate to the audience's cultural or organisational context. So when you're looking for the right story to tell, ask yourself three key questions: How does my audience think? What story would therefore be relevant to them? How do I tell it so that it hits the mark?

The key is getting into the shoes of your audience and seeing the story from their point of view. You may have a repertoire of anecdotes about the All Blacks that inspire you, but how much does your audience understand or even care about the finer points of international rugby?

Ensuring the story is relevant is just the starting point. For a story to be inspiring, you need to bring it to life. One way to do that is using highly descriptive language

that engages the senses: what did you see, hear, feel, experience? There also needs to be alignment between the narrative and how you are telling it. If you say something was "exciting", be excited.

In addition to being relevant, a story needs to have a clear point. This is particularly important when presenting to senior audiences that tend to have a low tolerance for being left guessing. Spell it out. For example: "The point of this story is we need to invest more heavily in leadership development."

WALKING THE TALK

Leaders who score highly on inspiration are seen to "walk their talk". Examples include the New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons.

Following the shocking Christchurch terrorist attack, Ardern was praised for upholding her values of hope, unity and inclusiveness with swift action on gun control. Fitzsimmons has been the public face of the battle to contain the state's devastating bushfires, displaying authority, compassion and a sense of calm throughout.

Conversely, inspiring leaders can fall from grace quickly when they are perceived to be not "walking their talk". Aung San Suu Kyi won the Nobel peace prize in 1991 for campaigning for democracy. Years later, as the leader of the Myanmar government, her award was at risk of being withdrawn after she failed to speak out against an army crackdown of ethnic minorities in her country. In December she appeared before the International Court of Justice to defend Myanmar against accusations of genocide.

Leaders cast a long shadow, and the effects of perception tend to be magnified – both positive and negative. That means when leaders take actions that are even perceived to be a deviation from the stated values or goals of their organisation, they erode trust and confidence. For example, if you're a collaborator and want to inspire others to collaborate, it's hard to do so if others don't see you collaborating.

While you may not be able to control how your actions are perceived, you can strive to pre-emptively address misperceptions and show that you are walking your talk.

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