How Great Leaders Make Work Meaningful

By Henrich Greve , INSEAD Professor of Entrepreneurship

Mired in day-to-day tasks, people easily lose sight of their work's higher purpose. That's where great communicators come in.

U.S. President John F. Kennedy once met a custodian mopping floors at NASA headquarters long after normal work hours and asked, ''Why are you working so late?'' The custodian replied, ''Because I'm not mopping the floors, I'm putting a man on the moon.'' If this story seems too good to be true, it does have a parallel in the historical events that illustrates how the United States created a remarkably successful space programme, and it offers an important lesson in leadership.

In a new article in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Andrew Carton reports on Kennedy's leadership of NASA in the 1960s, culminating with the moon landing in 1969, and lessons that leaders today can draw from the space programme's success. Specifically, when people find meaning in their work, everyone benefits: the organisation benefits because its employees work harder and smarter, and individuals benefit because work is an important part of life and success and meaning at work increases well-being. So what's the dilemma? Usually meaning is best gained from a mighty goal,

but such goals are often abstract and distant from any one task at work. Linking lofty goals to concrete actions is difficult, but the loftier the goal, the harder it gets. Meaningful work is wonderful, of course, but it’s hard to create and maintain.

Two examples illustrate this difficulty. First, Amazon’s goal is to be the earth’s most customer-centric company. How can this mission give meaning to one of its distribution centre workers, who could be pulling products from shelves or overseeing a robot pulling products from shelves? Second, part of INSEAD’s mission is to reduce poverty in the world, because economic growth is the cure for poverty, and improved management helps economic growth. But the daily work of INSEAD professors and staff is all the ordinary tasks associated with education.

Ladder to the moon

Kennedy provided a simple, powerful and very general way to address this dilemma in his direction of NASA. He distilled its mission to one of advancing science. Advancing science itself is not the daily work of a custodian, or of an electronics expert designing control circuits, so the gap between the lofty goal and concrete actions remained. So Kennedy gave NASA’s workers the concrete objective of a manned mission to the moon before 1970. Putting a man on the moon was not the same as advancing science, but it was an embodiment of the mission of advancing science that staff members could work towards.

Still, many years of hard work lay between framing the objective and its fulfilment. Kennedy was careful to set out a series of more immediately achievable milestones in the form of the Gemini and Apollo programmes, together known as the manned lunar landing programme. “The goal of Gemini was to perform docking in space, and the goal of Apollo was to build all remaining capabilities needed to land on the moon,” Carton states in the paper.

Kennedy’s vision for NASA outlived him. In November 1967, with the end objective in sight, NASA wrote the final six milestones on blackboards throughout Mission Control Centre in Houston, vertically arranged to represent “a ladder to the moon”.

Kennedy also used metaphorical language to fuse the concrete goal of walking on the moon with the abstract aspiration of advancing science. In a

1962 speech, he said, “Space is there, and we’re going to climb it, and the moon and planets are there, and new hopes for knowledge and peace are there.” Kennedy’s rhapsodic tone rubbed off on NASA leaders such as Eugene Shoemaker, who remarked in 1966, “direct observations on the moon will initiate a new phase in man’s quest for knowledge.”

Inspiring faith

Before Kennedy’s mission, NASA employees were entirely focused on day-to-day responsibilities. His challenge to reach the moon was initially met with a good deal of scepticism from employees who had a decidedly short-term outlook. But it was made more plausible when attainable milestones, both major and minor, that the mission entailed were collected into a small number of “stepping stones” (the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programmes). Consequently, scepticism was replaced by a feeling of progress toward a highly meaningful goal.

Employees’ sense of making a personal contribution to something as awesome as the moon landing produced enormous camaraderie and pride. As one staffer said, “The Apollo missions were like a giant jigsaw puzzle…My role in the puzzle, though small, was a necessary activity.”

As work ramped up, employees started to think of “putting a man on the moon” as their job, regardless of their individual responsibilities. Increasingly, participation in the president’s mission became its own reward, an accomplishment in itself.

Finally, employees began to see their work in Kennedy’s symbolic terms. A man on the moon became an embodiment of the ultimate mission: advancing science and thereby bettering the lives of humankind. The abstract and concrete became one.

Carton suggests that Kennedy’s symbols opened a pathway between pragmatism and idealism. His symbolic framework was necessary inspiration to an organisation that had initially scoffed at the notion of getting to the moon before the decade was out which went on to accomplish just that.

The idea of finding a way to embody an overall mission as a more concrete objective is related to an essential insight in management. Management practice often centres on “fluffy” performances such as missions, speeches, goal statements, and quick tours and interactions. None of this fluff helps if it

is disconnected from the activities and meaning of all members of the organisation. Mission and goal statements contribute to success if they are oriented toward the embodiment of concrete activities that people can use to choose their own actions and construct meaning.

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