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TOWARD A NEW STRATEGIC NARRATIVE FOR NORTH AMERICAN MISSIONS



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

The Great Commission community in North America needs a new strategic narrative that resonates with our rapidly changing global context and offers answers to important questions about our role in the world at this moment in history. It must provide guidance for retooling our systems and structures and redefine our relationship with the global church. Four fundamental global shifts provide the back story for this newly forming strategic narrative: from information scarcity to information abundance, from a closed system to an open system, from hard power to soft power and from gathering-based metrics to scattering-based metrics.

In 1947 George Kennan published “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” in *Foreign Affairs* under the pseudonym X, so as not to reveal his identity as a U.S. Foreign Service Officer. The X article gave us an intellectual framework within which to understand the rise and eventual fall of the Soviet Union and a strategy to hasten that objective.³⁹ It was this strategic narrative, well suited enough for the facts of the world we perceived at the time, which enabled us to create and maintain a loose bipartisan national consensus for forty years.



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On April 8, 2011, two senior members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Captain Wayne Porter, USN and Colonel Mark “Puck” Mykleby, USMC, writing in an unofficial capacity, released a document under the pseudonym Mr. Y, entitled “A National Strategic Narrative.” Porter and Mykleby’s Y article was a clear reference to George Kennan’s X article in Foreign Affairs and asserted the U.S. is in need of a new strategic narrative. In the preface to the article Anne-Marie Slaughter of Princeton University raises the questions that need answered: “Where is the United States going in the world? How can we get there? What are the guiding stars that will illuminate the path along the way? We need a story... that will transcend our political divisions, orient us as a nation, and give us both a common direction and the confidence and commitment to get to our destination.”

She goes on to say, “These questions require new answers because of the universal awareness that we are living through a time of rapid and universal change. The assumptions of the 20th century, of the U.S. as a bulwark first against fascism and then against communism, make little sense to young generations today.”⁴⁰

I believe the Great Commission community in North America is in desperate need of a new strategic narrative. We need to answer questions of our own, based on the realities of a new day. What is the role of North American missions today? How do we retool our structures and systems to get there? What are the guiding stars that will illuminate the path along the way? We need a story that will transcend our doctrinal differences as evangelicals, orient us as a mission force and give us both common direction and the confidence and commitment to get to our destination.

We need a new strategic narrative. And recognizing I don’t belong in this list, in the spirit of George Kennan, aka Mr. X, Captain Porter and Colonel Mykleby, aka Mr. Y, I’m stepping forward as Mr. Z, to offer the broad outline of that strategic narrative. My focus is not on what your church or mission should change but rather on how the world has changed. I want to highlight four fundamental global shifts that I believe we must understand in order to reposition ourselves for effectiveness going forward.

FOUR GLOBAL SHIFTS

From Information Scarcity To Information Abundance

To be more precise, the change is not only an increase in the volume of information but rather an increase in the accessibility of information. When information is scarce organizations tend to be centralized and gatekeepers have extraordinary influence. This is why public libraries were once epicenters of intellectual influence. I heard about Porter and Mykleby's Mr. Y article on a television news program. Thirty years ago if I wanted to get a copy of it I would have to go to a library and I'd be at the mercy of the reference desk as to if and when they might be able to get me a copy. It might be weeks before I could read it for myself.

When information is readily available it becomes less valuable, gatekeepers are marginalized and their influence is greatly diminished. My apologies to the librarians.

Why is this important? If the organization in which you lead or serve was started before 1990 (before the Internet was ubiquitous) it was born into a world of information scarcity and all the foundational assumptions that shaped your structures and systems reflected that reality. It is possible you have changed but if so it did not happen by accident and most of the changes we make are cosmetic. I suspect you think you have made more meaningful changes than you really have. Perhaps even more important is the fact you can no longer use information as a power base. That's true internally with your staff and even more so externally with stakeholders.

From A Closed System To An Open System

A nearly inescapable by-product of information abundance is an increasingly open system. When information is scarce the cost of entry is high and the system can remain closed.

Information abundance demystifies professional expertise and opens the system to outsiders. There was a day when the mission enterprise was functionally a closed system, limited to professionals with means, which in turn dictated a west to east, north to south, church to agency flow of human capital. That day is

gone, forever.

Organizations that evolved in a closed system struggle to adapt to an environment where stakeholders at every level expect the opportunity to co-create the future. Unilateral initiatives made sense in an open system. But today, regardless of how visionary or noble the intentions, from the perspective of an open system, unilateral initiatives are viewed as presumptuous, even disingenuous.

From Hard Power To Soft Power

When you control the information you control the agenda. When you control the agenda you control the use of resources. When you control all three, you have hard power. The idea of hard power comes from the world of international relations where coercion and inducement are the primary tools of influencing behavior. In the world of international relations, hard power calls for a strong military and strong economy. In the world of international missions it calls for information scarcity and a closed system.

Soft power is a term coined by Harvard professor Joseph Nye and refers to the influencing of behavior through co-option and attraction. Soft power focuses on engagement over exclusion, influence over control. Hard power produces friction in a world of information abundance and open systems. Dictators can cling to hard power but the sand is moving through the hourglass toward an open system.

Christian organizations would like to believe they have always chosen servant leadership and soft power in relating to their stakeholders, both here and around the world. But the inertia of hard power is difficult to stop. I submit our desire for Christ-likeness and servant leadership only made us benevolent wielders of hard power; we still controlled the information, agenda and use of resources. In a world where no one controls the information, everyone on the stakeholder list wants to co-create the agenda and the budget. The only credible path to influence is soft power, which is an entirely new skill set for Great Commission influencers from North America, in both churches and mission organizations.

From "Gathering-Based Metrics" To "Scattering-Based Metrics"

Gathering-based metrics focus on counting what you control, which fits nicely in a worldview of

information scarcity, closed systems and hard power. You count how many meetings you held, how many people attended your training, the commitments and goals made by people who attended the meeting.

But in a world marked by information abundance and open systems that call for soft power, “scattering-based metrics” will be much more important. In a church context scattering metrics shift the focus from how many people attended our service to how many hours of service did our people give away to the community and what difference is it making in their lives? Every month I receive a summary of prayer requests from mission organizations. It is filled with gathering-based metrics that focus on how many people attended and often what they promised to do in the future.

Scattering-based metrics are extremely hard to collect. And when the agenda is increasingly shaped by more than one stakeholder it is difficult to know who should get credit for what and how to report with integrity. I predict the more we lean in to information abundance, open systems and soft power, the less difficult it will be to identify and collect scattering-based metrics that reflect the difference people actually make in the lives of others.

Four shifts that I believe provide the scaffolding for a new strategic narrative for North American Missions: from information scarcity to information abundance, from a closed system to an open system, from hard power to soft power, from gathering-based metrics to scattering-based metrics.

So let me close with a few questions. What evidence would you provide that your organization, the culture as well as the operations, has embraced the reality of information abundance? How are you relating with stakeholders who were once on the outside looking in but now expect to co-create the agenda with you? Think back to the last time you were facing a high stakes decision and really wanted to exert your benevolent influence. Would the people you were seeking to influence describe your power-base as hard or soft? Take a close look at your organizational scorecard, the ways you measure progress for your primary stakeholders. Is it dominated by gathering-based metrics or scattering-based metrics?

NOTES

³⁹ A National Strategic Narrative, page 2, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, from the preface by Anne-Marie Slaughter, Professor of Politics and International Affairs, Princeton University

⁴⁰ Ibid, page 229

Sieze the Vuja de is a compilation of transcripts from Learning @ the Speed of Life, the video blog of Missio Nexus, by Steve Moore. Missio Nexus was formed out of the merger of CrossGlobal Link and The Mission Exchange and is the largest network of Great Commission oriented evangelicals in North America. For more information visit www.MissioNexus.org.

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