

We need a dream or two

Business leaders use jargon and technobabble to hide their lack of inspiration. Does this language encourage men and women to achieve greatness or even to do their jobs? Not at all says Dr Leandro Herrero

It's August 28, 1963 at Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC. Martin Luther King is addressing the multitude. "I have a 350-page strategic plan that gives us first the situation analysis of our racial problems and then describes a ten-point strategic programme and milestones to achieve the desired outcomes and deliverables of equality that will add value to our nation," he says. Does it sound credible? Actually, what he said was, "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood." Is that better? "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." Too much? I know you think this is populist rhetoric and you just can't imagine your chairman addressing the annual shareholder meeting speaking 'the dream language'.

Many years later, RD Laing, the British psychiatrist and father of what would become the so-called 'anti-psychiatric' movement, writes in desperation at reality. "Gone is any sense of possible tragedy, of passion," he says. "Gone is any language of joy, delight, passion, sex, violence. The language is one of the boardroom."

The issue here is not whether you agree with the first part of the statement, or even Laing's contributions to society, but the comparative reality: the language of the boardroom. That is, pretty boring, uninspiring and jargon-rich. Pretty much you and me (sometimes) in the 9 to 5 setting.

No dreams only nightmares

There are no dreams any more. Declaring the vision of the organisation in terms of competitive advantage and enhancement of market capabilities that maximise shareholder value is not a dream but a nightmare. Why is it that business has lost the ability (if it ever had it) to talk in terms of emotions and use the language of everyday life? Maybe some people are motivated by competitive advantage and the enhancement of their company's market capabilities that maximise shareholder value, but the question is, should they be professionally treated?

I have written before that we easily confuse metrics and surrogate indicators of success with a company's vision. The rhetoric of the metrics has taken over, however. Earnings per share are a measure, not a goal, but this is what we talk about in boardrooms. No wonder overall inspiration in the workforce has gone down. Perhaps Laing was right.

Where are the compelling visions of today's enterprises, the invitations for the quest of greatness? Lost in word-permutating mission statements. Steve

Jobs, when he was CEO at Apple didn't say, "let's make boxes that can produce text and graphs and sit on desks computing data and information, easily translated into bottom-line results". What he said was, "let's make a dent in the universe". A dent in the universe! This is bold, ambitious language closer to King's dream than to the return on capital invested. How many times in your career have you been invited to make a dent in any universe? We are suffering from an epidemic of IDD (inspiration deficit disorder). Living in the 'in merge we trust' society we've lost a sense of destiny in our organisations. Many of them are largely paralysed by the impending merger, the impending severance package or the impending plastic surgery and skin reconstruction of the organisation chart.

Knowing what motivates people

Some people still confuse inspiration (and inspirational leadership) with charisma. Not all leaders need to be of the King school. Actually, many well-run organisations have leaders who wouldn't pass the charisma test. That's OK. I am talking about the total inspirational capacity of the firm, whether it is technical, scientific, business or a combination of these. The acid test is to pose the most irritating managerial question to people out of the blue, on a normal, no-crisis day: "why are you still here?" This is the only way to understand and to know staff motivations, something that senior managers tend to assume they already know. Let's be clear. What motivates your particular workforce is often based on a combination of unvalidated assumptions. Very often, nobody has been asked. I say often, because it is received wisdom that when pressed workers tell us, for example, that it is the science that keeps them, not necessarily the pay, and that the place is full of 'good' people. So, that's it. A nice duo. You may be surprised to see what you get when trying to validate those assumptions. Some companies even practise what are called 'stay interviews', the main question being "why do you stay?".

The best reference I know about our own myths on motivation comes from Frederick Herzberg in an article written about 30 years ago. He said that to make a dog move you can show him a biscuit. The dog takes it and one assumes that it has done something for the dog's motivation. In reality the one motivated is you, the dog just moves. There is a lot to learn from this about leadership, believe me. We are very good at showing biscuits to our staff. The staff members take them, things happen, memos circulate, plans are drawn, actions are taken. Are they motivated or just moving? I suppose we can leave this philosophical discussion for another day.

Back to inspiration and language. Huston Smith, who has written and broadcast extensively on

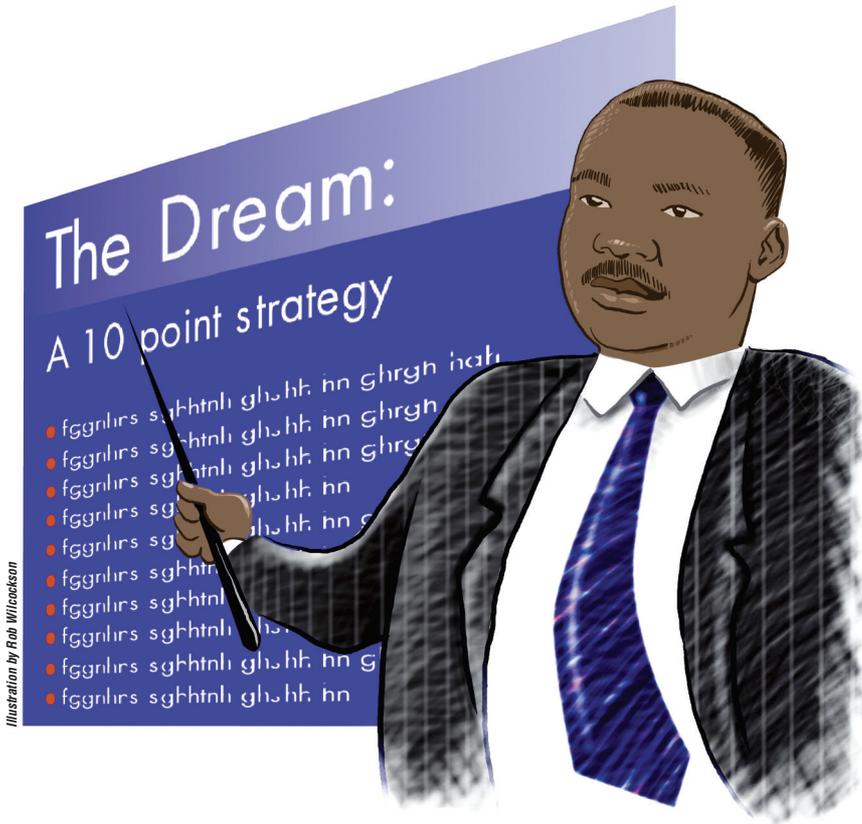


Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

"I have a dream and an overhead projector."

religions, studies the language of Jesus Christ in his lovely book, *The world religions*. He gives us three interesting insights. First, in terms of volume, Jesus would not compete today with the self-help, New Age or socio-political authors. His words could easily be captured in a single tape, not a programme of 30 cassettes, three videotapes, two booklets and the extra bonus of a glossary and a CD-Rom, which constitutes a typical 'follow-this-and-you'll-be-OK' self-help programme. Second, his language, for example that camels can go through needles' eyes, was what Smith calls 'gigantesque'. Third, his language was invitational: let's do that, come with me, move and so on. And it is this third element I insist on discussing with my clients: how much invitational language do you use? Most of the time, not much. We use a bullet-point-statement, PowerPoint-declaration language: these are the objectives, 1, 2, 3; this is what we have to do; these are our goals and critical success factors. Next, another list. And another. That's it. There is no invitation there. There is no "let's do it", "come with me", "let's get together", "let's walk as a team", "let's transform the way medicine is practised". It's as sexy as reading the telephone directory.

The field of 'inspirational messages' becomes confused with that of 'motivational language'. Sometimes people hire what are called "motivational speakers" for sales conventions or company retreats. These meetings are mainly designed to boost morale, create a climax, or elevate adrenaline levels. That's OK, but a cynical friend of mine says that their use correlates with the inability of the home leaders to articulate a compelling message. They fall back on entertainment in the absence of

their own inspiration. My friend is often unkind, often right and often both. The reality is that if you can't find anything truly inspirational in your business, no matter how many climbers of Himalayan mountains you bring to the post-dinner speech slot, you'll run a pretty insipid company.

In pharma companies, the language of mergers, bigger market share, so-called synergy of R&D, global critical mass and increased return on shareholder investment has replaced the language of quality of life, the mastering of disease, the generation of health and the quest for greater wellbeing. There are no dents in the universe, only in the market.

Back in 1963, King also said, "I have a dream, that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice." Big goals, big ambitions. We all have dreams. We may or may not fully share the dream of the company we work for, but we can aspire to have compatible dreams. Without compatible dreams there is no commitment.

Dreams are not goals and objectives. There is still, in some quarters, the idea that the big vision of the company, translated into objectives, needs to be cascaded down to everybody in the organisation in the form of a pristine, logical tree. The goals of my boss, a translation of his boss's goals, need to be divided into several goals for me, which then become critical to the success of my boss's goals. So, in the once-a-year strategic and business planning ritual, the entire enterprise becomes a logical web of goals and objectives: give me a goal for the lowest level employee and I should be able to trace it back to the goals of the chairman. Thousands of hours have been spent in corporate headquarters to make sure that everybody has guidelines for the web of goals, which eventually can be presented into a several-thousand-powerpoint-slide-thick binder of goals and objectives that can be used as a reference by managers. These binders make excellent book-ends, their main use being to contain all the magazines and papers that tend to fall from one end of the shelf.

Assuming that one could rationalise and create that web or cascade and that the exercise would be of some benefit, staff would be sharing goals and objectives but no dreams. I can share objectives, commit to actions and perform duties with the same life-transforming inspiration needed to recite the phone directory aloud. Or I can do so because my company and I have compatible dreams.

I make no apologies for this one-sided, biased, black and white, subjective, caricaturesque, unfair, skewed, prejudiced first article of the year. Right now, my clients, my industry, myself, need a dream or two. SM

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