

***Staging Change: Taking Cues from the Theatre
to Enact Organizational Transformations***

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The work of defining mission, vision and values is occasionally derided as “misty-eyed” or “fluffy,” among the uninitiated, and occasionally they are right. If the critical link between desired qualities and day-to-day behavior is never addressed, the soul of the organization remains just another nice theory. The trouble with intangibles is that they’re – intangible. One highly effective way to convey the import of this core work is to use theatre, or theatrical techniques. Drama, as an art form, distills the scattered events and motives of organizational life into one compelling story that holds up a mirror to the system. When the client is able to step outside their situation and see their own story, they have a chance to *feel* the weight of undesirable behaviors. Feeling, or emotion, is the key to motivation. Motion, emotion, and motivation stem from the same root. Unless people are moved, they don’t change.

In the brief example below, one consulting company (DramaWorks Interactive) used drama to move issues raised in individual coaching into the leadership team setting.

SCENE ONE: *A major medical services company is preparing for a new initiative in patient care assessment. Its CEO, a brilliant visionary who combines scientific method with market savvy, lays out the new direction to his leadership team – representatives from the science, marketing and operations divisions. It takes an hour or so for him to describe the vision. Then he takes another twenty minutes to describe, roughly, what is needed to get there. By that time, it’s nearly lunch. The executive committee members gather their notes and their marching orders, return to their routines.*

SCENE TWO: *The next day, a coach arrives at headquarters for his regular session with the CEO.*

Coach: “How’s it going?”

CEO: “Terrific. I spent all morning yesterday laying out the new direction, and I’m more convinced than ever that this is a home run. Now we just have to make it work!”

Coach: “Well, it sounds like you are going great guns. What were their responses?”

CEO: (*pauses*). I don’t know. What do you mean?

Coach: I mean, what were their questions? Look, you’re a genius, I can’t imagine that they could just absorb all of those breakthrough ideas and be ready to implement them on the spot.

CEO: *(now disturbed and a little defensive)* Well I can't just do people's thinking for them. Surely that is theirs to figure out.

Coach: Yeah, but do you assume that they're all geniuses too? That they can actually take in every idea you throw them? And... that they know how to coordinate it...when it's never been done before?

CEO: No, I guess not, but it *is* their job to figure it out, right?

Coach: You could take that position, it's true. So here's the hard choice: do you want to be smarter than all of them, and leave them to struggle, or do you want to create the conditions to see your vision actually realized?

CEO: Damn, you're tough. What do you have in mind?

Coach: I think we should stage it, like a play.

CEO: A *play*? Are you kidding me? Do you have other ideas? Arts and crafts, cut and paste, maybe?

Coach: No, seriously, hear me out. If we conceive of it like a play, we get all the characters together, we figure out the lines, the necessary props, the handoffs, the roles, and we craft it, like a story.

CEO: This could be just crazy enough to work. Send in the clowns.

SCENE THREE: *The coach assembles the executive team in a large empty room.*

Coach: Thanks for coming. Today, we're going to generate a very unique kind of script. It's the story of your future success.

Assembled: *(Look around, uneasy)*.

CEO: Coach here says that we should "stage" this vision of mine. I'm not proud, I'm willing to try anything that will make it work..... even art.

Coach: Last week you all heard CEO's vision. In order to stage this story, the first thing we have to know is, do we really *get* the story. Let's have everyone stand on this imaginary line representing the degree to which you **get** CEO's story based on what you heard last week and based on getting the story.....you know what you need to do in your work-life. At this end on my left, we have zero percent. At the far end of the room on my right, we have one hundred percent. Remember, we're going to spend all afternoon working this story, so it's important for you to accurately convey your level of comprehension.

Assembled: (*Cast sidelong glances, laugh nervously, meander to various spots across the room, mostly at the low end of the scale.*)

CEO: (*Grows pale, speaks quietly to himself*) Houston, we have a problem.

Coach: That's fine. Perfect. Now we have the reality, and so we know where the story starts. Obviously we have a gap between *the walk* and *the talk*. Let's take it from here.

As Shakespeare famously penned, "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players;" Within organizational life, there is plenty of drama. While professionalism is associated with cool dispassion and intellectual rigor, the reality can be closer to the Sopranos. And while the behavior is usually much more civilized – and legal – the official act of creating organizational value on a daily basis is constantly colored by personal agendas and collective scripts.

Everybody has little scripts, or schema, as psychologists call them - shortcuts about how to behave, what will happen, and what to expect, in any given circumstance. For instance, when we meet someone, we expect to shake hands, introduce ourselves. When looking for a job, we wear nice clothes and provide a resume. In small, practically unconscious ways, we are living out hundreds of scripts per day about how to conduct ourselves in any given situation.

In corporate or institutional life, we also have scripts about how leadership happens and how information is passed through the system. Much of what we know about leadership is an inheritance from the military, our strongest tradition of collective work. Leaders in crisis situations need unquestioned authority and clear chains of command. In other contexts, however, a "command and control" leadership style is counterproductive. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the current corporate culture. Organizations are under increasing pressure to adapt ever more quickly to changing market conditions. Competitive advantage often lies in a company's creative power: the ability to generate new ideas, prioritize the most valuable ones, and implement them in functional ways. Creative power is a direct result of context, or culture. In order for creativity to survive, it must have the proper context. That proper context is less like a military campaign and more like an improvisation theatre.

The trouble is, hundreds of thousands of professionals are operating on old scripts, scripts that read like this:

Employee: *You are the leader, and I work for you. If you have what you think is a great idea, I am not here to challenge it, I am here to just do it. I will not risk appearing stupid or disrespectful by mentioning anything unpleasant. I am not here to offer other, or better ideas, I am merely here to implement. I am here to be "positive." My job is to just say "yes."*

So how does this relate to theatre, and the staging of change?

Consider first, *what is the story you want to make real?* If you want to get from point A to point B, how, specifically, would that happen? Ironically, it's the imagination- the power of make believe – which is the vehicle to create the desired reality. In order for the organization to achieve new goals, it must first imagine, then create, a vivid story about getting there. Many change initiatives fail because the middle of the story is left blank, never addressed.

1. ***Be like an actor.*** When professional actors take on new roles, they are asked to alter many aspects of their own personalities to generate their scripted character: body language, communication style, even hair color or body weight. They may be cast with a lisp, or a limp. Change, or a new vision, requires that we become more personally flexible in the way we use our time and talents. What is really needed to get the job done?
2. ***Be ready to toss aside some familiar scripts.*** One common error that has reached epidemic proportions is the expectation that new products and services can be created within the same work rhythms of the old, factory- or military-based work day. Moreover, top-down leadership styles reduce, rather than enhance, the intellectual capital brought to bear on any new initiative. Leaders who want different results must model change by tossing out their leadership scripts. Organizational creativity does not occur within the familiar script of the 45-minute meeting, or one-hour meeting. Creative effort, in order to be productive, needs a longer arc of time. New scripts for the use of organizational time must be developed. Theatre is a useful metaphor because the use of time is strikingly different: groups developing a play may work together for several hours at a time, repeatedly.
3. ***Make it vivid through rehearsal, staging and simulation.*** In all kinds of situations in which outcomes are critically important, professionals engage in simulations so that they have a chance to rehearse. Surgery, aircraft landings, CPR, and - of course – Broadway plays, are examples of services in which all aspects of the act must be carefully orchestrated to ensure success. All too often, intangible, interpersonal factors that constitute the lifeline of a company are never formally addressed. Teamwork, leadership, collaboration, excellence, values – these factors are acknowledged as vital to success, but typical organizational trainings do not convert these qualities into the actual behavioral acts. Intangibles must be made vivid or meaningful within the working context. Critically important, high-value moments of drama within the organizational life – performance reviews, public addresses, team meetings, sales calls – can be wasted if vivid, staged, rehearsed skills are not actively cultivated by the organization. Staging and rehearsal are key elements for effecting meaningful change.
4. ***Improvise without blame.*** In the development of plays large and small, improvisation happens, and is a respected part of the creative process. Several, if not dozens, of iterations of characterizations are part and parcel of rehearsals. When an actor over-emphasises his or her character's flaws, or when the actor feigns an accent inconsistent with the socioeconomic

status of their character, the director does not say, “Oh, you’re being ridiculous; get it right the first time, or don’t get it right at all.” The director who achieves great things merely suggests that the chosen feature is not well placed. Organizations who want creativity and excellence must create forums for experimentation and failure, resisting the urge to blame and punish. Failure is the first step on the road to success. The surest way to prevent ingenuity is to judge the early efforts of those courageous enough to innovate. The wise organization creates a forum in which improvisation can happen until excellence emerges and is applied system-wide. Improvisational drama offers a useful model for blame-free experimentation.

The word “company” has its roots in theatre dating to the middle ages. Bands of entertainers sought the company and added security of fellow travelers as they moved from village to village to ply their wares. Contemporary companies would be well served by using theatrical techniques to make their creative efforts come to life. A company today, like the theatre of old, is a staging ground for human aspirations.