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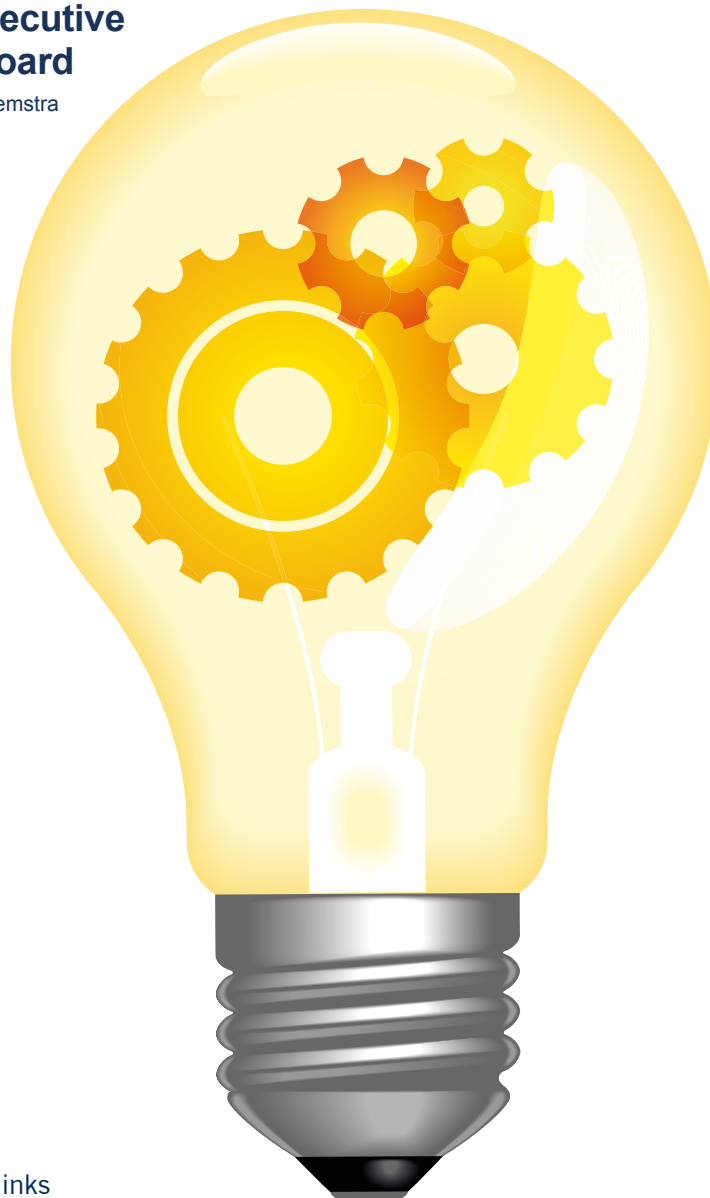
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Visions of continuity as visions of change

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The most effective visions of change given by leaders in organisations are those that assure employees of the things that won't change rather than the things that will. For employees, ensuring the continuity of organisational identity is not only reassuring but also essential.

When Barack Obama took to the podium to deliver his inaugural address in 2009, the US was in the throes of an economic crisis and two wars. He needed his first presidential speech to inspire faith in his vision of a very different future.

Referencing past generations and values and linking them to future actions, he said, 'America has carried on... because We the People have remained faithful to the ideal of our forbearers and true to our founding documents... the time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit.'

Obama created a strong sense of an evolving American identity – a sense of continuity of the collective identity. This, we now know, is key to mobilising support for a vision of change and a powerful tool for leaders seeking to mitigate the resistance that is behind so many failed change initiatives.

Organisational change

A recent survey of HR professionals found that organisations implement an average of two major organisational

changes each year. Most of these initiatives fail, largely owing to the uncertainty and thus resistance they provoke among employees. Given that leader vision is instrumental in mobilising support for organisational change – perhaps what leaders are telling their employees is not always what they want to hear.

Most management experts assume that effective visions of change depict the deficiencies of the status quo while portraying an idealised future both vastly different and greatly improved. If employees are convinced that what lies ahead is better, so the reasoning goes, they will be motivated to embrace the uncomfortable process of changing the way they do things. At the core of this message is – dispel with your current identity and embrace a new and better one.

But these assumptions are just that – assumptions lacking empirical support. The current state of science leaves us in the dark as to the exact way in which leader vision translates into follower action. And despite the

validity of the logic supporting these theories, they essentially encourage a discontinuity of the basis of employee's self-conception – the part of their self-definition they derive from their organisation.

Identity concerns

When Intel made the radical switch from producing memory chips to microprocessors they faced a profound change of identity. Employees described a sense of not knowing who they were going to become. Andy Grove, the CEO at the time, said, 'Intel equals memory in all minds. How could we give up our identity?'

Leadership scholars agree that leaders exert their profound influence through their impact on followers' self-concept. Importantly, our self-concept is based not only on unique self-descriptions but also the collectives to which we feel connected, such as the organisation for which we work. Just as people identify themselves with their country, so they identify with their organisations. Organisations provide employees with a consensually valid social template for what to think, feel, do and expect, thus reducing uncertainty.

But what happens when organisations change that identity – as they attempt to do with increasing frequency? Studies show that, while



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people like change, not many like to change the essence of who they are. Changes to the organisational identity represent a threat to employees' basis of self-definition. And that employees resist change when it poses a threat to their identity has been evidenced extensively in merger research.

Yet how can we motivate change and simultaneously assure continuity? This apparent paradox can be resolved if change is framed as involving features not central to what defines the organisation.

Visions of change

Our research proposes and validates an alternative conception of an effective vision of change – namely, that a successful vision of change must be one in which the organisational identity is not threatened; a vision in which employees are reassured of a continuity of identity.

We tested our hypotheses with a series of four studies, two of which were field studies on companies about to undergo significant change. We asked employees the extent to

which they perceived their leader as an agent of continuity and the extent to which they supported the change. The supervisor was asked the extent to which employees were contributing to the realisation of the change. Two other experiments were conducted involving a merger context and a controlled experiment where student participants read a vision of change regarding educational programme changes.

We found that the more people perceived a vision of collective continuity and a preserved sense of core identity, the more willing they were to accept and work towards realising the change. This was especially the case for people who were dispositionally uncertain – and therefore displayed the most resistance. Together, these findings allow us to claim with confidence that visions of continuity are effective visions of change.

What leaders can do

Leader visions that successfully inspire change do so because they address the primary source of resistance by employees – identity concerns. These visions assure employees that, of all the aspects that will change, the most defining features of the collective identity, will definitively not. Successful visions of change indicate changes to practices and features of the organisation, but not to the ▶

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organisation's self-defining aspects. In this way, the vision preserves the sense of collective continuity and gains the support of employees in its successful implementation.

Analyses of the rhetorical techniques used by effective leaders illustrate precisely this: visions that connect actions and goals to past and future, or assure employees of a continuation of core values and practices, thereby creating the sense of an evolving identity.

effectively mobilise support for visions of change. According to our findings, instead of creating dissatisfaction with the status quo or framing the change as a positive break from a deficient present, leaders would do better to assure their employees that the change is a continuation, reaffirmation or preservation of who "we" are as a collective.

Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear just how great a role leaders play in constructing the organisational

according to him was consistent with Apple's identity), advocating that by changing Apple would become more like its true self. This back to our roots strategy clearly shows that identity is negotiable (and not an objective, fixed thing) and effective leaders are skilful entrepreneurs of identity. More research analysing the rhetoric of leaders who effectively achieve this could offer even more insights into how leaders can become skilled entrepreneurs of identity – adeptly defining an evolving reality for others. ■

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When Charlotte Beers became the new CEO of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide in 1993, she developed a vision statement that outlined her plan for some major organisational changes. It also contained this important clause: 'The values we share, however, the way we do things, day-to-day, will remain constant.' Knowingly or not, her choice of words was undoubtedly key in helping her employees embrace what lay ahead.

Managers stand to benefit immensely from understanding more about how to

identity for employees and framing it as one that is evolving. In this respect, it may be interesting to use Steve Jobs's return to Apple as a case in point. This can be referred to as an instance where the leader seemed to suggest that proposed changes were more in line/consistent with the collective identity than the then current situation.

As such, change meant a re-affirmation of the collective identity. On returning to Apple, Jobs's strategy seems to have been to advocate a return to Apple's roots (which

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This article draws its inspiration from Merlijn's PhD thesis *Demystifying visionary leadership: In search of the essence of effective vision communication*. <http://hdl.handle.net/1765/40079>