
The Leadership Benefits of Performance and Storytelling



By Edmund Chow , INSEAD Post-Doctoral Research Fellow

Dramatic strategy moves audiences, empowers them to play a role and realigns them with a higher purpose.

The scene is set in 2002 at the San Jose Convention Centre in California where software developers have gathered for the Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC).

On a darkened stage, the giant screen shows the interior of a cathedral while Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor* echoes through the walls. Smoke glides across the floor. A white light overhead brightens the stage as a black coffin slowly rises from a secret trapdoor. As the music softens, the audience claps.

Steve Jobs, in his usual black turtleneck and blue jeans, walks to the casket and opens it. The audience laughs.

From within, he pulls out an oversized box marked "Mac OS 9". He props it against the opened lid – and the audience breaks into wild applause. Jobs walks away from the casket, closer to the pulpit, and reads from a piece of paper:

"Mac OS 9 was a friend to us all. [audience laughs] He worked tirelessly on our behalf, always hosting our applications, never refusing a command, always at our beck and call, except occasionally when he forgot who he was and needed to be restarted. [...] We are here today to mourn the passing of Mac OS 9. [...] Mac OS 9 is survived by his next generation, Mac OS 10, and thousands of applications – most of them legitimate. [laughter] Please join me in a moment of silence as we remember our old friend, Mac OS 9."

Jobs walks over to the casket, places his eulogy script inside, closes the lid and places a red rose on top of it. Some members of the audience laugh and clap, but Jobs stays solemn, purses his lips, walks a few steps backwards in silence with his left palm grasping his right wrist.

He waits.

A few prolonged seconds later, he waves the casket goodbye.

Immediately, the audience claps and cheers as Jobs turns his back to the casket and walks over to the pulpit to deliver his keynote.

Why the dramaturgical model?

The elements of storytelling and performance are key to Steve Jobs' approach in communicating meaning. His method diverges from the classical communication models typically employed by leaders who see things in linear or transactional ways. Traditional presenters think of themselves as "sender", the audience as "receiver". They choose their "channel", pick their message and anticipate the type of feedback they are likely to elicit. The dramaturgical model of communication, however, is neither about contagion, diffusion, nor agenda setting.

Firstly, the dramaturgical approach communicates meaning by enabling followers to become part of a larger narrative, or play a role. As you perform the story, your audience is naturally co-opted as fellow actors. Because the story has yet to be written, they become emotionally invested in change by participating mentally and emotionally in an emergent narrative. It is the same strategy when someone utters, "Once upon a time...": We all naturally perk up, anticipating characters to come alive.

Secondly, this communication approach galvanises its constituency towards a common goal – not through words, but imagination. When you perform a

story vividly with the right combination of emotion and tonality, your audience stays with you – because they anticipate what will happen next. Not all stories end happily ever after, as the demise of Mac OS 9 shows, but the journey's meanings can be co-created by leader and followers as characters fighting for something: an obstacle to overcome or a victory to be won.

Staging it: Lights, camera, action!

To employ the dramaturgical approach, there are some crucial considerations. First, the leader is required to "manufacture" meaning. William Gardner and Bruce Avolio identified four phases to help leaders do that: framing, scripting, staging and performing.

Framing: To frame a vision, charismatic leaders need to use words that amplify values, stress the vision's importance and, if necessary, disparage opposition. As an operating system, OS 9 did not have "protected memory", which means that when an application hung, the whole system crashed, which could happen several times a day. The funeral marked the demise of an old system, and its corollary, the birth of a new one.

Scripting: To start the scripting process, leaders need to assign protagonist and antagonist roles. IBM is the usual antagonist in the personal computer market, but here, OS 9 could have been seen as the enemy as it caused computers to crash frequently. Rather, Jobs describes OS 9 as an "old friend". For the audience to identify as friends mourning the passing of someone they knew intimately, Jobs strategically use "we" in his speech. This also eliminates potential tensions between the software developers and Apple.

Professor Yiannis Gabriel wrote in the *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Discourse* that "narratives require verbs denoting what characters did or what happened to them". In the above example, OS 9 had passed on and was survived by the next generation, OS X. As such, the lineage of Apple's operating systems continues with thousands of "children" and "grandchildren" applications. This also enrolls app developers in the lineage of Apple.

Staging: Next, staging a story requires logistics, settings and props. In this case, Jobs uses a coffin, smoke, music, a flower and the eulogy script. These are highly symbolic objects imbued with meaning. Charismatic leaders who

know how to use symbols (for example, a clenched fist, a flag, a hand wave) can effectively signal power, evoke empathy or mobilise crowds instantaneously.

Performing: Finally, performing the story means enacting scripted behaviours and relationships. Amid some laughter and claps before the final goodbye to OS 9, Jobs fully remained in character, keeping a serious tone. This further bolstered his authenticity as a charismatic storyteller and a revolutionary thought leader.

It is important to emphasise here that narratives are enhanced when storytellers bring the audience into the present. While Jobs told a story about OS 9's past, the funeral was set in the present moment.

In written communications, the use of the present tense (e.g. "Jobs walks over to the casket, places his eulogy script inside, closes the lid and places a red rose on top of it") brings the story in the present and fosters immediacy with the reader – just as I have done for an event that took place sixteen years ago when Steve Jobs was still alive. If I had written it in the past tense, its effect may have been lost.

The impact of storytelling

Even though the presentation was devoid of statistics and data, Jobs created a psychological contract with his audience through intimate storytelling. This caused his audiences to reflect and take action.

David Gratton, who was vice president of Totally Hip Software at the time of Jobs' presentation, said:

"This is important for us as a small developer, because presently we need to maintain development and support for both OS X and OS 9. Eventually dropping OS 9 from our product mix will help save us money, and improve development time."

With the dramatic impact of Jobs' performance, it was clear to developers that the old operating system had to die before Apple could live on. In the same way, the developers had to move on and write new software using the new operating system. Jobs' storytelling approach acknowledged the potential frustrations of developers and consoled them.

Tim O'Reilly, president of O'Reilly Media (formerly O'Reilly and Associates), said: "They [Apple] are giving strong guidance to developers about where they want them to go and what kind of commitment they want them to make." Because Jobs' performance was intimately intertwined with identity, developers were empowered to move in the same direction.

Storytelling gives every person a role (character), a purpose (motivation) and therefore an identity. Leadership can be embodied and performed, and Steve Jobs gave a clear example of such dramaturgical mastery, repositioning Apple into a world-class brand that truly *thinks different*.

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