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By Alexander Mackenzie

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A Storytelling perspective

He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened.
Lao Tsu

By weaving artistic practice into leadership training, executives can gain a profound understanding of organizational challenges and opportunities, facilitating better decision-making. A well-told story appeals to intellectual intelligence by presenting intricate information in a digestible and relatable manner, fostering clearer strategic thinking and visionary purpose.

Allow yourself to think differently about leadership for a moment. Just imagine that the issue is not **what** you know but instead **how** you know.

The Art of Contemplation

Contemplation in this context is the place where conceptual knowledge meets the non-conceptual. As a leader it is impossible to make sense of intellectual, emotional and visceral intelligence connections without resorting to the 'inward gaze' of contemplation.

Contemplation in this capacity has the scope to be qualitatively more engaging than thoughtful reflection. Contemplation opens the possibility of rising above the two-sided understanding of right and wrong and instead allows the compassionate response of 'perhaps'. Leadership that facilitates 'perhaps' is more rounded and open to creativity.

As Rumi, the 13-Century poet, puts it in his poem 'Story Water' when he says:

"Water, stories, the body,
all the things we do, are mediums
that hide and show what's hidden."

Instead of the fluency of concepts that are available to contemporary thinking, we can explore the alternative intelligence of visceral awareness. Visceral awareness has at its heart the field of contemplation. Contemplation knows what is 'on' before reasoning words.

Visceral awareness results in how the body feels with seminal fuller knowing. To be sensitive to how the body responds, is a decision is to be viscerally intelligent.

A well-told story appeals to intellectual intelligence by presenting intricate information in a digestible and relatable manner, fostering clearer strategic thinking and visionary purpose.

If you are wondering about visceral intelligence, consider first the ancient art of mandalas and the use of images before words. They have a very practical methodology that underpins leadership. It has a visual appearance first, that later emerges as conceptual thinking.

Mandalas

Mandalas are images that act as visual metaphors of self-realization and group awareness. Although mandalas have their roots in eastern culture, they are pertinent today as prompts of awareness to throw a light on current business leadership practice. A mandala (Sanskrit for "circle") is an artistic representation of higher thought and deeper meaning. Mandalas have been used to explore the spiritual, emotional, or psychological work and to focus one's attention on what lives most saliently behind the surface.

As a leader it is impossible to make sense of intellectual, emotional and visceral intelligence connections without resorting to the 'inward gaze' of contemplation.

The details of the meaning of a given mandala depend on the individual or peers creating or observing the image, but mandalas in many cultures serve, more or less, the same purpose of centring an individual or community on a given narrative in order to encourage introspection and, ultimately, an awareness of one's place and purpose in the world; this awareness then allows for peace of mind.

Below is an example of a management group that decided to explore personal mandalas as a way to express themselves individually as a precursor to talking about how they felt being in the organization.

The creation of a personal mandala is used to explore and posit a reframing of the individual self and relevant organization mores. As such leaders are able to communicate and share complex concepts succinctly and coherently in a creative way. Through the proactive application

of the spoken word and the active use of imagery in synchronicity it is possible to converse in a much more profound way, the individual's expression and personal understanding of leadership experientially.

What image comes up when you are asked to capture your essence as an image? How is this image influenced by peers contributing to this image? Before waxing lyrical about your potential as an informed ISTJ-type, or as a mover-and-shaker, you may find yourself talking about yourself as a type of tree or a style of boat, as an animal or vibrancy of colour, that has pictorially emerged in your image as a leader reframed.

A mandala image adds another layer of meaning to the more familiar use of post-it notes to explore personal sharing, which too often offers a more limited range of expression.

Organizational reframe

Organizational reframe is a more contemporary exploration of mandalas. A word-based exercise which results in the image above, can become more personal in feedback as one becomes more individualistic in response. Especially as you allow yourself to wax lyrical and use image words and metaphors.

Using written metaphors for actual lived experience and including a few words or a sentence about your-

Although mandalas have their roots in eastern culture, they are pertinent today as prompts of awareness to throw a light on current business leadership practice.

self and your peers, might relate to an actual experience within the organization, such as a 'cloudy sky' or 'walking a tightrope' or maybe the presence of a 'dragon' in your team. This process can quite inadvertently, without difficulty expose the participant, making them vulnerable as it creates greater awareness of the organizational underbelly.

The nature of metaphors and images, like poetry, have a natural tendency to being truthful and personal. Poetry is the language of the heart before it becomes the content of the head. Poetry is the domain of picture-building before it arrives at conceptual meaning.

The 'Big Picture' of Leadership

To work with the 'Big Picture' of leadership you will need to have a working knowledge of the 'little pictures' that often govern organizational life. It is important for a leader to become more aware of *how* they say what they say.

A group of senior managers from a corporate university create a shared image as an organizational reframe. Such an experience affords a sharing that is not possible with words alone. It illuminates contemplation to use color and image.

Your ability to 'see' the Big Picture of the organization determines your ability to lead in that organization.
Storytelling can also be an organizational reframe
Think for a moment about your living story. As a spoken personal narrative, it is a far cry from the fairytale narrative of Rumplestiltskin or the pictorial come-up-pance that becomes evident in the Three Pigs. These

stories are by design more like fables with a single point of learning. They are not built to share the complexities of personal narrative. When we speak out loud about our personal anxieties and triumphs, we evoke compassion and understanding in the listeners.

It is also very different from the media saturation of 'alternative facts' and spin. The aim of such hyperbole is to enjoin a certain kind of prescribed attention rather than explore the truth. Such stories do not anticipate a search for a deeper human context. When we talk about the 'community' of the business and rather than leveraging personal praise as a relevant signpost for such a community, refer instead to the most significant KPI, we

Calypso promised Odysseus eternal fame as a God if he paid homage only to her. How do we talk to those that respect us about a work/ life balance?

Odyssey : All at sea ; The journey is the adventure – no problems, only opportunities in the organization of the future.

The story of the Odyssey may well be the first story ever written, but it has lessons today for the organization of the future. The questions are as timely today as they were relevant then. Questions such as:

- Whom do you trust as a friend in the organization?
- Who has got your back at work? Who do you support, whatever?
- What do you do, when you don't know what to do?
- What do the shadows out of sight conceal?
- What does bravery look like in this organization?
- When does a leader lead the way?

At the very least, learning to speak out a version of the Odyssey as corporate professionals can lead to laughter, telling a good yarn and taking a risk while sounding authentic and credible. The Odyssey is a rollicking tale of love and loss, of daring to do the unusual, of being driven by fame and treasure, of learning about real trust when the chips are down.

are at risk of not being perceived as trustworthy.

Rather, working with the enlightening aspect of story-making calls upon three types of intelligence:

- **The intellectual:** The ability of the leader to rationalize, use logic effectively, know the difference between fact and fiction, apply critical thinking to reduce abstraction and 'spin', are all important to demonstrate intellectual prowess in leadership.
- **The emotional:** The ability of leaders to relate to others, using their emotional intelligence to demonstrate prosody, people awareness and seeing when character types are behaving true to form.
- T**he visceral:** is most telling when leaders say nothing and instead rely on presence and leadership persona to act out leading the way. This form of intelligence calls upon visceral intelligence to point out an attitude of contemplation that sits in the hub of leadership intelligence.

Storytelling relies on this Wheel of Intelligence.

In this frame of mind we can explore the story of the Odyssey, as one of the first ever spoken stories of all times, to ask the questions that have always faced a leader:

- When do you lead and how do you listen?
- How might deeper listening seem like a 'giving away' of control?

It is important for a leader to become more aware of how they say what they say.

Another story, The Parzival Legend (the medieval chivalric romance) asks us to discuss the context today of the real difference between the fool and the hero in his escapades to becoming a leader of all those around him? It is worth contemplating for example how might it be a deliberate business manner to appear gauche or naive?

When we combine these with artistic expressions such as the mandalas about the self and reframes about the organization, we may find ourselves with more questions than answers.

As the discussion moves away from academic certitude to the challenge of leadership being a very personal endeavor making calls on our integrity all along the journey, it can be a real time adventure!

It is our job to make sense of all this and luckily we have intellectual frameworks to do this, as well as peers that can be relied on as friends and, hopefully, a refreshing sense of self-appraisal and wonder.

But it also helps no end, to have a practice of contemplation for our leadership. If we are unlucky enough to work with someone who not only does not have a practice but who looks furrowed when anybody mentions storytelling, image making or artistic thinking, we know what it is like to *not* have a leader.

The Odyssey and the Island of the Lotus Eaters

This image is a depiction of one Urilicus, one of the heroes of the Odyssey who succumbed to the excesses of distraction in his quest for wealth until he was pulled away by Odysseus who dared to open his eyes to the temptation of pleasure.

When we can embrace uncertainty, difficult decisions and meet unruly behaviour with joyful abundance, you can be sure that a leader in the organization is not far away. If you are lucky enough to have a fearless leader, chocks away!

Contemplation is in the essence of 'Big Picture' of leadership

Big Picture leadership requires a form of contemplation that is a sophisticated use of the different kinds of intelligence that make up the Wheel of Intelligence. They

Storytelling cultivates empathy by sharing personal experiences and emotions, enabling leaders to connect compassionately with their teams.

are intellectual, emotional and visceral intelligence. Contemplation is the separate axis on which these three intelligences revolve.

Visceral intelligence uses the body and non-conceptual thinking as the center of self-awareness . Emotional intelligence holds others to account. Intellectual knowledge remains constant as the information is common to all.

Contemplation requires the user to put to one side that what has taken years to get right. It factors in conceptual thinking as only one dimension of understanding.

It respectfully asks the age old question "What do you do when you do not know what to do?"

Instead of an errant nonsense reply, this question asks from a well-trodden koan perspective. That is, the Zen Buddhist story-type that provokes great doubt, leading to greater insight, often in the form of a paradoxical anecdote or riddle without a solution.

It is the remit of the Art of Contemplation and its concomitant Big Picture leadership.

It asks us to be wise, trusting of the heart and to take risks. It also may ask us to be fearless.

Head, Heart and Body

Emotional intelligence is recognized as being crucial in building strong relationships and fostering teamwork. Storytelling cultivates empathy by sharing personal experiences and emotions, enabling leaders to connect compassionately with their teams. This in turn fosters trust, loyalty, and a sense of belonging among team members, with the end-game of leading to a more positive work culture.

Visceral intelligence, as the bridge that connects bodily feeling to what we intellectually know is sometimes overlooked and is crucial to the important role in making experiences impactful. Storytelling can engage the senses, and makes for establishing a lasting impression. Leaders who master the verbal art of crafting the spoken word, by being more aware of their prosody (the patterns of stress and intonation in a language), and presence as well as being strong in visually reframing concepts, can evoke emotions better and influence and inspire their teams, driving them by example to achieve exceptional results.

The Next Step

It's time to take the next step. You can use your head and trust the difference between the Enneagram[1] or develop-

mental models to factor a reliable way forward. You can use the Johari Window[2] or explore the merits of competencies as your organizational matrix.

You can rely on your team for the strengths of a Belbin 'Mover and Shaker[3]' to make a commercial difference. You can know that an optimistic choleric[4] has a different future plan from you and the more even strategic phlegmatic may take a broader view. This is the team that will shape the future of your organization.

It is you that is a measurement for confidence beyond words, that exudes your leadership style in your self deprecating laughter as well as being able to see the problem from both sides. It is only you that upholds your time out and your ability to contemplate the Bigger Picture and fashion the next chapter.

Alexander Mackenzie is an artist and an executive coach. His work lives on the intersection between creative initiative and corporate development. He has for many years led a storytelling skills program at Cranfield School of Management called Winning Hearts and Minds (WHAM).

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1 https://www.truity.com/test/enneagram-personality-test

2 https://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/glossary/johari-window

3 https://www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles

4 https://fourtemperaments.com/15-temperament-blends/

By Ingrid Pope

De-cluttering

Creating space for sustainability

"Hello, I haven't seen you for a long time. How are things?"

"Yes, it's been a while! Things are really busy. It's somehow even busier than before, though that hardly seems possible."

Does this sound familiar? I hear it a lot, from many leaders. Repeatedly. We seem to be at capacity, or probably somewhere beyond capacity, most of the time. And somehow from one year to the next, our busy-ness still ramps up. It has been an on-going trend for at least a decade and it is not slowing down. Quite the opposite.

Increased digitization of everything means that we have to carry out many more tasks than we used to: every activity now requires us to log onto an app or platform to go and do something ourselves.

Businesses are under incredible pressure to perform and deliver profits, especially in the current economic climate. Over the years, budgets have been whittled down again and again, leaving staff to deliver increasingly more with ever-reducing resources (both financial and human), more and more quickly. And this in an age where our life admin is also becoming increasingly complex.

The term "shadow work" was coined to describe all the tasks that we now have to perform as businesses and public services push more and more activities onto employees/service users. The joys of the DIY economy! The increased digitization of everything means that we have to carry out many more tasks than we used to: every activity now requires us to log onto an app or platform to go and do something ourselves, both at work and at home. Is anybody actually on top of all their passwords?

Taken individually, none of these activities are very difficult or time-consuming. But collectively, they add up to an incredible amount of time and mental energy to simply run the admin of our work and lives. We are at saturation, often spinning dozens of plates at once, and a small hiccup can make them all come crashing down. And that is before we even look at what we might need to deliver as part of our actual job.

This takes its toll. Burn-out and mental ill-health are on a steady rise, costing businesses dearly. The estimate earlier this year was that work-related stress and burnout is currently costing the UK economy £28bn a year. For employees, the cost is not only their mental health, but also their physical health, their relationships, the ripple effects on their family and friends.

In this context, it can feel impossible to have the head space to consider the bigger themes of our lives. How do we focus on our vision (at work or at home), when our time and energy is spent fire-fighting every day and simply keeping going without falling off the treadmill?

How do we create the space to introduce an agenda as complex as sustainability in a way that it becomes the heart of everything that we do, rather than just another box that needs to be ticked?

Those are big questions that can feel overwhelming, and a typical reaction to big questions like these is

to retreat into the familiar and just keep going on our treadmill. And that is what I am interested in. I am curious about how the clutter in our lives gets in our way, in the way of the big stuff, and keeps us right where we are. Only once we actually see it all laid out, how it is interconnected, what habits we have developed and what choices are available to us, only then can we consider ways of de-cluttering some of that stuff that keeps us stuck where we are.

Clutter? What does that mean? And how does it have anything to do with driving a sustainability agenda as a leader?

How about your employees, how much mental clutter are they carrying these days and how much mental capacity do they have for change of any kind?

We go through life accumulating all manner of stuff. Some of that will be physical stuff. That is the obvious, tangible and most visible manifestation of this accumulation. But alongside all the stuff we can see is also stuff that is less visible: there are our thoughts, our habits, our inner chatter, our feelings, our emotions, our beliefs… Then, there is also the broader context and the organizational stories and beliefs, habits and assumptions…

In my work studying clutter and its effects on people and businesses, I identified a number of different types of clutter. Each type impacts on us differently, but they are all interconnected and together, they contribute to making us feel stressed and overwhelmed. We will take a look at a few of these types of clutter shortly.

But before we get stuck in a bit more detail, I do want to make one thing clear though. Clutter in itself is not a bad thing, far from it! Who would we be without our inner world of thoughts, feelings and emotions, or the items that make up our ideal work environments or our homely cozy spaces? And many of our habits that we have developed over our lifetime are very useful to us.

Alongside the number of hours in the day, the other finite resource we have is our mental capacity.

Clutter does need our attention, however, when it gets in our way, when it stops us or those around us from doing the big stuff, both at work and at home. That is when we need to take a closer look and step into action.

Now let's turn our focus back to our sustainability agenda. What types of clutter could get in your way from delivering the changes needed at the pace required? If you observe your patterns and habits around this topic, what do you notice? Let's take a look at what might trip us up.

The first and probably most obvious area to look at is our diaries, and that of our team(s). The likelihood is that most of our hours are already filled one way or another. We are busy, the world is busy, work is busy. So if we want to start doing something new (like thinking sustainably), we need to stop doing something else, at least for a while.

But so often, we are asked to deliver ever more, without the recognition that something else will have to give. Does this sound familiar?

Just like budgets running out, our personal resources are also limited and will become depleted. So of course

we might look at what drains us versus what energizes us, and plan to build in those activities that will nourish us. But in the end, there are only so many hours in the day, and only so much that we can achieve. Unless sustainability is given sufficient time in calendars, it will not happen. How much time are you ring-fencing to focus on this in your organization and team, and is it enough?

Alongside the number of hours in the day, the other finite resource we have is our mental capacity. As increasingly more media stories report on all manner of topics related to climate change, the health of the planet, large-scale migration, rising inequality, the dying of the oceans, micro-plastic pollution and a host of other big macro-problems, what do you notice is your mental chatter around these stories? Do you give them much air-time in your mind? Is your brain at capacity with everything else you are dealing with at the moment? Or does it all feel too overwhelming to consider without falling into despair?

And how about your employees, how much mental clutter are they carrying these days and how much mental capacity do they have for change of any kind?

Our resources are finite. Just like there are only so many hours in the day, we also have only a finite amount of brain processing power in our pre-frontal cortex.

The pre-frontal cortex is located at the front of the

brain, and it is the part of the brain which carries out the executive function, meaning that this is the part of the brain where all our day-time processing takes place. It is where we take in information and make decisions based on goals, preferences, judgments on whether something is good or bad, where we work out consequences of our actions. This is essentially the machine-room that allows us to function, and which drives our actions.

And this part of the brain, this pre-frontal cortex, can only handle so many processes at any one time. Even if it is quite impressive in its abilities, it is none-theless limited, resetting itself and cleansing its memory whilst we sleep (so yes, looking at what clutter might get in the way of us getting a good night's sleep is also useful).

In our age of information overload, stimulus overload, out-of-control inboxes, addiction-inducing distracting communication and social media platforms - our digital clutter - as well as a general sense of never quite being on top of things, simply dealing with our day-to-day lives creates so much mental noise that makes it difficult to stay focused on any one activity or task for any length of time.

To implement anything new requires energy, we cannot keep piling change upon change and objective after objective and expect individuals to perform well if we do not first de-clutter and create some space for this new stuff. And so it is also for any sustainability agenda.

We need to clear some mental clutter to create head space for the thinking around the change that needs to happen to truly embed sustainability. Are you, your team

Our emotions are a part of us and we carry them with us in everything that we do. They are what makes us human, and in the age of the rise of AI, we might want to hold onto those as much as possible!

and the rest of the organization in a place where you are able to do this properly? What unhelpful mental clutter will you put aside in order to make this a success?

Finally, another area of clutter that gets in the way of us focusing on and implementing our sustainability agenda is our emotional clutter. Our emotions are a part of us and we carry them with us in everything that we do. They are what makes us human, and in the age of the rise of AI, we might want to hold onto those as much as possible!

So let's identify what emotions we might be holding around sustainability and consider how we might put them to good use.

Quite often when I speak with leaders, they seem conflicted and uncertain about what they feel. On some level, there is the above-mentioned despair and over-whelm, but on another level, there is also optimism and hope. The key is to find a way to hold all these different emotions simultaneously, simply acknowledging that they are there and know that they will be fluid. The same

will hold true for everyone else around us too, and unless we pay attention to what others will feel at a particular point in time, we will fail to connect with and engage them as well as we might.

Yes, it might feel awkward to start talking about our emotions at work. But equally, if we cannot align our emotions with whatever we are trying to do, we will not be as successful as we could be, and it will all feel like an incredible struggle. So find a way to talk to your team about emotions, yours and theirs, about the topic of sustainability, and you might be surprised at what you find out.

We have now covered a few different types of clutter (in our diaries, in our minds, digital, our emotions - there are more!), and highlighted some that might get in our way. What do we do about it all?

Step 1: We call the clutter out for what it is. We pay atten-tion to all the stuff that holds us back, keeps us stuck in what we have always done, keeps us safe from the unknown and from the difficult balance between doing what is right for the business as well as for the planet. We carry out an honest audit of how our personal and organizational clutter creates barriers to the delivery of our green agenda, and we identify what is required to overcome them.

Step 2: Once we know what clutter is in our way, we put together a plan of how we de-clutter some of the stuff that is in our way. As with all good plans, we make this one as clear, measurable and achievable as possible.

Step 3: We get started on delivering the plan. Right now. Of course, we might get derailed as other business imperatives creep up and take over. But we return to our plan and continue to carry out our tasks one after the other.

Sound too easy? Everything does not always have to be hard because we expect it to be. The key is to step back and create some thinking time to hatch the right plan, as well as using all the talent around us because we do not have to come up with everything ourselves.

So what will you do today to create space for sustainability in your diary, mind and heart?

Because if you don't, who will?

Ingrid Pope is the de-cluttering expert. She brings clarity to the situation when the noise makes it difficult to see or think.

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