

Tale-Telling Organizations: Using Stories to Create Collective Change

But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end,
Like quills upon the fretful parenting.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) Hamlet, Act I, Scene V

Introduction

In many organizations, the status of storytelling is the stuff of small talk and gossip. Like entertainment and jokes, stories are not for the serious. Thus tolerated in informal settings (in the elevator, around the water-cooler, lunchroom, etc), storytelling is often dismissed as irrational, unscientific and idiosyncratic.

“I found myself replaying in my head stories I had heard about and by teachers and leaders, ever since I was a small boy. Then I tried to replay in my head lectures on semiotics, or solid geometry, or systematic theology. Nothing happened. What did come back was Professor O’Nolan on Irish history of the 19th century. He told us a series of gripping Stories.”¹

What if stories were elevated as the natural medium of communication in formal settings (Boardroom, Meetings, Debriefings, Training Settings, etc.)? What would happen if senior management promoted storytelling as a means to sharing knowledge, building trust, and cultivating identity? What would happen if storytelling were looked upon as a principal agent for organizational change and learning?

In fact, this idea is not new, nor far-fetched. A growing body of management literature suggests that storytelling can and does play a central role in sharing, creating and changing how people think². Denning describes types of stories that spark action, transmit values, foster communication, share knowledge and evoke change in the future.³ Others have explored the emotional connections stories create that are “sticky” and therefore easier to retrieve even when the subject matter is complex.

Boje goes further and asserts that all workplaces are storytelling organizations – we simply know very little about “its theatre of everyday life”; “Where you work, you become known by your story, become promoted and fired for your story. It’s not always the story you want told, and there are ways to change and restory that story”⁴.

¹ Reflections from Ronald Marken, 3M National Teaching Fellow, University of Saskatchewan.

² See for example, Brown, J.S., Denning, S., Groh, K. and Prusack, L. (2005), *Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling Is Transforming 21st Century Organizations and Management*, Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, Burlington, MA.

³ Denning, S. (2004). *Squirrel Inc; a Fable of Leadership through Storytelling*, Jossey-Bass.

⁴ Boje, D. M. *Storytelling Organization*, (2006). London: Sage Publishers; revision expected Aug 1, 2008.

Stories for Change

Listen to Steve Denning's story that points both to the bias against story as unrelated to hard-headed realities of the World Bank and its power for social change in that same organization.⁵

Steve Denning tells how he—a rational manager—got involved in storytelling

The origin of my interest in organizational storytelling was simple: nothing else worked. As a manager in the World Bank in 1996, I had been trying to communicate the idea of knowledge management and to get people to understand and to implement it. At that time in that organization, knowledge management was a strange and generally incomprehensible idea. I used the traditional methods of communicating with no success. I gave people reasons why the idea was important but they didn't listen. I showed them charts and they just looked dazed. In my desperation, I was willing to try anything and eventually I stumbled on the power of a story, such as the following:

In June 1995, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia logged on to the website for the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta Georgia and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria.

This was June 1995, not June 2001. This was not the capital of Zambia but a tiny place six hundred kilometers away. This was not rich country: this was Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world. The most important part of this picture for us in the World Bank is this: the World Bank is not in the picture. The World Bank does not have its knowhow accessible to all the millions of people who made decisions about poverty. Just imagine if it had. Think what an organization it could become.

In 1996 in the World Bank, this story had helped galvanize staff and managers to imagine a different kind of future for the organization and to set about implementing it. Once knowledge management became an official corporate strategy later that year, I continued to use similar stories to reinforce and continue the change. The efforts were successful; by 2000, the World Bank became benchmarked as a world leader in knowledge management.

Try rereading Denning's description, substituting "University" for "World Bank" and "teaching, learning and students" for "knowledge management." What does the story tell you? Or, substitute a profit seeking organization. What kinds of stories might shape its future?

Dogs Sniff and Humans Tell Stories

Ever since the Old Testament and since the tales recorded by the ancient Greek citizen, Aesop, stories as a medium for learning have passed the test of time. We may have difficulty understanding Shakespearean prose, but Romeo and Juliet continue to live in our short and long-term memory. You need not be a Dickens, Maugham or a Hemmingway to tell your tale. When a story is told at the right time, in the right setting, by the most ordinary amongst us, our brains are wired to experience, internalize and reshape stories in a progression that pass on wisdom, culture and identity. Stories glue our survival instinct and embed our frame of reference.

Today's stories continue to be told orally but have also dramatically exploded online. Workforce blogging is an example of just how powerful and threatening stories are in shaping an

⁵ Steve Denning website: <http://www.stevedenning.com/index.htm> and his 2000 book *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann. 2000.

organization's identity. Stories are also the stuff of social networking systems floating in a Tamara⁶ like setting where the audience follows from one space to another, co-creating and threading their sense making depending on what they encounter.

Moreover, digital discourse has a multiplier effect—it is prevalent in field stories and downloadable podcasts that sustain frontline workers; it provokes senior management to blog with leading narratives that others can hook on to; and, it is increasingly shaping annual company reports that are beginning to resemble stories in a magazine that cater to multiple stakeholders. In other words, this discourse is blurring perceptions of the personal and professional, employee and employer, the organization and the community.

If organizations understood and embraced the pedagogical power of storytelling, the primary issue would not be the form (text, voice, video, or games), but rather the challenge to create supportive environments where stories could flourish, where their place and purpose are clear, or where listening to what is said, implied and ignored is valued and where storytelling moments are harvested just as commonly as the quality shifts that are expected from business reengineering efforts.

Horse Sense

Consider the following three examples where storytelling makes for good common horse-sense:

1. **The enculturation of new employees, managers and board members.** Leaders tell stories of founders, of turning points, of meeting challenges, of best practices, etc. Newcomers share personal stories and memorable experiences they bring to the organization. A storytelling process that is marked by critical incidents, honest personal exchanges, and moments of silence are likely to increase thoughtful, reflective responses as well as promote reflection, transformation and change.
2. **Launching, kick-starting, and brainstorming.** Whenever there is change, whether associated with a new product, project, division or merger, new attitudes and behaviors are inevitable. Stories that share history, get a group going, or set standards to reach new heights are the stories that tend to leverage collective understanding, motivate and bring people together and provide momentum to move the underlying change process forward.
3. **Complex problem-solving.** Just as soldiers adapt to ever-changing field conditions and share their experience to help the next shift survive, so too are experts who find stories to be an effective medium in passing on tacit knowledge. Companies that organize their professionals as teams working as a social learning unit rather than independent workers report productivity gains that are not surprisingly rooted in swapping stories in situ.

Expanding the repertoire of storytelling applications and encouraging the conditions for learning make for good business-sense. Storytelling taps into energies that allow managers to see the forest from the trees or what athletes describe as being in the zone. The storytelling pedagogy implicates internal and external organizational resources for deliberate practice. Viewed as a technology, its adoption is likely to follow an S shaped diffusion curve across functional and matrix lines of the organization's structure. Once there is critical mass, the tale-telling organization acquires horse sense—managers understand when stories are the agency for change. As people change, they learn as a community.

⁶ In a long-running Hollywood play called Tamara – about an expatriate Polish beauty, several characters unfold their stories before a walking, sometimes running, audience.

Another Example—Stories that Moved a Fellowship Forward

Five years ago, some 180 interdisciplinary teaching and leadership award winners in Canada—3M National Teaching Fellows—met at a Think Tank in Toronto to consider how they would give back collectively to their communities and to the students that served them so well. Their recognition was unprecedented for none received any money, grant or medal.

Instead, for each of the past 23 years, thanks to the generosity of 3M Canada and the Society of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE), the Fellows assembled in cohorts of ten at le Château Montebello in Quebec, for a simple three-day ceremony that allowed them to share stories about whatever they felt was important in higher education.

When larger groups of Fellows met at learned conferences, the stories multiplied. For the Fellowship, it was therefore natural to publish their collective stories.⁷ Their storytelling process not only celebrated learning but also helped to unify an eclectic group of academics scattered across every province in the country. Encouraged by the results, the Fellowship embarked on its second collection of stories on a subject that caught the imagination of many.⁸

Storytelling has thus not only helped the Fellowship to acculturate and kick start projects, it has also positioned them to consider spreading and affecting this pedagogy at a national level—in teaching and learning, in the campus culture, in building community and partnerships with tale-telling organizations.

Risky but Compelling

It is not surprising that the next major project award-winning teachers have decided to embark upon is the engagement of faculty in a national narratives venture which in principle has the support of 3M Canada. To move forward, we will tell each other stories and consider implementation issues at the multi-national forum in June⁹. Some of these stories will be retrospective and others prospective, which, as Boje suggests: "like the butterfly, are sometimes able to change the future, to set changes and transformations in motion that have impact on the bigger picture . . . and bring a future that would not otherwise be".¹⁰

Not surprisingly, any commitment to use the power of story comes with risks. To step out into the professional public eye and tell a story means you are taking off your tie, sitting on the desk, laughing a bit, even risking tears. Are managers willing to take those risks? Are Presidents willing to tell their stories and engage employees to follow? If Human Resource Departments were to design storytelling workshops whose purpose was clear, what would these sessions look like?

Within the Fellowship and STLHE, given the momentum to contribute storytelling know how to workplaces and communities suggests recipes for imaginative partnerships. In such scenarios, the fusion of theory, experience and practice are bound to generate powerful stories that are yet to be told. Can you imagine the possibilities for collective change?

⁷ *Making a Difference: Toute la difference*, (2005). Marilyn Lerch (Ed). Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Ottawa, Canada.

⁸ *Silences in Teaching and Learning* (2008). Betsy Warland (Ed). Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Ottawa.

⁹ This Forum gathers international award winning teacher-scholars which will be held at the annual STLHE Conference in the University of Windsor, Ontario.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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