



Dena's 'word-bites'

Leadership: Making meaning

It was six men of Indostan
to learning much inclined
who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
that each by observation
might satisfy his mind.

The *First* approached the Elephant
and happening to fall
against his broad and sturdy side
at once began to bawl
"God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a WALL!"

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk
cried, "Ho, what have we here,
so very round and smooth and sharp?
to me 'tis mighty clear
this wonder of an Elephant
is very like a SPEAR!"

The *Third* approached the animal
and happening to take
the squirming trunk within his hands,
thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
is very like a SNAKE!"

The *Fourth* reached out an eager hand
and felt about the knee
"What most this wondrous beast is like
is mighty plain," quoth he:
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant
is very like a TREE!"

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear
said: "E'en the blindest man
can tell what this resembles most;
deny the fact who can,
this marvel of an Elephant
is very like a FAN!"

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun
about the beast to grope,
than seizing on the swinging tail
that fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
is very like a ROPE!"

And so these men of Indostan
disputed loud and long
each in his own opinion
exceeding stiff and strong,
though each was partly in the right,
and all were in the wrong!

The Blind Men and the Elephant by John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)

This poem illustrates the problem that permeates politics, religion and leadership. Indeed, in all places where relationships exist! We see this phenomenon at work in organisational environments where the 'clearly communicated' messages from the senior team are deformed until they mean something quite different at the point of receipt.

As we reach adulthood, most of us are settled in our own world view and believe we have the correct perspective. After all, it has been honed by education and experience for many years so it must be 'right'. Sometimes, we can become so convinced that we are right, that we filter out any contrary information that might require us to rethink what we 'know to be true'. And sometimes, we resist new thoughts so fervently that conflict, even war, arises. It is almost as if we are physically constrained in a cage that disallows movement. This 'cage' is our meaning perspective; the lens through which we see the world and the means by which we make sense of it.

How you make meaning

In this 'word-bite', I am going to describe the way we make meaning and the implications this has on a leader's ability to interpret and reinterpret the world; for themselves as well as for others.

Throughout our lives, we refine and build what is called our 'essential Self'; the only enduring aspect of us as we cycle through our developmental stages and experiences. This refinement continues as we learn and grow, gradually revealing our values, beliefs and potential; and our personalities.

For the sake of argument I will suppose that we start with a blank canvas when we are born, save the genetic tendencies that we inherit from our family line. From the first moment of our lives, we begin to interpret and act upon the world. At first we do this in a naïve way. We cry. We get fed. We don't cry. We don't get fed. Simple cause and effect relationships. But as we get older, we use increasingly sophisticated processes to get our own way and to make sense of our observations and experiences. We might have tested the people around us to discover where their boundaries lie; we might have provoked reactions and experimented with physical matter to determine what the 'rules' are and we might have copied the responses and reactions of significant others to inform our own behaviour. And so it is that layer upon layer of learning and experience build up to create the 'lens' through which we now see and make sense of the world.

In learning circles, this lens is called the 'meaning perspective' and it is considered to be made from a combination of genetic inheritance, family background, societal and cultural values. This cocktail is laced by observations, learning and experience. The meaning perspective, therefore, is made up of thoughts that are continually worked, reworked and updated by our experience of life which, in turn, modifies the way we see ourselves and the way we behave. However, the meaning perspective is not 'who you are'; it is the means by which we understand who we are in our current circumstances.

The longer meaning perspectives are held, the more robust they become and the more difficult it is to change them. We often hear older people say that they are 'too old to change'. What they perhaps mean is that they have invested so much, and for so long, in their personal meaning perspective that it has become unthinkably hard for them to dismantle it and think anew about the world. In this way, peoples' ability to review and rework themselves can diminish or cease altogether as they age. Yet meaning perspectives are constructed by thought, there is nothing physical or immutable about them. They are illusory, and so, changeable.

The society in which we live conveys messages about what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'. We know already that these form the backbone of our meaning perspective. We also know that a structure of family values is added during our childhood and that more layers of complexity are added as we advance through the natural developmental stages of our formative years. Indeed, these sources of influence are responsible for the basic wiring of our meaning

perspectives - and this wiring can carry us into our adult years almost unchecked. For instance, if you were chastised for having temper tantrums as a child, you might wire your meaning perspective in the following way: 'If I show my emotions, I'll upset other people and be punished.' This creates a 'false logic' that prevents you from showing, and eventually accessing, your emotions.

In this case, the 'false logic' is created by making a link between the cause (If I show my emotions) and the effects (I'll upset other people and be punished). However, this linkage is not informed or ameliorated by a deeper understanding of the situation (whatever that is) and, because of this, the 'effect' adheres to the 'cause' and becomes a 'rule' that exists in any context. Reasoned (or unreasoned) logic is then built upon this rocky foundation in an attempt to explain the contradictions and dichotomies that exist within it. This is done through making assumptions, leaps in abstraction or fantasy. Although these techniques deny the evidence before our eyes, they do enable us to live relatively easily with the complex set of inconsistencies in our minds.

I am reminded of a nursery rhyme that I used to sing in my childhood:

There was a crooked man and he walked a crooked mile.
He found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked stile.
He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse.
And they all lived together in a little crooked house.

Although this nursery rhyme is rooted in English history and has nothing to do with meaning perspectives, it nevertheless evokes a feeling of the inevitable perpetuation of crookedness. Once it starts, it gets everywhere!

Our resistance to change, and the challenge for leaders, is largely due to the fact that we hold fast to our meaning perspectives. We invest in them and project ourselves into the world through them. Indeed, it is really hard to let go of our assumptions and beliefs because they form part of what defines us; they give us our identity. These are the views for which we are known. These are the attitudes and characteristics that we bring to our relationships. This is how people 'know' us and this is how we attract people to ourselves who have compatible or complementary views and approaches. This is how we build communities of 'like minded' people, none of whom may be 'right' but all of whom 'think they are right'! Indeed, this is often how we build organisations.

If, we see the value of belonging to an organisation (power, status or security) but we don't share the same values as the founding members, we may 'adjust' our values and behaviours (a bit!) to accommodate what we perceive to be the oddities in meaning that we see and hear. However, we can't fool ourselves for too long for we have an inner knowing when we are up against our own moral boundaries and eventually, we burst out. Before we take action, however, we may find ourselves feeling dislocated from the world we have entered - or we may make a feature of our differences and set ourselves up as the only inhabitant of the moral high ground! Whatever path we take, and there is an infinite variety of paths between these extremes, it creates a dilemma for leaders who are trying to focus meaning in a particular area of activity for commercial purposes.

If, as a leader, you pick up signs that alignment is declared but not demonstrated, you might ask whether people are feeling compelled to hold values, take actions or follow rules that do not accord with their belief system. They may assist you by confronting the issue directly but they may equally well resort to subterfuge; one of the few ways of acquiring power when otherwise feeling powerless. This may be perceived as malevolent but actually, what they may be doing is trying to defend their meaning perspective.

So how, as a leader, do you enter this complex territory and join the meaning-making dance with your team? Meaning perspectives do not have mechanical properties that can be easily unbolted, repositioned and re-bolted, they are more like a knotted mesh of silken threads that have been woven into a complex and unique pattern. And, although they carry the impression of delicacy, they are so strong that they can prevent a person's growth for decades – or a lifetime!

Let's look at the elements that go into making a meaning perspective in the first place.

Genetics (Nature) – a predisposition towards certain tendencies and personality traits

Influence (Nurture) – societal, family, educational and significant others who are present in the formative years

Formative experiences – that are consonant or dissonant with the fundamental meaning framework

Observations – what you see that confirms or denies what you hold to be true

Critical thinking (Logical or illogical deduction or induction) - robust cause and effect relationships (deduction) or, more complexly, an ability to conceive the future based on a recognition and extrapolation of current patterns and trends (induction)

Critical self-reflection – a deeply reflective and conscious examination of one’s assumptions, beliefs and affectations

Discussion and dialogue – the ability to test out ideas and respond to others’ ideas with an open mind

Reason - rational argument or persuasion by credible or influential others

Imagination – projections into the future that create a vision of the destination

Archetypal expectations – based on myth, legend, fairytale; the accepted roles and responsibilities that exist in society and are fed into the meaning perspective through nursery stories, classical and contemporary fiction

Of course, as a leader, there’s very little you can do about the genetically encoded attributes that have been passed down the family line. However, the rest of the meaning perspective is comprised of elements that are cognitively and experientially driven and, therefore, elastic.

Reflecting on yourself for a moment, you may notice that the changes you have made to your meaning perspective over the years has largely been triggered by a significant event or a ‘significant other’. Indeed, you may say that these changes were bidden by a personal or material interaction which, looking back, you see as critical. If you acknowledge that your personal transformations have rarely occurred in a vacuum, it is a short step to realise the part you can play in transforming others’ meaning perspectives. As a leader and as a creator of meaning, you have an opportunity to orchestrate and make sense of new experiences for others that are flooded with the opportunity to find meaning.

Learning theory¹ suggests that there are four critical elements to changing someone’s meaning perspective which, in turn, leads to personal transformation.

¹ Mezirow, Jack. (1991) *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. Jossey-Bass Inc: San Francisco

These are:

1. A disorientating dilemma
2. Critical reflection
3. Rational dialogue
4. Behavioural change

Putting these four elements into the organisational setting and placing the onus on leaders to create transformative environments, peoples' attention needs to be caught so that a credible 'call to action' is sounded. A disturbance to the status quo creates the need for, and impetus to change. This may be sounded as a competitive or commercial threat that demands a collective response or it may be a piece of personal feedback that conflicts with the individual's invested view of themselves. However their attention is caught, the feeling it is likely to engender is one of disorientation – to varying degrees. This is the seedbed of change.

So a vision; a vibrant or shocking picture painted by the leader who wishes to trigger change is perhaps the first step to new meaning and transformative change.

The disorientating dilemma creates a chance to try out different things; to experiment with new ways of being and behaving. It can feel quite uncomfortable because the ground on which an individual's world has been built is unsettled. What's more, their usual ways of responding are no longer appropriate and they have to dig deep into their feelings of incompetence to find talent that they didn't know they had. However, people are often surprised by their own ingenuity and inventiveness in such situations. This can be both revelatory and transformational.

Leaders can accelerate this forward momentum by creating forums for critical reflection and dialogue. In these settings, people are able to make sense of the confusion and chaos that they experience. Just hearing themselves speak out in a group of people who are prepared to think critically – yet non-judgementally – enables meaning to be extracted and distilled. And, as people are seen, heard and validated, confidence in their own ability to change and transform grows. Leaders can further enhance these communal meaning-making events by encouraging a coaching culture. This gives team members the freedom to progress professionally (and personally) and extend the boundaries of their capability. Leaders who adopt a coaching style of communication to tap the deeper pools of talent also sanction the

kinds of conversations that bring hidden issues to the surface where they may be aired and resolved. Although this kind of culture change needs vision and courage, it fosters healthy communication and team cohesion.

Thought precedes behavioural change. Generally, once we have had an insight, we learn to observe ourselves in situations that show us, in practice, the behaviours we wish to change. Having harvested this evidence, we learn to recognise the situations that trigger these behaviours. This equips us with the self-awareness to pre-empt the behaviour and replace it with something of our choice. Repetition creates habit. And so it is that our menu of behaviours changes according to our pre-meditations and desires.

As a leader, a dozen or so heroic myths and legends will be projected onto you that define your followers' expectations. These are the archetypal forms that hold the meaning of your relationship with them and inform their responses to you. It is said that, by the age of four², we have chosen our archetypal character and use it to seed the expectations we have of ourselves in the world. We also use it to test out our theories about the people we encounter and what the world holds for us in general.

Being a leader as a Hero or Heroine is a big deal. Not only are you making your own meaning, but you are (perhaps unwittingly - or unwillingly?) creating meaning for others. So, why not be party to the creation of your own heroic myth? Tell the story of who you are. Share your vision. Share your values and beliefs. And, in return, listen to the voices around you as they try to make sense of the strange things around them and pursue new meaning. By weaving together all these strands, you will not only be giving meaning to the world, but changing the world.

² Zipes, Jack. (1987) *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*. Methuen, Inc. and Gower Publishing. Pp xii