

Financial Times Book review:

Let me tell you a story about Al Gore

By Stefan Stern

Published: August 29 2007 17:14: If business leaders do not immediately grasp the vital insights offered by this book, both they and their organizations are doomed. But the good news is that there are examples of executives out there who have taken this book's messages to heart, and have acted successfully on them.

Got your attention? That opening paragraph was a ham-fisted attempt to put some of Stephen Denning's theories into practice. Leaders who want their businesses to embrace change, he says, must first get the attention of the people who matter. Negative messages (or bad news) tend to attract people's attention more effectively than good news.

But bad news alone might just be depressing. Hence the need for the second sentence of this review. The desire for change must be stimulated, Denning argues, by holding out the prospect that a better world can be and indeed already is being created.

This new book is Denning's latest attempt to explain why storytelling – or “narrative” – has such an important role in leadership. In the past few years he has written of the need for “springboard” stories – the sort of tale that can spark a reaction even among jaded and cynical audiences. He wrote an extended parable, published in 2004, about a community of squirrels, and the way in which powerful storytelling saved them from disaster.

This new book represents a considerable advance on the earlier work. The squirrels have been superseded by an intelligent and sustained analysis of the art of contemporary leadership. Those bosses who quietly despair of ever getting their people to change should spend a bit of time learning how to speak Denning's “secret language”.

One leader who does seem to have got the message is former US vice-president Al Gore. In a superb opening section, Denning takes Gore's lousy presidential bid of 2000 apart, showing how at each stage the man of destiny from Tennessee blew his chances.

The author describes 10 ways in which candidate Gore failed the test of leadership. His campaign was confusing and uninspiring, Denning says. He lacked commitment. His body language sucked. He misread his audience. He lacked “narrative intelligence” – in other words, Gore just couldn't tell a story that people wanted to hear.

He did not talk straight, unlike the apparently much more direct Governor George W. Bush. He lost people's attention, if he ever had it. He campaigned as the candidate of change, but failed to get people interested in the sort of change he was promoting.

His supposed strengths came across as weaknesses. And, in the end, every attempt to establish a dialogue with the electorate failed.

"Fast-forward to 2006, and what do we see?" Denning asks. "Millions of people have paid more than \$40m to watch a movie of Al Gore's PowerPoint presentation. And Gore's live talks enjoy the response of a rock star."

What has changed? "In his movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore conveys a passion for a subject he cares deeply about," Denning explains. "Now he isn't merely repeating what his political managers or handlers have told him to say...it also helps that he has learnt not to take himself so seriously in his public speeches and is able to poke gentle fun at himself. Even more important, the Al Gore of 2006 has abandoned speaking in a tangle of complex abstractions and used appropriate narratives."

Denning is a subtle and astute reader of audiences' minds. Don't try to out-reason deeply skeptical employees, he says. You have to make a personal – and emotional – connection with them first. Indeed, facts may be the last thing people want to hear right now. They will simply be discounted and rejected.

Of course, there is still a need for reasoned arguments, he says, but it is crucial to get the "sequencing" of messages right. Get people's attention, "stimulate the desire for change", and then wheel out the rationale.

"Leadership communications begin as monologue," Denning says. "If they are successful they turn into dialogue and then conversation. The conversation emerges because of the enduring enthusiasm for change that has been inspired."

Some business leaders may be skeptical about the need for language skills these days, but this "secret language of leadership" will reward further study.

###