

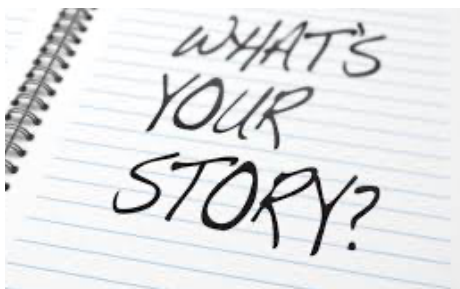


# Intentional Leadership

General thinking is that leaders are always intentional and purposeful. However, many, if not most, leaders are reactionary and opportunistic, and while there is nothing wrong with those leadership styles and at times these are good tools for the kit, real and lasting change requires intentional leadership.



Before we delve into this topic further, let's first set a baseline by describing the intentional leader. Intentional leaders are individuals that very purposefully and methodically drive change against a clear internal vision. They are mindful of every interaction and are always driving to a consistent direction, so that even when reacting their overall actions are still aligned with that direction. Ultimately, intentional leadership is just that—intentional. This means that everything is for a purpose and that purpose has been thought out ahead of time in service of a clear vision.



Before proceeding, first we need to set the foundation for leadership, and specifically leadership that looks to accomplish its goals through influence and inspiration vs. a more managerial view where targets and controls are the primary means to an end. This foundation for true leadership is as old as human history—it *is* the story. Humankind is driven by the stories we tell, and these stories define our past, provide color to our present, and shape our future. Our

stories connect us by providing the fabric of our relationships, they provide comfort by helping us understand and accept the world in which we live, and they provide purpose and meaning in our lives. In short, our stories define us.

For leaders, this connection of people to stories is essential. Whether deliberate or by happenstance, transformational leaders galvanize people through stories and generally through one consistent narrative into which other stories connect or branch off. It's for this reason that intentional leaders lead by guiding the narrative and by purposefully and intentionally managing the story of the organization. The other tools discussed from here on are ultimately used for managing the story. The first tenant of intentional leadership is the establishment of the basic plot of the story and a clear vision of how the story should end. Once you have the bookends of the story, the middle will come out in the telling, and in fact needs to be allowed to evolve. It's the natural evolution of the narrative that ultimately provides the guiding force behind change.



# Intentional Leadership

Like the evolution of plants and animals, the evolution of the narrative requires a stressor(s) or a reason to evolve. These stressors ultimately dictate not just how the story develops but more importantly how different people in the organization interpret that story as it's told. For this reason, it is extremely important for change leaders to be aligned on the case for change and the specific motive force(s) necessitating the end state vision. Take for example a simple compelling reason of improving cost competitiveness. On the surface this seems very straight forward, in that employees simply need to work to become more efficient and approach projects and initiatives from a long-term cost reduction perspective. However, if the ultimate business driver is combined with a need for immediate term liquidity, then employees can feel that they are getting mixed messages when they see decisions that will save money today but in the longer term actually increase the overall cost basis. If leaders try to keep the message too simple and focus simply on cost, then this other aspect of liquidity will be missed, and people will be left confused regarding the real case for change.



As we look at what makes good intentional leaders effective, we can start breaking down their tool kits and seeing some common tools. While each individual will put his/her own spin on how these tools are ultimately put into play, the basic tool kit is the same. For our purposes, we will minimize the overlap with classic change management models, assuming those are known or can be researched elsewhere, and will focus on this specific aspect of leadership. For ease of discussion, these tools are named below, and we will

explore each individually. It is important to note that there is as much art in these techniques as there is science, so mastery comes only with practice and experience.

## ***Dripping***

The best way to explain this technique is through an analogy. Imagine you are trying to change the shape of a stone and you have a large volume of water to work with. Now imagine that you dump this entire volume of water at once onto the stone. You get a big splash, the rock gets wet and now looks different, but give it a little time and it's dry again and looks the same as it did in the beginning with no lasting change to the rock. Now imagine instead that you take the same volume of water and slowly but consistently drip on the same point on the rock over a period of time. The result is quite different with only tiny splashes that are hardly noteworthy in and of themselves, but over time the dripping starts eroding that point in the rock, creating a divot and thereby changing its shape forever. Over time, you can carve the stone into any shape you want by being intentional about where you drip.



# Intentional Leadership

When applied by leaders, this technique is simply the continuous planting of a few select ideas or suggestions with a targeted group. The key is that it cannot be an obvious planting of an idea as that becomes an assumed directive but needs to feel natural in the discussion, and it must be focused to not be overwhelming. In order to do this effectively, leaders need to have at least a general idea of the next chapters in the story they are trying to narrate along with the key idea(s) or action(s) needed to advance the story accordingly. When done well, this repeated dripping of an idea allows it to be adopted by the audience and become theirs. Once an idea is adopted by others, it starts to take on a life of its own and then becomes a powerful driver in the natural evolution of the story.

## ***Calibrating***



The concept here is simple. The more people talk about something, the more aligned their perceptions become or at least the more clearly they understand one another. The key here is persistence in the purposeful engagement of others in the organization in discussions related to the story being narrated. Like dripping, the message being delivered needs to be focused, consistent, and should be conversational. This is all about dialogue and discussion and coming at the main points from different angles.

These discussions should start broad and open, becoming more closed and focused over time. The real goal is alignment over time and in stages so that there is a natural converging of ideas. When done really well, leaders incorporate the thoughts and ideas of others in the organization while maintaining alignment with the underlying plot, making the story a collective one. Secondly, these discussions serve the purpose of building a common basis for decision making and setting a baseline for overall risk tolerance.

The real challenge here lies in the time required and the feeling by leaders that they should be doing something more concrete with that time. First off and most importantly, when trying to drive significant change, time spent in dialogue with individuals throughout the organization is never time wasted, and in fact can be the most valuable time a leader spends on any given day. However, to-do lists beckon and tangible work products often feel like more valuable uses of time. Second, taking on an entire organization is overwhelming in all but the smallest organizations. Even if coming from the top, a single voice can be drowned out by the chorus of the organization.

Part of the answer to both challenges lies in strategically moving through the organization, gaining alignment in targeted groups of people with each group helping to bring the next into the fold. The other key component in addressing these challenges is being purposeful in where the discussion is focused. Specifically, focus the discussions towards the specific areas of improvement commanding the focus of senior leaders. By doing this, you accomplish two things. First, you bring focus to the problems that are at the top of your priority list, and that focus more often than not brings progress.



# Intentional Leadership

This progress in turn helps reinforce the value of the time spent. Second, this focus and the resulting progress helps reinforce alignment across the organization by providing a tangible value to the effort being expended. Just remember, calibrating is all about alignment, and alignment comes from extensive discussion over time.

## ***Experience Shaping***

A friend of mine once said while speaking to his leadership team, “If we want our people to believe we are serious about change, then we have to give them a different experience.” This statement perfectly sums up this technique.



This sounds simple, right? You just need to change how you interact with people every day in a way that reinforces the behaviors you want/need and discourage those you do not want/need. Unfortunately, this sounds much easier on paper than it actually is in real life. In practice, this is complicated by a number of factors, not least of which is that it requires leaders to also change. To be fair, this change is perfectly manageable when the situation is low stress and you are actively thinking about what you are doing. However, often times leaders need to provide people with a different experience in situations that are stressful or when they as leaders have their minds on the priority at hand vs. a future set of behaviors. This is what makes this technique difficult. Being mindful of changing how you as a leader interact with others is hard under stress and often times you will take three steps forward and two steps back as you progress.

So, all of this begs the question: How do we apply this technique effectively if it's hard to do in practice? The overall answer is simply mindfulness. That said, I'll offer a couple of techniques to help with that mindfulness.

The first is adopted from the military's practice of conducting after action reviews. This is the practice of reviewing a situation with hindsight and asking three questions: Did I/we accomplish what I/we intended, what could I/we have done better, and what went well that I/we need to make sure to do again? While this doesn't necessarily help you in the moment, it ensures you are constantly learning from your interactions with people. Also, the practice over time helps you become more mindful in the moment knowing that you are going to review the situation afterwards.

The second is simply to elicit the help of others. This can come in one of two forms. If you are working as part of an overall leadership team focused on driving change, then this is simply aligning that team on a couple of specific behaviors you are looking to reinforce and then supporting each other through the process by providing feedback, helping each other stay mindful in the moment, etc. If you are the lone leader driving change, then recruit some trusted advisors from your organization to provide you with feedback and help you stay mindful. These advisors have the added benefit of being some of your first followers and advocates for the change.



# Intentional Leadership

Make no mistake though, experience shaping is hard because it requires us as leaders to change ourselves through mindfulness and self-discipline, and that is difficult.



Intentional leadership is the defining characteristic of transformational leaders. The consistency and purposefulness of approach ultimately galvanizes people to drive an organization towards a shared vision. However, this is all about momentum. When you first start, and you are the lone driver of the vision, it's difficult, it's daunting, you will get discouraged, you will likely doubt yourself, and you will have this nagging voice in the back of your mind telling you how

much easier it would be just to tell people exactly what you want them to do and make them do it. What I can tell you though, after more than 20 years of doing this in both my own organizations and helping clients do it, is the transformational impact of intentional leadership is beyond anything you can accomplish simply via command and control. I can also tell you that this is how you leave a legacy both in the culture of the organization and what those that work in it take with them after they move on. Truly leading transformational change and seeing it take hold and develop a life of its own is one of the most rewarding experiences you can have in your professional life.

## About the Author

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