Build a Compelling Case

Key idea

Customer-centric leaders know how to discard traditional business plans, and how to tell and sell a ‘one company’ story, which communicates the customer-centric vision, and directs the actors and actions so that the new ways of doing things become compelling enough to get high levels of engagement and conversion, inside the company and out. In a reverse logic, flowing from the customer activity cycle, the strategy is told as a story, followed by an action plan.

The new narrative

Storytelling is a vital tool for serious transformations, whether the reconstruction is a gradual reshaping or a revved-up revival; whether it comes in response to an institutional decline, or as part of a continuous attempt to harness new opportunities through disruption, as some of the examples have and will continue to demonstrate.

Imbued with much more vim and vigour than conventional business plans, stories – the oldest and most powerful form of influence – are built for engagement and conversion. It helps the change leader and ‘points of light’ to build a compelling case, so that they can move up and along the change process, ultimately making customer centricity a reality.

Why stories are better

There are many good reasons why stories are better than business plans (see Table 5.1). Business plans are not conducive to change. People invariably react negatively to them, finding them rigid, deadly
boring and generally unwelcome: ‘an annual chore, more a control mechanism than a motivator’.

By contrast, stories are narratives and, if well told and credible, can present an exciting picture that people can identify with and respond to positively. An old proverb goes, ‘Give people a fact or idea and you enlighten their minds: tell them a story and you touch their souls’.47

Research confirms this ancient wisdom: people actually think in stories. Whilst traditional business plans instruct people, a story engages them emotionally and involves them, as these remarks from my work with executives illustrate:

It’s the connection between what we have now, and the future.
You identify with it personally, and you feel implicated.
You want to know how it will progress.
It compares what you have got to what’s possible to get, and that makes you think about what’s got to be done, and what you have to do.
People believe in stories – they are ingrained in us from birth.

Traditional business plans, written with the existing scripted framework in mind, are by their very nature product plans. So people continue to be mentally programmed to think, talk and behave in this mould, and so perpetuate it.