

Create a Compelling Vision That Everyone Understands

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CIOs understand the future direction, but are often challenged to communicate this in a way that team members can understand and take appropriate action. CIOs can use this research to share the vision, sow the seeds for change and enable employees to be part of the change journey.

Key Challenges

- Only a small percentage of employees understand the future vision or why the change is necessary. Without this understanding, change is unlikely or progress will be slowed.
- Clearly communicating the rationale for why change is needed is a frequently overlooked step. The "why" is the link between the vision and employee actions, and fuels the motivation that is needed for the change journey.
- Communication about change within the IT organization is generally focused too much on providing information and not enough on creating understanding. Information without understanding fails to facilitate the disruptive change that typifies digital business transformation.

Recommendations

CIO change leaders who strive to master leadership, culture and people dynamics must:

- Define an inspiring vision and a compelling "why" that will motivate employees and communicate it consistently to build understanding.
- Bring the vision to life by adding specifics about where your organization is today, what is changing, and what is staying the same. This will create clarity and reduce anxiety about the upcoming changes.
- Invite employees to participate and then frequently recognize specific contributions that demonstrate progress, to build buy-in and increase ownership.
- Share the vision tirelessly, listen to input and continue to adapt the story to inspire your organization on the change journey.

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Introduction

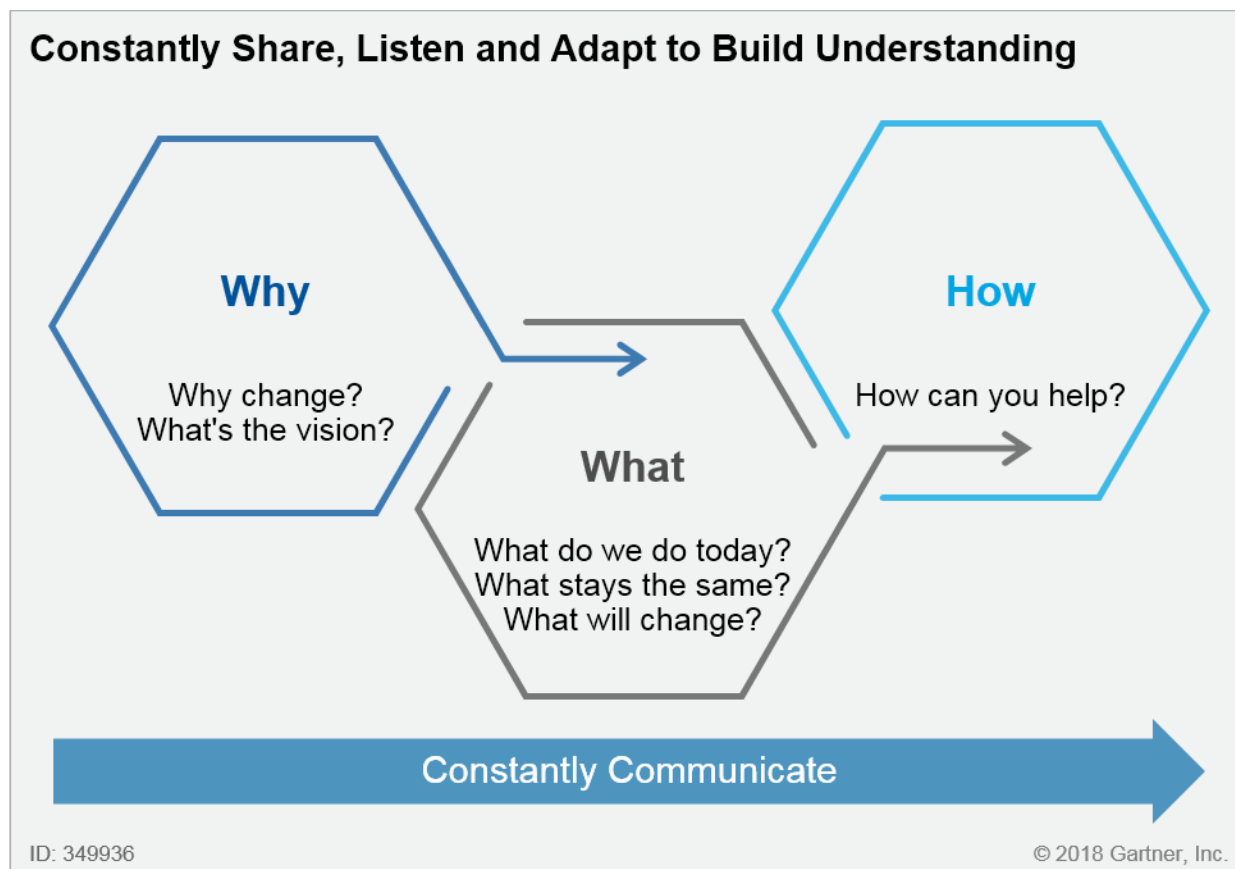
It is likely that only a small number of your employees understand the direction and priorities of IT, or of the organization. Research suggests that as few as 5% to 30% grasp the implications and are able to use this understanding to direct their actions.^{1,2} Executives often wonder, "Why aren't my employees stepping up?" If they don't understand the strategy, how can they?³ The solution lies not in blaming employees for inaction, but with you as a leader. You must adopt a more compelling method for communicating that focuses on fostering understanding not just delivering information.

Communicating for understanding starts with "Why?" At Gartner, we talk to many CIOs who will admit they and their leadership team do not have a good explanation of "why," nor is it a common view held across IT leaders and managers. Why enables employees to make sense of business strategies and put them into their own perspective so they can take action. In his book "Start With Why" Simon Sinek states "Every organization and its employees knows what they do, some know how, but very few articulate why they do what they do." We find this a similar situation for CIOs we speak with.⁴

What's the question a 3-year-old asks most often? "Why?" Asking why enables sense-making and understanding, and can accelerate learning in children.⁵ Asking why enables a child to lead themselves to an answer and frame the context. It is the same with adults. Taking time to fully investigate the "why" of your strategy or digital transformation will turn up the volume on your vision and grab employees' attention. Why sets the stage for understanding, which leads to employee action. Remember that asking why is not a challenge to the direction, but demonstrates a genuine curiosity about the origin of the thinking process. As a leader, this insight will help you communicate more effectively.

Beyond the "why," more information should be included in communications in order to inspire people on the change journey (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Constantly Share, Listen and Adapt to Build Understanding



Source: Gartner (February 2018)

Analysis

Define an Inspiring Vision and a Compelling "Why" That Will Motivate Employees

Few employees leap out of bed in the morning and rush to the office to be part of cost-savings and digitalizing work. Instead of starting with "what" is being done, first start by motivating with an inspiring vision, and at the same time develop the "why." Why is the glue that ties together the vision, enables action, and helps employees understand the rationale and direction, even if they do not currently agree. The first action is to develop both "Why?" and "What's the vision?"

According to CEB, employee engagement is already low, which means that you are squandering employee potential.⁶ An inspiring vision coupled with a compelling why can foster better engagement by increasing understanding. The statistics are sobering:

- Only 32% of employees do not regularly think of leaving the company they are currently working for. (This means that 68% of employees are regularly thinking of leaving.)
- Just 16% of employees are prepared to make a significant discretionary effort above the minimum required to keep their job.
- Globally, more than 70% of employees are *not* doing their best work.

The vision needs to be inspiring, but realistic, so test it with trusted colleagues and peers in different areas, and continue to revise. Look for signs of excitement: See if eyes light up and body posture changes. This is a sure sign that you are heading in the right direction. Remain open to co-creation and modification based on input. The goal is for the vision to be motivating to your organization, not just to leaders, so be aware of conscious and unconscious biases (such as sticking to what's familiar or disregarding alternate viewpoints). If you have a compelling enterprise vision, leverage this to tailor and align for IT audience and strategy.

Then, the hard work begins! Instill in your leadership team the need to communicate consistently. John Kotter suggests that for a change to be successful, 75% of management needs to buy into the change, so creating a "powerful coalition" of leadership is necessary.⁷ Even small deviations in delivery can dilute the message. It is impossible to articulate how a transformation will impact the organization, let alone create a common understanding across employees, if there isn't a common vision from leaders. "Common" is the key word here.

Recommended Actions

CIO change leaders:

- Develop why at the same time as the vision. Why exists in the part of the brain that controls emotions and not language, so it is vital to winning hearts, not just minds.⁸ Validate by asking employees what this means to them, as well as what actions they would take. If you aren't getting a connection, keep the team involved and continue to revise and revalidate.
- Keep the vision short, punchy and easy to remember. Avoid buzzwords and tired language (for example, market-leading, best in class, best customer experience). Create a memorable visual. Make it inspiring but unique to your organization and their mission, and validate this through testing before finalizing.⁹
- Iterate a From/To/Because model to define the current state and target future state. Use ["Compose the From/To/Because Story to Convey a Behavior Change Journey"](#) for detailed steps.
- Use this completed model as part of your communication. It will enable understanding. Educate your leadership team about the need for consistent leadership communication and the risk to achieving your target future state if they are not aligned. Define key messages that will be cascaded into the enterprise. See "Five Organizational Change Pitfalls for CIOs to Avoid." Then, check for understanding using the questions outlined in "Five Questions to Inform CIOs of Organizational Change Commitment."

Bring the Vision to Life by Adding Specifics About What Is Changing and What Is Staying the Same

Leaders, including CIOs, sometimes use uncertainty as a platform for change. Change is described as a good thing, and if the organization doesn't change, the consequences will be catastrophic. With this approach, employees are left fearful and stressed. No wonder this change tactic rarely works. The change just seems too big and too scary, and the steps to get there are not clear, short of a massive leap across a deep chasm. It's much safer to stay put and risk the consequences.

Change is often perceived by those impacted to be much bigger than it really is. What is needed to motivate employees is to ground them in the current environment, highlight what is changing and be very specific about what will stay the same. Don't scare them with a loss of their expertise, reinforce what skills they already have and excite them with the promise of personal growth. This approach creates comfort, confidence and control for those impacted. These are necessary conditions for successful change and overcoming the natural anxiety about an uncertain future (see "Leading Through Uncertainty for CIOs").

Recommended Actions

CIO change leaders:

- Don't denigrate the past. It is easy to offend by making employees feel that what they have done in the past has been wrong. Even if you don't say this, it is easy for employees to feel that their past commitments and contributions are not valued. Use "Leading Through Uncertainty for CIOs" as a guide to create comfort, confidence and control in your teams, to keep them in a positive mindset about the future.
- Identify what will stay the same, and document this as part of a communication plan that will be consistently shared. This step honors the contributions your employees have made and the values your enterprise exhibits in day-to-day work. Remind employees of past successes and how their efforts overcame challenges, and remind them that the same diligence and approaches will serve them well in the future.
- Be sure not to interpret questions as challenges or push-back as a sign of change resistance. What employees are doing is trying to understand. Take time to hear what is behind a question or concern. Effective CIO change leaders realize at the heart of these questions there's an opportunity to turn challenges into positives. See "CIOs Must Embrace Change Frustration as a Positive Sign of Engagement" and "Languages of Change: How to Tap Into the Positive Side of Change Resistance."

Invite Employees to Contribute, and Recognize Progress and Contributions Frequently

IT employees are likely used to letting leaders define the strategy and steps to get there. Then, they sit and wait to be told what to do, and when. To build successful and sustainable change, change can't be something done *to* employees; it must be done *with* employees. This shift is subtle but

necessary, and will require CIOs to let go of being the sole owner of the strategy and be open to co-creating the future with their teams.

A change leader CIO does not dictate the changes, but sets a direction and then invites employees to co-create the way forward. In this role, CIOs are amplifiers, connectors and advocates. Your employees are an improvisational jazz band, and you are the band leader whose role is to be responsive to help *them* perform better — not play all of the instruments or script the riffs.¹⁰ These actions will enable you and your leadership team to be more responsive and "in the moment," and to build change as a necessary organizational capability (see "ESCAPE the Past: Six Steps to Change Leadership"). The first step is to invite employees to participate in the process of developing the vision. This may seem awkward at first and may even feel risky to some employees, depending on how leadership has implemented change in the past. In times of change, CIOs need their staff to be fully motivated and committed. Read "From Push to Passion: Using Inspiration as a Management Approach" for specific techniques that you and your leadership team can use to increase employee motivation and commitment.

Then, always have your radar up — observe progress and actions. Share these examples. As adults we learn from the actions of others. This is learning by observing or "vicarious learning," a term coined by Albert Bandura.¹¹ Use this powerful method to acknowledge progress, and specifically point out the new behaviors and actions so others can imitate them. Consistently communicating these actions and behaviors will signal to employees who may be less risk tolerant that it is safe to try these out.

Recommended Actions

CIO change leaders:

- Explore novel ways to encourage idea sharing, as many IT employees are introverts. Some organizations use "idea walls" that enable employees to submit ideas on Post-it notes anonymously. Over time, as your leadership team accepts ideas and input, this can encourage employees to more freely share.
- Create a rhythm/timing for your communications, and have a segment that highlights employee contributions, progress and actions (see Note 1). Don't make this a mechanical process. You and your team must deliberately and authentically identify these situations and call out the employees, or they will be trivialized rather than being a powerful tool for change.
- Support your early adopters — the "first followers." Realize that they are taking risks and possibly going against cultural norms. Share their efforts and insights with others, while protecting them. Make the early adopters your peer advocates, a rich resource for the rest of the team during the process. Watch this video: ["Leadership Lessons From Dancing Guy: The First Follower and More..."](#)
- Assess your own mindset and honestly evaluate your leadership style. How you and your leadership team lead through the change will set an example for your organization. Use the assessment in "Reframing Your Mindset to Match Digital-Era Reality" research note to determine what adjustments should be made in your leadership behaviors.

Share, Listen and Adapt the Story to Inspire Your Organization on the Change Journey

In his book "The Advantage," Patrick Lencioni stresses the need for "over-communication." He cites the "rule of seven," which states that employees won't believe a leader's message until they've heard it seven times.¹² At Gartner we have yet to find a CIO who has told us that they communicate too much; usually the sentiment is that they communicate far too little.

Gartner encourages CIOs to inspire the employee base by using three key steps: envision, share and compose. Sharing must be done using a variety of mediums — videos, posters, key messages, meetings and informal discussions. Keep clear of email as an effective communication vehicle to promote understanding; reserve it for after-the-fact summaries. You are competing for employee attention, so be novel and bold to pique curiosity.

Listening is not often part of a communication strategy, but should be. Effective change leader CIOs tell us that honing their listening skills is a critical component of crafting the change plan and leading in an environment of constant change. Genuine listening needs a mindset of openness to what is being said, including the willingness to be corrected. Too many leaders, when listening, are focused on what they will say next, so that they can correct the "misunderstandings" and "misconceptions" of the speaker. That they, as leader, could be the ones with the misunderstandings or misconceptions never enters their minds. To be truly genuine, be prepared to listen generously and learn from your employees as much as you are prepared to instruct them (see "To Improve Stakeholder Engagement, CIOs Must Balance Advocacy and Inquiry With Conversation").

Recommended Actions

CIO change leaders:

- Prepare your communications, always asking: "Am I communicating for understanding?" Remember, what's important is not what *you* believe is being communicated, but what *others* hear. Learn to ask for the feedback that will help you determine this. Refer to "Share-Listen-Adapt: Connect Employees to Successful Change Outcomes" for tactics to bolster your communications.
- Build a peer advocate network. Peer advocates represent a specific stakeholder group and contextualize messages for better understanding to specific roles. They help to reduce employee anxiety by providing timely, targeted, trusted information that assists unique stakeholder groups to understand what will change and what will stay the same. Read "Leading From the Heart: Peer Advocates Make Organizational Change Easier" to put a peer advocate group into practice.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

"ESCAPE the Past: Six Steps to Change Leadership"

"Four Must-Have Practices for Successful Organizational Change"

"Five Organizational Change Pitfalls for CIOs to Avoid"

Evidence

¹ A. Gallo. "[Making Your Strategy Work on the Frontline.](#)" Harvard Business Review. 24 June 2010. "Even the most brilliant strategy is worth nothing if it isn't executed well, especially by your front line — the employees who interact daily with your customers. Unfortunately, these employees are regularly asked to execute strategies that others developed and that they may not understand, never mind feel committed or connected to. In fact, according to Robert Kaplan and David Norton, the founders of the Balanced Scorecard, only 5% of employees understand their company's strategy."

² R.S. Kaplan, D.P. Norton. "[The Office of Strategy Management.](#)" Harvard Business Review. October 2005. "Our research reveals that, on average, 95% of a company's employees are unaware of, or do not understand, its strategy. If the employees who are closest to customers and who operate processes that create value are unaware of the strategy, they surely cannot help the organization implement it effectively."

³ "[When CEOs Talk Strategy, 70% of the Company Doesn't Get It.](#)" Forbes. 9 July 2013. If 70% of your company doesn't know what they are striving toward and operating on false assumptions, your team will move slowly and defensively, rather than swiftly and proactively. You miss out having the entire organization contribute their talents to the overall endeavor. Executives also wonder "Why aren't my employees stepping up?" If they don't know, how can they?

⁴ S. Sinek. "Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action." Portfolio. 29 October 2009.

⁵ R. Palacios. "[Why Do Children Ask, 'Why?'](#)" Huffpost. 19 February 2016.

⁶ CEB Global Talent Monitor, 1Q17.

⁷ [John Kotter](#), who created [Kotter's 8-Step Change Model](#), is a best-selling author, thought leader and Harvard Professor regarded by many as the authority on leadership and change.

⁸ N. Dean Meyer. "[IT Mission, Vision and Value Statements.](#)" CIO. 26 July 2005.

⁹ S. Sinek, D. Mead, P. Docker. "Find Your Why: A Practical Guide to Discovering Purpose for You or Your Team." Portfolio. 5 September 2017.

¹⁰ "[What Leaders Can Learn From Jazz.](#)" Harvard Business Review.

¹¹ [Vicarious learning](#) was coined by psychologist Albert Bandura, the David Starr Jordan Professor Emeritus of Social Science in Psychology at Stanford University.

¹² "Discipline 3: Over-Communicate Clarity." The Table Group.

Note 1 Communication Timing

When planning your communication strategy, determine timing or rhythm for communications. This sets employees' expectations, rather than having communications that seem random. Regular communications also can even out content: When trying a new format that includes recognizing progress and actions, it won't seem like favoritism. This does not mean that you can't add to the schedule, but at least meet the minimum you have set out. It also does not preclude you and your leadership team from recognizing actions as they occur and compiling them for a routine communication.

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