

# Brief

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## Why won't they just get it? How to use emotion and meaning to unlock the brain and engage people

***If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea***

Saint Exupery

We are built and wired to base our decisions on instinct and emotion. So why do leaders try and persuade others, and manage change, in such purely rational ways? Some leaders use meaning and emotion naturally. Others feel embarrassed to show their feelings, or believe it is entering a dark world of spin and marketing, or it is simply too fluffy compared to the presentations they make to the Board. In short, most of us are raised and educated to believe that rational analysis and argument is the ultimate weapon that the human brain can offer. Behavioural economists, psychologists and neuroscientists have mostly now concluded that this is not the case. To make a case, win an argument, and engage people requires us to unlock emotions.

We look at the recent research and some established best practice to look at how to bring emotion and meaning into how we connect with our employees and all key stakeholders. These include academics from the Universities of Harvard, Stanford, California, articles from McKinsey and a best-selling book by Chip and Dan Heath.

### Emotions

Emotions appear to be central to how the brain is programmed to monitor, filter and respond to change. Emotions are how the brain makes fast choices between options, based on what has been learnt before. When looking at a how to lead and manage change, the evidence is that without prompting an emotional response it is unlikely a person will do something different or new. In fact: you will not believe something you hear, until you *want* to believe it, and to want to believe it you will need an emotional hook.

How do you let emotions in? The research suggests there are various routes to building an emotional response to a message, a strategic narrative or other important communication.

**Powerful:** being strong, committed and clear about a core big idea – one that is powerful enough, or suggests enough difference from the past or present that it makes people stop and

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think. Being powerful is not (generally) about numbers or facts. It is about an idea or concept that can fire the imagination (“We will put a man on the moon”).

**Empathy:** the desire to listen and take notice will be directly influenced by whether the message comes from someone who sounds like they know how you already feel – which means recognising uncertainty, challenge, loss (jobs, status, income) or pressure. It is also about showing you are listening – the psychologists have shown that the listened-to are more likely to listen in return.

**Concrete:** sounding real, practical and tangible in ways that people will imagine having an impact on them individually, is much more likely to be embraced than abstract ideas, jargon or (in the interest of compromise or inclusion) being too broad or vague.

**Unexpected:** this may be most important of all, or at least the aspect that is most often lost in the corporate world. If anger is designed to make the brain shut down options and make actions quick and predictable, the unexpected is designed to make us (literally) open our eyes, and other senses, stop talking and look for new information, check for meaning, danger or opportunity. This is not about novelty for its own sake, or using gimmicks to get noticed. It is about sparking curiosity in the minds of others by raising something they were not thinking about, or have little knowledge of. For example: “80% of our profit comes from 20% of customers”. Why? Does it matter?

Too much surprise will shock people and prompt dysfunctional response and even shut-down. Enough of something unexpected – relevant to the core idea – will open the mind. One of the reasons why constructive challenging debate around options is a good thing is that it can prompt people to open their mind to new or different perspectives, and strengthen the attachment to the outcome of the discussion.

## Meaning

The research suggests that meaningful work engages people more than anything else – causing people to go the extra mile for their jobs and their organisation. There is clearly a strong overlap between meaning and emotion. Ideally leaders will want to use both to strengthen their communication.

There are four potential levels of meaning for employees in an organisation. Each can be important, and for some only one will matter – or be possible.

### **1. Making a difference to your colleagues:** *the satisfaction, fulfillment and fun of teams*

The satisfaction of coaching and developing young talent, or providing the first work experience that inspires a future career. Being a great manager that makes people feel

recognised and engaged. The sense of identity and strength that comes from being in a strong team that has real common purpose and trust.

**2. Making a difference to customers:** *an impact on their lives in small or big ways*

You work in a local bookshop and have just helped an aunt find the perfect book for her young nephew; or you work on the Toyota plant and have just stopped production to sort out a seat-belt installation that looks like it might cause a future problem with drivers and passengers; or you work for Dove beauty and personal care range and feel you are helping build women's self-esteem. This, of course, is the employee experience of a strong consumer brand.

**3. Making a difference to the company:** *beating competitors, changing an industry*

The Sony mission statement from the 1950s is a great example: "To become the company most known for changing the world-wide poor-quality image of Japanese products". This is the meaning for employees that comes from contributing to a business that is growing the market share, becoming a 'top 10' company – or number one, or doing what it takes to beat the competition in a tender, being the most respected in the market, or being faster than anyone else. In a turnaround, having an opportunity to recapture market leadership and change the industry by offering customers services that had never existed before. People like to be in a winning team.

**4. Making a difference to the world:** *to the environment, the economy, society*

You work for a logistics company that is reducing its carbon footprint, or a technology company that is helping accelerate the economic growth of remote communities in Brazil and India. You know you are helping make a profit in ways that cause good not harm - for example as a clothing retailer avoiding child labour and rock-bottom wages.

Research also shows how to build meaning and what leaders often do (usually without thinking) to destroy meaning:

**Clarity:** simple, clear, direction and purpose. This is what the US military call 'commanders intent': the single sentence or paragraph at the front of any plan – at any level from the small unit to an entire army - that is the one thing everyone needs to understand. What are the few core guiding principles that can help an employee make their day-to-day decisions without any reference back to paperwork or computer? Often this is mission and vision: As a Disney employee are you working in a theme park or making people happy? Or it is the headline of the annual or three year plan ("Our priority is to grow profitably by being much better at retaining customers for longer").

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*Evil twin:* the curse of knowledge – you are so expert, or so close to the subject that you take the main picture for granted – or provide too much detail. The related danger is that having spent six months thinking about a new strategy (or discussing it carefully and thoroughly in the executive team), you have become very familiar with the context, underlying knowledge and assumptions that you then get frustrated that everyone else in the organisation does not get it the first time they hear it.

**Credibility:** making sure that the experience of the employee matches the rhetoric, that as a leader you walk the talk, and that there is consistency across leadership. This is not an argument for fixed scripts, or all leaders trying to behave like clones. Authenticity matters as part of credibility, and all members of the leadership team can find their own way of showing that they are genuinely aligned, and that their own actions set good examples of the right behaviour, actions and decisions.

*Evil Twin:* chaos theory – the combination of attention deficit disorder (streams of ‘initiative of the moment’ from leaders, where cynicism soon ensures all messages are ignored), or plans not grounded in reality, or not properly resourced or supported so that people not believe that in reality they will succeed.

**Connection:** a clear line of sight between the employee and the big idea, so it is concrete and relevant. This of course is the core role of managers and unit leaders – to take the wider plans and ideas and connect them up with a particular set of employees or teams. Of course it helps if the connection is two way – frontline colleagues are in the perfect place to improve plans or accelerate success if their insight and input are listened to.

*Evil Twin:* meaningless mantras - ‘Maximise shareholder value’ and others that may help the CEO make decisions but are useless in guiding the actions of most employees.

**Celebration:** the emotional, meaning in the message – what is different about what we are doing. This can be closely connected to the mission, vision and values (back to Disney’s ‘We make people happy’). The key points are that it has a strong emotional core and that it is what makes the organisation special and different from others – especially peer group ones. The idea of ‘celebration’ may make some leaders uneasy – especially during recession, periods of difficult change or when a crisis hits. However, it is at these moments above all else that a good leader reminds everyone about what is special – and why everyone should care deeply about beating the challenges ahead. Celebration is not about the staff party, it is about what makes you proud.

*Evil Twin:* the icebox – being so rational and cold that you sound like you are auditioning to play Star Trek’s Spock. We all have hearts and guts as well as a head. We should use them all.

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In a favourite quote of the marketing industry: "The essential difference between emotion and reason is that emotion leads to action while reason leads to conclusions." (Donald Calne Canadian Neurologist)

(For more, see our *Brief* on storytelling: *The second mouse gets the cheese: why CEOs use stories to spark change.*)

## Sources

Sources used for this article include: Roselli, Skelly, Mackie: *Processing Rational and Emotional Messages* (University of California – Journal of Experimental Psychology); Amibile, Kramer: *How Leaders Kill Meaning at Work* (McKinsey Quarterly); Gilbert *How Mental Systems Believe* (Harvard psychology professor in American Psychologist journal) ; Heath, Heath: *Made to Stick* (Professors at Stanford University and Duke University); Damasio: *Descartes Error* (Neuroscience Faculty, University of Southern California); Damasio: *The Feeling of what Happens* (Neuroscience Faculty, University of Southern California); Watzlawick, Bavela, Jackson: *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Mental Research Institute, California); Maerkic: *Rationality and Emotions in Decision-Making* (University of Ljubljana).