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FINE-TUNE YOUR STRATEGIC CONVERSATION TO BE HEARD IN THE MARKET

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Spend just a little time in most organizations, and you'll hear someone say, "What gets measured gets managed". But what just about everyone overlooks is the fact that it's only what gets *talked* about that will be either measured or managed.

Most critical, of course, is what the leader talks about. For his or her words quickly become gospel – and they determine which way a firm moves and how fast it does so.

If the boss is a fanatic about customer service, and not only talks often and publicly to customers, but also constantly reminds others to deliver great service, employees will make customer service their cause, too. Or watch what happens when the boss talks obsessively about cost control or innovation or design – or whatever. Others take the cue and start saying the same things, and doing some of them.

This is so obvious it shouldn't need to be said. But it must be said precisely because it is so obvious. It's right under our noses, and thus easily missed in favour of something more complicated.

In this complex world, executives must think on their feet and flex and change with lightning speed. A new CEO can expect to survive in the top job for perhaps three or four years. So the pressure for rapid results is enormous. Today, speed is the stuff of life.

Inevitably, this leads to lots of experiments. Desperate for "solutions" to the stream of challenges on their radar screens, executives grab one new tool after another in the hope of finding The Answer. They are suckers for snake-oil. And there are plenty of people willing to sell them the next new thing.

Worldwide, though, three out of four change and improvement efforts do not deliver the expected results. This is not because the tools managers seize are flawed or useless, but rather because they are not underpinned by a sound strategic conversation.

Much of our daily conversation is a *default* activity: it just sort of happens. By contrast, "strategic conversation" is no accident. It's a *deliberate* process and the No. 1 leadership tool. All else rests on it. So you need to think about it systematically, craft it carefully, and use it purposefully.

The first task of a leader is to provide a clear point of view – "There's the hill we're aiming at ... these are the results we want ... this is how we should conduct ourselves ... here are our priorities ... this is what we'll do to get where we want to go." This is the context in which people work.

The ongoing task is to focus and inspire them. Talk about the right *issues* in the right *way* to the right *people*, and extraordinary things happen; but get the conversation wrong and you're sunk.

Strategic conversation must be carefully crafted and meticulously managed. The best leaders are acutely aware of the impact of their words. They handle all stakeholder relationships – with their own people, customers, suppliers, government and others – with great care. And they think through four key issues in order to frame their messages:

1. Their organisation's purpose – why it exists, where it's going, what it must achieve.
2. Their business recipe – how it makes money.
3. Their organizational character – how people behave.
4. Their goals, priorities and actions – their targets and what they will focus on to get there.

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