

Meaning and Purpose Network (MaPNet) thought-piece series

# Communicating purpose



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**If you don't  
communicate  
your purpose,  
it will remain a  
useless cultural  
artefact**

Organisational purpose and how we successfully communicate it came to mind recently as I was watching an episode of the TV programme *The Repair Shop*. A craftswoman had to restore a badly damaged Victorian pot that had been lovingly brought to life on a pedal-powered potter's wheel – the product of human effort, time, money, and expertise.

Imagine if that pot, when it was first created, had remained unused because of the risk that it might break and need to be repaired. The pot stays hidden away, an untouched, beautiful artefact serving no function. It can be the same with organisational purpose. Once we've figured out our purpose, rather than it being stress-tested through rigorous communication and becoming more valuable with use and age, it can remain invisible and pristine.

How do you communicate your purpose so that it serves its function as your organisational North Star, fully integrated into the business, and brought to life for all your stakeholders? If you don't communicate your purpose, it will remain a useless cultural artefact. Let's remember the oft-used adage 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'. Similarly, successfully communicating purpose is essential if you are to ensure it doesn't just become a mid-morning snack that leaves your people hungry for meaning by lunchtime.

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## Language shapes behaviour

I'm passionate about the need for purpose-led business and I specifically help organisations craft narratives that create change. Indeed, my mantra is 'truthful stories powerfully told can drive transformational change'. In that spirit, I'm going to share some thoughts on communicating purpose based on many years in global communications and sustainability roles, including as Fellow at the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership.

These are key practices or fundamental 'do's' and 'don'ts' when it comes to communicating purpose. However, I offer these up with a word of caution. As communications professionals know all too well, language has the power to shape our behaviour and even the words 'do's' and 'don'ts' are loaded. A more accurate framing might be 'try' and 'avoid'.

With all these suggestions, the first step is to notice. When you start this organisational dance, in the language of systems scholar Donella Meadows: 'Get the beat. Before you disturb the system in any way, watch how it behaves.' Communications experts start with 'noticing' the mood of the organisation and tailoring their messaging to what will land best.

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## Stakeholder expectations

Nowadays, all our stakeholders expect us to have a business purpose. The Great Realignment has shown that current employees, as well as future recruits, make choices based on a company's values. The flurry of B Corps and mission-driven organisations is proof of the shift towards purpose becoming 'business as usual' – this also affects the decisions that partners and suppliers make about who they work with. Similarly, we are seeing customers and consumers make active choices based on the question 'is this good for me and the planet as well as just the business's coffers?'. What this means is that if we do not clearly communicate our purpose to our stakeholders, our organisations will not thrive.

I have worked both in global communications agencies and in-house. Whether in consultancy or corporate roles, the question I heard most often in meetings was, 'How do we communicate our purpose so that people understand it and are motivated and inspired to take action?'. This, I would suggest, is the holy grail of purpose.

Clearly, communicating purpose well is important. But what are some of the challenges that can arise and how do we overcome them?

## Challenges to communicating purpose

Let's consider what gets in the way of communicating our purpose in the early stages. Put simply, perfect is the enemy of the good – we can fixate on going for the gold star rather than the North Star. So often in workshops, when I invite people to practice communicating their purpose to a fellow participant, they doggedly remain scribbling, muttering 'It's not finished yet.'

We underestimate the importance of testing, refining, and getting feedback from others in the early stages. I've often seen people struggling with what I call 'perfection paralysis'. Professor Robert Holden has termed this 'destination addiction', where we obsess about the end of the rainbow rather than considering the impact our everyday decisions have on the world around us. He says that to live with purpose is to make the means the end, as well as the end the means. In other words, the end is in how we are communicating our organisational purpose in every moment.

Communicating and living your business purpose is the work of a lifetime but it starts with the first step. Don't panic, instead, practice and pilot. Start with exploration, experimentation, be curious about how it lands and open to the fact that it may be received differently to how you intended. Listen, learn, and reflect back what you've heard. This is the

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start of the process of communicating purpose. It needs to be owned by everyone in the organisation and beyond, in the same way a new baby is welcomed by everyone in the extended family. It takes a village to raise a child and it takes an organisational eco-system to breathe life into your purpose.

Purpose is not something that should explode on stage with the brand gurus, walk-on music and fireworks. As an avid am-dramer, I know that, to make a performance a success, you need twice as many people behind the scenes as there are on stage. In organisations, that starts with every single employee, not just the executive sponsors, and your purpose needs to radiate out to customers, partners, suppliers, peers, communities, and competitors. Dr Zella King is the creator of a concept called Your Personal Boardroom, which looks at how to expand your influence and have conversations with purpose. Everyone should be invited to your purpose boardroom including critics and detractors. The more voices that are involved in the creation of your purpose statement, the more robust it will be when you start to communicate it.

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## The power of the pause

In storytelling, we often talk about ‘the power of the pause’ – the moments of silence when people really lean in to what you are saying. Hitting ‘the purpose pause button’ can also ensure that you act with intention and use the business purpose as an anchor in a crisis, stabilising the team when there is no precedent.

During the pandemic, the businesses that flourished were the ones whose purpose came to life when truly tested, where employees felt seen and cared for when they needed it most. Leaders in organisations did this by ensuring that their actions spoke louder than words. In many instances, this resulted in a purpose-led pivot, a business model transformation to support the Covid crisis – from perfume companies shifting from scent to sanitiser, to fashion brands making scrubs.

Bringing this back to the successful communication of purpose, this means finding moments as a team to reflect on what has been achieved and what more needs to be done. Are your communications successfully reaching all parts of the organisation or do you need to pause or pivot to finesse the plan?

The pandemic was proof for many that purpose is not only for the good times. While pauses and pivots are to be applauded, stay alert to the potential for paralysis – times when communicating purpose is a ‘nice to have’ but when comms are shelved because profits become precarious.

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## Align organisational and personal purpose

# 60,000

Number of Unilever employees who participated in a day-long workshop, culminating in the crafting of a personal purpose statement

Communicating purpose starts with your people and making it personal and relevant to them. Some employees say that they only hear their leaders talking passionately about their purpose behind closed doors. If that is the case, you are creating a polarising disconnect that signals that your purpose is not integral to the business.

Unilever is an example of a company that works hard to enable employees to align their personal purpose with the organisational purpose. To date, 60,000 employees have participated in a day-long workshop which culminates in the crafting of a personal purpose statement, and people are expected to share their purpose with their teams. In some cases, employees have changed role to ensure they are living their purpose in their work. Moreover, the company's annual people survey shows that people who are living their purpose thrive, with important benefits for the business: 92% say they would go the extra mile (versus 30% of people who didn't go through the workshop).

From having worked with senior leaders at Unilever, I can also attest to the fact that their personal purpose is very much at the forefront of how they talk about the business and their role in it. Microsoft's head of learning and insight, Joe Wittinghill, also talks about the importance of helping people find their personal purpose and aligning it to the organisation. This starts with communicating our purpose with clarity.

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## Cross the gap between intention and action

Communicating true intent about your business purpose comes not with what you say but what you do – it's the moment when you cross the gap between intention and action. This involves ensuring that the purpose is embedded in all aspects of the organisation's hardware such as systems, processes, incentives, policies, metrics, operations, and investments, as well as cultural software such as principles, practices, training, and safe spaces. For communications folk, this means scrutinising the language used in all these vehicles and ensuring it reflects the language of your purpose.

Shifting to being truly purpose-led can be challenging and complex and it is important to be transparent with employees about the work required. If you are not prepared for this level of transformation, you are perpetuating purpose-washing which can destroy trust, reputation, and market value. Purpose becomes a mockery when it is not embodied in practice but is seen as mere marketing jargon or veneer.

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## Expand to external stakeholders

Communicating clarity of purpose to stakeholders beyond your organisation can help your business to innovate and develop progressive policies and products that support systems level change. When external stakeholders such as investors, civil society partners, and your communities understand your purpose, as well as your internal stakeholders, you can reap even greater rewards. This can translate to benefits including loyalty, trust, productivity and ultimately profit.

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## The value of persistence



Scandinavia bank Nordea conducted more than 1,500 coffee-corner discussions

The moment when you think all your stakeholders understand your purpose, and it is truly embedded in the business, is the moment when you must keep going. The biggest mistake I see people make is to stop communicating after they have said it once. The goal of shifting mindsets and behaviour, inspiring and equipping stakeholders to think and act differently, is not a quick fix. It is an iterative process that requires leaders at all levels to dig deep, demonstrate the behaviours they wish to cultivate, and ask themselves and others ‘have we communicated the “why”, and what more is required to support others to bring the purpose to life?’. Most importantly, it requires deep listening to the responses.

For example, in an initiative to re-examine its purpose, over a period of six months, Nordea, a large bank in Scandinavia, listened to more than 7,000 people in workshops, through online surveys and in more than 1,500 coffee-corner discussions. Now that’s what deep listening looks like!

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## Shift culture through stories

For culture to shift, to be truly ingrained in ‘how we do things round here’, purpose needs to be talked about regularly and stories shared. Anyone who has ever had a dental brace knows that if they don’t regularly use a retainer and have permanent wires put in place, their teeth will move back.

It’s the same with culture. If we are to hardwire purpose into our organisations and inspire all our stakeholders, we need to continually communicate the why and the how and keep asking ourselves – how does this project impact our purpose? How am I contributing to our purpose?

## Conclusion

Purpose drives all business and the most successful are those that understand that purpose is a shared vision. Your purpose is not 'owned' by any one individual or team but is contributed to by all your stakeholders. Openness and transparency are key to communicating purpose – do not expect to get buy-in if it's decided behind closed doors.

Purpose may shift as circumstances change – but the core purpose will remain true to your values. And beware, when purpose goes, so do your core values. Even when a business purpose is well-established, do not take it for granted that your stakeholders will always know exactly what it is. Businesses are always in flux. So keep communicating and finessing your purpose to ensure you are truly purpose-powered as an organisation!

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### Dos/trys

Do start by listening to all voices, even detractors.

Do hit the purpose pause button to ensure that purpose is your anchor for action.

Do make it personal – start with your personal purpose and align it to the organisational purpose.

Do communicate intent through not just what you say but what you do - embed purpose in the firm's hardware and software. Do use connecting language.

Do continue. Do listen deeply, share stories, explain the 'why' and ask questions.

### Don'ts/avoids

Don't let perfect become the enemy of the good. Don't panic, pilot.

Don't let your pause become a permanent paralysis.

Don't create polarising disconnects between what is said behind closed doors and in public.

Don't become guilty of purpose-washing where purpose is just a marketing campaign or slogan. Don't use marketing jargon.

Don't assume the job of communicating and embedding purpose is ever done.

### About the author

Zoë Arden is an independent leadership and stakeholder engagement specialist and Fellow at the University of Cambridge's Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL). She designs and delivers leadership programmes, supporting business leaders to deepen their leadership, purpose, influence, and impact. She is passionate about helping individuals to build their capability, confidence, courage, and commitment to drive change in their context.

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The opinions presented in this report are those of the author and do not represent the official position of King's Business School.



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