

Purposeful Leadership: Why, How, Then What.

A rather obvious starting point: a leader can (or not) have a remarkable impact on the success of their organisation. What explains the variance?

Most who rise to the top were managers before they became leader, well-versed in directing things, using structures and processes to improve a specific business against reasonably specific outcomes: a lot of how and what, less of the why. But, on reaching the top, often in a new organisation, they suddenly discover that they don't run anything material like a business; instead, they oversee and can but influence a group of senior people who run a group of businesses. Being the most senior, but with less direct control, is often unsettling.

Successful leaders overcome this paradox by changing their focus: from a lot of how and what and less of the why to more of the why, plenty of how and only a sprinkling of what. We call this purposeful leadership. It starts with why: values, and specifically ambition, the goal the leader wants to achieve. His/her ambition indicates, or should, what they believe and stand for and want to see come true. Appendix One explains this idea in more detail.

It becomes reality through how: the building blocks that tie people (the raw material of organisation) together and align them against this goal. After all, organisation is, or should be, the articulation of purpose and strategy. In our experience, story plays a powerful role in sharing purpose, explaining how, and keeping score on progress. Appendix Two explains this idea in more detail.

Successful purposeful leadership is revealed through what: the outcomes created by the purposeful action sparked and sustained by the leader's relentless focus on their goal and story. The what is an output but not the unique focus of purposeful leaders, and there is a growing body of empirical evidence to support this view¹ from both the observable performance of organisations and the workings of the human mind.

How does this work in practice? Successful leaders create and tell a compelling, purposeful story about the future that people want to help make happen. This is much, much more than strategy and slides; a good story amplifies values, engages, motivates and rewards followers. Indeed, the greatest leaders' stories even resonate with us through a phrase, for example, 'the pursuit of happiness,' 'their finest hour,' 'every little helps,' or even 'think.'

Effective purposeful leadership is similar to an effective brand. Successful leaders show their commitment to the shared purpose in how they behave and engage others. They create big, challenging jobs; jobs with clear accountability and authority so people can show what they can do in simple, agile structures focused on (relevant) decision-making. They coach for performance & development - now. They coach people to think – so that they can perform to aligned goals without bureaucracy - all the time and in the moment; to set clear job standards, goals and objectives for individuals & teams; to have honest conversations, whether informal or formal (but both), that are fact-based and focused on how to improve, because helping people do well, right now, improves performance and creates the opportunity for us all to get on in pursuit of a purpose and story we believe in.

More of the why, plenty of how and only a sprinkling of what.

¹ See Keller & Price, Beyond Performance (2011); Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011); Sinek, Start with Why (2009).

Appendix One: On Ambition

The challenge isn't so much what ambition is – a desire for distinction in something and the drive to strive for it – but rather why one has it, for what, and how to realise it. The why and what must work together to make sense of the how - execution. This trilogy creates actionable ambition. Take Orthros as an analogy: the double-headed dog with a serpent's tail Hercules had to overcome on his tenth labour (he clubbed the doggie to death).

To shape the right ambition, one should attack the double-heads of why and what, and beware the sting of how, if you too are, in your labours, to nail the doggie you select. So, ask yourself three questions; why do you have a desire for distinction and the drive to strive for it? What something do you want to apply this to? How will you do it?

The why of ambition shapes the what (and both shape the how). For example, if one's ambition is driven by the desire to help other people (altruism or utilitarianism), then one might reasonably expect a lot of other people to be supportive. On the other hand, if ambition is shaped by a requirement to lead, to fulfil a Nietzschean sense of heroism, the what and/or how had better be effective, because not everyone will like the why.

The same is true of two further examples of ambition; discovery and excellence. Discovery, life as an adventure, defying convention, is the ambition of the pioneer or the existentialist to, as Kierkegaard might have it, take on the responsibility of free will: a true celebration of individual diversity and an individual's unconstrained power. But, most people prefer to stay part of the herd despite/because they believe so many lemmings can't be wrong. Excellence, to be the best one can be, is an ambition of craftsmanship and the fulfilment of perfection. It appeals to elites and draws on Aristotelian ideas of virtue, of the reasoned and measured pursuit of quality. But, most people have spent most of history struggling to extract rights from elites who believe themselves to be excellent.

Each of these four ambitions has a different why. Each has been applied, by different leaders, to different whats. And how each, in execution, was prosecuted, decided whether Hercules clubbed the doggie or whether Orthros gnawed on the bones of one who would be great. The table below summarises these four examples of ambition: their why, what and how.

Ambition	Why? Philosopher	What? Applied to	How?	
			Example of success	Example of failure
Altruism	Increase happiness: Hume	Retail, social enterprise, public service	Sam Walton (Wal-Mart) – 'I saved Americans billions of dollars'	Freddie Laker (Laker Airways) – 'people get on & buy the ticket at the door'
Heroism	Be great: Nietzsche	Politics, motors, steel, software	Henry Ford (Ford) – 'If I'd asked people what they wanted, they'd have said 'faster horses''	Adolf Hitler (Germany) – 'a thousand year Reich'
Free will	Pioneer: Kierkegaard	Tech & media, social movements	Tom Watson (IBM) – 'THINK'	Timothy Leary (psychologist/social activist) – 'turn on, tune in, drop out'
Virtue	Be excellent: Aristotle	Prof services, journalism, tech, architecture, sport	Steve Jobs (Apple) – 'Be a yardstick of quality. Some people aren't used to an	Maurice Saatchi (Saatchi & Saatchi) – 'our mistake wasn't trying to buy

			environment where excellence is expected.'	Midland Bank, but failing to buy it'
--	--	--	--	--------------------------------------

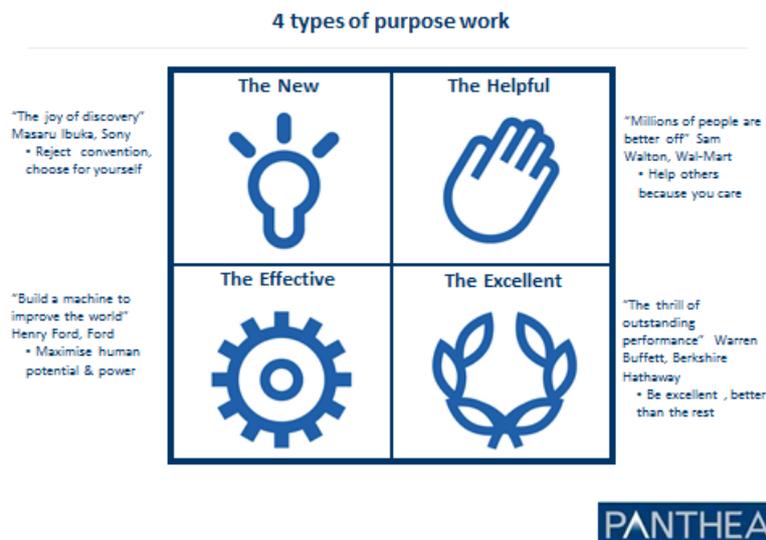
Salvador Dali thought ambition an obvious requirement of the capable - “intelligence without ambition is a bird without wings.” He would have got on well with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. TE Lawrence saw ambition as less about the individual and more about its consequence - “all people dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their mind, wake to find it was vanity. But, the dreamers of the day are dangerous people, for they dream their dreams with open eyes, and make them come true.” He would have got on well with Hume and Aristotle.

So what? Ambition is a dangerous dog with two heads and a serpent’s tail. To club the doggie to death, you need to tackle both heads and the tail – why, what, how. Even if you get the why and what right, the table above suggests the how can have a nasty sting. So, you and your ambition is not a trivial question with a simple answer.

Appendix Two: Purpose and Story

This note asserts a simple truth: modern business leaders succeed by telling a clear moral purpose in a clear story that resonates with and animates purposeful action in their people. By succeed we mean lead organisations that are sustainably successful during their tenure and beyond. By moral purpose we mean a goal to engage and animate the hearts & minds of an organisation’s people who share these values.

Let us start with moral purpose. The graphic below identifies four purposes that have helped leaders in very different organisations sustain their impact. Organisations generally don’t last very long; those that do tend to have a clear moral purpose akin to one of these four.



For purpose to have meaning, it has to be expressed in a way people can understand it and use it to make choices. This is story. Leaders use stories to animate action by tapping in to the beliefs of those they’d like to follow them and helping them decide to act. The essence of great, purposeful stories can be caught in a single phrase; the forbidden fruit, their finest hour, in pursuit of happiness, every little helps. We attach as Example One, a favourite, from Elizabeth I.

Successful leaders use stories that match their situation to what their followers believe: purpose explained in story sustains organisations if the story can be seen to come true. General Petraeus in Baghdad understood the value of narrative focused on a purpose his audience shared and which ‘a wall of facts’ showed to be coming true (see Example Two). Terry Leahy understood the same point at Tesco using a steering wheel to present a wall of facts that showed Tesco’s people that Tesco’s purpose of altruism (‘every little helps’) was coming true (see Example Three).

So what? Modern business leaders succeed by telling a clear moral purpose in a clear story that resonates with and animates purposeful action in their people. This is good for profit, for people and society more widely. Most business leaders want to do the right thing and succeed, so it is pleasing that doing the right thing is the key to success for modern business leaders.

In our experience, this involves two leadership skills that use but go beyond traditionally valued management skills of analysis, structure and determination. First, to be a good judge of the situation you’re in so as to shape a commercially sensible as well as morally compelling story. Second, a relentless drive to use story to make purpose the very thread of the organisation’s fabric; how people behave, how decisions are made & how the organisation works, and what business results create the wall of facts that show the story is coming true. We summarise this argument in the graphic below.



PANTHEA

**Example One: The Spanish Armada, a Speech by Queen Elizabeth I
(To the English army at Tilbury Fort – 1588)**

My loving people, we have been persuaded by some, that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery; but I assure you, I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people.

Let tyrants fear; I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good will of my subjects. And therefore I am come amongst you at this time, not as for my recreation or sport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle,

to live or die amongst you all; to lay down, for my God, and for my kingdom, and for my people, my honour and my blood, even the dust.

I know I have but the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart of a king, and of a king of England, too; and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realms: to which, rather than any dishonour should grow by me, I myself will take up arms; I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.

I know already, by your forwardness, that you have deserved rewards and crowns; and we do assure you, on the word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you. In the mean my lieutenant general shall be in my stead, than whom never prince commanded a more noble and worthy subject; not doubting by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and by your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over the enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people.

Example Two: Petraeus on Narrative

Petraeus argues that driving change is central to leadership and a narrative is central to making this change sustainable. This requires the leader to find out the truth a people believe, to tell it, and deliver it.

Telling and delivering a story is engagement strategy; helping people touch the future you describe by relaying its delivery clearly and accurately. The story is underpinned with a ‘wall of facts.’ The wall must be relevant facts for ordinary people not just an elite – e.g. people killed, policemen on streets, bombs exploded, terrorists ‘retired,’ etc. Engagement requires this wall to be built very frequently – lots of quick, simple, hourly/daily updates – ‘one-liners not brochures.’ It needs to be sincere, as clear on what is not working as on what is because people value truth ‘above bad news’ and leaders have a responsibility not to lie to themselves or others. For Petraeus, the following underpin how leaders sustain change in a tough environment:

Understand what local means. What locals want in Iraq for example is not the same as what a US general might want. Knowing what local means to people not from a map in HQ and knowing what they care about for their community helps a leader identify containable areas of change to focus on – what Petraeus calls ‘ink blots.’

Find out what local leaders care about. Make sure you get what matters to people locally and support their efforts. Petraeus worked with anthropologists, historians, economists, local politicians and residents to do this and to praise and publicise even small progress.

Lay out the facts: the change that could be achieved, the value that could be delivered, the specific problems that could be overcome. Specific facts build momentum and are hard to refute – the wall of facts. Here is a typical Petraeus comment [our underlining for emphasis]:

Progress has been made in police training. In the past week, 1,100 graduated from the basic policing course and 5 specialty courses. By early spring, 9 academies in Iraq and 1 in Jordan will graduate 5,000 police each month from the 8 week course

Build & share a 3D model of what the future will look like so people can touch it and believe it – this is what each ink blot provides supported by a wall of facts.

