




LEADING WITH NARRATIVE

Storytelling as a catalyst for strategy execution.

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Storytelling translates strategy into meaning and execution, especially in high-context regions such as Asia.
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Narrative provides context, and helps bridge the strategy gap via relatable and actionable meaning.
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Inviting teams to interpret the strategy and retell it results in clarity, trust, and momentum for strategy execution.

"I don't understand how we can be so aligned at the top and so misaligned everywhere else."

This was the frustration voiced – half in resignation, half in exasperation – by a regional Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in Asia. His company's transformation strategy had been crafted with precision in Europe, reviewed exhaustively by the board, and signed off at the group leadership offsite. But as the change initiative rolled out across Southeast Asia, momentum stalled. Meetings were held. Town halls delivered. Slick internal videos with carefully chosen employee footage had been released. Yet frontline engagement lagged, middle management seemed overwhelmed, and whispers of "another foreign idea" began to surface.

This scenario is familiar to many leaders operating in Asia. Strategies are increasingly globally conceived but locally executed. The leadership teams tasked with execution are often multicultural composites – comprising expatriates, regional experts, and returnees – working within organisations that may still carry deep-rooted traditions concerning hierarchy, implicit communication norms, and linguistic gaps.

In such environments, strategy isn't just a matter of rollout. It's a matter of resonance. Strategy must not only be understood; it must be felt, carried, and enacted at every level of the system. And for that to happen, the transmission mechanism needs to change. The inability to communicate strategy has been noted as one of the top three reasons for failure of strategy execution.¹



THREE LAYERS, THREE REALITIES

To execute strategy effectively, leaders must acknowledge three fundamentally different realities within their organisations.

The C-suite sees strategy as direction, vision, and future readiness. Their world is shaped by long-term shifts in markets, macro trends, technology, and stakeholder expectations – both from global headquarters and the boardroom. Senior leadership teams leave offsites energised, aligned, and excited about transformation. But that clarity does not always travel.

Middle managers experience strategy as a tangle of new key performance indicators or KPIs layered on top of already stretched responsibilities. They are the operational glue of the organisation, expected to implement strategy while keeping the business running. Often, they're in firefighting mode. As one said, "We're not resisting strategy; we're firefighting. We're trying to keep the ship up and running and the shiny new thing from the top does not always align for us to do that."

Frontline employees, especially in factory or service environments, receive new procedures and directives without the broader story. The connection to strategic intent is almost always missing. What they perceive is more work, not more meaning. "We were told to change our processes, but no one explained why. It just felt like more work. I am paid per hour, I need to just get the job done," noted a factory supervisor.

WHY STORY WORKS – THE NEUROSCIENCE OF NARRATIVE

Storytelling can act as a powerful tool to bridge the gap between strategy creation and strategy translation, which finally impacts strategy execution. It all has to do with the powerful research on the neuroscience of narrative.

When we hear a compelling story, our brains light up differently than when we hear raw information. Neuroscience shows that storytelling triggers the release of three key chemicals. The first is oxytocin, which builds trust and empathy, and is essential for aligning teams emotionally. Second

is dopamine, which increases focus and memory, and is critical for recall under stress. And third is cortisol, which is generated by tension in a story, and heightens attention and urgency.

These aren't just interesting facts. They explain why people act on a well-told story but forget a dry, fact-laden email. Story engages language, emotion, and sensory processing simultaneously. It breaks through scepticism and taps into meaning-making. In high-context, high-power-distance environments like Asia, this emotional engagement is often the bridge that logic alone cannot build. Strategy explained using this powerful tool has the power to resonate, and realign the effort and motivation needed for execution. It can overcome the impersonal publicity campaign that strategy translation can sometimes end up becoming. Moreover, many collectivist cultures of Asia are steeped in the storytelling tradition, both oral and written, that has worked as a glue to keep their values and culture aligned. Hence it is also a tool that has local resonance.

CASE STUDY: STRATEGY RETOLD IN VIETNAM

A European-headquartered manufacturing company operating in Vietnam was mid-way through a multi-year transformation effort. Yet, halfway through the rollout, it became clear that the message was not sticking. Middle managers were disengaged. The front line was following new procedures but didn't understand their purpose. The strategy had been explained, but it had not been translated in an emotionally resonant way for the person responsible for implementing it.

The company partnered with external facilitators to use narrative as a tool – not to communicate the strategy, but to help people internalise it.

The intervention unfolded in the following three stages.

1. Leadership narrative co-creation

In a two-day offsite, the C-suite and regional leaders were challenged to articulate the transformation story without PowerPoints. At first, the C-suite team approached the storytelling intervention with visible scepticism. Several executives were used to communicating through metrics and timelines, not metaphors and emotion. One remarked, "We're not here to write novels; we're here to deliver transformation." But as the session unfolded, the group began to recognise how their individually compelling slides lacked a shared emotional throughline. As they explored deeper the reasons behind the strategy – and heard each other frame the journey in their own words – resistance began to shift. What emerged wasn't just a story, but a collective understanding. By the end of the session, one executive admitted, "This is the first time I've heard us describe the strategy in a way that I'd actually want to repeat." The story became not just a tool, but a turning point. Through facilitated exercises, metaphors emerged organically. One leader said, "It's like rebuilding the engine while still flying." Another replied, "We're laying tracks while the train is moving." These metaphors became anchors that reflected both urgency and continuity.

2. Middle management reframing

Middle managers were not handed a script. They were invited to shape the story themselves by bringing in their functional expertise, the realities they were navigating, and the language their teams would actually

respond to. In facilitated workshops, they worked with the core metaphor – "laying a new track while the train is moving" – but translated it into their world.

In procurement, this meant telling the story of transformation not as a cost-cutting mandate, but as a shift in how the company partners with suppliers for long-term resilience. In supply chain, the story became one of evolving from reactive firefighting to anticipatory planning, even while delivering under existing constraints.

"We couldn't stop to explain strategy in every meeting," one manager said, "but once we had the story, we could weave it into the way we made decisions. It gave us a common thread to guide our trade-offs."

By shaping the story in their own voice, managers began to engage their teams not with slogans, but with *strategic context*, explaining not just *what* was changing, but *why* it mattered and *how* their team's work fit into the bigger picture. Storytelling helped them move from *compliance to conviction*.

3. Frontline embedding

At the factory level, storytelling was to be moved out of the posters and into the pulse of the day. Morning huddles would become a space not just to review safety metrics and shift goals, but to connect small wins to the larger transformation story. Supervisors were to begin calling out everyday moments where the strategy came to life – moments that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

One technician, for example, redesigned a routine maintenance step that reduced machine downtime by several hours a week. Instead of just being acknowledged for efficiency, the supervisor framed his action in the larger narrative: "This is what stabilising the bridge looks like; you're helping us keep things running while the rest of the system changes."

That framing helps change the energy in the room. Workers began offering ideas more freely, not just for improvement but in service of the bigger picture. The strategy no longer felt like something handed down from above. It felt like something *being built from where they stood*. Storytelling didn't make the work easier; however, it made the *purpose clearer* and strengthened the connection to strategy translation.

Strategy must not only be understood; it must be felt, carried, and enacted at every level of the system.



A ROCKET LAUNCH REFRAMES A ROLLOUT

In another example, a company was expanding its CAPEX (capital expenditure) investment, and the transformation was framed using a shared metaphor: the rocket launch.

- The C-suite became Mission Control, monitoring indicators and adjusting flight plans.
- Engineering and operations were the Launch Crew, executing ignition and system coordination.
- Finance and HR (human resources) became Ground Systems, ensuring readiness, a steady fuel supply, and staffing.
- Frontline teams secured the launch pad and supported astronaut boarding, and were the final lift-off team.

The metaphor was not decorative. Instead, it provided a common language, helped align role clarity, and created momentum.

FROM STORY TO STRATEGIC OWNERSHIP

What changed was not the message, but the process of shaping it. Leaders stopped delivering strategy like a memo. They started inviting teams to interpret and retell it. The act of translation created emotional alignment and practical engagement. This created clarity, and middle managers reported fewer misunderstandings around goals. It also energised the employees, who offered more bottom-up ideas aligned with transformation. And it built trust: teams began quoting the shared metaphors in cross-team interactions.

The strategy had not changed. But now, people felt a part of it.

WHERE SHOULD YOU BEGIN?

A STRATEGIC STORYTELLING CHECKLIST

Embedding narrative into your strategy execution is essential if you want your strategy to travel beyond decks, townhalls, and posters. It requires intentional choices at every layer. Use the questions below to assess where your organisation stands – and where to start.

1. Have you co-created a strategic narrative that names the tension, not just the targets?

Most strategies talk about the destination. Few acknowledge the discomfort of the journey. A compelling narrative doesn't just celebrate growth; it explains what's at stake, what must change, and why now. If your story only outlines ambition without naming the real frictions people are feeling, it won't gain traction.

2. Have you equipped middle managers to adapt that story using their own language and metrics?

Middle managers are the translators of strategy. But too often, we expect them to cascade what they didn't help shape. A story becomes powerful when managers can localise it by tying it to operational decisions, resource trade-offs, and leadership conversations they're already having. Have you given them permission, training, and trust to tell the story using their own voice?

3. Do your frontline teams hear and see the strategy in ways that feel relevant and recent?

Frontline teams are bombarded with instructions. Unless the story shows up in what's recognised, what's rewarded, and what's explained, it gets tuned out. When was the last time a shop floor success was framed as a strategic win, not just an operational one? Storytelling bridges the gap between daily effort and broader purpose.

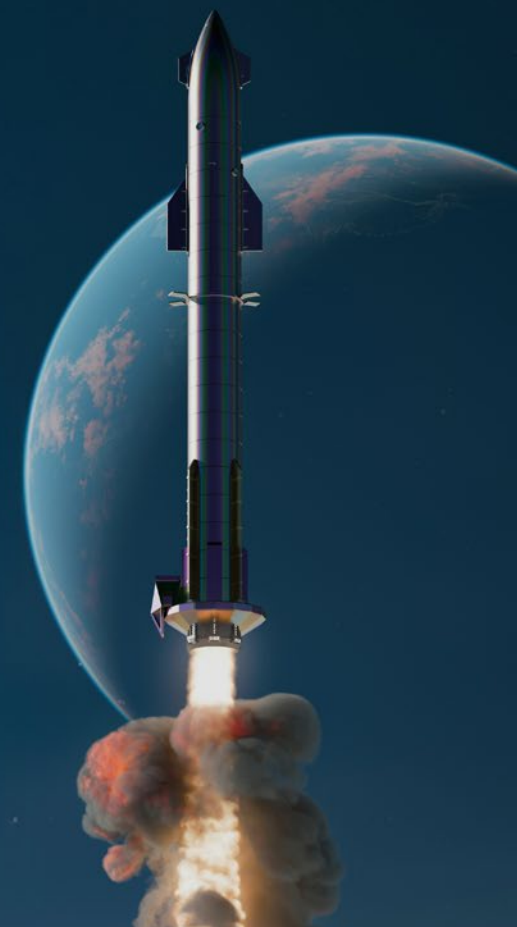
4. Is the story embedded in recurring rituals, not just in slides?

A narrative survives not through one great presentation, but through consistent reinforcement in the rhythms of work. Is the story part of onboarding? Does it show up in town halls and team huddles? Is it referenced in how you celebrate wins, share learnings, or review performance?

When a story becomes part of the culture's muscle memory, strategy becomes more than a plan; it becomes practice.

5. Are your leaders modelling the story, not just messaging it?

Strategy storytelling is not just about what is said; it's about what is seen. If leaders communicate one narrative but behave in ways that contradict it, the story collapses. Are senior leaders using the language of the strategy in their decisions, their recognition, and their trade-offs? Are they open to feedback when the narrative drifts from reality? When leaders embody the story, it becomes credible. When they don't, it becomes noise.



CONCLUSION: STRATEGY TRAVELS AT THE SPEED OF STORY

In Asia's multicultural, multilingual, and multi-layered organisations, strategy doesn't cascade; it diffuses. The form it takes at the front line often has little resemblance to what was crafted at the top. To fix that, we don't just need better planning. We need better transmission. Storytelling provides the emotional scaffolding that allows people to carry strategy across contexts.

When leaders use story – not as a slogan but as a structure – they don't just communicate a plan. They build the meaning that makes movement possible.

Because ultimately, people don't follow PowerPoints. They follow purpose. And a story is how we make purpose speak. [SMU](#)



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