

The Power of Dialogue. Uncovering the 'Great' Questions that Drive Progress for Leaders and Policy Makers

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Abstract: Effective leadership involves not only having the right answers but also asking the right questions of the right people. Rather than relying solely on monologues, the best leaders stimulate conversations and prioritize key narratives by tracking societal sentiment. In the wake of the pandemic, leaders must ask themselves authentic questions to demonstrate leadership during a time of unprecedented change and transformation. This update from our Virtual Living Lab explores how we can track what people feel is important and engage with existing narratives that are helping to shape our world and lives amidst this maelstrom of change. This paper investigates how individuals are asking existential questions of themselves to regenerate their lives after the pandemic, with a focus on comparing the situations in the UK and Japan to explicitly consider culture. For leaders to be authentic, they must also engage in this self-reflection, or risk coming across as shallow and inauthentic.

Key Words: Narratives, Uncertainty, Leadership, Questions, Well-Being, Transformational, Engagement, Empowerment, Authentic

1. Introduction

This paper builds on our earlier research note (Beaumont et al., 2023), that considered the Personal Confidence narrative in Japan, in the December 2022, research wave at our Virtual Living Lab [VLL] The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant period in modern life (Beaumont & Ricketts, 2020). It has caused people and institutions to question everything as the virus dramatized that many things were broken, and for many leaders were found to be lacking. It exacerbated inequalities, heightened mental health concerns, and daily lives have recently become worse for many because of rising costs; thus, societal and living transformations continue almost unabated. With such volatility and uncertainty creating greater personal concerns, for some, the military acronym VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) has taken on a broader relevance. The pandemic also accelerated digitalization, something that has been both magnified and taken centre stage since the ChatGPT prototype launch at end of November 2022, with the broader access to generative Artificial intelligence (AI). AI is having an intense impact on the way we live and work. While more innovative breakthrough to benefit people and society are highly anticipated, we must also acknowledge the risks and

limitations, of mis- disinformation / dis-information, especially in open societies. The increase in data is not making people feel more informed. People want to use data to improve decision-making, but don't know how and where to begin, and this the overload creates stress (Decision Dilemma, 2023). In the absence of knowledge and clarity, fear (of the unknown) of the unknown machines well beyond the Cambridge Analytica data scandal, is increased. Our emotional readiness should not be to compete against the machines but learn to cooperate with them. Social media has become central to our daily lives and the stories we share have the potential to change how we think and behave. We established, before the pandemic, our VLL to track key lifestyle narratives in Japan and the UK. We believed that interconnectivity was greater than globalization, and the imperative was to be able to understand the evolving and important role culture would play in facilitating sustainable transformation. Moreover, with so much change taking place simultaneously the increasing imperative was for leaders to be able to simplify the complex and provide clear strategic leadership narratives. The societal sentiment, in our VLL, helps leaders prioritise and lead during a period of unprecedented volatility. Moreover, our VLL, significantly provides context to the on-going narratives which can empower leaders to engage, while current AI initiatives focus on content, without context, or emotion. Our focus on the affect of a narrative (Figure 1). Affect is a rich measure of the emotional tone of the narrative. It is felt emotion, which is a powerful descriptor of future behaviour since emotion precedes action. It is thus effective and efficient to 'engage with (existing) engagement' and stimulate the already on-going narrative. Leadership is not as much about the answers but asking the right questions (Maxwell, 2014) ,..., of the right people. As Drucker put it "The best answers often come from asking the right questions". The best leaders do not participate in monologues; they stimulate conversations. They understand conversations are not competitions to be won, but opportunities to engage, to enrich, to inspire, to challenge, to illuminate and, to continuously learn about what people feel is important, ... and above all to lead (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013).

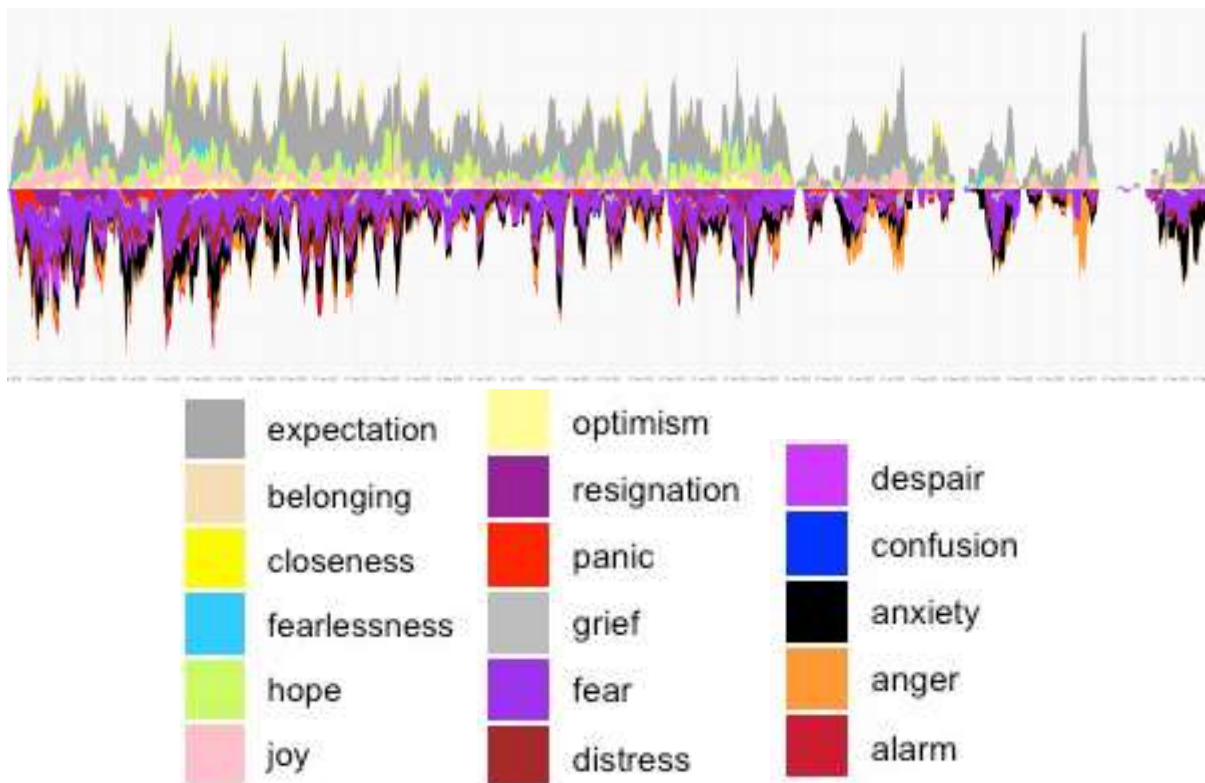


Figure 1. Daily Emotional Response to the Covid-19 narrative in the UK (March 2020- May 2023)

To track the COVID-19 narrative we look at all open online sources, in the UK, every day since the start of the national emergency in March 2020, through to May 2023 (Figure 1). However, there is no time window. So,

depending on how the narrative, self organises, it could be dominated by recent content ... or not. Below the horizontal we see negative emotions dominating the positive senses (above the vertical). Initial panic (red) was replaced by fear, grief, despair and resignation, and material periods of confusion and anger. People's resilience (above the vertical) came through with a greater sense of belonging helping to maintain hope and create optimism. One clear learning in coping with the pandemic has been the need to be positive. Anxiety, indeed, anger, was magnified by confusing, contradictory messages from leaders. The Guardian (January 2021) felt that lockdown rules changing more than sixty times, in nine months, since the start of the lockdown had increased the uncertainty and distrust.

2. VLL

Significantly, before COVID-19, the University of Tokyo's LifeStyle by Design Research Unit established a long-term Virtual Living Lab (VLL), of some narratives that aligned with the Unit's mission to explore a holistic lifestyle design that can contribute to improved personal well-being / life satisfaction (Beaumont & Ricketts, 2020). Since June 2019 there have been 8 distinct research waves through to last in December 2022. The latter forms the basis of the findings presented here. Thus, the VLL has tracked the narratives that are helping to shape our world, during BC and DC [before- and during-COVID-19 pandemic (Nelms, 2020)].

English (UK)	Japanese
Well-being	ウェルビーイング
wellness	健康
personal happiness	個人的な幸せ
personal satisfaction	個人的な満足
leisure time	余暇
personal employment	個人雇用
personal life balance	私生活バランス
personal friendship	個人的な友情
my family	私の家族
personal nutrition balance	個人の栄養バランス
personal activity	個人的な活動
my free time	私の自由な時間
motivation	動機
my community	私のコミュニティ
personal bonding	個人的な絆
being employed	雇用されている
personal wealth	個人の富
personal relationships	個人的な関係
my resilience	私の回復力
personal confidence	個人的な自信
personal optimism	個人楽観主義
personal pessimism	個人的な悲観主義
social stability	社会的安定
economic growth	経済成長

Table 1: VLL Lifestyle Narratives tracked in Japan and the UK

The narratives consistently tracked (Table 1) were determined by subjective PreSearch of a variety of current publishing channels related to health and wellness. This was felt most efficient in establishing a broad but somewhat focused benchmark which would overcome the transient nature of the vast majority of social narratives. The original premise was to understand what people felt was important and that would enable innovation to magnify on-going trends, through engaging with existing stories. Thus, we anticipated that that it would facilitate social entrepreneurship.

Measuring and interpreting social and linguistic signals by accessing openly available online content is naturally more directly reflective of human behaviour, than traditional qualitative or quantitative survey methodologies. Critically, they also provide a coherent diagnostic base to understand, exploit, and change behaviour. Significance Systems measure and characterize long-term engagement for narratives (Beaumont et al., 2023).

Distinct narratives, *a priori*, behave in discrete ways and fluctuate in their value and utility. Most internet exchanges are white-noise and thus, unless harnessed, are transient (82%, with low engagement). Transformative narratives, in general, reflect only 2%, while those that are timeless account for 5%. These two types of narratives are generally those that have the most utility. We will focus here on the transformational narratives (section 3). Tribal narratives account for some 11%, in general, but while characterised by intense debate it rarely has any impact. If one analyses the narratives of the top 100 brands/companies, then their effective communications strategies are focused and efficient, with timeless engagement representing at least 90% of such corporate narratives.

With the pandemic, increased inequality, heightened inflation, and everyday concerns associated with the cost of living, this paper focus on some of those narratives identified as being transformational in the December 2022 research wave. Such was the volatility that things that had long been accepted as givens (timeless), were now in flux as people looked to reset and regenerate basic societal elements. This involved much self-reflection and looking to find my(new)self, but not in a selfish way. This was highlighted in our earlier research note (Beaumont et al., 2023) which demonstrated how the Personal Confidence (個人的な自信) narrative, in Japan, had changed its' nature and classification during the pandemic, becoming a tribal narrative in December 2022.

3. Key Findings

Within the VLL, many narratives that were originally timeless, in 2019, have with the pandemic become transformational such has been the fundamental change in, and reevaluation of, daily lifestyles. Transformational narratives (Tables 2 and 3) are generally intensely engaged with timeless topics. They are dynamic with the potential to change attitudes and then behaviour. The narratives that are transformational in both Japan and the UK are dominated by personal themes which is reflective of the fundamental nature if the recent changes that are leading people to reassess their fundamental lifestyle precepts. Being personal, people are asking deep questions: asking existential of themselves. For the leaders, they must ask questions of themselves. To succeed they must engage at depth, so that they can convey authentic understanding. Otherwise, during a period of on-going change, leaders will come across as shallow (and unfit for purpose).

Narratives
personal life balance
personal friendship
my family
personal nutrition balance
personal activity
personal bonding

being employed
personal wealth
my resilience
healthy food

Table 2: Transformational Narratives in Japan in December 2022

Narratives
personal friendship
personal confidence
personal happiness
personal satisfaction
personal activity
social stability

Table 3: Transformational Narratives in the UK in December 2022

In contrast to Japan, in December 2022, the Personal Confidence narrative was transformational. Affect orientation is a measure of the degree to which the narrative stimulates an emotional response: active or passive, positive or negative. Its' affect orientation conveyed a sense of delight being both active and positive (Figure 2) so has momentum. Significantly the emotional response of the narrative is largely positive (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Affect Orientation of Personal Confidence Narrative in the UK (Dec 2022)

Figure 3 represents the emotional wheel. In this figure positive emotions are highlighted in green, whereas negative emotions are red, their intensity are indicated by the strength of the colour. If there is a clear tonality to the emotions expressed, such as expectation or apprehension, these are shown in purple. The width of each arc reflects the degree to which the named emotion contributes to the overall emotional response. Broad emotions, such as fear and love, are closer to the centre of the chart. The more subtle emotions, which contribute to those broad emotions, are shown in the concentric rings further out. Moving out from the centre, each ring shows a further level of detail. Personal Confidence is dominated by a feeling of self-pride, which comes from achieving a sense of personal pride. Both of which are much stronger than similar emotions

associated with Personal Confidence in Japan at the same time (Beaumont et al., 2023). The media driving the Personal Confidence narrative are multi-dimensional in their nature reflective of a re-evaluation of work-life balance, personal development, well-being as people reassess what is important. Critically the focus on self-improvement is a realisation that new capabilities can enhance performance and confidence. This is illustrated in Figure 4.



Figure 3. Emotional Response of Personal Confidence Narrative in the UK (Dec 2022)

Inextricably interwoven in Personal Confidence are the narratives Personal Friendship and Personal Activity which in Japan and the UK, were both transformational in both countries in December 2022 (Tables 2 & 3). A deep dive into both forms the remainder of the VLL analyses in this section.

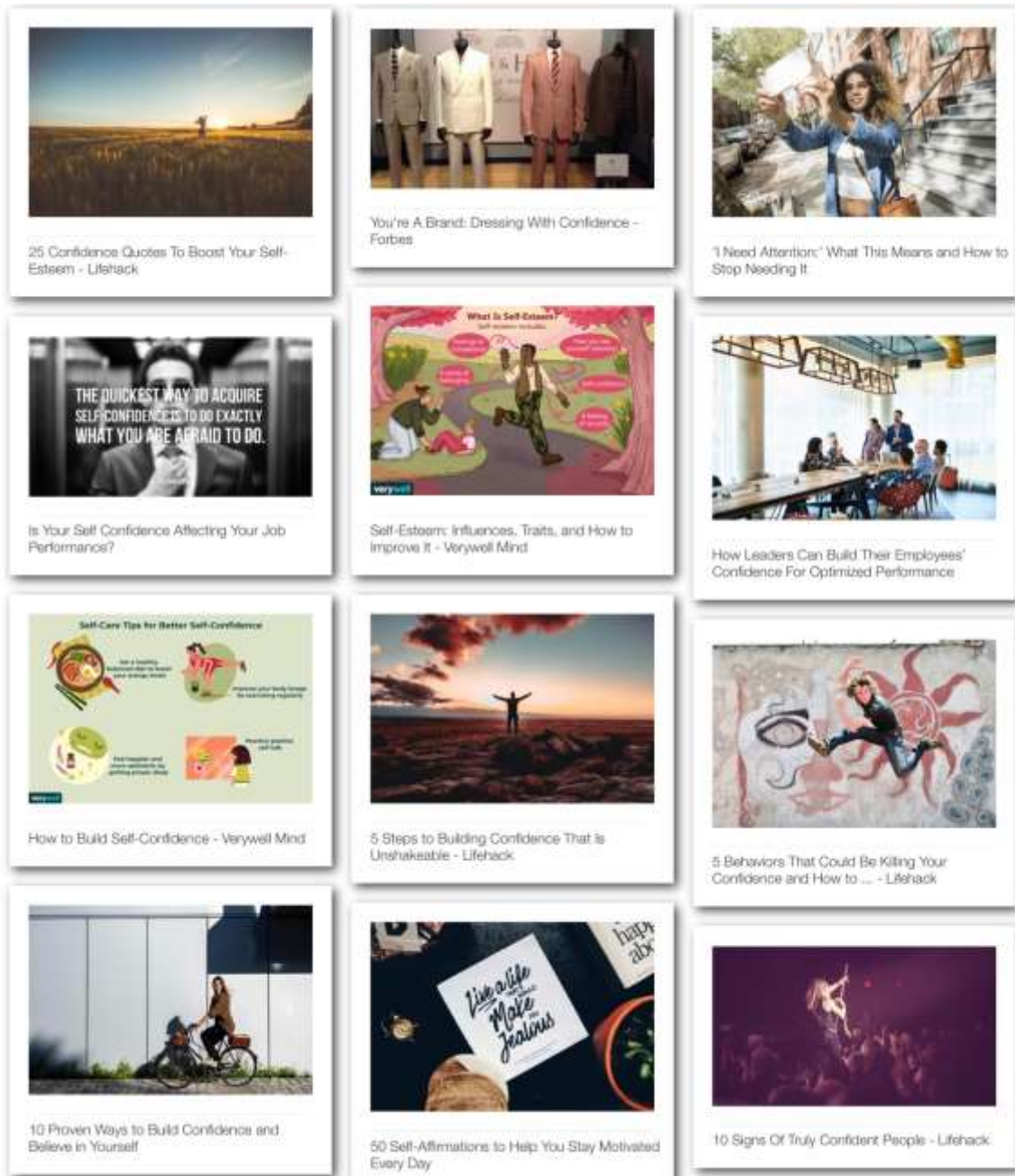


Figure 4. The most powerful content driving the Personal Confidence Narrative in the UK (Dec 2022)

Personal Friendship, in Japan, is transformational. The affect orientation (Figure 5) is active and somewhat negative. Narratives such as this, which are driven by an active, negative engagement, will polarise opinion. Although they have the power to grow, to maximise long-term power, they must address their negativity issues in order to transform from destructive and oppositional, to positive and creative. This is clearly shown in the emotional response (Figure 6), which is dominated by negative emotions, with compassion, anxiety, fear, and sadness reflective of a sense of loss. For some their friendship conveys a sense of love and joy creating happiness. To be more sustainable and positive friendship needs to be seen explicitly as more important. In the UK, Personal Friendship narrative is in such hyper flux, that it has an affect orientation (Figure 7) which overall is simply neutral and does not provoke any emotional response. The Personal Friendship narrative is now openly learning and thus transformational. It has a remarkable level of engagement and relevancy, but so much is still going on, it is formless in its' emotional response. Structure and emotion are orthogonal

measures, so currently this transformational narrative has an emotional response more usually associated with a transient narrative.



Figure 5. Affect Orientation of Personal Friendship Narrative in Japan (Dec 2022)



Figure 6. Emotional Response of Personal Friendship Narrative in Japan (Dec 2022)



Figure 7. Affect Orientation of Personal Friendship Narrative in the UK (Dec 2022)

On the other hand, the Personal Activity narrative, in Japan, is both transformational and has momentum since its affect orientation is active and positive (Figure 8). That said, there remains some negative emotions coming out of the national emergency with a genuine sadness in daily life and a frustration leading to dislike. Coming out of the pandemic it is critical to be positive and within the narrative this is conveyed most meaningful by a need to create a sense of 'team'. These positive aspects of team driving the narrative, are fueled by news.livedoor.com being by far the most powerful media.



Figure 8. Affect Orientation of Personal Activity Narrative in Japan (Dec 2022)



Figure 9 Emotional Response of Personal Activity Narrative in Japan (Dec 2022)

In the UK, the narrative classification of the Personal Activity narrative is on the border of being transformational and tribal (Figure 10). Verging on being tribal, most of this debate has no impact. Far less than one percent of content in such a narrative, will have any significance. Although it is easy to be a participant, it is far more difficult to be a player or leader in such narratives. This narrative shows mass participation, but its content is poorly defined. Nobody is quite sure what the conversation is really about. Nor, does the majority of existing content successfully provide definition or focus. Whilst there's a lot of buzz, there is a lack of clear direction. The affect orientation is strongly positive but somewhat passive. Narratives such as this, which are driven by a passive, positive engagement, are often long-lived, but are vulnerable to apathy and unanticipated disruption. They may not have the strength to survive rapid transformative change.



Figure 10. Narrative Classification of Personal Activity Narrative in the UK (Dec 2022)

The emotional response of the Personal Activity narrative, as noted above, is wholly positive with satisfaction bringing contentment and joy. That said, the intensity of the emotions are quite weak. The media that drives the narrative focuses on personal growth through self-development with a focus on business growth (cf. Inspiring Founders event accessed via LinkedIn).

4. Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented societal transformation. Leaders must adapt to these changes and ask questions that are sensitive to the context and audience. In doing so, they can address the implications of the pandemic on well-being, inequality, and engagement.

One of the main implications of the pandemic is that what was once fixed is now a variable. Individuals are testing lifestyle and societal fundamentals, and poor messaging has compounded isolation. Leaders must ask themselves the same questions to be seen as authentic. Maxwell (2014) stresses the importance of asking questions for self-discovery, leading people, and leading a team.

Furthermore, the pandemic has magnified inequalities, with some individuals in high-demand jobs while others need reskilling. Moreover, well-being and mental health are becoming increasingly important, as people desire new ways of living and feel unheard. Leaders must monitor and focus on what people feel is important to them to ensure engagement and relevance.

Another important implication is the need to engage with like-minded communities with existing narratives in the wild. Doing so enhances credibility, fuels relevance, and can change behavior. Leaders must monitor and prioritize what people feel is important to them to lead effectively.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused profound societal transformation and has magnified inequalities while highlighting the importance of well-being and mental health. It is no surprise that the CWO (Chief Well-Being Officer) is getting more traction; becoming an increasingly important role as many companies try to create a more human focused workplace. HR (Bratton & Gold, 2017) is being transformed by a more human capital stance. Leaders must adapt to these changes and ask questions that are sensitive to the

context and audience. By doing so, they can address the implications of the pandemic on well-being, inequality, and engagement. Monitoring and prioritizing what people feel is important is crucial to leading effectively.

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