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Communications as an OD Change Intervention

A Microsoft Case Study in Theory and Practice

By Christina Watt

Abstract

Studies repeatedly reveal that a very high percentage of change efforts fail, and they typically cite poor communications as the culprit in various ways. Further, communications is often mentioned as a necessary component for change work and OD professionals are often expected to lead or advise on change communications, yet there is no recognized standard for change communications within the OD practice. This article attempts to offer a unique contribution to communications for OD. It introduces a practical blueprint that was developed and used within Microsoft to successfully navigate communication across the lifecycle of change. It includes a flexible go-to-market (GTM) launch approach, introduces the concepts of Narrative Architecture and Purposeful Narratives as tools for aligning strategy and behavior, and examines a Microsoft case study that brings these ideas to life. Through exploration of real-world tools and the OD theories and neuroscience behind them, you will explore how to shape, sequence, and socialize messaging across functions and organizational scales. You'll gain language and visuals to advocate for clearer alignment, improve cross-functional collaboration, and accelerate change readiness. Whether you lead change communications or partner with those who do, this article will leave you better equipped to help strategies resonate, stick, and move systems forward, making this article especially relevant for OD practitioners supporting culture, change, and transformation efforts.

Keywords: change management, communications, appreciative inquiry, narrative development, organization development

Introduction

Research consistently shows that transformation efforts fail at high rates, with communication quality among the strongest predictors of success (Kotter, 1996; Elving, 2005; Lewis, 2006; Burnes, 2011; McKinsey, 2015, 2019, 2021). Because organizations evolve through socially constructed meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1994), and communication is both critical to organizational effectiveness and frustrating to manage (Schein, 2014; Cummings & Worley, 2019), co-creating

communications and aligning narratives becomes key to influencing change (Bushe & Marshak, 2015).

Yet while communication is frequently cited as essential, OD and communications literature provides limited guidance on how to operationalize it as a core intervention rather than a downstream activity (Elving, 2005; Lewis, 1999).

This aligns with my own findings and experience, which suggest a continued lack of integrated, theory-based guidance for communication and narrative development within organizational development (OD)

texts and practices. This article addresses that gap by introducing an integrated communications framework developed and applied at Microsoft.

Origins of the Communications for OD Change Process

The Communications for OD Change Process (CODC) evolved from my decades of experience as a communications strategist, architecting culture narratives with the CEO of Starbucks, and most recently, launching global HR initiatives at Microsoft, where culture and behavioral alignment were central to program success. Drawing on communications strategy, change management, and later formal OD training, I developed and refined an integrated communications process across six global programs. The case presented here illustrates the most comprehensive application of that approach. The efficacy of this process was recognized by senior leaders within Microsoft and generated enthusiasm among external partners and customers who sought to replicate the program.

Outline of the Frameworks and Case Study

The following three frameworks represent the culmination of that evolution. Each integrates communication strategy with organizational development principles to bridge the gap between *what is said* and *what is sustained*. Together, they form a coherent methodology for designing and communicating change in ways that are both emotionally engaging and operationally effective.

The first framework, the Communications for OD Change (CODC) Map (Watt, 2019), details seven phases of change communications. It provides a useful big-picture view of the steps, timing, and cross-functional roles involved in effective change communication. The model is intentionally mapped to several prevailing OD change theories, illustrating how structured communications practices can complement and reinforce the practitioner's preferred change approach. This visual

framework helps clarify how communication can be embedded throughout the lifecycle of change, transforming it from a downstream activity into an integrated, strategic function that supports alignment and adoption.

The second framework, the Narrative Architecture Model (Watt, 2025), includes the Purposeful Narratives Process (Watt, 2025), which includes Purposeful Inquiry (Watt, 2025), and the science behind its effectiveness. It demonstrates how narrative construction with specific communications elements can be integrated into OD Appreciative Inquiry (AI) interventions to co-create shared meaning, align stakeholders, and generate emotional commitment to change while developing a purposeful and practical enterprise-wide narrative platform to encapsulate the aspirational state.

Finally, the third framework provides an aid for key message development, illustrating how the narrative can be made actionable. This end-to-end process is reinforced through artifacts from a Microsoft change program, serving as a real-world demonstration of the efficacy of the approach (all artifacts were shared externally by Microsoft).

The Communications for OD Change Map

The Communications for OD Change (CODC) Map was developed with two core objectives:

- » To provide a Go-to-Market (GTM) plan for launching new programs that align with defined organizational goals.
- » To streamline and coordinate the many groups and individuals involved in change communication, ensuring alignment, timing, and message coherence across the system.

Originally designed for a global enterprise launch to more than 200,000 employees, the model represents a scalable, whole-system approach to change communications. While the scale and resources may vary by organization, the foundational steps remain consistent across contexts, demonstrating that successful communication for

change is not a matter of size, but of structure and integration.

The CODC Map details seven phases of change communications and provides a useful big-picture view of the steps, timing, and cross-functional roles involved. It is important to note that the CODC Map intentionally represents a communications-first lens. While other critical components of change planning, such as learning solutions, leadership alignment, or performance management integration, operate alongside it, this model offers a bird's-eye view of the communications process end-to-end, helping OD and communications practitioners visualize how communication can act as the connective tissue that sustains momentum throughout the change lifecycle.

The CODC map focuses on two groups that were responsible for change but reported through different organizational structures: the corporate communications team and the HR/OD teams. A RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) framework (Project Management Institute), was used to identify all parties that might be involved, to determine the altitude of the communications, and to clarify which teams were responsible for specific phases and communication items. The RACI process is itself a valuable systemic alignment intervention using dialogue to surface assumptions about roles, power, and decision-making authority.

At the top of the CODC map, you can see it was determined through the RACI dialogue that the Corporate Communications team would be responsible for creating the master narrative and messaging that would go to all employees, managers, and leaders. The HR/OD teams were then responsible for using that messaging and tailoring it for smaller, more specific audiences, such as HR-to-HR Communications, specific executive communications, and to other stakeholders who had a role in activating the change. These distinctions clarify ownership, accountability, and resource allocation across complex systems.

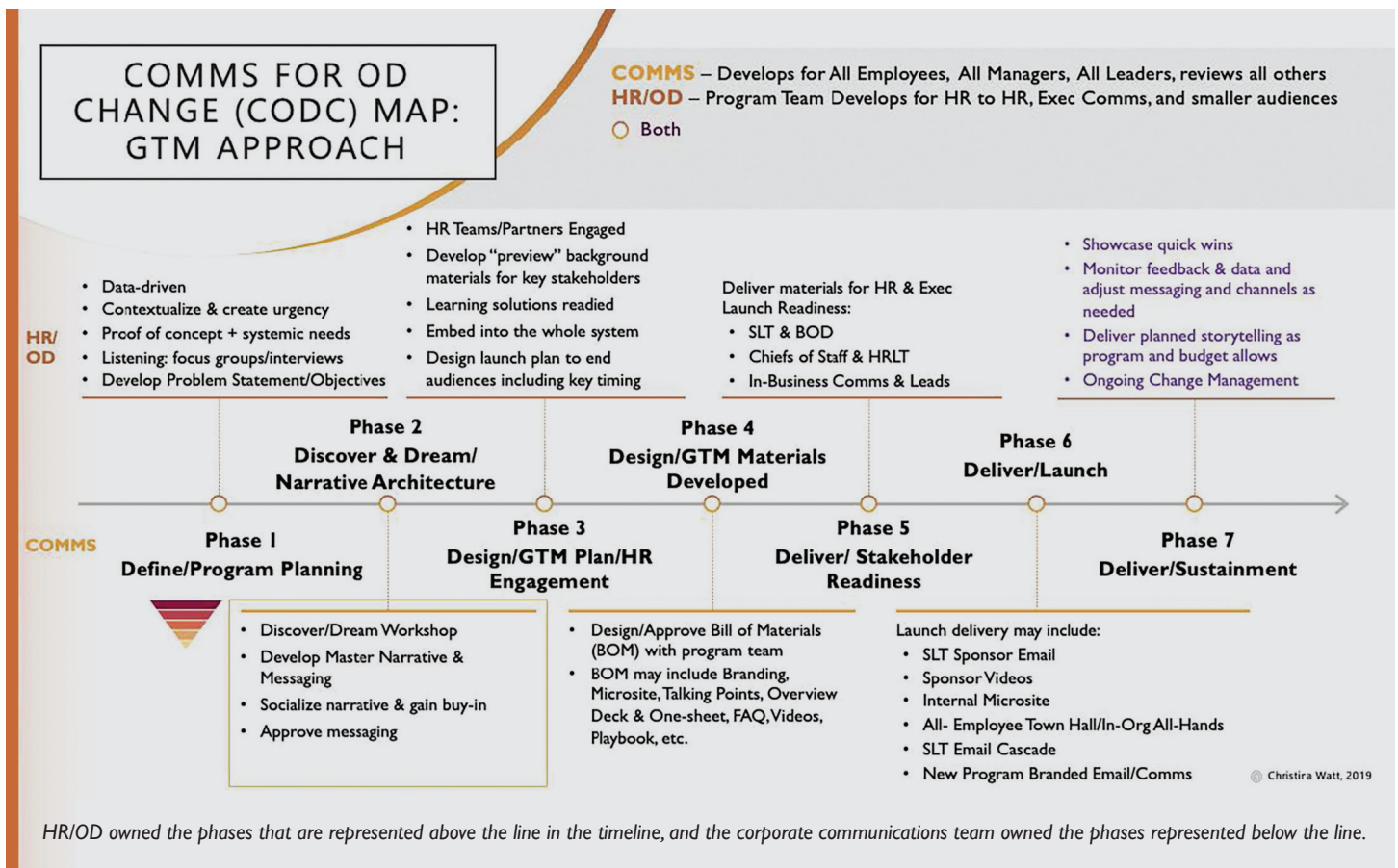


Figure 1. Communications for OD Change Map (CODC)

Alignment to OD Models

The CODC map is aligned to the 5-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry: Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver (Cooperrider et al, 2008), because the social constructionist perspective provides the most useful framework for narrative purposes (Gergen, 1994; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Communication is thus not merely descriptive but generative, creating new realities through dialogue, storytelling, and shared inquiry.

At the same time, the framework aligns with many established models of change, including Lewin’s (1951) three-phase process of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing, Kotter’s (1996) eight-step process for leading transformation, and Cummings & Worley’s (2019) General Model of Planned Change. These models emphasize the importance of readiness, engagement, implementation, and sustainment—core elements embedded in each phase of the Comms Change Map as seen in the comparison diagram. This makes the CODC map a useful tool to help embed impactful

communications strategies into overarching change plans, whatever change methodology most suits the organization and practitioner.

Together, the CODC Map and related Narrative Architecture processes we will further describe in this paper, use a structured, diagnostic-style process as the container for deeply appreciative and constructionist change methods. This produces a blended approach that honors both the diagnostic precision of classical OD and the generativity and dialogue of contemporary OD. The Comms for OD Change (CODC) model thus provides an integrated, purpose-driven framework that unites head and heart—balancing structure and emergence to enable transformation that is both systemic and human-centered.

The Seven CODC Map Phases

The CODC Map contains seven phases resulting from many RACI planning exercises with specific groupings of change activities and designated hand-offs between

teams in a company with large, differentiated Communications and HR/OD functions. However, the CODC Map is applicable to companies of all sizes. While the number of people involved in the change may vary by size of company, the phases and actions will not. In the Design and Deliver phases, actions are differentiated for the Communications and HR/OD teams, while the final phase is co-owned as the work evolves into an integrated, shared plan that sustains alignment and engagement.

We will now go through the phases in Figure 1 (see Figure 1. Communications for OD Change Map), at a high level through the lens of the 5-D Appreciative Inquiry process as seen in Figure 3 (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

PHASE 1—DEFINE/PROGRAM PLANNING

The Define Phase clarifies purpose, scope, and desired outcomes (Cooperrider et al., 2008), establishing context, urgency, and readiness (Kotter, 1996). This diagnostic

Comms Change Map Phases	AI 5 D's	Planned Change	Kotter	Lewin
Phase 1 – Define Problem & Program Planning	Define	Entering & Contracting Diagnosing	1. Create Urgency	Unfreeze
Phase 2 – Narrative Architecture & Socialization	Discover & Dream	Diagnosing	2. Form a Powerful Coalition 3. Create a Vision for Change 4. Communicate the Vision 5. Remove Obstacles 8. Anchor the Changes in Corporate Culture	Unfreeze
Phase 3 - GTM Plan and HR Engagement	Design	Planning & Implementing	2. Form a Powerful Coalition 5. Remove Obstacles	Change
Phase 4 – GTM Materials Developed	Design	Planning & Implementing	3. Create a Vision for Change	Change
Phase 5 – Stakeholder Readiness	Deliver	Planning & Implementing	4. Communicate the Vision	Change
Phase 6 - Launch	Deliver	Planning & Implementing	4. Communicate the Vision	Change
Phase 7 - Sustainment	Destiny	Evaluating & Institutionalizing	6. Create Short-Term Wins 7. Build on the Change	Refreeze

Figure 2. CODC Map Blends Diagnostic and Dialogic Approaches

and contracting phase (Worley & Cummings, 2019) uses active listening and dialogue to surface systemic needs and build shared understanding.

In practice: The sponsors, in this case HR/OD, lead the process of data collection, framing the inquiry, and setting objectives.

PHASE 2—DISCOVER & DREAM/ NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE DEVELOPMENT

The Discover Phase explores “what gives life” to the organization at its best, while Dream invites participants to envision “what might be” (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Together, these phases represent the heart of social construction, where meaning is co-created and new possibilities emerge through conversation (Gergen, 1994), and ensures ownership and coherence, aligning with research that links participatory design to change effectiveness (Kotter, 1996; Burke, 2018). The pyramid icon in the CODC Map denotes the Narrative Architecture process supporting this phase. Socialization of the narrative ensures emotional resonance (Elving, 2005), and early leadership engagement removes barriers and builds momentum (Kotter, 1996).

In practice: Engage leaders early through discovery and dialogue with key stakeholders to create alignment, energy, ownership, and the visible sponsorship necessary to sustain change.

PHASE 3—DESIGN/GTM PLAN/HR ENGAGEMENT (HR-Led)

The HR/OD Design Phase translates the generative insights from Discover and Dream into actionable systems, structures, and plans (Cooperrider et al., 2008), bridging vision, planning, and implementation (Cummings & Worley, 2019).

In practice: HR/OD leads development of engagement and readiness plans that embed change through alignment with people systems and learning strategies. They create the launch timeline, and conduct broader stakeholder engagement to secure resources and alignment. Teams use approved narrative and messaging to engage partners, preview plans, and develop learning solutions.

PHASE 4—DESIGN/GTM MATERIALS DEVELOPED (Comms-led)

The Comm-led Design Phase includes strategic communication frameworks (Elving, 2005; Lewis, 2006) that ensure materials are audience-centered, contextually relevant, and emotionally resonant. By codifying key

messages and visuals, this phase translates shared meaning into visible, repeatable practices that enable scale, consistency, and systemic reinforcement of the change narrative (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Worley & Cummings, 2019).

In practice: Working in parallel with HR’s Design phase, the communications team develops the Bill of Materials (BOM)—branded platforms, visual identity, overview decks, talking points, microsites, FAQs, and tools enabling consistent storytelling across functions and levels.

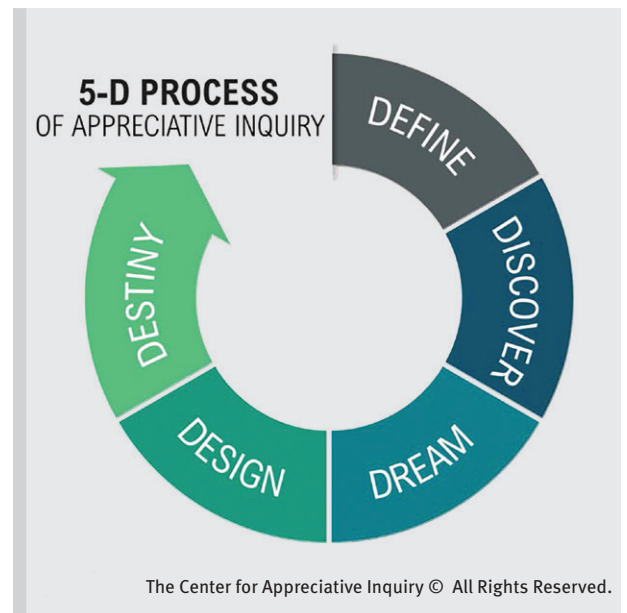


Figure 3. 5-D Process of Appreciative Inquiry

PHASE 5—DELIVER/STAKEHOLDER READINESS (HR-led)

The HR/OD-led Deliver Phase represents the culmination of AI’s “Deliver” or “Destiny” stage (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010), where commitments turn into collective action, mirroring Lewin’s “refreezing” and Kotter’s (1996) emphasis on mobilizing coalitions and communicating for buy-in.

In practice: Tailored communications and HR-led engagement activities prepare

(Damasio, 1994; Zak, 2015), while launch events create sense giving opportunities for leaders to help others interpret and internalize change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). When done effectively, these communications do more than inform; they help generate psychological ownership (Pierce et al., 2001) and emotional commitment, fostering a shared identity around the new direction.

In practice: Bring the program to life through all-company town halls, executive sponsor emails, leadership cascades, and

In practice: Plan for this phase from the beginning. Secure resources for ongoing storytelling and measurement. Review launch data, engagement analytics, and sentiment feedback to adjust content, cadence, or channels. Develop a secondary communication plan timed to organizational milestones to reinforce early wins, celebrate progress, and maintain visibility.

Narrative Architecture Process

We began by covering the structured processes and diagnostics driving our change, and now we will shift into the dialogic work needed to make the change stick. The Narrative Architecture process is designed to help organizations consciously construct a new shared reality through co-created storytelling—engaging employees as sense-makers and co-authors of change (Cooperrider et al., 2008), and providing practitioners with practical tools to guide the process.

This is a deeper dive into Phase 2, the Discover/Dream phase, and the outputs from it.

The Narrative Architecture process also bridges the diagnostic and dialogic traditions of OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2014). It provides enough structure to hold complexity while inviting inquiry, imagination, and reflection. As shown in *Figure 4*, the process follows a clear flow from defining purpose and context through to codifying shared meaning in the master narrative itself, before translating that meaning into tactical key messages, materials, and ongoing communication systems.

The Purpose of Purposeful Narratives

In organizational development and change, narratives function as integrative communication tools that align meaning, purpose, and action across systems. They are variously referred to as a vision, north star, purpose, or possibility statements—each articulating an aspirational view of a desired future state. While many frameworks describe how to craft these aspirational statements, few explicitly address the

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stakeholders for launch, aligning message, timing, and readiness across leadership layers through background materials, preview sessions, and targeted conversations.

PHASE 6—DELIVER/LAUNCH (Comms-led)

The Comms-led Deliver Phase brings the shared change narrative to life through orchestrated launch communications, paralleling the “action” stage in Cummings and Worley’s General Model of Planned Change, where interventions are implemented and new behaviors are initiated across the system (Cummings & Worley, 2019). Research demonstrates that communication that is participatory, consistent, and reinforced across organizational levels strengthens alignment, accelerates adoption, and reduces resistance (Lewis, 2006).

Emotional engagement is essential at this stage; neuroscience and organizational behavior research have shown that emotionally resonant communication enhances memory, motivation, and behavior change

storytelling through internal and branded channels. Each moment reinforces the change story, strengthens collective efficacy, and sustains momentum.

PHASE 7—DELIVER/SUSTAINMENT (Co-led)

The Ongoing Deliver/Sustainment Phase integrates ongoing learning, feedback, and reinforcement to maintain momentum and embed new behaviors (Kotter, 1996; Cooperrider et al., 2008). Kotter’s (1996) sixth step, generate short-term wins, is central here, as visible progress strengthens belief, reinforces commitment, and creates the energy needed to sustain change. Reinforcement through emotionally engaging communication supports habit formation and consolidates new neural pathways that drive ongoing engagement (Damasio, 1994; Zak, 2015). Measurement through metrics and qualitative feedback is critical (Burke, 2018; Worley & Cummings, 2019).

BUILDING A NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE

FRAMEWORK 2

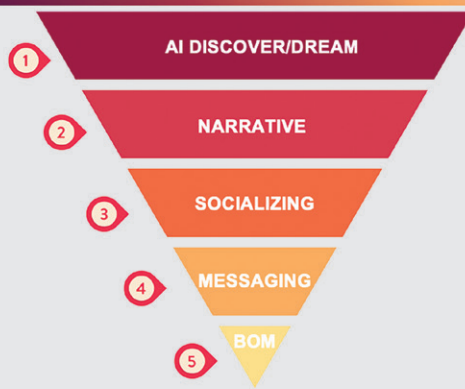


Figure 4. Narrative Architecture Overview

specific communications elements necessary to drive sustained change along with stakeholder engagement.

The Purposeful Narratives Process (Watt, 2025) responds to this gap by blending OD AI facilitation and strategic communications, referred to as Purposeful Inquiry (Watt, 2025), to create master narratives that both unite diverse stakeholders around shared meaning AND equip communication teams with clear, resonant messages to activate behavioral alignment. This dual focus reflects the perspective central to the CODC Map, in which communication is not a downstream deliverable but a vehicle for sense-making and transformation (Burke, 2018; Gergen, 1994).

When typically using Appreciative Inquiry practices for vision development, OD practitioners draw on the problem statement developed during the Define phase, and then design Discover/Dream workshops—sessions that surface collective wisdom and articulate desired possibilities (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). In theory, the resulting master narrative or Possibility Statement not only defines where the organization is headed but also clarifies why it matters, creating what Kotter (1996) described as a “compelling vision” that mobilizes commitment and guides action.

However, in practice, the typical Appreciative Inquiry Possibility Statement—while highly energizing in the room—often dissipates once the session ends. Without including planning for communications needs and without structured narrative

scaffolding, participants may struggle to translate the inspiration into master narratives that can drive sustained movement.

This is a gap the Purposeful Narratives process was designed to close: transforming the energy of discovery into language and messaging that can be operationalized across systems.

While a Possibility Statement may provide the vision, a Purposeful Narrative provides the systemic structure and language detail to ensure that vision actually resonates, sticks, and moves systems forward over time. The Purposeful Narrative process brings together both the communications elements needed for a communications professional to polish and refine a master narrative, and the expertise of the OD practitioner in the generative design and facilitation skills essential to co-creation, helping ensure the master narrative (which I henceforth call a Purposeful Narrative) is both emotionally resonant and organizationally grounded, anchoring the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of change in a shared story of purpose and possibility.

When and Why to Create a Purposeful Narrative

Purposeful Narratives are particularly useful when organizations face moments of ambiguity, transformation, or identity change. Because narrative co-creation invites participation, emotion, and meaning making (Bushe & Marshak, 2015), they

are best used when leaders need to explain a change in direction, culture, or purpose; to launch a new initiative; or to reinforce alignment across distributed or dysfunctional teams. Narratives are not needed for smaller, less critical programs.

A well-developed master narrative provides transparency and participation for key stakeholders and an anchor point against which all future key messaging can be tested: if the key message aligns to the narrative, it supports coherence; if not, it is much easier to course-correct. The master narrative becomes the north star that ensures communication remains consistent and purpose-driven across levels, functions, and time.

Finally, it must be said that inspirational narratives cannot be used to dress up poor strategy or policy misalignment. Authenticity and congruence are essential; the most compelling story will fail if the underlying actions or systems contradict its message. When constructed honestly and collaboratively, however, narratives function as both a mirror and a map, reflecting who the organization is, while guiding who it is becoming.

Components of a Purposeful Narrative

After developing several impactful Purposeful Narratives for key change programs, I began to get requests from senior leaders to do more of this work, so I analyzed past narratives and processes to see if I could identify the core repeatable components in successful narratives.

I determined that a successful Purposeful Narrative consistently contains seven key elements:

1. **Purpose and Context** to ground people in why the change matters, fulfilling the need to “create a sense of urgency” at the start of successful change (Kotter, 1996). Purpose, culture, mission—taps into the intrinsic human need to connect to something larger than oneself (Frankl, 1946).
2. **Emotional Resonance** that allows audiences to internalize the story because emotion is fundamental to reasoning

and behavioral change (Damasio, 1994; Green & Brock, 2000).

3. **Rhythmic and Repetitive Structure** which aids memory retention and signals importance (Large & Snyder, 2009; Levitin, 2006). Cadence counts.
4. **Commitments and Beliefs** through declarative statements such as ‘We believe...’ and ‘We are committed to...’ These articulate the organization’s espoused values, which provide guidance for shared norms and cultural alignment (Schein, 2010).
5. **Aspirational and Achievable** language that stretches people toward a compelling ideal (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) while remaining believable. This balance between hope and credibility sustains trust in the system (Henrick, et al, 2005; Seligman, 2002).
6. **Internal Momentum and Alignment** building by serving as the organizing mechanism through which strategy, culture, and leaders align (Kotter, 1996).
7. **Co-Created and Simple** which means the narrative is discovered through social constructionism (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and should be simple enough to fit on a single slide for socialization. This is a helpful guide, as it typically gives enough room for all the important context to be captured without creating a struggle over what gets to be “in” or “out.”

Ultimately, a great narrative ignites **hope, belonging, and agency** through these elements.

The Neuroscience Behind Purposeful Narratives

I wanted to verify these consistent purposeful narrative elements, and most of all, I wanted to better understand the neuroscience behind the emotional reaction they illicit—the “goosebumps” people often experience when they hear a co-created Purposeful Narrative read aloud, even if they were not involved in its creation and regardless of the credibility, status, or intonation of the presenter. Those spontaneous *oohs* and *ahs*, the eager nodding heads, and the surge of collective energy that emerges

as individuals suddenly commit to activating change are so common, they can’t be accidental. I wondered: *Why do these Purposeful Narratives literally shift posture, perspective, and participation in real time?*

Purposeful Narratives are effective because they align the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral systems that drive human engagement.

Purpose makes narratives matter. Rhythm makes narratives stick. Together, they create momentum for change.

Purpose activates relevance. Neuroscience and behavioral research demonstrate that emotion is integral to reasoning and decision-making (Damasio, 1994). Purpose activates relevance and focus, and promotes trust, empathy, and connection—the fundamental ingredients of social coherence (Ajzen, 1991; Frankl, 1946; Green & Brock, 2000; Kosfeld et al., 2005; Zak, 2015). Purpose also fuels hope, a future-oriented motivational state grounded in agency and pathways thinking (Snyder, 2002). When purpose is clearly articulated within a narrative, it creates cognitive coherence and motivational direction.

Rhythm enhances memorability and shared resonance. Rhythmic and repetitive structures create memorability and emotional lift by reinforcing neural patterns (entrainment)—the synchronization of brain activity to external patterns of sound or speech (Large & Snyder, 2009; Levitin, 2006), which enhances attention, prediction, and memory formation, allowing listeners to anticipate what comes next and experience a sense of pleasure when those expectations are met (Davidson & Begley, 2012). In this way, repetition is not merely stylistic but physiological: it stabilizes neural firing patterns, increases retention, and signals salience. In group settings, rhythmic narrative structures also amplify emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), allowing affective states to synchronize across participants.

Purpose and rhythm together generate physiological engagement. Research on social neurochemistry suggests that emotionally resonant storytelling can stimulate the release of oxytocin, which promotes empathy and trust (Zak, 2015); dopamine,

which heightens anticipation and motivation (Levitin, 2006); cortisol and adrenaline, which sharpen focus and readiness; and serotonin, which supports well-being and social bonding (Davidson & Begley, 2012). This natural “chemical symphony” deepens emotional resonance, perceived relevance, and embeds meaning in memory, translating into greater connection, urgency, and focus across systems. When narratives authentically reflect shared norms and commitments, they also strengthen trust and collective identity—critical foundations for coordinated action (Zak & Knack, 2001; Eisenberger et al., 2001).

This naturally aligns with Appreciative Inquiry’s broader assertion that positive emotion and shared vision fuel human and organizational flourishing (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Seligman, 2002). As individual purpose connects with the purpose of others, it generates a collective sense of possibility (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Senge et al., 1994), strengthening both hope and direction at the system level.

In organizational contexts, this alignment of purpose (meaning), rhythm (structure), and physiological activation (engagement) supports what can be described as **head–heart–hand integration**:

- » the head understands the rationale,
- » the heart feels the resonance, and
- » the hands are mobilized toward action.

When narrative design intentionally integrates these elements, communication moves beyond information transfer to become a structured intervention that influences attention, motivation, trust, and coordinated behavior.

Great communicators intuitively understand this. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “*I Have a Dream*” speech exemplifies how cadence and repetition transform purpose-driven language into movement. Each repeated phrase built neural and emotional anticipation—generating physiological energy while uniting purpose, emotion, and action.

In the rapidly changing world of work, our mission—to empower every individual and every organization on the planet to achieve more—is more important than ever. This is as true for our employees as it is for our customers. Empowered employees reward their employer with loyalty and passion. They collaborate and innovate. They feel a deep sense of purpose and seek to bring it to life through their work.

We are committed to empowering employees through bold new ways of working that shifts paradigms, embraces flexibility, creates enduring connections, promotes inclusion, and drives innovation. It is imperative that we design a work environment that is effective, productive, and collaborative in meaningful ways for both individual and collective impact. Most importantly, we are committed to respecting both individual workstyles and business needs while living our culture. We believe in impact, not hours worked, and we know that accountability is key to rewarding and recognizing hard work. We trust our employees to make informed decisions and choose to do what is best for their individual and our collective success.

We know that designing a global hybrid workplace will take time. As always, we will learn, grow, and innovate. We will evolve over time with intention—guided by data, sound policies, and fiscal responsibility. We know our customers look to us to lead the way and we take pride in this honor and responsibility. When we empower our people to define how they do their best work, we will empower the planet to achieve more.

Figure 5. Sample Purposeful Narrative: Microsoft Flexibility Framework

Case Study:
Microsoft Flexible Work Narrative

Let’s take a look now at an example of a Purposeful Narrative.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Microsoft created a Flexible Work Framework to guide the organization’s transition back to the office. The framework sought to reduce anxiety, clarify expectations of work site, location, and hours, and reconnect employees to the company’s mission and culture. The Purposeful Narratives process was used to align stakeholders around the flexibility guidance goals, reinforce values, and help leaders communicate consistently across a highly distributed organization.

The resulting Flexible Work Narrative is shared in Figure 5.

This narrative served as the foundation for the company’s internal and external communication and cultural reinforcement during a period of great uncertainty as employees and employers alike contended with the impacts of coming back into the office, and it remained durable for a period of five years. It connected the pragmatic with the emotional, providing direction, belonging, agency, and hope when they were most needed.

The Purposeful Narratives Formula

Once I understood the science behind why Purposeful Narratives worked, I further refined the key components into specific, repeatable categories of needed information that make a well-rounded, impactful narrative. The Purposeful Narratives Formula (Watt, 2025) provides a simple, repeatable framework for constructing authentic organizational stories that bridge meaning and movement (see Figure 6).

This equation reflects both the art and science of narrative construction. It begins with emotional resonance (how it feels) and ties it to strategic intent (why it matters), grounding both in lived reality (context and proof) and forward-looking commitments. The formula helps practitioners find the intersection between meaning and movement—the space where communication becomes transformation.

For OD practitioners, the Purposeful Narratives Formula functions as a

facilitation framework rather than a writing tool. It supports the design of Purposeful Inquiry Workshops, Appreciative Inquiry-based design that surface collective wisdom, capture the organization’s strengths, co-create the desired future state, and include the communications components needed to build the change platform. Participants are guided through reflection and dialogue on “what is,” “what could be,” and “what will be.”

In this process, OD professionals gather the qualitative stories and contextual data needed to understand both the emotional and systemic drivers of change. They act as sense makers and synthesizers—bridging data and dialogue, systems and story—to translate collective aspirations into language that communicates both purpose and possibility.

It prompts users to identify:
Purpose/Mission: What is the intent or driving “why”?

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \text{Resonance/Rhythm} \times \\
 & (\text{Purpose/Mission} + \text{Context} + \text{People} + \text{Proof} + \\
 & \text{Commitments} + \text{Desired Outcome/Impact}) \\
 & = \text{Momentum \& Change}
 \end{aligned}$$

Figure 6. The Purposeful Narratives Formula: Diagnostic and Dialogic Approaches

Our mission is to **[state purpose/mission]**. In a world of **[context/challenge]**, this mission is more important than ever.

We know that success depends on **[who/people]**. Research shows **[external proof]**, and internally we see **[internal proof]**. This tells us that **[key insight]**.

To live our mission, we commit to **[behavior 1]**, **[behavior 2]**, and **[behavior 3]**. This means we must **[specific expectations or principles]**.

When we do this together, we will **[outcome/impact]**, and in doing so, we will realize our mission to **[impact on mission restated]**.

Figure 7. Purposeful Narratives Template

- Context:** What internal or external conditions make this change necessary now?
- People:** Who is involved, affected, or leading the effort?
- Proof:** What evidence supports the need or demonstrates progress?
- Commitments:** What promises, values, or guiding principles will shape future behavior?
- Desired Outcome/Impact:** What shared future are we moving toward, and how does this align with our mission?

Once these elements are defined, OD and Communications partners can use the Purposeful Narratives Template (Figure 7) to co-develop the narrative and begin the process of socializing it across key stakeholder groups.

A note for practitioners: In this phase, your key stakeholders need to agree with every word of your narrative. However, your partners and tangentially related stakeholders and influencers do not. They simply need to let you know if there is anything

specifically that they cannot support and why, and they otherwise need to indicate that they are enthusiastically aligned.

This socialization aligns with Kotter's (1996) change objectives of removing obstacles, gaining buy-in, and fostering visible leadership support.

Using the Purposeful Narratives Template ensures coherence and continuity across all communications while preserving room for authenticity, cultural nuance, and emotional tone. The

Master Narrative Themes	No-one-size-fits all - Offer as much flexibility as possible – Learn and grow over time - Empowerment - Trust – Culture + Business/Individual + Collective		
Messages	We will offer as much flexibility as possible to support individual workstyles while balancing business needs and ensuring we live our culture.		
	Flexibility can mean different things to each of us, and we recognize there is no one-size fits-all solution given the variety of roles, work requirements, and business needs we have at Microsoft.		
	We will learn, grow, and innovate. We will evolve over time with intention, guided by data and employee input.		
	We are committed to exploring new ways of working that shift paradigms, embrace flexibility, create enduring connections, promote inclusion, and drive innovation.		
	We have learned that now more than ever, flexibility, trust, and empowerment are key to delivering success.		
	We will, together as One Microsoft, build a hybrid workplace that empowers our people to do their best work so that we can empower everyone on the planet to achieve more.		
Supporting programs/initiatives	Include work site, work hours, and work location descriptions as needed.		

(This table was reconstructed by the author based on professional experience developing internal messaging frameworks at Microsoft and through analysis of publicly shared materials from the company's flexibility communications. It serves as a representative example of how narrative coherence is maintained from the conceptual level through tactical communication planning.)

Figure 8. Example Key Messaging Framework from Microsoft Flexibility Case Study



The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged all of us to think, live, and work in new ways. As a company, we have proven that we are agile in the face of adversity, rising to meet business and customer needs while caring for loved ones and ourselves. Through all of this, we have learned that—now more than ever—flexibility, trust, and empowerment are key to delivering success.

We are committed to exploring new ways of working that shift paradigms, embrace flexibility, create enduring connections, promote inclusion, and drive innovation. We will offer as much flexibility as possible to support individual workstyles, while balancing business needs, and ensuring we live our culture.

This guide is a starting point to help both employees and managers understand our policies and guidelines and make informed decisions. It's important to keep in mind that options around where and when employees work may differ based on role or region, but my expectation is that we continue to enable a hybrid workplace where individuals, teams, and our business can be successful.

As always, we will learn, grow, and innovate. We will evolve over time with intention, guided by employee input. We will—
together, as One Microsoft—build a hybrid workplace that empowers our people to do their best work so we can empower the planet to achieve more.

Kathleen Hogan
Chief People Officer, Microsoft

Figure 9. Employee Handbook Message from Kathleen Hogan, Microsoft CHRO

formula is not meant to be followed rigidly; rather, it serves as a guiding rhythm—a flow that balances consistency with creativity and connects message design to meaning-making.

Key Messaging: Translating the Narrative into Action

The relationship between narrative, key messaging, and artifacts is illustrated in *Figure 4: Narrative Architecture Overview*.

Once a Purposeful Narrative is co-created and developed, the next step is to translate its essence into Key Messaging. Key messaging distills the story's "why" into clear, actionable points, ensuring alignment across every channel. While the Master Narrative requires group consensus and co-creation, key message development is typically handed off to a Communications professional to develop from the core themes and tailored to specific audiences as needed. Approval is then secured from key stakeholders to close the work.

The messages become the backbone of leadership communications, employee FAQs, and internal presentations. By aligning every artifact to the same foundational messaging, the organization ensures coherence without uniformity.

In order to demonstrate the complete flow from narrative to key messaging to materials, *Figure 8* showcases a sample of key messaging for Microsoft's Flexibility Guidance. This is useful to understand how messaging may be pulled directly from the narrative, or entirely new messaging may be created to better encapsulate a need, but all messaging drives the same core themes and essence of the narrative.

Three Artifacts That Bring the Narrative to Life

These artifacts demonstrate consistency in how the narrative and key messaging came to life. Together, they show how the system of communications (BOM) worked together, and how they were translated into external media coverage that reflected back the objectives of the program in great alignment with the program goals and with added emotional resonance and validation.

The message in *Figure 9* from Microsoft's *Employee Flexibility Handbook* demonstrates how key messages were directly drawn from the Purposeful Narrative. Microsoft shared the handbook externally, allowing customers to learn from its approach.

The external blog post in *Figure 10* was shared on the Official Microsoft Blog, to coincide with the internal release of the *Employee Handbook*, demonstrating consistent core messaging adapted for different contexts and audiences.

The *Inc.* article in *Figure 11* reflects external interpretation of Microsoft's flexibility guidelines. The piece generated significant customer interest in the form of calls to the CHRO's office, further validating the program's messaging success.

Go Forth and Communicate: Implications for OD Practitioners

The integration of the Comms for OD Change Map, the Narrative Architecture overall, and the Purposeful Narratives process, offers OD practitioners a holistic approach to leading change through both systems and story. It demonstrates how the structured rigor of planned change (Cummings & Worley, 2019) can coexist with the dialogic, inquiry-based spirit of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

For OD practitioners, the opportunity lies in the courage to inhabit the intersection where purpose meets practice, and communication becomes transformation.

Embracing a flexible workplace

Oct 9, 2020 | Kathleen Hogan - Executive Vice President and Chief People Officer



Over the past few months, we have learned so much about productivity, flexibility, resilience, and compassion. We have been working in ways we never thought possible, including managing necessary safety precautions, learning to connect with small or large teams while presenting to a screen, taking care of family and friends while being in the next room on calls, adjusting hours to address new demands and so much more. And I am deeply empathetic that this is on top of navigating the emotional toll of all that we are witnessing and experiencing.

At the same time, the pandemic has raised questions about what our employees can expect in the future, so we provided some guidance this week to employees on our thinking about work flexibility. Moving forward, it is our goal to offer as much flexibility as possible to support individual workstyles, while balancing business needs and ensuring we live our culture.

Flexibility can mean different things to each of us, and we recognize there is no one-size-fits-all solution given the variety of roles, work requirements and business needs we have at Microsoft. To address this, we have provided guidance to employees to make informed decisions around scenarios that could include changes to their work site, work location, and/or work hours once offices are open without any COVID-19 restrictions. Our step-by-step guidance includes considerations like office space, salary and benefits, local law, personal taxes, expenses and more.

Our guidance includes:

- **Work site (the physical space where you work, e.g. office, center, home, mobile):** We recognize that some employees are required to be onsite and some roles and businesses are better suited for working away from the worksite than others. However, for most roles, we view working from home part of the time (less than 50%) as now standard – assuming manager and team alignment.
- **Work hours (the hours and days when employees work, e.g. workday start and end times, full- or part-time):** Work schedule flexibility is now considered standard for most roles. While part-time continues to be subject to manager approval, our guidance is meant to facilitate an open conversation between a manager and employee regarding considerations.
- **Work location (the geographic location where you work, e.g. city and country):** Similarly the guidance is there for managers and employees to discuss and address considerations such as role requirements, personal tax, salary, expenses, etc.

Our guidance is to help employees plan ahead for the future. For now, returning to many of our offices around the world is still optional for employees, except for essential onsite roles. While we've shared that we will challenge long-held assumptions and seek to be on the forefront of what is possible leveraging technology, we have also communicated that we are not committing to having every employee work from anywhere, as we believe there is value in employees being together in the workplace.

We will continue to evolve our approach to flexibility over time as we learn more.

Tags: COVID-19, employees

Figure 10. Official Microsoft Blog Message from the Chief Human Resources Officer on Microsoft's New Flexibility Guidance. Hogan, K.



Microsoft's New 6-Word Remote Work Policy Is Brilliant. Here's Why Your Company Should Steal It

Microsoft's new policy is great because it recognizes its employees as individuals. And that's empowering.

Microsoft recently announced new guidance for remote work, and it has potential to change how the company works for years to come.

The biggest change: making work from home, at least part of the time, the new permanent standard. Also standard is "work schedule flexibility," which gives employees more freedom to choose the hours and days when they work, along with their workday start and end times.

Microsoft's announcement, which you can read here in full, does a great job of leading with empathy. But I'd like to zoom in on a single sentence, because it reveals a major key to keeping employees happier and more productive:

"Moving forward, it is our goal to offer as much flexibility as possible to support individual work styles, while balancing business needs and ensuring we live our culture."

These six words advocate a brilliant business strategy founded on emotional intelligence, the ability to make emotions work for you, instead of against you. Let's break down why every company should implement it.

Why flexibility is invaluable

To understand why Microsoft's new policy is so great, you have to acknowledge a fundamental truth:

Your employees aren't just workers, they're individuals. Real people with different working styles, tastes, and preferences. This applies as much to the topic of remote work as to anything.

For example, one employee may prefer to work from home, so they can easily take their children to school. Another, also with children, may prefer working in the office for the opposite reason--so they can get away from the chaos of home.

Or, consider a single employee who lives alone. If more introverted, they may prefer to work from home where they don't have to have more than necessary contact with others, and can focus on their work. In contrast, a more extroverted person may prefer to come into the office, where they can have social contact and enjoy collaboration.

Of course, there are many who prefer a hybrid approach, with the choice to work in the office or at home, depending on the circumstances or simply how they feel that day.

So, how do you keep all of these employees happy?

Offer as much flexibility as possible.

"Flexibility can mean different things to each of us, and we recognize there is no one-size-fits-all solution given the variety of roles, work requirements, and business needs we have at Microsoft," writes Kathleen Hogan, Microsoft's chief people officer. In other words, you treat your employees like adults and give them the freedom to make the choice that's best for them--and allow them to take responsibility for those choices.

When adopting this policy, though, it's important you not constantly subject your employees to comparison. Managers will be tempted to look at the surface, judging the "stay-at-home" employee as more or less productive than the "office" employees. But remember: These aren't just workers, they're people. Each is an individual, with a unique personality. A unique set of strengths and weaknesses. A unique set of circumstances.

By providing each individual with flexibility, i.e., options to fit their circumstances, you provide them with the environment that allows those individuals to become the best version of themselves.

And that's empowering. So, for all you companies out there who are trying to figure out your own remote work policy, take a page from Microsoft's playbook and:

Offer as much flexibility as possible.

By doing so, you'll be using emotional intelligence to build stronger relationships with your people. You'll give them the freedom they crave and need. You'll prove that you see them not just as cogs in a machine but as individuals. And that will put your people--and your company--in the best position to succeed.

Figure 11. Article about Microsoft's Flexible Work Policy in Inc. Online. Bariso, J.

Elevating the role of purpose-led communications within OD practice is central to this shift. When practitioners approach communications not as an output but as an integrated intervention, they expand its function from information-sharing to sense-making. Purposeful Narratives provide a bridge between the rigor of OD methodology, the art of communications, and the importance of human connection, helping organizations move powerfully from awareness to alignment to action.

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