



Ignite Change

How Empathetic Communication
Helps You Illuminate a Path that
People Will Want to Follow

Nancy Duarte & Patti Sanchez

Change is inevitable.

Whether we're talking about business, society, politics, or life, we all know that trying to stay still is a recipe for stagnation. Since Duarte, Inc., was founded twenty-five years ago as a small design firm in Silicon Valley, the company has undergone numerous transformations. But none has been more challenging than the internal reinvention we began three years ago.

As we worked to motivate our employees and align our organization around a new vision for our collective future, we were simultaneously studying how other leaders—in business and society, at companies large and small and as different as Apple and Starbucks, IBM, and Market Basket—have successfully helped others embrace change, and sparked movements. This new understanding colored everything we've done at Duarte Inc. during the last few years and spurred the creation of our latest book, *Illuminate*.

Illuminate is our manifesto for change communications and, more specifically, for leaders who want to inspire others to understand and follow their vision for change, over and over again. It's a tricky road to navigate. Most people are more comfortable with what they know than with the unknown future. Great leaders anticipate this challenge, empathize with that struggle, and communicate in ways that overcome resistance. Throughout this process, four tenets play a critical role in helping them to succeed in realizing their goals.

Transform To Thrive

A leader's job is to anticipate the future, to identify the trends that will affect their organization, and to guide and inspire people to move toward a better reality. Today more than ever, this job requires leaders to grasp the rapid rate of change in the business world and to build an organization that's capable of continually adapting.

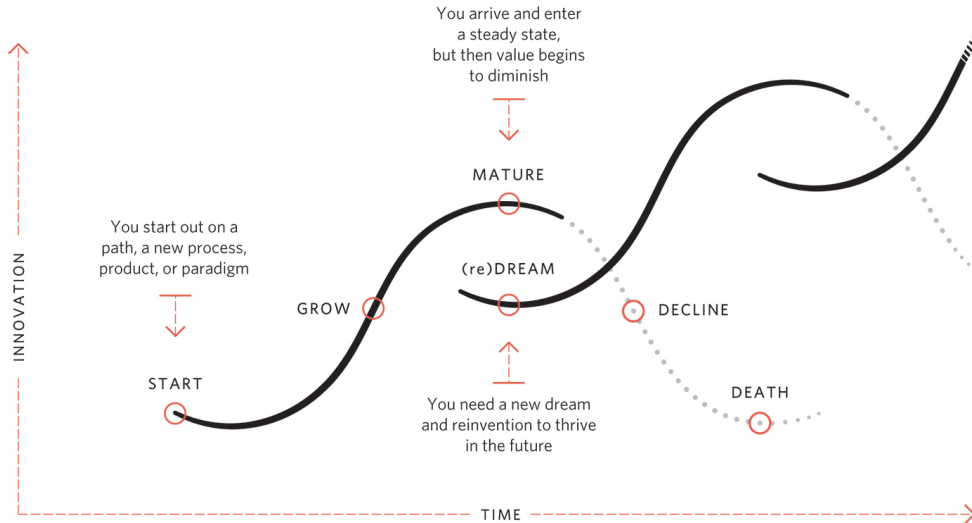
Change is necessary, but not easy. Every leader must make a choice whether to embrace change or ignore it; if they want to succeed, avoiding change isn't an option. Yet many leaders do. That's one of the reasons why 40% of newly created businesses last less than 10 years.¹ But this tendency isn't just the folly of new businesses; quite the opposite. Many large organizations fall victim to the belief that they can keep doing the same things and succeeding the same way in perpetuity. The longer they choose to avoid change, the quicker the industry evolves past them. History shows us the result. Since 2000, 52% of Fortune 500 companies have gone bankrupt, been acquired, or ceased to exist altogether.²

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1. Arie de Geus, *The Living Company*, 2002 edition, p.2, available at books.google.com

2. R. Ray Wang, "Research Summary: Sneak Peeks From Constellation's Futurist Framework And 2014 Outlook On Digital Disruption," February 18, 2014,

The most common symbol used to represent this cycle of change in the business world is the S-Curve.



The curve's shape shows the start, growth, and maturity of a business lifecycle. Once the business achieves success, the onset of stasis often causes the business to begin declining. For businesses to avoid decline (or even death!), they must find fresh ways to grow by launching a new S-curve or movement, what we refer to as a “venture.” Together, these transformative ventures form the epic movements that carry an organization from one era to the next.

Each of these transformations is hard-fought. They require businesses to change the way they do things, often in painful or difficult ways. A leader's job isn't just to see what that change must look like; their job is to rally people to make it happen. Whether a leader is an executive preparing their enterprise for an overhaul, an entrepreneur seeking investment, or an individual contributor inspiring their peers to join them on a common quest, they must convince travelers—the people who need to accompany them on the journey—that this change is worth it.

The leaders who succeed in making the future feel a little less dark and intimidating are torchbearers, capable of using empathetic communications to “light” the path the travelers will take through the unknown towards their desired future.

Listen With Empathy

The future can be a scary place, especially when you are unsure what it will look like or how you will get there. This uncertainty creates much of the resistance to change that leaders encounter as they drive towards transformation. Even when a leader has a clear picture of the future, the people around them (the travelers) may not see it quite so clearly. The travelers need help crossing the threshold from the comfortable present to the uncertain future and understanding how they will overcome the many obstacles along the way.

To help travelers see and embrace that future, a torchbearer leader must start by seeing the future through their eyes. The leader must anticipate how travelers might react by imagining the steps they will need to take and illuminating the path by communicating clearly and empathetically.

That process starts with listening. When Duarte recently went through a restructuring process that would change our internal processes and systems, the company held 90 minute “Discovery Sessions” where employees met in small groups to candidly discuss what was working and what needed fixing in our culture. Many successful business leaders have employed a similar strategy.

For example, when Howard Schultz returned to the role of Starbucks CEO in 2008, he convened a meeting of his top executives and gathered a diverse set of employees to honestly discuss how the company had lost its way and begin the process of turning the business around.

By listening to your travelers and even imagining yourself in their place, you will establish empathy that helps you understand what they will need to cross the most difficult thresholds. Different stages of the journey will require different things. Some parts will be fairly easy to navigate, and in those moments travelers may even feel excited to commit. Other stages will feel more uncertain, and travelers will be more likely to resist. The leader's job is to empathize with and speak to both mindsets. When they need help to commit, emphasize the rewards they can expect. When they need to be moved away from resistance, emphasize the costs of failing to change. By doing both at the right moments, leaders keep travelers motivated and ventures moving ahead.

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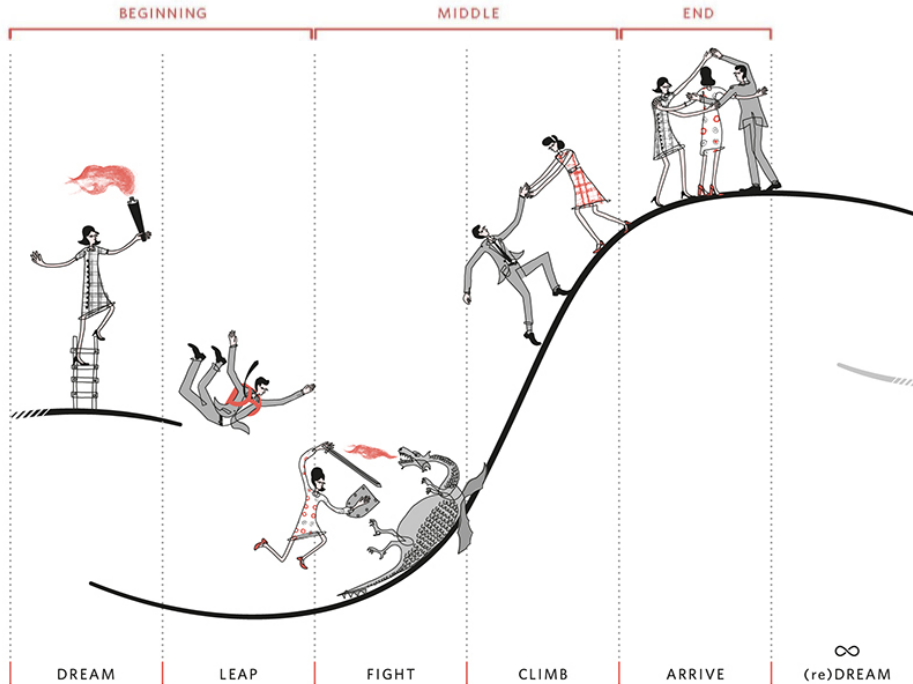
Navigate the Journey

Throughout this journey, a leader will encounter both commitment and resistance. They will need to use communication to create moments that galvanize their followers and move them past obstacles and on to the next stage of their journey. Together, these moments create movements that follow the same structure as a story.

Act One (Beginning): A leader asks the travelers to commit to their Dream, to cross a threshold, and to Leap into the venture. Travelers often resist change, especially because the new future-state is still far off this early in the story, so the leader must convince them to begin the journey together.

Act Two (Middle): The travelers Fight obstacles and Climb towards the ultimate goal. This is the most challenging part of the story because the difficulties travelers encounter will require them to transform themselves. They will have to make the choice again and again to continue down the path towards the leader's vision even as that path requires them to undergo changes themselves.

Act Three (End): The travelers cross the final threshold and Arrive at their destination. Together they reflect on what was accomplished and acknowledge lessons learned before starting the next phase of the epic journey.



To successfully lead travelers through this journey, leaders must know which stage they are in and match their communication to the needs of that moment.

By taking the time to understand this ‘Venture Scape,’ as we call it, they can help their travelers understand where they’ve been, where they are, and where they must go next.

Dream: Whether a leader is kicking off a new vision, beginning an initiative, or launching a new product, their dream for the future will begin the process of transformation. But they can’t drive that transformation alone. Travelers need to share in this dream, to understand why change is necessary, and to feel inspired to begin the long road ahead.

Leap: Once travelers are able to envision and accept the need for change, they must also commit to it. The leader must ask their travelers to accept new responsibilities in order for the venture to succeed.

Fight: In order to prepare for battle, travelers must feel the strength that comes with numbers. The leader must rally them with a battle cry that helps them feel prepared for the long fight ahead of them.

Climb: Inevitably, the journey will begin to feel longer and more difficult than anticipated. Enthusiasm will erode as travelers lose sight of what they were trying to achieve in the first place. The leader must help them find their resolve to finish the journey.

Arrive: When the travelers meet a milestone or cross the finish line, the leader must declare the victory and recognize what they've accomplished. Whether that win is big or small, the travelers will want to celebrate their accomplishments, vent frustrations, and express emotions they've experienced along the way.

By using this story structure to frame and control their own epic venture, leaders can better understand what their travelers are thinking and experiencing throughout the journey. They can address frustrations and hesitations as they arise, and keep their travelers (and themselves!) motivated as the journey progresses.

The Venture Scape isn't a short story. It bears more resemblance to the epic tales of old, spanning years and many struggles and victories. But much like Odysseus and other epic heroes, great leaders are more than capable of navigating through the darkest of moments to reach their greatest of triumphs—if they know how to communicate well.

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Communicate Empathetically In Each Moment

Once a leader understands the stages of each epic journey—and determines which stage their movement is in—they can begin to control, frame, and communicate the narrative of the venture. Each stage in that venture is made up of a series of moments, designed by the leader. In each one, they will need to maintain focus on empathizing with and inspiring their travelers by saying, showing, and doing what's necessary to keep the travelers moving forward.

The value of this type of communication is often downplayed or ignored in many organizations. But the most successful business leaders—the leaders able to transform their organizations and lead their employees through epic ventures—skillfully use what we call the Torchbearer's Communication Toolkit. The Toolkit is comprised of four powerful communication vehicles:

Speeches create longing for the future. By comparing the status quo (what is) to the desired end-state (what could be), leaders make the future seem preferable to the present. Speeches can be particularly useful when leaders need to convey important information and call on their audience to act. They can be delivered in large settings (e.g. a formal address, a keynote speech at an event) or small ones (e.g. an informal town hall, a leadership team meeting). Whatever the setting, they need to make clear the vision the travelers must move toward and let them know how to change in order to make that vision possible.

Stories help travelers understand why and how you want them to change. Numerous studies have shown that the human brain is wired to respond to storytelling. People respond to stories, remember them, and share them. Leaders can share “I” stories that tell of their own experiences, “we” stories that emphasize common experiences, and “they” stories that detail the experience of another person that holds value or insight for this audience. Each type of story can help the leader convey important information and connect emotionally with their travelers.

Ceremonies mark particular moments in the venture scape and express collective emotions. Throughout history, societies across the world have created ceremonies that mark “rites of passage” (e.g. weddings, graduations, bar mitzvahs, and inaugurations). These ceremonies often mark the beginning or end of a phase of our journey through life. By pausing to gather and celebrate, grieve, or accept change, leaders can help their travelers build community and adapt to the future.

“Stories help travelers understand why and how you want them to change.”

Symbols remind travelers of key moments in the venture. Everyday items—including images, objects, words, and places—can become emotionally charged artifacts because of their association with a particular speech, story, or ceremony. Leaders can use these symbols to remind travelers of the importance of the venture and the way they felt at particular moments in time.

These tools need not be used exclusive from each other. Speeches may contain stories. Stories may cement symbols. Symbols may play an important role in a ceremony. An effective leader will choose the right combination of tools depending on the stage of the venture and the needs of the travelers they're addressing.

For example, when Howard Schultz launched his transformation venture at Starbucks, he chose to employ a variety of these tools. He held a ceremony that used music and visual images to help leaders move into a more creative mindset. The meeting room contained iPods loaded with Beatles music and posters with images of the band, establishing the Beatles as a symbol of what it means to be an icon. At a later gathering of two hundred senior managers, he gave a speech encouraging them to seek the rewards that would come with change, and told a story comparing the Starbucks of the status quo with what the company could become in the future. And these opening steps only reflect a small subset of the ways in which he deployed these tools throughout his epic venture to return his company to greatness.

Embrace Your Inner Torchbearer.

At Duarte, we've long believed in the power of story to change the world. But only by writing *Illuminate* did we discover the varied ways in which the great leaders of the business, political, and social worlds have employed speeches, stories, ceremonies, and symbols to help their fellow travelers see the future they envision and motivate them throughout their epic movement.

We believe in the power and necessity of change. To continue thriving well into the future, organizations of all kinds must continue reinventing themselves to avoid decay. We've seen the S-Curve pattern emerge across every industry, and we've found it holds equally true for our own business.

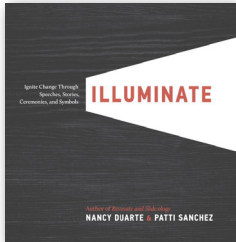
“Speeches may contain stories. Stories may cement symbols. Symbols may play an important role in a ceremony. An effective leader will choose the right combination of tools depending on the stage of the venture and the needs of the travelers ...”

We know that change is just as difficult as it is necessary. People prefer to stick with what they know rather than travel someplace new, someplace unknown, especially when the path to get there may be treacherous and require hard work.

But change is possible when great leaders create a feeling of hope that inspires people to put in that extra work and stay the course throughout the journey. Each movement toward change is its own epic venture and follows the same structure as the stories future generations will tell when remembering its success. In example after example, we found that leaders who helped travelers see their dream, leap into the future, fight for their vision, and climb over obstacles would also help their travelers arrive at their desired destination.

We hope these four tenets help you find your own inner torchbearer and cast some light on the journey ahead. **Remember: You, too, have the power to shape your own epic venture and drive it to a successful conclusion.** 🏆

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS | **Nancy Duarte** is a communications expert and principal of Duarte Inc., where she has served as CEO for 21 years. She is the author of *Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences*, as well as *Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations* and *The HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations*. **Patti Sanchez**, the Chief Strategy Officer for Duarte, has distilled 25 years of experience as a communicator into this book. She has presented hundreds of workshops on communication to marketing and sales leaders around the country.

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