

Chapter Six

Creating Shared Context

“All truth passes through three stages. . . . First it is ridiculed, second it is violently opposed, third it is accepted as being self-evident.” This comment is variously attributed to eighteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, George Bernard Shaw, and Mahatma Gandhi. Like most aphorisms, if measured against great changes in history, it would seem to be true. Change occurs when it is time. A leader notices that history has pointed the way toward change and, by skillful and heartfelt communication, makes the direction of change obvious to others. Where we’ve been points to where we are, which points to where we are going. Yet as things shift, others see either change, progress, or both, depending literally on their point of view. What they perceive as past and future and how they perceive your competence and trustworthiness will largely determine their attitude and their level of enthusiasm or opposition.

So after competence and trust, point of view is paramount. It is as though the leader is captain of the ship, looking out from the bridge to the horizon in back and the one in front. The captain can see the weather, the waves, the sharks, any land ahead, and any dangers or good omens. Most others will have a limited view, perhaps from the lower deck, and then only from a small porthole. From that point of view, it is hard to tell whether a change of course is needed or disastrous.

Hence, communicating context is vital. When people see this complete story as the leader sees it, they will have an understanding that the time is right for change. They might even decide that change is needed on their part. They will not yet, however, be committed to contributing to make it happen.

As you tell the story of where we’ve been and where we are, you are accomplishing three purposes. First, you are establishing a common understanding of events leading up to the status quo, including past occasions and circumstances, summarizing the current reality, and establishing the urgency or priority of what you are proposing—this is the historical context, a common understanding that becomes the foundation for a decision to change. Second, you are presenting a view of the issue that is broader than the self-interest of those involved in implementing that decision (including yourself) and large enough to hold the change you are advocating. This context has to do with values, culture, and meaning. You are offering constituents a chance to be a part of a change in an atmosphere that has seemed unchangeable, and something larger than themselves. Third, you are continuing to reinforce others’ sense of your personal makeup and their feelings of trust in you—your personal connection to the history and meaning. In this way, you are building on your already-established competence and trustworthiness.

When you and your constituents have a common understanding of the context, change is a natural outcome. But most often, others haven’t thought about the context that you have considered, that you know to be true; they need to be informed of it in order to make sense of what you are saying.

Building a Common Understanding

The importance of context is demonstrated daily. George Lakoff writes brilliantly about the “framing” of an issue.¹ But to me, a story from one of my favorite spiritual writers, the late Henri Nouwen, demonstrates the quandary and the importance of context to those who are listening, but who have no experience themselves. Nouwen was a Catholic priest, mystic, and teacher. One of his works, *The Genesee Diary*, recounts his experience during a seven-month sabbatical inside the cloister of the Trappist monastery at Genesee. For the monks, there were no newspapers, television, or other means of finding out what was going on in the world. Only the proctor (in this case, Father Marcellus) was privy to the *New York Times*.

Evening services in the monastery include the mentioning of “prayer intentions” by the monks. Nouwen reported the following occurrence:

On one particular evening, Father Marcellus said, “Let us pray for the wife of the President of South Korea.” . . . Then he realized that nobody except he had read the latest newspaper, and quickly added . . . “who was assassinated.” . . . Then it probably flashed through his mind that nobody could understand why anyone would want to assassinate the wife of the President of South Korea, so he added . . . “while someone was trying to assassinate the President himself.” . . . Then he realized that by now the monks wanted to know the end of the story, so he concluded his intention with the words. . . . “who safely escaped!”²

While most of us are not communicating to people as cloistered as monks in a monastery, everyone *is* cloistered in their own reality; the need for creating a new context remains. In the worlds of business and geopolitics, continuous instability and a plethora of media messages prevent many from knowing the real context and thereby determining the value of change. Very few people are willing to commit to change without a substantial education. As a leader, you have to inform people of the context—and then remind them, again and again. If you do not do so, your suggested change might well be seen as meaningless or nonsensical. Context answers the question, “why?” It has many facets.

Generational and Cultural Context

I was on a trip to the Far East when an aspiring Japanese MBA candidate engaged me in conversation in Japan’s First Bank of Commerce. We had just heard a lecture about the changing relationship between Japanese banks and their customers. The young man explained to me that for the last fifty years, Japanese banks and their commercial business customers were partners with the Japanese government. The incentives for industry and financial service entities had been clearly the same over that period. Regulations, however, were now changing to give banks and the commercial customers they serve some different motivations. Accordingly, customers were no longer willing to accept the judgment of the bank without question. For the first time, the bank was being asked by customers to justify currency trades made on their behalf that turned out badly. In the absence of common goals, customers needed to know why banks make these currency trades. To respond, the bank started a series of training classes for its customers to explain the vagaries of currency trading. It took the responsibility of articulating the context for its customers.

Later in the same conversation, the young man told me that the identical problem exists between the older generation in the bank and his own peers. “The veterans have the benefit of the old culture, and we do not. Consequently, we do not understand the reason for their actions.” This contextual misunderstanding was far greater than the reasons for making certain trades. In this case, the leaders of the bank had not shared the context of the historical linkages between banks, their long-time customers, and the government. Such connections run very deep and are based on the fundamental pillars of the interconnected Japanese culture and economy, and they frequently are the primary driver in actions that are taken. Because this young man and others like him had gone to school in the West, they were unfamiliar with these roots. The context that was absent for the young man and others like him was the unspoken understandings of the past and their results in the present, a connection that was not communicated by the elders.

By explaining the *why* of currency trading to its customers, this bank assured their continued loyalty. Without the *why* of the Japanese business culture, the young Japanese employee will perform his duties without meaning, never developing any loyalty to the institution.

While international public ownership does dilute some company values and shift some tradition-based contextual decisions, synergism is still present between the values of the owners and the organization in companies that are privately owned. Michael Nahum is president of Microencoder, an American company wholly owned by Mitutoyo Corporation, a large private technology company near Tokyo.

Michael provided a great example of cultural context and communication from direct experience. A long-time and close supplier of Mitutoyo was to show a product at a major European trade show. Unbeknownst to the supplier, Mitutoyo had committed to begin producing a competitive product and was also scheduled to have a display at the show. Speed to market was critical—it was important to launch the product as soon as possible. Still, out of respect for their long-time supplier, the parent company refrained from showing the new product, valuing the relationship more than the market advantage. They took advantage of the contact at the show to reinforce their respect for their long-time friend and to smooth the way for a transition that would honor that bond.

The same opportunity and risks of culture differences exist between generations. Young leaders might well depend on an older generation for financing, consulting, or operations expertise, and older people might not have the benefit of a fresh approach or more global understanding. One of your jobs as leader is to provide the needed information by communicating your perspective. The same generational issues exist in nearly every culture, as Baby Boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) all over the world begin to retire from leadership positions, and their successors try to communicate with employees or constituents who grew up not knowing the Beatles, never being without a computer or an e-mail address, and—for some—having global travel experiences before they were of legal age. Others have not had the benefits of computers—or travels—and come from a context of living longer at home, shrinking possibilities, and

perhaps a limited vision of a future beyond their current jobs. Still others are not familiar with collaborative work models that span continents.

Rules of the Game

Organizations, like countries, have a culture that can simply be defined as “the way we do things around here.” Such a culture is constituted as “the rules of the game”—yet another context. The world of baseball offered a solid lesson in the significance of context during one of the pastime’s most famous games.

Fans get chills at the mention of a “perfect game”—a game in which the pitcher has been successful in getting every batter on the opposing team out three times in nine innings. Not one player from the other team reaches first base. A perfect game is a very rare occurrence. Only one such game has ever been pitched in the World Series of baseball. The late Stephen Gould, natural scientist and author, related the story in *The Flamingo’s Smile*, and credited a *New York Times* op-ed piece of November 10, 1984:

What could be more elusive than perfection? And what would you rather be . . . the agent or the judge? Babe Pinelli (who died at age 89 at a convalescent home near San Francisco) was the umpire in baseball’s unique episode of perfection when it mattered most. October 8, 1956. A perfect game in the World Series . . . and coincidentally, Pinelli’s last official game as arbiter. What a consummate swan song. Twenty-seven men to the plate, and twenty-seven men down. And, since single acts of greatness are intrinsic spurs to democracy, the agent was a competent, but otherwise undistinguished Yankee pitcher, Don Larsen.

The dramatic end was all Pinelli’s, and controversial ever since. Dale Mitchell, pinch hitting for Sal Maglie, was the twenty-seventh batter. With a count of 1 ball and 2 strikes, Larsen delivered one high and outside . . . close, but surely not, by its technical definition, a strike. Mitchell let the pitch go by, but Pinelli didn’t hesitate. Up went the right arm for called strike three. Out went Yogi Berra from behind the plate, nearly tackling Larsen in a frontal jump of joy. “Outside by a foot,” groused Mitchell later. He exaggerated . . . for it was outside by only a few inches . . . but he was right.

Babe Pinelli, however, was more right. A batter may not take a close pitch with so much on the line. Context matters. Truth is a circumstance, not a spot.

Truth is inflexible. Truth is inviolable. By long and recognized custom, by any concept of justice, Dale Mitchell had to swing at anything close. It was a strike . . . a strike high and outside. Babe Pinelli, umpiring his last game, ended with his finest, his most perceptive, his most truthful moment. Babe Pinelli, arbiter of history, walked into the locker room and cried.³

Babe Pinelli was able to break the objective written rules of a national pastime by virtue of the universally understood rules—the *context* of the game of baseball and the circumstances of this particular game. Had the game been played at midseason, with nothing on the line, he would have called the pitch a ball. Or, had he called a strike, there would have been cries of “we were robbed!” In *this* case, in *this* context, the leader stated the truth, and the change was agreed to instantly by everyone in the park, everyone who was glued to a radio, and I would bet, even by Dale Mitchell.

This application of the principle to baseball is American, but the application to business and politics is global. The idea of shared context is easy to see among baseball fans, even easier among citizens of the United States; it is more challenging when applying the principle to the citizens of the world. Different cultures have different standards regarding compensation, cronyism and favors, bureaucracy, family, and ethics. While we may not compromise our own standards or rules, knowing others’ is essential for global impact. Empathy assumes its highest purpose in such circumstances.

Context Has Personal Meaning

In preparing a Leadership Communication Guide, you have to consider the historical background, the deep cultural roots of the issue and the organization, and the oft-unspoken rules of the game. But you must also think through the broad implications of change and reflect on the moral consequences as you perceive them. Your constituents have not looked at the issue so thoroughly; they have not traced the issue to its conclusion, nor have they imagined themselves personally in a new future. Like the young Japanese student, they do not have the benefit of seeing this issue against the background of the “old culture.” You, on the other hand, do.

Peter Senge, in researching *The Fifth Discipline*, found that a profound sense of scale was common to inspirational leaders. “Each [leader],” says Senge, “perceived a deep story and sense of purpose that lay behind his vision, what we

have come to call the *purpose story*—a larger ‘pattern of becoming’ that gives unique meaning to his personal aspirations and his hopes for their organization . . . ”⁴ While this language might seem ethereal, Senge suggests that reflection on your own personal values will yield a broader and more personal context for your role as leader. Communicating this larger “purpose story” invites an audience to become a part of something larger than themselves, giving them a chance to make a difference in a bigger arena than they have perceived possible. You are giving others the opportunity to trade their commitment for greatness. Nearly all consider this a very good bargain.

Consider the fact that Nobel Laureate Stephen Hawking’s first book, *A Brief History of Time*, has sold more than ten million copies in thirty languages since its publication in 1989, and was on the London *Sunday Times* best-seller list for more than four years. This is somewhat astounding, when you consider that according to the author, to read and understand this book (an explanation of the search for a unifying theory for the origin and working of the universe) would qualify the reader to start a Ph.D. in theoretical physics. Many explanations have been offered for the book’s unanticipated popularity. Hawking, however, thinks the reason is simply that the general public wants to be involved in the discussion of “really big questions.”

I agree. Many leaders—in all fields, particularly politics—are too quick to patronize their public, assuming that they are either selfish, dull, or uninterested in global or universal questions. Quite the contrary: the public is eager to hear, eager to engage, and eager to act when called to contribute to just causes that are larger than themselves, even when they don’t understand the details. All monumental changes that eventually occur originally seem to be too great, too challenging, too costly. Just in the last twenty-five years, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the beginning of nuclear disarmament, the Arab Spring—all changes seemed beyond reach. Yet each one was preceded by a call, and then by ordinary people sharing the vision and knowing the context of that call. The confidence of today’s public can only be strengthened by leaders who can present change as a chance for others to have an impact on a scale that is much larger than the immediate and mundane. As the interconnectedness of the world becomes more obvious, the scale of impact simply must become larger. This is a major challenge of our time. Few leaders have the perspective to make this shift.

Where Did I Come In?

Finally, the context section of the Guide also affords opportunities to reinforce the competence and trust that you have established earlier. As Dov Seidman said in *How*, his 2007 bestseller, “In a world of constant, radical change, we all need a bulwark that will act simultaneously as propellant and guide. We need to root ourselves in what we know should never change—our values. That’s why now more than ever we need people . . . rooted in sustainable values.”⁵ As Seidman suggests, perhaps the most important factor in the history of the issue is that your personal values have been supported or challenged by it. In the final analysis, it is your conviction about the change that’s needed, supported by your values that will move others to act.

Thomas Jefferson lived in the context of “when in the course of human events.” He felt the oppression of the British through, personally experiencing the frustration of taxes that he paid without representation. So it was with Gandhi, Barbara Jordan, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Joan of Arc. Because they lived in the circumstances, they rarely had to speak of them, but it was clear that they were affected by the history of the issue, and the common knowledge of that fact made their motivations clearer, their competence more obvious.

So it is with you. While the change you are advocating might seem less significant than the changes led by these icons, the principles of inspiration are the same. Letting others know your historical experience with the issue that you are advocating—where you came in—might not strengthen the logical case for the mind, but it will compel the heart to listen as well. The mind makes a decision based on agreement with the information the speaker provides. The heart makes the commitment based on a feeling of connection to the leader. The mind looks for evidence, the heart looks for passion. The mind weighs facts, the heart acts on faith. The mind looks for purpose, the heart seeks meaning. The mind believes, the heart trusts. Both are necessary for committed action.

Creating a common understanding, providing a broader view of the opportunity, and reinforcing trust and competence—these are the purposes of communicating context. This chapter presents a few examples.

Historical Context

- What is the history of this issue? Where have we been?
- What stages have we gone through and what conditions brought them about?
- What is the story that captures the history?

- What has changed to make this issue timely and critical?
- In light of history why do we need this change now?
- Where do we currently stand?
- What role did I play in this history?

In 2011, I was fortunate to begin working with the president and general manager of the Chemical Analysis Group of Agilent Technologies. The world's best measurements company, Agilent is not only financially successful, it has developed and nurtured a culture of innovation and collaboration. Mike McMullen became general manager of CAG after an assignment in finance in Japan. He had also been active in China and Korea before accepting the job back in the United States. A Wharton MBA with a great track record, Mike was eager to actually lead something, so when he returned to the States to begin his tenure as a general manager, he was a bit dismayed to find an apparent atmosphere of gloom. The business unit had been holding its own, but people seemed to think it was on a holding trajectory.

Mike approached his new assignment as a turnaround. He was convinced that the business could not only thrive as it was, but that it also had a future that could include growth in both revenue and profitability. After a few years of executing on a refocused strategy and re-energizing the team, he was able to convince the CEO and the board to make the biggest investment in the history of Agilent—the procurement and assimilation of Varian Associates, active in the same general fields but offering synergies in both product line and geography. I was brought in the first time when the acquisition was being put together. As with most such international mergers, it became far more complicated than Mike or anyone else had anticipated, and involved some divestiture and adjustment to make all the international regulatory bodies happy.

Finally ready to exploit the advantages of the acquisition, Mike started to communicate with everyone in the organization including the board about his plans for the future. In working together on his Guide, we defined the purpose of his efforts as follows:

- 1. To redefine and recast the mission of CAG to allow us to take advantage of the growing opportunities in the global markets we serve—opportunities that have significant implications for some of the important issues of the world's future. Doing so will allow us to obtain investments and allocate resources to new applications in our current markets and pursue other markets appropriate in food, health care, the environment, and energy.**
- 2. To energize others (board, family, employees of Agilent, and other stakeholders) regarding our future.**
- 3. To frame the issues and the opportunities.**

For most of the employees to understand the need for this change would require an immense context. Not all of it would be relevant to every communication, but in constructing the Guide, we included it all. After defining his own competence and establishing his trustworthiness, we began to frame the historical context. Mike chose to do this in four phases, Assessment, Engagement, Start Rolling, and Growth. Assessment was the period when he first arrived and was characterized by language like this:

When I arrived for my first day in office, my first reaction was that we were in need of some good news. The morale was not great and when I went on the road to meet with the field it was the same; eager but a little demoralized from the lack of recent progress. From Asia, I had not fully understood what had been happening to what had once been a “crown jewel” business for the company. . . . The articulated strategy was “defend and protect,” and while perhaps appropriate as a strategy, it was not an inspiring message.

Mike continued into the Engagement phase, reflected in his Guide this way:

I knew that I had to build a new strategic plan, even though other GMs had just completed one. What was different with mine was the theory of construction. It's not just about what's in the business plan, but who contributed. I alluded earlier to a belief in true collaboration. We needed to involve the broader organization, particularly the field. Broader engagement gives you a better plan (more perspective) and the real payoff is in the delivery of the results. We built the plan on inspiration for what we could do together, and on making some very focused bets.

For the Start Rolling phase Mike recalled and documented a story:

I was in Santa Clara reviewing the only project that we had going, when the project manager stopped me in a hall and told me that the machine under development could only do 80 percent of the applications, and would actually hurt the market. It took a lot of engagement for them to do that. I said, “OK, but I need something.” They took the

rest of the funds and produced, in six months, a machine that eventually gulped up the space we were looking at. It was the first sign of real life in the entire group.

Finally, Mike wrote about taking CAG into the Growth phase and spelled out what was becoming the current reality:

Despite signs of life, every time I would go on the road, I would hear things like “You are a finance guy. You are just dressing us up to sell us.” But we fixed the issues and people in the field began to believe. My boss began to see potential. Finally in 2008, we became a fully aligned business group and questions about our track record were put to rest. We got a new name and a new logo, and launched an effort to fill product and geographic holes in our business. The result was what was then the largest acquisition in the history of Agilent. We bought Varian for \$1.5 billion and launched a successful integration that today has us exceeding our objectives in customer satisfaction and meeting or exceeding all of our financial targets.

Throughout the process, Mike was able to create shared historical context by cutting history into discrete pieces spanning the early years when enthusiasm was really lacking through to the integration of the company’s largest acquisition.

To communicate change effectively, everyone has to share the story. Mike’s Guide allows him to deliver some or all of this story when he needs to. Speaking to new employees or while recruiting, he might well relay all of it. Or a specific question could prompt him to use only a part of it, perhaps the part that related to the specific product line or country.

These excerpts illustrate that Mike has covered the history, priority, and current reality, and that we know where he came in. Yet what I’ve presented here is only about a quarter of the context material. His complete Guide includes much more detail, all aimed at answering the questions that began this section. And it will continue to evolve and grow in fresh iterations over the years.

The Leadership Communication Guide to change the U.S. education system begins its historical context at the turn of the twentieth century and proceeds through four phases to the current reality.