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Creating momentum for digital transformation without a burning platform

To drive your digital transformation, you need to become skilful in connecting the past, present and future in a compelling story, write Verena Stingl, Marcus Lantz and Josef Oehmen



We know: the most important factor to drive change is a blazingly obvious reason to act. Change management calls these drivers 'burning platform' as a metaphor for urgent crises that demand immediate and swift reaction. A blazingly obvious reason to act. Yet, when it comes to venturing into a daring digital transformation strategy, most organisations have no immediate reason to act – we have successfully been making money for a while, after all. Still, many of us sense that no matter how uncertain the future is, we have to accelerate our digital transformation to remain competitive tomorrow.

The uncertainty of the digital future allows different interpretations of where we are and what is going to happen: while a few in the organisation may clearly see a burning platform, for others there is at best a little smoke on the horizon. In this article, we discuss how you can create momentum for digital transformation in your organisation, nevertheless, by becoming a skilful storyteller who compellingly connects the past, present, and future.

You know it is time to act. You know that digitalisation is galloping forward and if you do not push now to make your organisation the digital poster boy of the industry, you will all face a very bleak future. Metaphorically speaking, the platform is not only burning, it is ablaze. Now, all you have to do is to convince the executive leadership team. Luckily, you have figured it out. You have identified the five key areas to prepare your organisation for its digital future, and you have a solid action plan. Implementing your plan will not come cheap, and there are certainly some risks involved, but none as bad as losing touch technologically. Remember Nokia or Kodak? Right! Thus prepared, you walk into your strategy meeting. You make your case with enthusiasm and passion. You expect excitement – but all you get is a lukewarm “We’ll look into it.” Sounds familiar?

Venturing into unknown terrain

While 'digital transformation', as a buzzword, has risen to the top on many CEOs' agendas, many organisations remain timid when it comes to bring about digital change to their business. In our research, we asked senior executives what has been holding their organisations back from venturing into emerging digital technologies. What one executive told us sums up all too well how many organisations respond to the uncertainty around digital transformation: "It has to go wrong before it is interesting to do something about it. If we suddenly lost millions of euros, then we would prioritise digitalisation right away. But as long as we manage to keep it together, then it is very, very difficult to talk about it. Because, what is the probability that it will go wrong?"

These organisations see digitalisation as a possible threat, not as a certain opportunity. And thereby, in order to change, people keep waiting for the convincing burning platform to come along. Yet, the problem with digital transformation as a strategic priority is, that there is nothing on fire just right now. You have nothing that *demand*s change.

When it comes to digital transformation, most of what you have are fuzzy projections of the future: What technologies will emerge? What will our competition do? What will our customers want? What will happen if we lag behind? This uncertainty allows for interpretation: The fire you see is a mere hypothetical one; it is fuelled by your belief that the future will evolve so drastically that you have to start now with radical changes.

If it is not broken, why fix it?

The harsh truth is that your view of the future is just one perspective of many across your organisation. The values or perspectives of others in the leadership may diverge significantly from yours. Those – often in operations – who value stability and incremental improvement, may see no need to fix anything that is not broken (yet). Those who have dedicated their career to developing or optimising some of your organisation's products or services may feel that you put their life work into question. And while some others may at least agree with you that you need digital change, they may consider your predictions completely off target.

That does not mean that they are 'too dumb' to see the threat, it just means that from their perspective, they see bigger fish to fry. If you want to motivate them to join ship in your journey of digital transformation, pointing to facts and statistics – which they might contest – is therefore not enough.

Strategic change in an organisation works best if we manage to align perspectives on where we are, where we could be, and how to get there. When we argue for decisions that have no absolute truth, emotions and values seize a dominant role. In consequence, you will need to become a storyteller who skilfully connects the past, present, and future in a novel, yet familiar way to create a trustworthy and emotionally compelling story. Now, how do you become this engaging storyteller in a world of uncertainty and diverging perspectives?

Stories in strategic decision-making

The organisational scholars Sarah Kaplan and Wanda Orlikowski studied the strategic stories that accompanied successful organisational changes. They found that stories that managed to settle the differences of perspectives within the organisation, shared three commonalities: they were *coherent*, *plausible*, and *acceptable*. *Coherence* relates to consistency between future projections, past understandings, and present concerns; *plausibility* describes whether a proposed response is reasonable given the internal and external environment; *acceptability* is concerned with the ability of the story to reduce conflict among the involved actors.

Based on our fieldwork in organisations on their route to digital transformation, and the research of Kaplan & Orlikowski, we describe an approach that allows different world views to co-exist without giving up the need for organisational change.

Coherence: Rethink the past! Instead of creating a sharp divide between what the organisation did in the past and the change you believe it has to perform now, try to identify examples in which your organisation successfully made bold or daring moves under uncertain circumstances. Stress examples where your organisation fared best when it dared to change, rather than remained in inertia, in order to make decisions of change that can logically fit with experiences. Demonstrate that being open to daring change is part of your organisation's identity (or at least, that it can be!) If your bold moves of the past were no blazing successes, tell a story how you learned from them and emerged stronger.

Acceptability: Reframe the present! Engage in an inquiry to understand where present concerns including fears, hopes, and assumptions come from – and have the courage to explain where your own conviction comes from. What are the current strengths and weaknesses? What are existing constraints, but also untapped opportunities? Acknowledge the perspectives and concerns of your peers in order to reduce conflict and invite to explore how digitalisation may even address those concerns. By acknowledging and reflecting concerns, and co-creating your digital vision, you will also build up ownership of the story across the room.

Plausibility: Reimagine the future! Do not use threatening tales of a burning platform but go with its visionary twin brother: the opportunity tale. In other words, do not talk about Nokia, but about Apple. The key is to imagine a sufficiently visionary, yet realistic strategic perspective that a majority of the organisation could identify with. The use of analogies and metaphors is a proven tactic in projecting desired future states that can still match organisational, technological, and market contingencies, and thus be seen as plausible.

Do you remember back in 2012 when we just said 'let's do this!' to the idea of reducing emissions in our production? And it turned out to be just the right call at the right time! With the work that we did between 2012 and 2015 we prepared ourselves to jump the wave as one of the first in our industry when it started to roll after the Paris Agreement. We would not be the 'green' industry leader now if we hadn't been bold and daring back then. And just mind you, we had absolutely no certainty back then.

I am aware that the investments of the past year restrict our possibilities for big financial leaps right now. But I am convinced we have a golden opportunity right now as we have a highly motivated, young workforce of digital natives who are eager to create and execute new ideas.

After the substantial changes of our emission initiatives, we all acknowledge that we need time to stabilize our operations again, and that we are on the right track. So where do you see the next logical steps in improving our operational performance and how do you see that digital technologies could accelerate these improvements?

We can think of digital technologies as a roomba, a robot vacuum cleaner, that cleans our floors all by itself and gives us simply more time to focus on the important tasks. So what are your 'dusty floors' that you hope that somebody else takes care of so you and your team can focus on delivering great customer service? And it is not only about making those things easier, that we already do. Digital technology could also be our jet-pack to go where we could not go before. Just think of how 3D modelling opened entirely new doors for our design team.

Past

Connect to past examples of successful 'daring' moves – and what you have learned when it went wrong.

Present

Acknowledge concerns, and involve others in discovering how digitalization may help addressing these concerns or leverage present strengths.

Future

Create a positive vision where digitalization creates opportunities. Use analogies, and examples from outside your organization

Great storytellers connect the past, present, and future

By connecting the tales from the past, present and future in one coherent story, you can convince people that there is a need for action when they cannot (yet) see the need from where they are standing. When it comes to highly uncertain strategic topics, such as digital transformation, you will never have the one factual and immediate burning platform on which everyone can agree. Therefore, to create momentum despite an apparent lack of a crisis, we recommend that you develop an emotionally compelling strategic story that connects the past, present and future.

Great leaders are great storytellers. Stories are more than bedtime fairy tales with a creative twist. Great stories connect several understandings of the past that fit with the present concerns. They thereby convince an organisation that it gains more from seizing an uncertain future than from sticking with an otherwise comfortable status quo.



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