Picture this:
How the language of leaders drives performance[☆]

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2007, Delos M Cosgrove, CEO of Cleveland Clinic, wrote a letter to the Clinic community. It read, in part:

> Here at Cleveland Clinic, we've always positioned quality in terms of outcomes. But I have come to understand that there is more to quality healthcare than great outcomes...The patient experience encompasses many aspects of care, from the physical environment to the emotional. It is about having rooms that are clean. It is about having people who smile and greet patients at every corner of the hospital. It is about communication and the expression of care and concern at times when they are most needed. Sometimes we forget that patients feel cold in the operating room and could use a warm blanket. Or we forget that they might be hungry at a time when no food is being served. We can no longer do that. We must be aware of patients' needs from the very moment they entrust us with their care. Everything we do must communicate competence, compassion and caring.

The impetus for this shift in purpose had come nearly a year before during Cosgrove's visit to the Harvard Business School (an experience that was subsequently outlined in a Harvard case study). There, a student described how her father had decided not to seek heart surgery at the Cleveland Clinic, instead opting for the Mayo Clinic, despite the former's superior overall patient outcomes. The reason? A perceived lack of empathy at the Cleveland Clinic. Her question proved pivotal for Cosgrove: "What are you doing to teach your doctors empathy?"

That interaction set Cosgrove on a path toward improving the empathy and compassion with which the organization carried out its work and the level of satisfaction patients derived from their experience. The effort was an unequivocal success. Based on data available from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, between 2007 and 2011 the overall satisfaction reported by the Clinic's patients improved by fifteen percentage points, an increase of more than three times the national average over the same time period. Even more impressive, patient perceptions of their interactions with care providers increased at nearly five times the national rate for nurses, and more than eleven times the national rate for doctors.

The purpose of the present article is to offer a framework for thinking about the role of leader language in organizational coordination and performance. Our framework suggests that Cosgrove's communication to the Cleveland Clinic community likely accomplished much more than merely to convey the new shift in focus. To be sure, Cleveland Clinic's path to improvement was filled with a variety of programs and initiatives. Our research suggests that their effectiveness was, in part, dependent on the actual language used by leaders to communicate about the ultimate purpose of those efforts. The key is not simply to communicate a meaningful purpose, but rather to do so in a way that creates a *shared* interpretation of that purpose *across* people in the organization. Before discussing the details of this process, we will first briefly examine the role of meaning-making in management and organizations today.

MEANING AND PURPOSE IN ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

Purpose is fundamental to organization. Though scholars have offered a variety of definitions, and these definitions

differ somewhat across fields, an organization is generally thought of by its purpose (i.e., goals, objectives, common interests). Nevertheless, the clarity of that purpose and the effectiveness of the associated organizing are not foregone conclusions in organizational life. Indeed, organizations vary substantially in the degree to which they are infused with purpose. We have observed in our own work, in fact, that the creation, maintenance and adaptation of purpose may be one of the most central challenges faced by leaders today. Still, we have long associated purpose with effective leadership, describing the latter as "the management of meaning," or as a social influence process primarily concerned with "meaning-making." Unfortunately, creating such purpose—that is, creating a *shared* sense of purpose among organizational members, which is key to translating purpose into performance—seems to have taken a back seat in the modern study and practice of leadership and management in organizations.

Observers have offered at least two related reasons for this decline. First, modern firms (and to some extent those who study them) have become excessively concerned with economic performance. Such an observation can hardly be surprising, given the rise of the modern bureaucratic organization and, perhaps more importantly, the dominance of the market economy. Of course, economic performance is important. But the reality is such that all other meanings and purposes have been subsumed under narrowly defined objectives patterned around stock market cycles and the pursuit of profits. Consequently, the only "meaning" that often matters is the bottom line. Lost in the shuffle, however, is the very real possibility that meaning-making, broadly construed, may not only be compatible with economic performance but perhaps even generative of it.

Second, strategic management has largely become a quantitative, analytical exercise. The role of self-reflection, introspection, personal yearning for something "more"— i.e., the "softer" side of decision-making—seems to have faded from view. This is reflected in what has been described as an excessive focus on market positioning and, in more egregious (sometimes illegal) cases, financial engineering. Rigorous industry and market analysis have become the dominant tools in the strategist's toolkit; they are the primary means for identifying and pursuing sustainable competitive positions. While such approaches can clearly add value, such value may come at a cost.

This loss of broader, shared meaning in organizations may be one reason why employees in the United States are less happy and less engaged. Gallup has long tracked employee engagement and recent surveys suggest that only 13 percent of the working population in the United States is engaged and motivated at work. However, corporations may not be the only ones falling down when it comes to infusing the lives and work of their members with meaning. As other researchers have noted, the meaning individuals have historically derived from society's institutions has been eroding, perhaps especially when it comes to community-based institutions like churches, and even families. This broad movement away from meaning-making and toward economic positioning may provide one explanation for why many leaders exhibit a preference for generically-worded organizational goals centering on financial performance. Although, as scholar Cynthia Montgomery has argued, there is nothing wrong with thinking in financial terms, "there is a basic fallacy in confusing a financial plan with

thinking about the kind of company you want yours to be." Our research suggests that overcoming this fallacy requires a shift in how leaders think about and use language to articulate their organization's purpose. Such purpose is at the heart of an organization's very existence and therefore should be leaders' top priority. Not only should top managers prioritize the time and energy required to carefully define and articulate purpose, but also they should prioritize doing so in ways that lead to a shared interpretation of that purpose across members of the organization. Why? Because coordination improves, along with performance, when everyone understands the "why" of his or her work in the same way.

CREATING A SHARED SENSE OF PURPOSE IN ORGANIZATIONS

How, then, can leaders create shared, meaningful experiences for members of their organizations? Our research suggests that the task does not necessarily entail framing the organization's goals in positive societal terms, though certainly such goals are laudable. In many cases, however, a leader's claim that the organization's mission is to "change the world," for instance, may be misguided at best and strain members' credulity at worst. Instead, a critical dimension of effectively creating a shared purpose is for leaders to use specific kinds of language (either verbal or written) when communicating about purpose. In organizations, the two most common platforms for such communication are vision statements—the rhetorical "portraits" of what the organization aspires to achieve in the future—and values statements, or declarations of the organization's desired end-states and guiding principles. Although in practice vision statements may have values embedded in them—for example, the Mayo Clinic has long subscribed to a values-based purpose statement, "The best interest of the patient is the only interest to be considered"—in many cases visions and values are conceived and communicated separately, though they work together to convey the goals of the organization. Not all vision and values statements are created equal, however. Messages containing (1) a large amount of concrete, image-based language and (2) a limited amount of conceptual, values-based language can successfully facilitate a shared sense of purpose. In our experience, very few organizations communicate messages that do both of these things well.

By "concrete" we mean that the language refers to objects or states that have materiality and/or a physical presence in the world. Such words and phrases point to a tangible reality that is cognitively available and thus produce vivid images in the minds of an audience (hence the "image-based" aspect). In this way, "concrete" language is different from "specific" language—indeed, a sentence such as "our goal is to achieve a 1% increase in productivity" is specific without being concrete and imagistic. In contrast, when Cosgrove, the CEO of the Cleveland Clinic, referenced "smiles," "cold patients," "warm blankets," and being "hungry" in his letter, he was using concrete language. By "conceptual" and "values-based," on the other hand, we mean that the language refers to important end-states and guiding principles. Such language conveys meaning and semantic detail rather than vivid images. For example, Cosgrove's references to "competence," "compassion,"

and "caring" entailed a limited set of focused principles that could guide the organization's efforts and that specify the significance of the aforementioned concrete images. Why does such a combination of language choices yield a shared interpretation of the organization's purpose?

First, language steeped in concrete imagery is likely to not only conjure up a mental picture in the mind of the audience, but, more importantly, it is likely to conjure up a *fundamentally similar* kind of picture for all audience members given its sensory qualities. An example may be helpful. For many years, the toy retailer Toys 'R' Us envisioned that its purpose was "to put joy in kids' hearts and a smile on parents' faces." When encountering the language of this statement, most people will picture scenes with a comparable set of physical and behavioral details (e.g., a parent smiling as they observe their child's joyful experience); this is not true, however, if people were presented with an equivalent, but more abstract, vision statement such as "to bring enjoyment to customers of all ages." The latter is likely to trigger a host of possible visual details in the mind's eye, and therefore people are less likely to "see" the same type of scene. Indeed, there are an almost unlimited number of ways customers might exist in a state of "enjoyment" after purchasing an item at Toys 'R' Us. Are they smiling? Laughing? Are they playing with friends? Are they alone? And who are these customers? Are they children? Adults? The chances of a collectively-shared mental picture emerging from this abstract vision statement are comparatively low.

Second, a limited amount of values-based language provides conceptual context to a mental image, giving it a circumscribed, and thus coherent, sense of meaning. For instance, although the first Toys 'R' Us vision statement mentioned above may generate shared imagery, the significance of the imagery is up for interpretation. What does it *mean* exactly? In this context, suppose that the CEO of Toys 'R' Us communicated a values statement with simply one value—reliability (currently the company espouses this value and three others: urgency, authenticity, and responsibility). The practical effect of this kind of focused values statement is that it crystallizes what the vision means and why it matters. Why is making customers smile important? Because it reflects the quality of their experience and is a sure way of establishing that the company is dependable, and such reliability is what we, as an organization, value above all else. In sum, because the range of possible meanings of the vision has been restricted to this one possibility, members who encounter it are likely to be unified in terms of not just what they *see* as the goal, but also in terms of what the image they see *means.* Another example of a company with focused values is Royal DSM. The company has structured its entire vision around a single value that it believes should guide all of its activities: sustainability.

When these aspects of a leader's language come together—that is, a large amount of image-based language and a limited amount of values-based language—the result is a sense of common purpose among organizational members. This sense of purpose in turn facilitates improved coordination and performance. Because members have the same understanding of the goal and why it matters, it becomes easier for them to work together—simply put, they have the same destination point around which to focus their efforts and energies. In addition, they have an aligned understanding of the kinds of behaviors and attitudes that are normatively appropriate for the tasks that will lead them to the goal.

It is important to point out that this particular rhetorical method seems to be effective even when holding constant the perceived pro-social importance of the vision itself. In fact, we found that even hospitals vary in the degree to which their vision conveys an obvious social utility. The key mechanism driving performance, we find, is thus located elsewhere—in the language itself and in the streamlined coordination that it facilitates. Thus, although the manager of an acute medical care facility, like the Cleveland Clinic, may be able to more easily construct a compelling, emotionally charged message about its vision and values, this does not mean that a manager in, say, one of Amazon's warehouses cannot access the benefits we are describing. In either case, the key driver of improved performance is a mutually-envisioned and therefore shared organizational purpose, which leads to better coordination between people with different skill-sets and responsibilities.

HOW DO LEADERS TODAY *ACTUALLY* COMMUNICATE ABOUT PURPOSE?

It is not all that novel to suggest that the way a leader communicates is key to organizing with purpose. Indeed, numerous books and articles can be found that insist on the importance of leader communication. Yet these studies often focus on providing advice regarding communication style (e.g., use charismatic body language to establish presence; use carefully-calibrated emotional displays to persuade others) at the expense of the deeper linguistic and rhetorical issues at play. Perhaps because of this lack of language-intensive analysis, many leaders and organizations tend to engage in dysfunctional practices when it comes to communicating about purpose. Most organizations have formal vision, mission, and/or values statements, but as we have all seen, highly abstract statements are the norm. Still, the *ways* in which such statements are abstract can be instructive. In our research, we found two specific maladaptive tendencies.

First, we found that leaders tend to *under*-utilize concrete, image-based language. Indeed, statements of purpose tend to be saturated with phrases that denote virtually no concrete imagery, such as "striving for excellence" or "delivering cutting-edge services in a global marketplace." Often derisively referred to as "corporate-speak," such phrases are endemic to organizations today. (See Table 1 for actual examples of common abstract phrases compared to concrete alternatives.) These abstractions are so common, in fact, that there is even a website that runs a satirical "mission statement generator" (see http://cmorse.org/missiongen/). With the click of a button, anybody can have a professional-sounding statement of purpose, the interchangeability of which speaks to just how widespread this style of statement has become. As another illustration, consider the similarity of the following actual statements of purpose:

1. "Commerce Bank will be the preferred provider of targeted financial services in our communities based on strong customer relationships. We will strengthen these relationships by providing the right solutions that

Table 1 Actual (Current or Past) Organizational Visions: "Image-based" Versus Abstract Words and Phrases.

"Image-based" Phrases	Abstract Phrases
"to put joy in kids' hearts and a smile on parents' faces"	"to be the world leader in…"
"to detect a previously undetectable tumor…inside a human lung…by asking a patient to breathe into a device like ours"	"to be the recognized performance leader in…"
"to make people laugh"	"to be the most trusted provider of…"
"to ensure the security and freedom of our nation…from undersea to outer space, and in cyberspace"	"to be a leading…company… delivering improved shareholder value"
"we believe in long candlelit baths…filling the world with perfume"	"create a better everyday life for many people"
"a computer on every desk and in every home"	"to create long-term value for customers, shareholders, employees"
	"to create a better future every day"

combine our technology, experience and financial strength. Our goal is to create customer loyalty, shareholder value and employee satisfaction."

2. "The mission of People's Community Bank is to be the preferred independent community bank which meets and exceeds the expectations of our customers and communities, by providing excellent customer service, products and value, while maximizing shareholder return, along with maintaining the well-being and satisfaction of our employees."

To be clear, our intention here is not to be critical of these particular companies. Indeed, there are a multitude of other organizations whose statements of purpose lack image-based language and are virtually indistinguishable from those of other companies, including companies in completely different industries. For example, Unilever's vision statement ("Unilever is a unique company, with a proud history and a bright future…") contains language similar to that of Thiess ("…Creating a brighter future, together…"). Unilever is one of the world's largest consumer products companies while Thiess is one of the world's largest mining companies.

Second, we found that leaders tend to *over*-utilize conceptual, values-based language. This trend is most easily seen in corporate values statements, which typically present a dizzying array of desired end-states and guiding principles. For example, the values statement of Riverside Community Hospital in California contains eight primary values: passion for excellence, integrity, dignity, teamwork, diversity, initiative, community partnership, and financial responsibility. Beyond these eight values, the organization includes statements under each one that introduce additional guiding principles, including compassion, respect, quality, gentleness, empathy, fairness, trust, proactivity, financial stability, among others. While this is an extreme case, such values-proliferation is common. Even large corporations like Accenture and Foot Locker exhibit this same pattern. While Foot Locker's "core" values include integrity, leadership, excellence, service, teamwork, innovation, and community, clarifying statements for each also introduce respect, trust, support, diversity, responsibility, and commitment, among others. Accenture's core values statement exhibits a similar

pattern, and there are many other organizations (e.g., Whole Foods, Teach For America) that take a similar tack. In sum, leaders today appear to favor an abundance of conceptual, abstract language—whether in the context of a nebulous vision statement or a lengthy values statement—at the expense of concrete, image-based language paired with a focused set of meanings.

These trends suggest that many leaders may believe they are communicating effectively about purpose, but it is unlikely that their audience members are interpreting these messages in a similar way. Indeed, these members would have an extraordinary amount of freedom to decide how to interpret the purpose of their organization. Such discretion may be useful, in some cases, but if not properly kept in check, this freedom can easily turn into disunity, disagreement, and tension. For example, several researchers explored this problem as it recently played out in the Episcopal Church, the catalyst being the election of the first openly gay bishop, Rev. Gene Robinson. The ordination of Rev. Robinson set off a firestorm of controversy within the church, prompting both liberal and conservative members to advocate for their respective interpretations of the church's defining goals and values. From the ashes of these battles has arisen an inclusive religious organization that yet struggles to clearly define itself and unify its membership, in part because it allows for such an exceedingly wide range of interpretations of its animating values. Is the church focused on promoting inclusivity? Pushing back against the tide of secularism? Fighting for social justice? Advocating for a traditionally Christian interpretation of scripture? The answer, of course, is yes—depending on which member of the church you ask. Each person is likely to have an idiosyncratic view of what the church is striving toward and why it is headed there. Of course, such flexibility can have its advantages, namely, a membership that rarely feels threatened for its beliefs or pressured to conform. Positivity, hope, and well-being may flourish under these conditions. On the other hand, if coordination and performance are the objectives, then clearly this kind of culture has its downsides. Indeed, allowing for a wide range of views on central organizational features can often make unification difficult, just as flexibility can often turn to chaos.

The trends we have thus far outlined may seem to paint a rather grim picture of the possibility of shared purpose in many organizations today. To be sure, in our research we uncovered a strong tendency among leaders toward using visions and values in ways that are less effective. And yet, we also found examples of organizations (e.g., Lush Cosmetics, Lufa Farms, Ducks Unlimited) that seem prescient in their ability to use language differently, in ways that truly motivate, inspire, and unify its members. For example, Ekso Bionics, a manufacturer of wearable robotic prosthetic devices, communicates its vision and values in the following way: "One day, [our] robotic exoskeletons [will] be a viable and accessible option for the millions of wheelchair users who [want] the option the stand up and walk" (eksobionics.com, 2005). As another example, Microsoft, for many years, used a vision statement that similarly depicted a concrete, physical scene: "A computer on every desk and in every home; all running Microsoft software." And, of course, we can point to the example of the Cleveland Clinic, one of the most prestigious hospitals in the United States. The Cleveland Clinic example is notable, moreover, for how other forms of communication were used to ensure the organization's purpose was shared across the entire organization of 43,000 employees. For example, the organization got rid of the term "employees," referring to all organizational members instead as "caregivers" in order to emphasize that everyone's purpose—from janitors to phlebotomists to physicians—is to care for patients. The Clinic also used imagery not only rhetorically, as in Cosgrove's letter, but also *literally*, by creating emotionally-resonant videos about empathy and care—two of the organization's core values.

Looking beyond organizations today, one finds that history is replete with examples of messages whose power lies in the concrete imagery evoked by their language. In 1940, for example, Winston Churchill gave a famous speech to British parliament, the purpose of which was to convince the nation of the severity of the Nazi threat and of Britain's responsibility to continue the costly war effort. At the same time, Churchill needed to inspire confidence in the country's ability to emerge victorious. To accomplish this task, Churchill presented a vivid and harrowing picture of where the country was heading, while yet grounding his words in the core values of national integrity and the triumph of good over evil:

> "We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old."

The impact of Churchill's words was profound, and people around the world immediately understood the speech's historic implications. A politician friend of Churchill's was even reported to have remarked, "My dear Winston. That was worth 1,000 guns and the speeches of 1,000 years."

CREATING A SHARED SENSE OF PURPOSE: A "HOW-TO" GUIDE

Although developing a vivid vision and focused set of values may seem like a straightforward task, the mechanics of the process are not always obvious. One challenge is the human tendency to think far too abstractly—to have only a fuzzy "big picture" idea of things—when considering the future. Moreover, leaders often aspire to create visions that are lofty and all-encompassing, the idea being that such grandiosity will not only be inspirational, but that it will also offer maximum strategic flexibility down the road. However, we would argue that inspiration, strategic flexibility, and image-based language are not mutually-incompatible pursuits. Still, given these and other logistical challenges, a "how-to" guide may be useful. In the remainder of this section, then, we offer a roadmap of sorts for leaders seeking to implement the rhetorical methods we have outlined in this article.

Crafting Vivid Images of the Future

To begin, consider how a vision statement could be crafted such that concrete, sensory images are maximized. One useful way to start is to think about an aspirational event that could be physically observed by members of your organization, one which could therefore also be determined to either have occurred or not and then be celebrated if so—this is what Chip and Dan Heath in their book, Made to Stick, have labeled the "champagne test." This mental exercise can go a long way in eliminating purely abstract organizational goals. For example, when Jim Rudolph assumed ownership of Rita's Italian Ice in 2005, he saw tremendous expansion potential. In pursuing that expansion, Jim and his team placed happiness at the center of the company's purpose. "When people come up to the counter," Jim was quoted as saying, "one thing I can assure you is that they're happy." In seeking to articulate that purpose further, the company subscribed to a vision in which customers are given "a chance to be carefree, to escape the pressures of everyday life, to take a moment for themselves and enjoy a great big, fresh, delicious serving of happiness." Moreover, it is a vision in which "Treat Teams stop at nothing to ensure each Guest enjoys the freshest, highest quality treats—served quickly and with a smile". Such a scene is both physically observable and vivid in its portrayal of "treats" and "smiles." When Jim and his team took over Rita's in 2005, the organization had 109 locations. By 2011, Rita's had expanded to more than 600 locations and in 2013 opened its first international location in Shenzhen, China. In sum, if you, the leader, cannot realistically imagine members of your organization witnessing the aspirational event you have outlined, or if you imagine a goal that nobody at any point will be able to say has been accomplished or not, then chances are that you are thinking in terms of abstractions rather than concrete, imagistic language. In such cases, the idea can (and, we would argue, should) be jettisoned.

Next, the specific words and phrases you use to craft your purpose statements must be given careful consideration. Specifically, you will want to prioritize words that have a high degree of "imageability," or that can easily conjure up a crisp image in the minds of an audience. But which words can accomplish this? Research in cognitive science, psychology,

and psycholinguistics is instructive here. Various studies in these fields shed light on the types of words that are likely (as well as unlikely) to generate mental imagery. The types that generate imagery include the following:

1. Nouns that refer directly to the physical features and sensory aspects of a particular object, rather than to, say, properties which may be a generic feature of many objects ("leaves" or "trunk" when describing a tree as opposed to "vegetation" and "wood")
2. Verbs that convey a precise physical gesture or motion, rather than a generic action layered with adverbs (e.g., "whisper" as opposed to "speak softly")
3. Nouns that are familiar to most people and thus easier to recall in memory (e.g., a global celebrity as opposed to a local celebrity from a distant country)

Through experimental methods, cognitive scientists and psychologists have developed comprehensive lists of "imageable" words. In Table 2, we have included a selection of image-based (vs. abstract) words based on these research findings. We suggest that, if possible, a

Table 2 "Image-based" Words Versus Abstract Words.

"Image-based" Words	Abstract Words
Costume	Learning
Cloud	Jeopardy
Brush	Mastery
Mirror	Truth
Machine	Chance
Airplane	Virtue
Pencil	Treat
Bible	Attitude
Garden	Quench
Scissors	Facility
Asphalt	Compulsion
Timber	Decency
Pepper	Health
Animal	Origin
Balloon	Capable
Apartment	Wealth
Dentist	Entry
Crutch	Excuse
Factory	Glory
Cards	Patriotism
Liquor	Dare
Newspaper	Fault
Jewel	Capability
Basket	Legend
Orange	Fiction
Eagle	Ability
Building	Grace
Penny	Method
Magazine	Impression
Poison	Permission
Tower	Concept
Mouth	Chaos
Movie	Conquest
Cigar	Essence
Elephant	Advice

leader crafting a statement of purpose would do well to incorporate words that match the types described above.

Focusing Organizational Values

Finally, consider what it means to have a focused set of values. Precisely because values often serve as guides for action, in addition to communicating desired end-states, the natural tendency is to attempt to communicate a broad range of "positive" values. Moreover, being seen as a "values-based" organization would seem to have many reputational benefits—and thus, it seems, the more values, the better. As we have described, however, this tendency can be counter-productive when it comes to coordination and performance. Still, effectively winnowing down values may be trickier than it seems. One reason for this difficulty is that having a distinctive set of values depends on also having a clear sense of the organization's distinctive identity. In order to find out just how distinctive your organization truly is, we recommend an exercise first suggested by Adam Brandenburger and Barry Nalebuff. The exercise is to simply imagine the world with your organization in it versus the world without it. If the world loses something in your organization's (hypothetical) absence, you can be confident that therein lies your organization's unique identity. In 2010, Clark Gilbert took over as President of Deseret News, an online and print news service owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Gilbert embarked on an aggressive strategy focused on reorienting and retooling the organization for the digital age. As part of that strategy, Gilbert and his team considered the identity and values of the organization. Gilbert described what they learned: "Our readers have been clear that they want more than information. They crave and deserve insight, context and thought leadership relevant to the events and issues of the day from sources they trust. The values we champion are time-honored concepts that belong to people of goodwill around the world." Those values revolve around two issues that Gilbert and his team discovered were vital to readers of the Deseret News: faith and the family. In other words, the unique added value the Deseret News brought to the market was its ability to provide "insight, context and thought leadership" around faith and the family. That conclusion was perhaps not surprising given the newspaper's ownership, yet the Deseret News had been well known for its lack of oversight by its owner. Nevertheless, Gilbert and his team recognized that the organization's connection to faith and the family was unique, distinctive and valuable to readers. Gilbert has summarized the organization's renewed focus in this way: "We want to own faith and the family the way the Washington Post owns politics". At a time when print circulation of newspapers was declining in general, the Deseret News experienced tremendous growth. For example, between March 2011 and March 2012, circulation of its Sunday edition grew from 79,436 to 160,617, making it one of the fastest growing newspapers in the country. Such success was, in part, predicated on a renewed understanding of the organization's distinctive identity—and the focused set of values that came as a result.

While we have suggested one thought exercise for thinking about your organization's distinctive identity, we certainly do not claim it as the only method. The key point, however, is that leaders need to put thought and effort into understanding

what the world would lose in the hypothetical absence of their organizations. That understanding should be at the heart of the desired end-states and guides to action embedded in the values statement. To further winnow down and focus the list of values, we further suggest that leaders subject each value to the following test: "*If we no longer communicated this value, would we retain—or perhaps even enhance—our distinctive identity?*" To use values effectively, then, we are suggesting that organizations first seek to get clarity around what makes their organization distinct and then use that distinctiveness to guide the selection of a set of focused organizational values.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have presented a framework for thinking about the role of leader language in communicating about purpose and the impact it has on organizational performance. Our framework suggests that purpose statements infused with the "right" kind of language can improve cooperation and coordination. Such language consists of two key elements: (1) concrete, image-based language centered on the organization's long-term goals combined with (2) focused (i.e., limited) conceptual language centered on the values (i.e., desired end-states and guides to action) of the organization. Such carefully crafted messages can have a powerful impact not simply by effectively communicating a meaningful purpose, but by doing so in a way that creates a shared sense of that purpose across individuals in the organization.

We have also outlined how leaders appear to generally craft purpose statements in counter-productive ways. Thus, we could also speculate that the disengagement among members of organizations today may not simply be the result of work that seems meaningless to them or because their organizations have failed to communicate anything at all about purpose. Instead, it may be because they and their fellow members do not share the *same* understanding of the organization's purpose. Camaraderie, fellowship, community, and teamwork cannot easily flourish under such conditions, and the loss of meaning and motivation may be the inevitable result. Whether or not this speculation holds in reality, the benefits of a shared sense of purpose are difficult to deny. People simply perform better when they have a common interpretation of their organization's purpose because they have a unified sense for *what* they are collectively working toward and *why* they are doing the tasks they have been assigned. The values of the organization can thus be "brought to life" by the concrete images of the future, conveyed by the leader's vision, and vice versa.

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