

Learning the Art of Painting the HR Landscape

*What Aunt Sally and Others Can Teach HR
Professionals About Communicating “Up”*

Sandi Cardillo
Queen's IRC Facilitator



It's Saturday morning in cottage country. You're hugging a cup of coffee on the porch. The mist is just clearing from the lake. The view from the deck is stunning. The geese are feeding at the shoreline. A hawk circles above the pines in the distance. Waves lap the deck, reminding you that you promised your cousin a kayaking lesson later this morning. He's coming with your Aunt Sally on the train as part of the adventure. Aunt Sally recently discovered plein art painting. "Bring the SUV to the station," she said. "I have the easel."

Your mind is on the meeting you were invited to in ten days with the Director of Really Big Stuff. Your assignment: present your thoughts on the two-year view of the strategic people project that became your task when you accepted your new role as business unit support human resources leader for your division. It's big and you're just getting your head around it.

"Keep it simple," her executive assistant said. "She doesn't want to know about the trees, just the forest. I've seen her chew others up when they start talking about the trees. She doesn't have time for the trees. She takes care of the forest and lets those taking care of the trees do their job. Sorry about the metaphor, but I wanted to give you a head's up."

“Wow,” you think. “The forest. Not the trees. Every presentation I made in my last role was all about the trees. My manager wanted the details. He wanted to know that I had a firm grasp of everything and had tied it all up in a nice, neat package. My team members wanted the same thing – to know that I had their back and they could see it in the spreadsheets I’d prepared.”

“How the heck do I approach this?” you think. “I’ve got twenty minutes to cover my thoughts on a two-year seriously strategic project?” Then you remember the Queen’s IRC Advanced HR course your new manager had asked you to attend when you accepted the role in the business unit. At the time it was still pretty new, and frankly, slightly overwhelming to make the transition from subject matter expert to business unit support leader. You remember something from that session about turning the curve on the way to the next level and how things at the next level require a different kind of thinking.

Looking up from watching the steam rise about the coffee mug you’re holding, you realize the view from the cottage deck is a whole picture – the water, the trees, the sky, and the critters enjoying the morning. You decide the director’s assistant is right. There is something about being able to describe the whole picture that is important to your success in the meeting. “Now,” you think, “how do I paint that picture?” Half in fun, you think that Aunt Sally might have a perspective. She was talking about what she’s learning about painting “a big picture” just the other day. She might have something to say.

Painting a Landscape: Framing the Picture

“What’s up Ben?” says Aunt Sally on the way back to the cottage. “You look deep in thought.”

“Well, Aunt Sally,” you reply, “I’ve got this presentation in ten days with a very senior leader in my company. Her assistant was really clear on keeping it simple and making sure I talk about the forest, not the trees. I guess there have been times in the past when other HR advisors have gone into too much detail. I don’t have much time to cover a whole lot of information. This is my first time with this director and I want to make a really good impression.”

“Paint a landscape,” said Aunt Sally, never one to mince words.

“Ok,” you reply. “How do I do that?”

“Landscapes are a big picture,” Aunt Sally continues. “There are lots of things that make up the picture. The person looking at the picture stands back and takes in the whole thing at one time. As the artist, we get to create the entire view we want those looking at our picture to see.”

Not one to miss an opportunity to teach, Aunt Sally continues, “Our art instructor often speaks of Ansel Adams’ process of visualization in creating a picture. We use our mind and our eyes to frame a picture. Our instructor reminds us all the time to visualize what we see before we ever lift a brush. ‘What do you see in the frame?’ she says. ‘What colours are there to make it interesting? What needs to come to the forefront? What can stay in the background? What balances the whole picture so the eye is drawn to the right place?’ It is a lot to think about, but my teacher is right. I’m always tempted to pick up the brush and start mixing the colours too fast. I’m really learning to take the time to see the picture in my mind before I ever pick up my tools.”

“I would think,” she said, going on, “that creating a presentation is just like creating a landscape picture. You are the artist, with something to say about what you are seeing. You want this director person looking at the picture to see the same thing. In the case of this presentation, you are creating a landscape, not a portrait. Portraits are about detail, landscapes are about the view. What’s important in that view?”

“Wow,” you think. Once again, Aunt Sally’s wisdom is right on. This is exactly what the director’s assistant said. “She wants to see the forest, not the trees.”

Learning to communicate “up” with senior leaders in your organization is about learning to paint a landscape. Senior leaders are, at some level, accountable for a big picture. They are designers of strategic landscapes. Their role is often to draw a five year picture in the form of strategic goals and objectives. They then work with their teams to move the view in closer through the organization. As landscape designers, they recognize that time is an important element of where they want to go. Landscape designers, says Susan Herrington, design and prepare landscapes that take time. Landscape designers understand that things take time: time to plan, time for cultivation, time for roots to take hold, time for sunshine, rain and the pollinators to do their job.

Moving through the “Leadership Pipeline” (Charan, Drotter and Noel 2001) requires navigating around curves. Those curves mean a change in thinking from what Michael Watkins describes as “seismic shifts of perspective and responsibility” (Watkins 2012, 65). With increased responsibility in an organization comes the need to “shift fluidly between the details and the large picture.” Moving up this leadership pipeline changes the view. Communicating “up” recognizes this shift in how the picture is framed at the senior levels.

The view changes from a detail view to a system’s view. Senior leadership roles look at the whole picture – the market, the people, and the systems that hold it all together. Increasing complexity, extended timelines, systems and structure and moving from an inside to an external view form

the basis for these shifts in leadership. The view truly changes from portraits and still life to landscapes and sweeping vistas.

Later that day, watching Aunt Sally pencil in the edges of the sky and the water, you decide she's on to something. Taking in the whole picture requires selecting the frame. "What frames the picture that I am trying to present to the director? Let's see, there's the connection to the customer and the marketplace we heard about at the strategic meetings last month, and there's the question she tossed out to the HR group last week about talent needs over the next ten years. I could start the conversation there. That would frame it nicely."

Where is the Focal Point – Drawing the Eye to What is Most Important

"How come," you say to Aunt Sally the next morning, "you put the heron right there? It's a big lake. Why there?" you ask, fascinated by the process unfolding before you.

"It's the focal point," she says. "It's where I want someone looking at my picture to be drawn to. It's what I want their eye to see in the middle of the landscape. With all there is to see in this picture, that beautiful bird is the one thing I don't want them to forget."

"To continue the lesson from my art instructor," she goes on, "it's about how we use our eyes and see what's in the picture. Ansel Adams wrote about the difference between the camera and the human eye. The camera will record the whole picture, exactly as the lens and the shutter see it. The human eye scans the landscape, looking for what captures its attention. The eyes take it all in, and then find a focal point. My teacher constantly reminds us to create a focal point for someone to see within the big picture. It's subtle, but it's there."

"Great," you respond. "I'm framing a masterpiece, but I also need to decide where I want her to focus. How do I think about that one?"

Michael Watkins, in "How Managers Become Leaders", describes what he calls a seismic shift for a leader moving from tactician to strategist. Here, he states, the skill of "level shifting" is critical. Level shifting, he states, "is the ability to move fluidly among levels of analysis – to know when to focus on the details, when to focus on the big picture, and how the two relate" (Watkins 2012, 68).

Making a shift from a HR specialist to a generalist or business advisor role is one of those shifts. Your work focus expands, as David Ulrich and others describe in *HR From the Outside In*. (2012) Moving from specialist to generalist involves competency in two specific areas: learning to "see" the organization from the outside (or external customer) point of view, and being able to

strategically position work that must be done inside the organization in relationship to the outsider's perspective.

Senior leaders in an organization must understand the expectations of their external stakeholders. Strategy is based on this understanding. They must also make the managerial decisions to get the work done. In making these managerial decisions to get the work done, they turn their view finders between the larger picture and the smaller, finer details almost daily. Learning to communicate "up" requires that one can both frame the picture as well as draw the viewer's attention to the right amount of detail at the right time. It is about assisting a senior leader in turning the view finder from the big picture to the detail in the blink of an eye. Success at this level for an HR professional requires learning "level shifting" in the same manner as the leaders with whom they work.

Light and Shadow are Important. What Ties the Picture Together?

"Aunt Sally," you ask, while watching her mix three different colours to paint the sky, "how do you know when to change the colours?"

"Ben," she replies, "our dear friend Ansel talked about something called The Zone. Fundamentally, it is all about the relationship of the elements in the picture. In photography they use the meter to tell you something about the light and the shadows. Mr. Adams and my art teacher would tell you the meter tells you something, but the eye tells you more. It's about learning to see how the elements come together. Light, shadow, and line are all elements in a picture. Once the picture is framed and the focal point is chosen, it is all about pulling together the elements that integrate the whole picture. That's the trickiest part of it all, but practice makes me better every time I paint."

"Light and shadow," you think. "What are the elements of my picture that need to be pulled together?"

In senior leadership roles, one of the strategic shifts that must be mastered is the ability to move from a single focus to an integrated, multiple focus. Watkins describes two significant changes in thinking that take place. The first shift is the change in work and responsibility from deep analysis to integration. Many elements come together and require an understanding of how they all fit together. Making this shift, Watkins states, "is understanding how to make the trade-offs and explain the rationale for those decisions" (Watkins 2012, 68). In painting a picture for a senior leader, it's about helping them see the patterns to be tied together. Yes, there is noise. Your role is to assist in sorting through the noise, not add to it.

Another critical skill for a senior leader in moving from tactical work to strategist is what Watkins describes as pattern recognition. Pattern recognition is “the ability to discern important causal relationships and other significant patterns in a complex business and its environment – that is, to separate the signal from the noise” (Watkins 2012, 68).

In working with a senior leader it is a question of what has to be understood to get us “there.” There is much to be understood: the longer the timeframe, the farther the view, and the more complex the elements of the picture, the greater the need for the ability to frame the masterpiece, as well as find the focal point and understand the patterns of shadow and light.

Painting Your Own Picture

“Thanks, Aunt Sally. This has been an awesome weekend,” you say, lugging the easel down the path to the SUV. “I really appreciate all you had to say about creating a landscape. It helped me think through my presentation to the director. I have to say, wisdom comes from the most interesting places.”

“Glad to help, Ben,” she replies. “I’m so proud of you and I know you’ll do very well. Now, let’s get me to the train.”

Presenting to a senior leader is like painting a landscape. As the presenter, you choose what you want the viewer to see. You frame the landscape. You decide the focal point. You adjust the light and pay attention to what’s in the shadows that creates the whole picture. “A landscape,” says Malcom Andrews, “is what the viewer has selected from the land, edited and modified in accordance with certain conventional ideas about what constitutes a ‘good view’” (Andrews 2000, 4). In presenting to a senior leader, you get to decide how you want the picture to be seen from their point of view, while understanding what you, as the artist, want to convey.

Just remember three things. First, frame the picture. Next, determine the focal point. Last, but not least, tie the elements together in a way that holds it all together. Learn to do this and you’ll be invited back.

About the Author



Sandi Cardillo is president of Conrad Associates based in Omaha, Nebraska. Sandi consults with both profit and not-for-profit organizations applying accountable management principles in structuring, talent management and improved managerial practices. She has over twenty years of experience in management, human resources, organization development and internal consulting. Sandi earned both Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of Nebraska. She is a Senior Fellow of the Global RO Society and Certified Coach Practitioner. Sandi serves as a facilitator in the Queen's University IRC's Advanced Human Resources program.

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Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
irc.queensu.ca