

# Get employees onside with a story

## Written by

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## Category

[Strategy & Leadership](#)

## Key topics

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## **Design firm Alessi's lauding of its own history and products holds an important lesson in how businesses can use stories to reduce resistance to change**

We all recognise the [elegant citrus press](#) designed by Philippe Starck: the tall curving legs, the inverted teardrop-shaped body, the all-round spaceship-like looks. Its iconic design embodies the pedigree of the creative Italian power house Alessi. But did you know that Alessi once had no design credentials at all? It was simply a metal workshop making kitchen utensils.

Today, Alessi is world renowned as a creative leader; endorsed by architects and designers, its stylish and beautiful products are coveted in kitchens around the world. Behind this transformation lies a carefully crafted and executed strategy; the company's successfully reinvention of itself is testament to the power of storytelling.

All business leaders know that taking a company in a different direction is complex: successful transformations require employees to be on board, investors to have faith, and customers to accept the new products or services. Alessi managed this by

harnessing a narrative and using it to enable and drive the company's reincarnation.

Alessi has carved out the history it wants others to see

## **(Re)writing the past**

Why have we singled out Alessi? It's a unique company about which so much has been written: both by its leaders and by recognised authorities in the design world. Between 1979 and 2010, Alberto Alessi, the third generation of the Alessi family, commissioned, wrote and published more than 30 books covering the company's history and evolution. He invested in the potential of storytelling, with remarkable results: these accounts now form a conscious strategy that has altered and guided how employees, customers and investors see the company.

A well-told story has impact. In our research, [Giada Di Stefano](#) and I discovered three narrative pillars deployed by the company within Alessi's written accounts with powerful effect.

The first is memorialising: gradually building and shaping a shared account and collective memory of changes that have taken place over the decades. By creating a continuity within the stories – what we call serialising – authors can build a coherent storyline and help reinforce links between the past and present. Alberto Alessi orchestrated the storytelling with the first corporate biography in 1979. He invited the influential architect and designer Alessandro Mendini to write and contribute to successive texts; Mendini became a “memory maker”, a curator of Alessi's story.

Strategies, services, even a company motto could be imbued with meaning and iconised

Revisioning forms the second narrative pillar. This means rewriting the company's history with the benefit of hindsight, depicting change as a novel but coherent departure from the past. Past events and decisions were reinterpreted: a tighter focus was placed on experimental projects for instance, while some other events have been left to fade. Alessi has carved out the history it wants others to see.

Finally, events and strategies are sacralised: by this we mean they are imbued with a transcendent quality. Products are given iconic status (Carlo Alessi's revered Bombé coffee set for instance) while individuals are presented as

“prophets” of change (Alberto Alessi emerges from his texts as the unquestionable interpreter of the true meanings of design).

## **Wider application**

We don't see these strategies as dodgy: they're a perfectly legitimate reworking of past events to give them meaning that aligns with the current strategy. It's a way of making sense and connecting the past. In Alessi's case, they have worked remarkably well: change was embraced both inside and outside the organisation.

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We believe these techniques are a practical and transferrable method that can be used by any company involved in strategic change. But – as we have seen with Alessi – the desire to deploy this strategy must come from the very top of the firm in order to be effective. Company leaders need to believe in it and engage in such systematic storytelling efforts throughout the change process.

Alessi – with its long history, visually enticing product range, and particular prominence – lends itself to the world of history books. But that doesn't mean books are the only way of constructing narratives. Companies might want to use a system of letters to employees or shareholders, or video messages or presentations. They don't need a consumer product, either: strategies, services, even a company motto could be imbued with meaning and iconised. And it doesn't need, as in Alessi's case, to take 30 years.

But it's this narrative model that is important: memorialising, revisioning and sacralising. It can be adopted by any organisation planning strategic change as a means to prevent resistance among employees and other stakeholders. It's a way of garnering support and mobilising staff around a core idea. It's a very clear and actionable strategy that we believe any chief executive could use.

*This article draws on findings from “A Universe of stories: Mobilizing Narrative Practices During Transformative Change”, published in the [Strategic Management Journal](#), and authored by Elena Dalpiaz (Imperial Business School) and Giada Di Stefano (HEC Paris).*

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## About Elena Dalpiaz

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Dr Elena Dalpiaz was an Associate Professor of Strategy at Imperial Business School until the academic year 2024-25. She holds a PhD degree from Bocconi University, where she also earned her BA in Economics and Law (with honours). During 2007 and 2008, she was a visiting scholar at the University of Texas at Austin, McCombs Business School.

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