

What's the PLAN ?

Rethinking your business for now and for the future.



What's the plan? For every sized organization, this is surely the most asked question of 2009. In meeting spaces everywhere and every day, decision-makers continue to struggle with how to answer it. How can their organization best respond to continued global uncertainty? One positive aspect of the current mass confusion is that it has triggered an urgent need for corporations, special-interest groups and governments to rethink, reinvent and restructure themselves and their balance sheets - something they possibly should have done several years ago. Awaiting the answer to the question "What's the plan?" are employees, shareholders, partners, customers and, in the case of governments, citizens - anyone and everyone whose own future is linked to what that the organization's leaders are now thinking.

"What's the plan?" has become the 2009 equivalent to "How are you doing?" or "How are you holding up?" It is a sincere question being asked by people inside businesses and on the street. It has opened the door for organizations and the people who rely on them to connect and to respond. There seems to be a wave of civility that has come with this economic upheaval as people reach out for dialogue and understanding. Therefore, organizations must be prepared to be completely transparent about how this sequence of events is impacting them and their decision-making. Businesses need to summon a genuine answer they can live with.

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The answer to the question is best communicated in the form of a story, excerpts of which can be told on a website or at an annual general meeting or, more informally, shared around the office coffee maker or at the family breakfast table. Because these days, everyone is in fact keenly interested in the response to "What's the plan?" And hope is not a plan.

In these uncertain times, the facts and bullet-points normally associated with strategic plans are not enough. People want to hear something more reassuring - devoid of jargon, acronyms and other forms of business-speak - a story they can believe in. A story that comes from the hearts and minds of the leaders themselves. As Steve Pinker of Harvard University's Department of Psychology explains, "The mind best understands facts when they are woven into a conceptual fabric, such as a narrative...Disconnected facts in the mind are like unlinked pages on the Web: they may as well not exist."

Asking the leaders of an organization to write their own future story of their organization and precisely how they're going to manage their way out of the impact of this downturn is a very effective form of strategic planning. That's because stories, if they are to be believed, must also be seen as being achievable, which requires their authors to be both visionary and pragmatic. They can do so by translating the story into actionable steps. Story + Strategy = Plan.

Whether it's an evolutionary story (how to change in a world that may be changing faster than you are) or an upstart story for a totally new business, product or service, a story can provide clarity, commitment and, above all, consensus. When there is no friction - no disagreements as to where the organization is headed - a solution and success inevitably come more quickly. And these days, rapid response - focused urgency - has become, and will continue to be, a prerequisite for all organizations small and large.

Don't underestimate how challenging it is to write this kind of story. To do it right, you should follow some proven techniques. It will require two uninterrupted days or possibly longer, depending on the size of the organization. An inspiring but completely unfamiliar setting. No distractions. Open minds. The participation of everyone in your organization you are counting on to bring the story to life. The involvement too of a small number of very smart people who don't think like your organization does. Their contributions, because they can see your world through fresh eyes, dramatically increase your possibility for breakthrough solutions. These outsiders could be associates, acknowledged experts or gurus who are known for the innovation they have introduced to their own organizations - but they must be from outside your industry.



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Through the use of the Internet, even the largest of organizations can also involve every employee, in some meaningful way, in the evolution of the story. In building the story, again using the Internet, you can also ask customers what your organization could do to sustain their confidence in you. Because the timing for your organization's need for a fresh story may be pressing, activities like these could occur several weeks or months after the foundational story has been written. The value in engaging staff and customers in the process is that people believe more deeply in a story they have helped author themselves. When the story becomes theirs, they are more likely to tell and retell that story to others.

To assist you in authoring your story, you will need a skilful facilitator to keep egos in check and to help the group find their way through previously uncharted territory. If you don't have someone in-house who can pull the pieces of the story together and edit them into a compelling narrative, rely on a respected company that specializes in creating actionable, substantive stories filled with new ideas, new ideals and new ways of working.

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The completed story should be a snapshot of both the immediate and longer-term future and exactly how everyone who comes in contact with your organization will experience it as it begins to change. The story becomes a roadmap into the future that decision-makers can follow. It should identify the values an organization can trust and abide by - the values that will help continue to build customer confidence. The story should define what your distinct competitive advantages are now and what they will need to become. It should also be a story that vividly

and accurately describes how your organization will emerge from the current malaise in a way that will give it a flying head start on its competitors as the economy continues to turn. Your new story will serve as a briefing document that informs everyone from your website builder to Human Resources what they should be saying on your behalf. Finally, the story assures that precious resources (time, talent and funds) are being concentrated in the right places.



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WE CAN CHANGE

Over the past year-and-a-half, I have continued to marvel at Team Obama's understanding of the power of story.

Throughout his campaign, in his Inaugural Speech and then in his Address to Congress, he has demonstrated that he not only has a plan, but also, via intelligent use of the media including the Internet, he has encouraged all Americans to align their stories and their visions with his - that of a nobler America, an America that can earn the right to lead once again. His use of repetition, his plainspoken but highly visual language, his references to renewal and regeneration, and his challenge to 300+ million people to individually and collectively seize their future and to accept that "we can change" are, in terms of emotion-based storytelling, masterful. He may yet talk the world out of this recession.



What are the qualities of a strategic story? In 2009, when many in the world believe they have been duped by some of the large organizations they once admired and trusted, every business must have a story that is authentic, frank and relevant to the moment. In these most emotional of times, it should also be heartfelt. It must consider current circumstances, yes, but it must also see beyond 2009. Can we find opportunity in adversity? How can we harness innovation to become a new company in a new world? What have we learned from this defining event and past mistakes? And, above all, how do we become wiser leaders?

Ours is a world that is now overwhelmed with wave upon wave of confusing and conflicting information and even intentional misinformation. Twittering. Blogging. Texting. All part of a global rumor mill. There's so much information and such a high percentage of it is purely speculative that it has created a new kind of mass hysteria and is actually impeding the ability to make clear judgments of almost any kind. Therefore, your story needs to be a simple, logical and achievable one, delivered with the depth of emotion you feel for your organization. One that confirms your organization is making seriously tough choices balanced by aggressive innovation.

Organizations with a captivating and credible story will stand out as a bright light in the current economic gloom. Forget about traditional tortoise and hare business stories. Instead, think in terms of becoming a frog and a story of how you are using innovation to leapfrog past your challenges and your competitors and into the future.

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What stakeholders urgently want to hear from the leaders of their organization is a farsighted story. The next five years will redefine the way business is conducted. The emphasis will switch from "image" to "substance" - to value and values. That not only applies to the Big Three automakers and the Big Banks, but to all businesses that, hopefully, have learned something from the crisis of 2008-2009. Today, organizations like yours, large and small across North America, have the opportunity to unselfishly band together and, in unison, help rewrite the story of global enterprise.



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PROCESS IS AS IMPORTANT AS PLAN

When my good friend Paul Belserene and I first conceived of the concept of strategic storytelling, we saw it as being a way to get complex organizations to agree on the fundamentals of the story they had asked us to tell on their behalf. What we didn't foresee was that these people would value the two-day process as much or more than the story itself. What made it so engaging for them? It was fun. It sparked a level of creativity few people in the room had ever experienced before. Because a small but select number of mavens, radical thinkers and overachievers - all of them outsiders - were also invited to participate in each session, they helped bring new dimensions to the story. Above all, the participants recognized the story as being one they had personally written, with minimal editorial input from Paul or myself. It was their story, not ours, and they felt committed to bring it to life.

