

## Symbolic Frame Notes

What is a symbol?

Is something that stands for or suggests something else; it conveys socially constructed meaning beyond its intrinsic or obvious functional use.

Harley Davidson-

People revel in the unique culture- owning a Harley is a way of life. Harley riders have something in common: a fanatical dedication to their Harleys. The brand loyalty is emotional – its symbols include the American flag and the eagle- symbolizes camaraderie, individualism, the feeling of riding free, and the pride of owning a product that has become a legend. A Harley rider always helps another in distress.

Example of how symbols permeate every fiber of society and organizations

Harvey Perlman State of the university – glories of past.

Inaugural speeches are invitations for symbolic performances.

University is a sacred place whose legitimacy rests ultimately on faith in the transformation power of knowledge, and as a theater whose success derives from staging powerful dramas that connect and communicate to important audiences—effective administrators are spiritual leaders who help to build and sustain constituents' faith in the institution & in their contributions to it and a spirited artist who gives audience members an inspiring performance that they will remember and endorse.

Leaders are always on stage, closely observed by their audience. Success depends on how well their performance conveys the messages and evokes the responses they intend.

Certain roles like president, chancellor, or dean are by their nature heavily and visibly symbolic. Harvey represents UNL

@ lower levels smaller stage and audience but the role is important—attention to symbols & hope.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL SYMBOLS**

People seek meaning in life. Since life is mysterious, we create symbols to sustain hope and faith. These intangibles then shape our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Symbols cut deeply into the human psyche and tap the collective unconscious.

They are part of everyday life and can stimulate energy in moments of triumph or tribulation.

Function of symbols:

1. Economy  
communicates a complex message in a succinct way that saves words, time, effort
2. Interpretive and emotional  
Symbols work when they influence what something means and trigger deeply embedded, non-conscious association that affect our feelings and attitudes toward it.

Speak to the head and the heart.

5 suppositions

1. What is most important is not what happens but what it means
2. Activity & meaning are loosely coupled  
Events and actions have multiple interpretations as people experience life differently
3. When facing uncertainty & ambiguity, people create symbols to resolve confusion, find direction, and anchor hope & faith
4. Events & process are often more important for what is expressed than for what is produced.  
Their emblematic form weaves a tapestry of secular myths, heroes & heroines, rituals, ceremonies, and stories to help people find purpose & passion
5. Culture forms the glue that bonds an organization, unites people & helps an enterprise accomplish desired ends.

Academic leaders must continually confront basic questions that can never be fully resolved:

1. Who are we
2. What are we here to do?
3. How should we go about doing it?

Organizational Symbols

1. Myths, vision & values  
The story behind the story- explains, expresses, legitimize, and maintain solidarity and cohesion  
Myths often originate in the launching on an enterprise

Southwest airlines Example-

Original plan was sketched on a cocktail napkin in a San Antonio bar- 2 founders Herb Kelleher who became CEO and Rollin King. There was much opposition to connecting Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, court battles over 4 years. By 71 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of SWA. A local sheriff threatened to halt flights and Keleher

said” You roll right over the son of a bitch and leave our tire tracks on his uniform if you have to” This order signaled the resolve more than an actual intention to cause harm.

The persistence and zaniness of SWA mythologize beginnings shape its unique culture—it is what makes SWA a remarkable company today.

Myths undergird an organization’s values

## EXAMPLES

### **YouTube**

According to a story that has often been repeated in the media, Hurley and Chen developed the idea for YouTube during the early months of 2005, after they had experienced difficulty-sharing videos that had been shot at a dinner party at Chen's apartment in San Francisco. Karim did not attend the party and denied that it had occurred, while Chen commented that the idea that YouTube was founded after a dinner party "was probably very strengthened by marketing ideas around creating a story that was very digestible".

### **DELL**

While a freshman pre-med student at the University of Texas at Austin, Dell started an informal business putting together and selling upgrade kits for personal computers in room 2713 of the Dobie Center residential building. He then applied for a vendor license to bid on contracts for the State of Texas, winning bids by not having the overhead of a computer store. Operating out of a condominium, the business sold between \$50,000 and \$80,000 in upgraded PCs, kits, and add-on components.

### **HP**

The company was founded in Packard’s one-car garage in Palo Alto by William (Bill) Redington Hewlett and Dave Packard with an initial capital investment of \$538. A flip of a coin decided the ordering of their names  
Values characterize what an organization stands for—intangible and define a unique distinguishing character.

SWA billboards typically have something about freedom

Vision turns an organizations core ideology or sense of purpose into an image for the future.

Vision is seen as vital in contemporary organizations—Johnson & Johnson (eliminate pain and disease), 3M “though shalt not kill a new product idea”

Ebay – Pierre Omidyar- founder

Dinner with his fiancée she complained that moving from Boston to Silicon Valley severed her ties with fellow collectors of Pez dispensers – story made up. Nobody wants to hear about a 30 year old genius that wanted to create a perfect market.

## 2. Heroes & Heroines

Embraces their symbolic role as cultural heroes, living logos, human icons.

We love heroes. 911 police and firefighters, soldiers, Congressional medal of honor winners.

## 3. Stories and Fairy Tales

Stories grant comfort, reassurance, direction, and hope to people of all ages. They perpetuate values and keep feats of heroes and heroines alive. Stories are deeply rooted in the human experience—they are told and retold. Stories spark action, communicate who you are, brand, transmit values, foster collaboration, tame grapevines, share knowledge, lead people into the future.

Effective organizations are full of good stories. Stories communicate myths by establishing and perpetuating tradition.

Subway and Jared Fogel

## 4. Ritual

Rituals connects people or groups to something mystical, more than words can capture. They give meaning and structure to each day—morning coffee, reading Facebook, certain phrases—personal and communal.

Rituals of initiation induct newcomers into communal membership—cherished organizational secrets.

Initiation ritual—clash between a new arrival and an established veteran  
Rites of passage

Rituals bond a group together and imbue the enterprise with traditions and values.

Death notifications by the military- everything is scripted

## 5. Ceremony

Cultures rely on ritual and ceremony to create order, clarity, and predictability. Ritual is everyday; ceremonies are episodic (grander and more elaborate)

4 major roles:

- Socialize
- Stabilize

- Reassure
- Convent messages to external constituencies

When properly conducted and attuned to valued myths—rituals and ceremony fire the imagination and deepen faith otherwise they become cold, empty forms that people resent and avoid.

Symbols cut both ways—they can cement the status quo and block adaptation and learning

## 6. Metaphor, Humor, and Play

Metaphors make the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

As it is:	As it might become:
Maze	well oiled wheel
3 ring circus	championship team
wet noodle	oak tree

Metaphors compress complicated issues into understandable images, influencing our attitudes and actions.

Humor integrates, expresses skepticism, and contributes to flexibility and adaptiveness.

## **ORGANIZATIONS AS CULTURES**

Culture- a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members s the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems

How we have learned to think and do things around here— both a product and a process

From a symbolic perspective building and shaping institutional culture is at the heart of academic leadership.

History of success – culture is strong and coherent → difficult to change

Troubled—in need of substantial overhaul

Toxic- culture is coherent and strongly rooted despite dysfunction

For the university will always circle back to content, pedagogy, and purpose.—they continue to fuel the fires of intellectual and political combat.

Leaders must always find ways to reframe their institution—its history, its circumstances, and its possibilities.

Product that embodies wisdom accumulated from experiences  
Process- it is renewed and re-created as newcomers learn the old ways and eventually become teachers themselves.

Examples:

BMW 1959 bankrupt getting hired there is practically impossible they want people who fit in.- steeped in rituals, Nordstroms (heroics are rewarded) 'Nordies' - "the customer is always right"—storewide rituals to reward top sales people, Continental Air – gathered manuals and set them on fire in parking lot, gave tangible awards for top performance, removed security cameras

Symbolic leaders construct meaning & foster hope & faith by...

1. Building on the past for an exciting, new vision of the future  
Every department, unit, and institution has a history—wise leaders study the history, listen to constituents and engage them in developing a new sense of vision, purpose, and possibility.
2. Leading by example  
Teaching despite schedule, strong symbolic leaders understand they they are always on stage and they take advantage of it to use themselves as symbols of important values, priorities, and agendas—which takes discipline, planning & creativity
3. Constructing a heroic narrative and telling it often  
JFK, Lincoln, MLK—these have 3 parts:
  - a. Great past
  - b. Troubled present
  - c. New path to an inspiring future
4. Leveraging the power in ritual & ceremony  
Universities are richly symbolic institutions, infused with myth, ceremony, and symbols rooted in ancient tradition. Mascots & academic regalia are among the more visible symbolic vestments that adorn universities—they are vital because universities survive and prosper only so long as they sustain constituents belief and faith in their mission and activities.

Risks & Reward of prophetic Leaders

Can be inspirational and magical as they lead toward previously inimagined possibilities. They can also be seductive and dangerous, leading their institutions to damage and disappointment

Strong leaders know their audiences and what they value and they choose their symbols carefully to reflect that.

Now what?

You need further support for your ongoing leadership development and your search for your professional best. There are a number of recurring issues that often impede the ability of leaders to sustain their energy, focus, and hope in the face of seemingly endless vicissitudes of administrative life.

1. Manage conflict to make it productive
2. Surviving and prospering the face of conflicting pressures from every direction
3. Strategies for dealing with bullies, backstabbers, and other challenging people
4. Leading from the middle—leading your boss and others above you
5. Taking care of oneself- health and vitality
6. Building and sustaining faith and spirit in the face of discouragement and being overwhelmed- feeding the soul...