

## How can I help managers cascade key messages through the organization?

*Leading industry experts answer your strategic HR queries*

Kate Cowie



Kate Cowie is founder and director of The Chaos Game.

In our rapidly shifting and increasingly complex business conditions, leaders need to have a clear sense of where their organizations are now, and where they need to be in order to meet the challenges ahead. This is a self-evident truth. But it is not enough for them to know where they are leading those who follow them; they also need a strategy for communicating vividly and vitally the way forward and how they are going to get there.

### Big picture making

Over the last five years, I have worked with many leaders – CEOs, plant managers and business unit heads – in three different industries to do “big picture making” in order to help them create a vision for their organizations. In these sessions, they have identified their stakeholders and how they produce value for them, they have reviewed the influential trends in their industry, they have reaffirmed their values, they have clarified their organization's role and responsibilities in the community and so on. And the outcome is, indeed, a clear statement of their vision for the future, which provides a new focus for action and a valid mechanism for making strategic choices and taking the difficult decisions.

### A vision: necessary but not sufficient

But they soon discover they need to do more than simply point the way if they are going to lead their people into this future. Any change program, large or small, involves letting go of old ways of doing things, and doing new things in new ways.

Inevitably, this creates uncertainty, resistance and even fear. Their task, therefore, is to describe a future that is vibrant and compelling, that offers opportunity and hope and that engages people emotionally as well as intellectually so that they are inspired and motivated to follow them there. The world's greatest political leaders know this instinctively. Witness Mahatma Ghandi, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela – to cite the obvious examples. They stirred and enthused millions of people to achieve their dreams by offering them a vision of a better world that resounded in their hearts as well as in their minds.

### Storytelling as a key leadership skill

These great leaders drew on the ancient practice of storytelling to describe the future. As the anthropological record reveals, we have been telling stories to each other since the dawn of civilization. When we harness the power of imagination and metaphor we are able to make



sense of the world: seemingly disconnected things cohere, truths that were hidden are revealed and answers to our questions become clear.

Organizational leaders do not need to muster the extraordinary skills of Ghandi and King, but all of them can and should master the art of good storytelling. And never has this been more necessary than now in our globalized world, where leaders are often working in a different time, space and culture to the people whom they lead, and where simply telling them what to do and overseeing them in the doing is neither productive nor even possible.

### How to tell a “future story”

So what does it take to translate your vision of the future into a vivid and vital story that will inspire and motivate others to follow? Here are eight lessons from the field that managers can apply to cascade key messages through the organization using effective storytelling:

**Pose your questions**

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1. Mean what you say: own the truth and tell the truth.
2. A story is not a canned speech: change how (and sometimes even what) you tell to meet the particular needs of your listeners.
3. Take your listeners to the future in their imaginations first: use more visual imagery and fewer facts.
4. Use your voice: vary your tone, use pauses and do not be afraid of silence.
5. Use your body: move freely, gesture and be visibly attentive and inclusive.
6. Never learn by heart: you need to be “present” not perfect.
7. Do not read from a script: use other opportunities for written communication.
8. Do not stand behind anything: be in among your listeners.

Remember, good people always have choices. The leaders in your organization can help people to choose to follow them by using their narrative skills to bring the future they foresee alive for others.

### About the author

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