



# Keeping Your Mythos Alive: How to Nourish and Nurture a Business’s Mythos Through Corporate Transformations

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## Abstract

What makes a business successful? How does it remain successful?

In order to answer this question, I have developed the MythosResearch® approach, which helps medium-sized, family-owned businesses to tap into their most important resource for making them successful: their deepest sense of purpose—their “mythos.”

Mythos potential pulsates throughout a business’s history, its doctrines and beliefs, and its vision of the future. A clearly defined and communicated mythos creates identification, orientation, and enthusiasm. It is therefore a magical breeding ground for a successful corporate brand.

Over time, however, a mythos may become a burden and a risk factor, as it stands in the way of new developments. The mythos then “bites back.” It is therefore crucial for the leadership to become aware of the business’s mythos and to realign it to the changed requirements of the market.

## 1 Organizational Mythos: An Introduction

### 1.1 Which “Mythos” Are We Talking About?

The scintillating notion of “mythos” is used in a variety of semantic fields—religious content, Greek mythology, exciting brands, and false assertions—thus creating a lot of confusion. Let’s make one thing clear right from the start: in this article, “mythos” is not used in the colloquial sense of “lie” or “phenomenon,” nor in the historically restrictive ancient context.

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Instead, “mythos” here denotes a mode of perception allowing us to experience a sense of purpose and meaning. Contrary to logical thinking, a mythos is not limited by language and its notions. In mythos mode, we perceive things in a holistic way while thinking synthetically (cf. Cassirer 1964; Langer 1992; Jamme 1999).

Members of a culture develop and use specific systems of signs and symbols as a way of talking about these perceptions. The mythical element therefore not only manifests itself as a way of perceiving but also as a way of expressing oneself. Within these processes, we can distinguish between three levels:

1. Mythical thinking as an analog way of perceiving and processing
2. Preconscious premises reflexively arising from the mythical way of processing
3. Development of (mythical) symbols to allow culture members to reflect on their perceptions and communicate them

Culture is thus primarily characterized by a prelingual, analog, and holistic way of thinking. A culture’s values, premises, and actions derive from the orientation and imagination patterns thus formed (cf. Schein 2003).

Based on this perception- and symbol-based concept of mythos, a corporate culture is seen as a symbol system consisting of words, rituals, images, and mythoi helping its members to bring order to reality as they experience it. This continuous process is fuelled by the subjective perception of meaning and the desire to derive from it a collective sense of purpose. Corporate mythoi thus have the same function as their ancient models: they reduce complexity and serve to interpret the world.

## 1.2 The Mythos Model

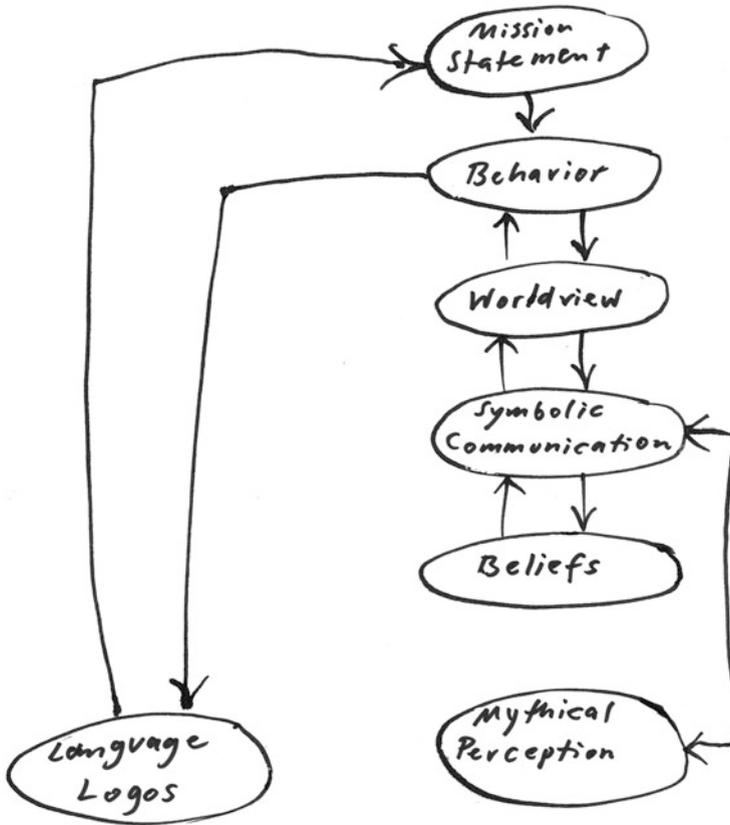
The MythosModel® illustrates the complex ways the dynamics of mythical perception shapes reality. It shows that logical and mythical thinking are based on two different perception modes. Only their mutual interaction forms our image of reality (Fig. 1).

We only know for certain what we believe in. WILHELM BUSCH (Balzer 1953)

### 1.2.1 What Is an Organizational Mythos?

Powerful cultures have a common crystallization point characterizing them, such as a historical mythos, a charismatic leader, an exciting product, a brand, or a powerful vision of the future.

If a company starts out with a captivating vision, a magical narrative speaking to people’s minds, hearts, and souls, chances are that it will develop a powerful mythos. This is because the mythical mode of perception yearns for a sense of purpose—what is good, true, and beautiful. In people’s experience, founders, events, heroes, places, visions, objects, institutions, concepts, and ideas are charged with excitement and acquire a collective meaning as they are communicated.



**Fig. 1** Mythos Model ©Silvia Zulauf, 1992, authors' own figure

“The personal computer” (Apple), “having music moments everywhere” (Spotify), and “the free encyclopedia” (Wikipedia) were (initially) perceived as novelties. What is particularly appealing is messages that are simple while combining two seemingly disparate aspects. Robert Bosch, for instance, is a company that stands for technological innovation and social pioneering; it has remained loyal to this message. This bipolar allegiance continues to inspire the company and impact its strategic direction.

Each mythos manifests itself in objects, rituals, and patterns of symbolic language. Stories, anecdotes, legends, and proverbs implicitly convey a meaning in excess of what individual words can impart.

**1.2.2 What Distinguishes a Mythos from a Narrative?**

The “mythos” and “narrative” terms are of the same origin; both stand for anecdotes and tales.

The most significant difference is that a mythic story is received in a particular way. Across cultures and ages, it can implicitly convey content that speaks to us directly, independently of a factual, historical context. This is because a listener who is in mythical perception mode disregards time and history and absorbs what is said as a real-time experience (cf. Assmann 1999).

A mythos neither needs to be logical nor true. What it conveys lies not in the past and not in the future; its message speaks to us in the here and now. Typical introductions to mythical tales are:

The story still rings in my ears...  
I see it before my eye...

Whether or not a narrative develops into a mythos ultimately depends on how people perceive it. According to Roland Barthes, everything can become a mythos: events, historical figures, concepts such as “technology” and “progress,” and even places and institutions (cf. Barthes 1964, p. 85).

The reason why not everything becomes a mythos is that each new mythos takes up some familiar theme. It gains its depth and persuasiveness by invoking old cultural patterns and essentially working with mythical material.

Tales and anecdotes are ultimately secondary forms of the mythos as they are based on the premises implied by it; they point to the mythos itself.

### The “Binary Code” of the Mythos

The story a mythos tells takes the form of a succession of episodes. It is, however, not about chronological events based on cause and effect. The actual driving force behind the story is the need to deal with contradictions and paradoxes. To resolve them, the mythical language operates on an enhanced level. To each conscious point, there is an unconscious counterpoint. It thus lifts its listeners to a new level of experience. Claude Levi-Strauss describes this phenomenon as the “binary code of the mythos” (cf. Levi-Strauss 1981, pp. 226ff.).

The following story told by a sales representative of Adolf Würth GmbH & Co. KG in an interview illustrates how resolving the “profit-seeking/altruism” paradox helped transform the pronounced sales orientation of the company:

As a boy, Reinhold Würth used to pull a handcart through Künzelsau which is where the company’s headquarters is today. He went from one craftsman to the next trying to sell screws. His dad died when he was still young, which by itself was very difficult for a boy who would have other things on his mind. But he went on to be the first of his industry to deliver directly to customers. I think he did it at his father’s behest. It was for his dad that he turned the one-man business into a corporation with a revenue of €4.9 billion and 70,000 employees. That’s the point that most touches my heart. (Zulauf, personal communication, April 2010)

A Levi Strauss-based structuralist analysis makes the binary structure of the Würth story visible (Table 1):

The persuasive power and the stability of a mythical tale are driven by these open or hidden ambivalences. Irreconcilable logical contradictions are negotiated on a

**Table 1** The binary structure of the Würth story

Old town of Künzelsau	Modern Würth headquarters
Handcart	Sophisticated logistics
Lost his dad at age 19	Independent and innovative
Mourning, passivity	Ambition, activity
One-man business	Global corporation
Success for his father	4.9 billion euros revenue

Authors' own table

dialectical level, thereby overcoming intellectual paradoxes. Using a “this as well as that” and “has never been but will always be” approach, the mythical story slips through “a hole in reality’s umbrella” (cf. Blumenberg 1979), tames contradictions, and creates its particular charm and dynamics in this tension field. A certain vagueness and the inclusion of supernatural elements add to its magical potential.

### 1.2.3 Organizational Culture and Mythos

A corporate mythos that works well is a blessing. Employees put their hearts and souls to their work; suppliers, customers, and investors are loyal; and the industry’s best experts apply for jobs.

To participate in a mythos means that, on a dialogic level, opposites and contradictions are reconciled. Opposites are not analyzed but integrated. The mythos takes a position beyond the logical level, thus increasing the tolerance toward contradictions and discrepancies companies face on a daily basis, such as the one between fundamental goals and objectives and the actual operational behavior.

An organizational mythos acts as a “common denominator” in that it creates a sense of purpose, identity, orientation, and trust. It paves the way for collective action, intuition, and creativity, as well as enthusiasm and motivation, potentially leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Mythical stories express context and values in an inspiring way, fostering immediate action. To new employees, they communicate the priorities and principles of how to do the work. Taboos and unspoken rules are also enshrined in stories. By metaphorical transfer, they can trigger changes and preserve tradition and continuity at the same time.

These positive, culture-strengthening qualities of a mythos have a particularly dynamic impact during the founding phase and the middle phase of a company’s life. They persist as long as the company’s behavior and strategy are aligned to its values and fundamental beliefs.

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## 2 Worst-Case Scenarios: When a Corporate Mythos Stands in the Way of Necessary Transformations

While a mythos is in essence quite persistent, it is not a static construct. With each act of listening, the members of a culture modify, adjust, and develop it so that it caters to their need for purpose, certainty, and orientation.

Companies are in perpetual motion. In order to survive, they need to constantly adjust to the challenges of their environments and even reinvent themselves every now and then. Changes in the marketplace, technological innovation, generation changes, and mergers have a significant impact on the corporate culture. Various primary and secondary strands, variants, and sub-mythoi can thus develop during a company's history.

While mythoi have a capacity for ignoring differences, they create cognitive dissonance and lose their power of persuasion once values, behaviors, and decisions experienced on a daily basis start to diverge too much.

A strong mythos, however, can slow down or even seriously jeopardize the development of a company. This is the case if it contains elements that do not support a necessary realignment.

All disruptive change comes with the risk of causing a deep split between the ingrained system of meaning and the new behavioral requirements. Corporate cultures often derail after a "successful" transformation when this split occurs.

Ideally, company owners and leaders have a strong cultural competence that helps them realize that corporate change requires realignment not only of its business's purpose but also of its deeply shaken system of meaning.

Corporate upheavals and changes, however, often happen unexpectedly, absorbing all available energy; in such times, the task of recognizing and cultivating a shattered corporate culture can easily take a backseat. The following examples describe the risks that characterize such transformations.

## 2.1 Scenario 1: Dazzled by the Mythos

Company members take refuge in their mythical self-image, ignoring the call for change. They so strongly identify with the mythos that they turn a blind eye to changing markets and conditions. This creates a huge risk that they will miss the right moment for timely adjustments. In extreme cases, people prefer the demise of their own system to revising the mythos.

Example: Leica Camera AG, a company that misjudged the digital development at the turn of the millennium.

Digital photography was regarded by the management as a passing trend which would never affect the analog luxury segment. At the Photokina in Cologne, the biggest photo tradeshow in the world, Leica representatives proudly wore lapel stickers saying, "I am a film dinosaur." Competitors however had long taken the lead, and Leica was declared as good as dead in the industry. (Cf. Nutz 2017)

Sure enough, Leica saw its returns drop by a dramatic 40% between 2000 and 2005 and suffered several crises in subsequent years. It owes its survival to an investor excited by the Leica mythos who, at the very last moment and supported by a loyal staff, made the necessary adjustments toward the market. Today, Leica

Cameras are fully digitized and well on their way—in union with the Chinese smartphone manufacturer Huawei—to recapture their place in the market.

## 2.2 Scenario 2: Ignoring the Mythos

The company management takes up the challenge of the market and embarks on a reorientation. They then frantically communicate new guidelines and, at best, engage a consulting agency to introduce staff members to the new values and messages on a Friday evening. Staff members' confidence, however, has been shaken; they no longer identify with the company but, instead, are overtaken by skepticism and cynicism.

A similar development, which is far from untypical, befell a Berlin company 140 years after its establishment. The large handicraft business's new management considered it necessary to introduce a new structure. However, it failed to recognize the existing mythos and to build on it; instead, it severed long-established structures and fired long-serving employees. Out of a feeling of insecurity, angry employees took to sabotage and work refusal. Within a year, product development and customer service deteriorated to such extent that the company had to file for insolvency.

While these two scenarios differ, there is a common cause: in both cases, leaders were unaware of the company's mythos; they were unable to look at it from the outside and perceive it on the meta level.

In the dynamics of the first scenario, company members were dazzled by the radiance of their mythos. Since they perceived it only on the preconscious level, they blindly fell victim to it.

In the second scenario, the new management fails to perceive the mythos and to understand its meaning. Without realizing it, the management ignored what the bearers of the culture were proud of, what they identified with, and where they put their hearts and faiths.

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## 3 Mythos Management

The mythos often remains a blind spot even for circumspect culture managers. It is in fact easy to overlook. Not being apparent is in fact part of its communicative structure. Instead, it acts like a source of light illuminating an object while remaining invisible itself. "The narrator remains hidden; Nature herself seems to narrate" (Cf. Barthes 1964).

For company members, viewing their own mythos from the inside is barely feasible. The difficulty of recognizing a mythos is also reflected in the saying of "not seeing the wood for the trees." You need the neutral, "extra-cultural" view from the outside to be able to take in a mythos's complex and dynamic system of meaning.

Only if the management has a clear view on a company's mythos can it master these challenges:

- Align myths and strategy in such a way that they can solve the paradox of constantly adapting to the challenges of the present future while preserving the company's origin and purpose.
- Avoid a split between a company's myths and strategy by deliberately cultivating its culture.
- Know when a mythos should be abandoned and how the development of a new mythos can be fostered.

#### 4 How to Work with Organizational Mythos: The MythosResearch® Approach (Fig. 2)

If you want to change or develop a mythos, you must first have a clear view on it. But how can a mythos be exposed? The MythosResearch® approach effectively helps companies to dive deep into their fundamental assumptions and beliefs. To this purpose, it uses target-oriented and qualitative one-on-one interviews all across the company, as well as seminars, field research, customer surveys, and document analyses, which also take into account official value systems, messages, philosophies, and mission statements.



**Fig. 2** The MythosResearch® Approach. Illustrated by ©Helge Leiberg, 2018

### 4.1 Discovering the Mythos (Fig. 3)

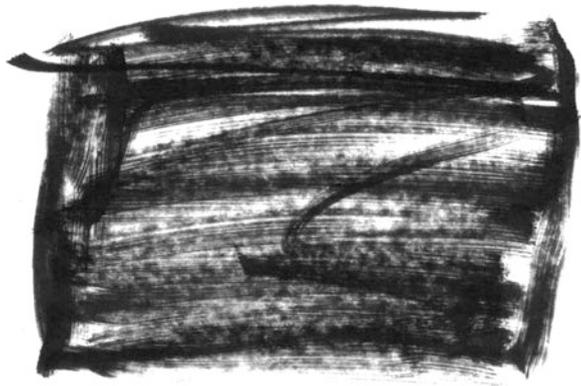
In a MythosResearch® project, in addition to case-specific topics, key research questions include:

- Above controversial viewpoints and everyday contradictions, what are the crystallization points, fundamental beliefs, and messages shared by everybody?
- What are the impulses that led to the establishment of the company?
- What does the company see as its unique characteristic that enables it to enrich the world? What does it want to look like in the future?
- What unconscious ideas, wishes, values, and images drive people's thinking and acting?
- Are they aligned to the values and beliefs that have formed during the company's history and are manifest in the company's mission statement?
- Are these fundamental assumptions and the mission statement aligned to key stakeholders' needs?

This feedback loop helps evaluate the results of the subjective-interpretive analysis. After the stories, rituals, and object symbols have been decoded and their symbolic structures, metaphorical meanings, and emotional charges have been laid open, they are contrasted to the official mission statement to make visible value fields, contradictions, crystallization points, taboos, knots, tension fields, and power sources.

As a by-product, each MythosResearch® project provides a fund of very lively and authentic artifacts—powerful content that commissioners love to use for internal publications and external communications.

**Fig. 3** The Black Box; authors' own figure





**Fig. 4** The Pistol Hairdryer; archiv Springer and Jacoby (1990)

### 4.1.1 Symbols

Symbols are key indicators of fundamental values and beliefs. There is therefore a particular focus on identifying them and laying them open (cf. Gagliardi 1990). In the following examples, they point to the dissolution of a culture, to a product mythos, a personality mythos, and the basic character of a strong community.

#### The Undoing of a Mythos

The so-called “pistol hairdryer,” a stick pin for deserving members of Springer & Jacoby, was formerly a highly valued status symbol. Those awarded with it wore it not only as a talisman at presentations but also after work in the trendy bars of Hamburg. Around the turn of the millennium, its meaning changed. As a relict of the 1980s, it was no longer cool. In the analysis, this change of meaning proves to be an indicator of the agency mythos’s decline. While the agency expanded massively (the mythos had by now outgrown reality, becoming a pseudo-mythos), its people were no longer able to see what justified the mythos (Fig. 4).

#### Product Quality

A medium-sized manufacturer produces high-quality equipment. People identify strongly with their products. The “brown bread” is a powerful metaphor for quality, which can also be used for external communication purposes (Fig. 5).

#### Attitudes

Often a founder shapes the culture of their company far beyond their time. MythosResearch® uncovers these fundamental assumptions so that they can be used to strengthen the culture or carefully adjust it to changed requirements.



**Fig. 5** Brown Bread, Zulauf (2015); designed by Manja Hellpap



**Fig. 6** Each department; Zulauf (2015); drawings by ©Helge Leiberg, 2015

Here is an example: individual and group interviews with the members of a family-owned company laid bare the founder’s deep-rooted message, “each department is equally important,” which has ever since been lived out and passed on (Fig. 6).

**4.2 Evaluate the Mythos**

Everything that lives—a mythos is no less alive than the culture in which it exists—moves through the stages of becoming, existing, and passing away. A mythos that no longer fulfils its function loses power. Sometimes it is therefore inevitable to dissolve the mythical system of meaning to give way to something new. Great culture management aims to preserve its supporting aspects as long as possible by adopting a connective strategy.

After the research results have been evaluated, the mythos will be put to test:

- Does it have the messages and resources that will be a source of power in the future?
- Does it still inspire?
- Is it still sappy enough?
- Can it be aligned to current requirements?

### 4.3 Analyze and Transform the Mythos

A mythos cannot be socio-technically exploited; it is not possible to transform it by sheer decision or to outsource its transformation. For a mythos transformation to be successful, it must take place in a truthful and authentic way, involving each and every member of the culture.

Strong mythical systems of meaning can be primarily found in medium-sized family-owned companies. Sometimes the founder who is still in the leadership role represents the mythos, or the company is led by the second or third generation the way its founder had shaped it.

Only with top-down permission to openly deal with obstructive taboos, holy cows, outdated values, and a counterproductive self-image is it possible to evaluate and optimize a cultural system. For company owners, this deconstruction process is a huge challenge or at least demands strong self-reflecting capabilities.

The willingness of the company leadership to question themselves and their traditions is crucial for the mythos analysis and transformation to be successful. Their approval is the basis for people's confidence and willingness to strongly and openly get involved in the interviews. Only if there is transparency is it possible to take a deep look into the black box of the mythical system of meaning.

By challenging the mythos, we also challenge people's way of feeling, acting, and thinking. As with highly personal change processes, working on the foundations can evoke feelings of irritation, grief, disillusionment, and fear. One affected employee from the following case study uses a striking image to describe these feelings: "We hung with all fours in the air."

**Case Study** A medium-sized family-owned company has manufactured electro-acoustic equipment for 65 years. Its mostly long-term employees strongly identify with the collaborative production process and the quality products they help create. For production and economical reasons, however, the company leadership feels compelled to outsource the prefabrication of a number of component groups to Asia. This transition comes with substantial structural changes. While layoffs can be avoided, people nevertheless show feelings of repulsion, fear, and uncertainty, resulting in resistance to change and lack of motivation.

The leadership recognizes the need to take into account all parameters in order to initiate a sensitive change process potentially leading to a new self-image. They convince managers and staff to take part in a mythos analysis. As early as during the data collection process, the dynamics of the company change. As company members relate stories, uncovering their meaning, and remember episodes and traditional rituals, they start to see their company from the interviewer's external, "extra-cultural" perspective. Intensive reflection and animated conversations take place throughout the company (Fig. 7).

The results are first presented to the leadership and discussed in a workshop. Everything is put on the table: points of conflict and fields of force, taboos, nodal points, holy cows, and crystallization points. What had previously been suspected,



**Fig. 7** Tradition/Progress, Zulauf (2015), drawing by ©Helge Leiberg, 2015

feared, hoped for, and interpreted is now visible to everybody. A common view of the present takes shape, which is an essential prerequisite for the creation of a connective strategy.

For an analysis of such depth to be successful, absolute loyalty and confidentiality in carrying out and evaluating the interviews are crucial. In a second step, of course, it is necessary to provide feedback and reflect the results back to the entire company. This requires the right filter settings and a lot of sensitivity.

As with individuals, the willingness to reorient increases if at least some of the deep-rooted fundamental assumptions can be preserved or stabilized and brought to bear on the new challenges. These fundamental assumptions should be protected. Rationalizing them would lead to their losing their implicitness and plausibility.

## 4.4 Communicating the Mythos

### 4.4.1 Expressive Fictions and Impressive Symbols

Any mythos transformation takes place in a highly collaborative fashion. People yearn for purpose. As old meaning attributions lose their legitimacy and power of persuasion, the need arises to quickly refill this vacancy. The company leadership must be prepared for this in order to be able to provide crucial impulses. Otherwise, there is a big risk of destructive constructs of meaning propagating via grapevine.

In this situation, leadership has to provide nothing less than what Paul Bate (1997), borrowing from Susanne Langer, describes as “Sinnform,” an expressive fiction which has the potential to draw attention and get people enthusiastic about something new. This is only possible if the sense-form’s message can be experienced in a holistic fashion: that is, if it speaks to the mind, the heart, and the soul, conveying ethos, pathos, and meaning.

What is described here goes beyond the notion of vision. Visions aim to create a specific image of a desired future state. Most of the time, they only speak to the cognitive and rational perception mode of the *Logos*.

The central idea of an expressive fiction directly aims at the mythical level of consciousness; it has its impact in the here and now and is only subsequently registered and decoded by the *Logos*. It can have its crystallization point in the tradition, in a leader with a strong landmark theme, in a powerful brand, or in a vision that is oriented toward evolutionary progress. The modern “technology for life” slogan, for instance, reactivates the “technology and humans” poles known from Robert Bosch’s early message, which point to a future technology that caters to humans and enriches their lives (Fig. 8).

Rational strategies and visions are important for orienting oneself toward a goal, planning, and coordination. Enthusiasm, loyalty, motivation, and creativity,

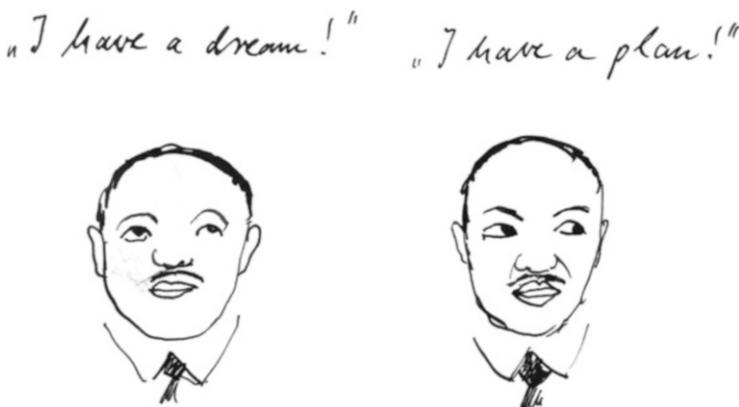


Fig. 8 I have a dream. Drawing by ©Helge Leiberg, 2019

however, are created wherever we are susceptible to high ideals, purpose, beauty, ethos, and pathos. Only messages of this kind can germinate and take roots.

It is important to understand that a desired change of mind (or meaning) cannot be brought about and controlled by socio-technical and functionalistic means. The company leadership can at best provide impulses affecting the informal symbolic networks. In this situation, attitudes, messages, decisions, and behaviors are evaluated through continuous processes of learning and interpretation, which culture members distill symbols (mythologemes) from, wrapping them in metaphors, stories, anecdotes, aphorisms, images, objects, and rituals—thus implicitly coordinating their fundamental assumptions, worldviews, and behaviors.

If applied in a culturally sensitive and sensible way, symbols, in their capacity as the “language of the mythical perception level,” help align mythical worldview with strategic direction, supporting the development of a system of meaning that company members can align their goals and energies with (Fig. 9).

Examples of an inventive use of symbolic communication include Springer & Jacoby’s “The Fat Man” pamphlet, which is designed like a commercial. It was developed for employees and key customers, sharing historical and fictitious facts as well as the cornerstones of the agency’s philosophy.

In a first step, stories, successes, values, and talents have been extracted from the agency culture, selected, substantiated, accentuated, and finally linked to the relevant, up-to-date message and the desired values and orientations.

It is of course vital to actually live these values, which, if communicated symbolically, can create a strong common perception of reality and a future orientation,



## IT ALL BEGAN WHEN REINHARD SPRINGER FELL ASLEEP IN HIS OFFICE.

→ Anyone aiming to found an advertising agency needs four things: a client, a fashionable letterhead, a fashionable brochure and a fashionable philosophy. Reinhard Springer had none of the above when he set out to establish our agency. What he did have were two rooms in a Hamburg merchant’s house and a cozy down sleeping bag.

He slept next to his desk at night, rolled up his sleeping bag each morning and opened the door to see if the first customer was waiting on the other side. No, he wasn’t a die-hard romantic, just your everyday salesman.

And, essentially, this initial simplicity and thrift hasn’t changed.

Why should it? Within just a few years, those attributes have made us the leading creative agency in Germany. And one of the most durable. It’s no accident that we are still working for our very first clients today and have rarely lost one along the way.

But we’ve won another 36, from Bacardi to Quelle, from Miele to Schwarzkopf, from Reemtsma to Mercedes.

And here’s what we made of it:

1979:	2 people	0 million returns
1983:	10 people	16 million returns
1985:	33 people	45 million returns
1987:	72 people	80 million returns
1990:	162 people	262 million returns

**Fig. 9** The Fat Man, pamphlet, archiv Springer and Jacoby (1990)

ultimately leading to the realization of a common goal or even a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Ways to convey purpose and meaning and strengthen the feeling of togetherness include the cherishing of objects such as portraits of founder(s), the documenting of important episodes, affectionate presentation of the company's products, and cultivating rituals of appreciation and action-oriented stories and anecdotes.

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## 5 Summary: Why Working with Mythos Is Amazing, Effective, and Fun

Cultural sense circulates and reproduces of its own accord. There is no need to circulate or reproduce it. JAN ASSMANN (Assmann 1991, p. 26)

A corporate mythos is made from authentic material—real purpose, values, ethos, and pathos. It grows from the inside out. Once it has gained momentum, it develops a system of signs and symbols that is understood throughout the world. Such a mythos appeals to the best people, opens doors to new markets, and carries the company over cliffs and crises. Similar to the “made in Germany” label, it eventually “rubs off” on the company's products and services.

While a mythos can be a huge competitive advantage, it also comes with the risk of complacency and hubris. It is therefore important for the company leadership to take an observer's perspective, stepping out of the preconscious-mythical level of subjective sense orientation. They can then perceive (virtually from the outside) the symbolic interactions shaping the common worldview and provide impulses using “connective” communication (containing as many familiar elements as possible to allow people to reconnect).

A corporate mythos, however, doesn't lend itself to the mystification of facts, nor can it be “fabricated,” as structures of meaning are an emergent phenomenon; you simply cannot influence or control them in a functionalistic way.

By addressing ethical feelings and by living values and symbolically sharing them, impulses can be provided, and processes of learning and change can be initiated. In their capacity as the “language of the mythical perception level,” symbols help develop a system of meaning for company members to align their goals and energies with.

Prerequisites for this holistic approach include a relationship of trust between the leadership and the people, an open and transparent corporate culture, and absolute loyalty on the interviewer's part. Only then can the deep treasures of a culture be exploited—and properly reflected.

In a MythosResearch® project, the entire company engages in both the survey phase and the presentation of the results. The “mirroring back” of stories, anecdotes, images, and symbols creates deep impulses that release strong energies as things that were previously hidden, repressed, or vaguely surmised are now openly communicated. This also leads to an intense experience of appreciation: “This is who we are. We are unique and we are visible!”



**Fig. 10** Amazing fun. Drawing by ©Helge Leiberger, 2000

A leadership endeavoring to unearth their company's deeper purpose will find promising starting points in the mythos. Against this background, it is possible, in particular, to “deepen” work on the company's strategy, vision, and brand essence. Accessing the mythos can thus be a way of guarding against short-term trends and calibrating the importance of economic interests against loyalty toward people, history, principles, and long-term goals (Fig. 10).

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