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ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING: CONCEPTS, CHARACTERISTICS AND ADVANTAGES

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ABSTRACT

Just as every person has a story to tell, so do organizations. Organizations are made up of many stories and competing story interpretations. An organization story is a narrative tool that tells the tale of a company's strategy in action. The story evokes a common vision of the future, sketches the journey to achieve that vision, identifies critical milestones along the way, creates a clear path for employees to follow and defines success in observable terms. Many organizations are turning to storytelling. Storytelling is becoming better understood as a device for informing employees about their organizational cultures. Stories provide a wealth of wisdom and a powerful toolbox for communication, problem solving, innovation and much more. The aim of this paper is developing literature on story and organizational storytelling . In this paper, we explain the concept of stories in organizations. Then we discuss the Characteristics and Advantages of storytelling in organizations. We also discuss how to create stories in organization and give an example of how a story works.

KEYWORDS

Narrative, Storytelling, Organizational Story.

INTRODUCTION

I he organization is a mythical entity with no tangible existence within reality. Each organization develops a cultural base that is a reflection of its history, leadership, membership and its storied journey over time. Organizations like other social constructions strengthen their positions through the narrative and mythical reinforcement of their heroes, successes, achievements and goals (Keogh, 2003).

Organizations are made up of many stories and competing story interpretations. The stories of an organization allow researchers and practitioners a way to understand and try to bring about change in an organization's culture (Boyce, 1996). It is not surprising that much of the storytelling work in organizational studies has direct links to the organizational culture literature (Martin, 2002). Specific applications of organizational storytelling that have been outlined in the literature include, among others, confirming shared experiences, generating commitment, renewing a sense of purpose, co-creating a vision for the organization, engaging emotions, driving strategic change, and facilitating sense-making. Others have considered the extent to which stories are embedded in daily conversations regarding ethical conduct (Driscoll and Margaret, 2007).

Stories told in organizations consist of the narrative itself as well as the morals to the story, and they reflect deeply held assumptions (Martin, 2002). The images and metaphors that are used in organizational storytelling influence our individual worldview and redefine organizational values. Stories can be used to construct a new organizational sense (Fleming, 2001). Stories act as both mirrors and windows on the human experience, showing people either how to look at reality in a different way or suggesting alternative realities. Stories appeal to both the heart and the mind. They help us to define who we are, why we are here, and what we should value. They are used to make sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. Storytelling has an important role in most spiritual traditions, religions, and cultures. For example, most indigenous peoples of the world use oral storytelling (Driscoll and Margaret, 2007).

STORIES IN ORGANIZATIONS

A story is a structured narrative related in a particular way, that is, the sequence of the events may not be perfectly chronological, the recounting may use nonverbal signs, descriptions of place, actors, or reactions may use a variety of tropes, and the voice of the narrator may well be a participant or observer of the fabula or simply a conveyor of the story itself. Te purpose of a good story is to make the common themes new and fresh by using a range of poetic techniques (Poulton, 2005). A story is a narrative that conveys a thought, a moral or virtue, a consequence in a way that forces us to look at a common message in a new way, allowing us the opportunity of not being repetitive or mundane conversationalists, that is, story-tellers tell particular stories in order to illustrate general truths which they expect their recipients to infer; story-tellers prefer to imply rather than baldly state the general truth they are illustrating (Nair, 2002).

An organizational story is defined as a connected discourse about a unified sequence of events that appear to be drawn from an oral history of an organization's past (MacLeod and Davidson, 2007). Story as a particular kind of narrative has a beginning, protagonists and a culminating event (Alvarez and Urla, 2002).

Storytelling is a powerful tool in organizational learning as well in that they communicate implicit organizational values, relate events or actions of individuals, control the behavior of others in an organization by the use of stories themselves or the words used to tell the tale, play a significant role in organizational change and are basic to the process of organizational socialization and change and are in integral to the storage and retrieval of organizational memory (Poulton, 2005).

Stories are a fundamental way through which we understand the world. By understanding the stories of organizations, we can claim partial understanding of the reasons behind visible behavior (Berry, 2001). As such the exchange of stories, rather than merely routines, allows participants to develop a new collective story through which they can become a social learning system. Stories are thus an important part of organizational learning, and balancing the past, present, and future through storytelling is an essential skill for strategic leaders who hope to promote it. Routines and rules capture only a limited part of explicit knowledge. They do not capture the past and the historical journey of an organization. They don't capture tacit knowledge or the emotional component of knowledge. It is in the creating, telling, and retelling of stories that the systems and processes of perspective making, perspective taking, and perspective shaping take on tangible form. It is in the creating, telling, and retelling of key stories that the past, the present, and the future of the organization are connected (Boal and Schultz, 2007). What are the characteristics of stories that have powerful impact and are remembered? The four key characteristics are (Morgan and Dennehy, 1995): First, the organizational stories must be concrete and tell about real people, describe real events and actions, be set in a time and place which the listener can recognize and with which he can identify, and must be connected to the organization's philosophy and/or culture. Second, stories must also be common knowledge in the organizational story believed by the listeners. To have impact and make its point, a story must be believed to be true of the organization. The powerful organization are not done in the organization. Stories allow the listener to learn about organization norms, rewards, and punishments without trial-and-error experience. Fourth, a good story must also be unique and demonstrate that the institution is unlike any other. Objectively

THE ENEMIES OF STORYTELLING

Although the benefits of storytelling are impressive and widespread, they were not more widely recognized. One reason was that for the last couple of thousand years, storytelling has been under a cloud of disapproval. Understanding the source of the disapproval is a key to recovering the power and benefits of this incredibly powerful technology (Brown et al., 2005).

Plato: It is hard not to credit Plato with much of the disfavor in which storytelling has fallen, since a literal reading of his masterpiece. The Republic, shows that about half of it is devoted to arguing that storytellers (and poets) be censored or banned from the cerebral republic he was describing. But as Plato himself was one of the master storytellers of all time. Plato's arguments in The Republic made sense in the context of ancient Athens, when the main emphasis was on storytelling and there was little hard-headed analysis. But the modern world has gone too far in the opposite direction, with an exclusive focus on analysis and a dismissal of narrative. There has been an unfortunate tendency for Plato's followers to adopt what can be construed as arguing in The Republic, rather than what he himself practiced in the Symposium.

Aristotle: Aristotle helped implement much of the intellectual agenda of The Republic, by placing a huge emphasis on the taxonomy and classification of what we know. He created a model for science that left storytelling in a peripheral role of illustrating abstract propositions. Abstract knowledge moved to center of the intellectual stage, where it has remained ever since.

Descartes: The separation of the self from the world meant the supposed abolition of feeling and emotions from rational discourse. Descartes laid the foundation for the concept of a mechanistic world free of mind and spirit. Scientists, feeding on their success through experiment, began to claim that their experimental method was the sole guide to discovering the truth. Scientism emerged—the view that only knowledge generated by science is genuine knowledge. The antagonism toward storytelling may have reached a peak in the 20th century with the determined effort to reduce all knowledge to analytic propositions, and ultimately physics or mathematics. In academia, abstract knowledge is still dominant and scientism is often the underlying assumption. To escape from the intellectual blinders of scientism, we must unlearn some of the most fundamental knowledge that we have been taught:

- We have to unlearn what we have been taught about the unimportance of narrative and storytelling
- We have to unlearn the machine model of the universe in general and of the organization in particular.

WHY NARRATIVE PERVADES ORGANIZATIONS

Some of the characteristics of narrative and storytelling that account for their pervasiveness in organizations and elsewhere are listed below (Brown et al., 2005; Driscoll and McKee, 2007):

- Stories have salience to the lives of people in organizations: Wit, succinctness, and emotional power contribute to it.
- Stories help us make sense of organizations: Stories and narratives reflect our efforts to understand the often baffling context of the modern organization as it goes through transformational change.
- Storytelling is quick and powerful: Purposeful storytelling can reach large numbers of people, amazingly rapidly. People get the idea, but not slowly and painfully by the accumulation of evidence and meticulous elaboration of multiple dimensions. Stories have magically rapid trajectories through the social fabric of organizations. Storytelling communicates ideas holistically. As a result, listeners can get complicated ideas not laboriously, dimension by dimension, but all at once with a new gestalt, which is transferred with a snap.
- Storytelling is free: Storytelling doesn't require expensive investments in hardware or software. It doesn't involve recruiting expensive experts. Storytelling is the ultimate low-cost, high return technology.
- Storytelling skills are easily upgradable: Everyone can become a better storyteller: Though we all tell stories all the time, we are often unaware of it. Once we realize what we are doing, we can all learn not only to become better storytellers but also to use storytelling to get business results. Experience shows that skills in storytelling can be quickly improved even with people with little apparent aptitude.
- Narratives communicate naturally: Storytelling is our native language. To use it is refreshing and energizing. Abstract language by contrast is something that we learn at the age of 8 or later and becomes a kind of foreign language that we rarely feel as comfortable in as our native language, storytelling
- Storytelling communicates collaboratively: In abstract discussions, ideas come at us like missiles, invading our space and directing us to adopt a mental framework established by another being, and our options boil down to accepting or rejecting it, with all the baggage of yes-no winner-loser confrontations. Narrative by contrast comes at us collaboratively inviting us gently to follow the story arm-in-arm with the listener. It is more like a dance than a battle.
- Storytelling communicates persuasively: When the listener follows a story, there is the possibility of getting the listener to invent a parallel story in the listener's own environment. The story so co-created becomes the listener's own, and something the listener loves and is prepared to fight for. Storytelling can thus galvanize action.
- Stories can communicate holistically: Stories can communicate deep holistic truths, whereas abstract language tends to slice off fragments of reality. Storytelling draws on our vast deep of the imagination to convey the connections that are missing in abstract thought. At the same time, we must be wary of the unreliable story and the unreliable narrator and subject all stories to analysis.
- Storytelling communicates context: Before the advent of instant global communications, there was less need to be aware of the context in which knowledge arises. When communications were among people from the same village or district or city, one could often assume that the context was the same. With global communications, the assumption of similar context becomes obviously and frequently just plain wrong. Storytelling provides the context in which knowledge arises and hence becomes the normal vehicle for accurate knowledge transfer.
- Storytelling communicates intuitively: We know more than we realize. The role of tacit knowledge has become a major preoccupation because it is often
 the tacit knowledge that is most valuable. Yet if we do not know what we know, how can we communicate it? Storytelling provides an answer, since by
 telling a story with feeling, we are able to communicate more than we explicitly know. Our body takes over and does it for us, without consciousness. Thus,
 although we know more than we can tell, we can, through storytelling, tell more than we consciously know.

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- Storytelling communicates entertainingly: Abstract communications are dull and dry because they are not populated with people but with lifeless things. As living beings we are attracted to what is living and tend to be repelled by inert things such as concepts. Stories enliven and entertain.
- Storytelling communicates movingly so as to get action: Storytelling doesn't just close the knowing-doing gap. It eliminates the gap by stimulating the listener to co-create the idea. In the process of co-creation, the listener starts the process of implementation in such a way that there is no gap.

CREATING STORIES

The most valuable stories told in organizations are created from personal experience in the past, from ideas and questions concerning the present and from a personal vision about the future. Here are some tips for creating a repertoire of stories (Kaye and Jacobson, 1999).

- Look for patterns: Examine the plots and themes of your life. The values, priorities, concerns, interests and experiences together create patterns. Some may relate to advice for dealing with adversity, obtaining scarce resources or overcoming challenges. When we see the multiple incidents of our lives as essential parts of a pattern, we find value in the stories that created the pattern.
- Look for consequences: Determine the cause and effect of your choices. If we look back on our lives chronologically, we see that one thing happened and then another thing happened. The events might not be interesting and not worth a story. But if we search for the consequences of our choices as leading to the next event or action, the narrative becomes more interesting and sometimes highly instructional.
- Look for lessons: When we think back on events or our actions as they unfolded, we can find stories in the answers to the questions: What did I learn from that? What did I discover about myself and others that has changed me in some way?
- Look for utility: Recall your successes. They are fertile ground for organizational narratives. When we reflect on the kinds of successes that might make good stories, we need to dig for hidden principles. They are what make a story transferable to other situations and possibly applicable to someone elses successes.
- Look for vulnerability: Identify your imperfections, mistakes, failures and even derailments make wonderful stories_ probably the best. Such narratives have powerful qualities: They invoke peoples intellect by motivating them to probe for causes and better approaches to problems, and they evoke peoples emotions by giving them a feel for the pain and frustration of negative results. Such stories are usually the most interesting and memorable.
- Look for future experience: We learn well from experiences we have not had, by imagining how we might behave. Observing what is happening around us can help us create our own scripts for how we would handle similar situations. We learn from imaginations as well as from an actual experience. When we turn the scripts into creative stories other people can also learn. When a script is enlarged into a vision, it becomes a scenario for success.
- Look for recollections: Go over the meanings and memories of your past. Let the stories of the literature guide you. A story that is worth sharing is already within you and another one is in the making. But for now, It may exist only as an untapped experience, idea or value until you reflect and imagine the possibilities.

THE ADVANTAGES OF STORYTELLING

Stories provide many advantages including the following (Steen, 1999; Mclellan, 2006; Marzec, 2007):

- Stories show us patterns and they help us to make connections
- They are tools for empowerment
- Stories originate in problematic situations and show the way out of these situations
- Great Stories provide us with a road map which outlines all of the actions and tasks we have to accomplish in order to complete the journey successfully
- Stories also provide a toolkit for solving all of the problems that have to be dealt with along the way
- Stories eliminate suspect
- Good stories make you feel you have been through a satisfying, complete experience
- Stories are a form of expert system for remembering and integrating what we learn
- Stories help us to identify and understand the forces impacting upon us
- Stories are thought machines by which we test out our ideas and feelings about something and try to learn more about it

FIVE SIDES TO EVERY STORY

Silverman revealed five practices surrounding the use of stories that influence results: How to find stories, How to dig into them to uncover hidden patterns and themes, How to select those stories that need to be reinforced, How to craft memorable stories and How to embody stories to positively affect attitudes, thoughts and behaviors. These five aspects are described below (Silverman, 2007):

- Finding stories: there is an implicit assumption behind finding stories that stories already exist in abundance within organization and we must bring them to the surface.
- Digging into stories: every story provides both surface content and deeper meaning. Hidden below the surface narrative of stories are the assumptions, models, expectations and beliefs that guide peoples decisions and behaviors. These elements do not reveal themselves on surveys, and rarely do they come out in response to specific questions.
- Selecting the stories: some of the criteria used to determine what stories to reinforce inside and outside the organizations are:
- 1. Stories must support the vision, mission, strategy and goals.
- 2. Stories must define and demonstrate the core values of the organization.
- 3. Stories communicate our successes and our failures
- 4. Stories must connect us to our history and our legacy
- 5. Stories highlight both good and bad customer feedback
- Crafting stories: stories have a pattern. They have a beginning that establishes the context and hooks the listener, a middle that showcases the conflict, and an ending that brings resolution and provides a lesson_ a moral or key point.
- Embodying the stories: Telling a story in person is one way of embodying it. It is in fact preferable to video, audio and print due to the power of nonverbal communication and the interaction between the speaker and the listener. But these are not the only means of sharing stories.

How can organizations link together various facets of the five sides of story and integrate them into a larger initiative? Here is an example that embraces several of these approaches.

In 2003, Maj. Mark Tribus, an officer in the Personnel Management System Task Force of the U.S. Army Human Resources Command, was the brigade personnel officer for 4000 soldiers to be deployed to Afghanistan. Tribus teamed up with colleagues from companycommand.com, a forum that facilitates an ongoing professional conversation among past, current and future commanders about leading soldiers and building combat-ready units. They constructed a leadership development program that used stories to help prepare 70 of the brigades key leaders and their troops for the situations they would face.

First, Tribus had the key leaders read the book "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia", to give them some context about where they were going and to instill awareness of the culture. Then, Tribus and his colleagues asked the group to submit questions they had about their upcoming deployment.

They sent the questions to 100 company commanders who had served in Afghanistan; about half the responses included short stories. The team extracted overarching themes from these stories and then compiled them into a book that was given to the 70 leaders.

To reinforce the information from the book, Tribus and his team brought in six of the company commanders who had provided stories. After a day of practicing their stories orally, the commanders presented them to the group of 70 leaders, making sure to include accounts of the effects that the experience had on soldiers. A day later, the commanders visited with individual units to answer questions about what they had presented. Following this, each taught workshops in their area of expertise.

By evoking stories from experienced commanders, selecting those that where the most meaningful, digging into them for themes, and embodying different types of stories in interesting ways, Tribus augmented what the new leaders already knew about the situation on the ground in Afghanistan in a memorable and meaningful fashion.

CONCLUSION

Stories emanate naturally from our social dimension and seem to exist everywhere. They surround our very existence and ebb and flow through the times and pores of our lives. They are used for cultural identification and reinforcement and support purposes and are critical to a meaningful understanding of our place in the universe. Relevant stories exist close to the surface and are packed within our everyday thoughts, conversations and understandings. They are critical to organizational bonding and understanding. Such stories are used to inspire, imprint, teach, control and to explain the changes necessary to maintain competitive viability. The use of stories is key to the communications and understanding process and provides a broad opportunity to build the relationships which drive organizational commitment. The importance of stories is critical to the efficient management of the organizational system. Through the process of storytelling, Managers achieve innovation and change by demonstrating its legitimacy and consistency with the past. Storytelling can:

- Communicate a manager's vision of the future and envoke other's commitment.
- Create a collective sense of shared purpose and meaning that can enhance cohesion around an organization's culture.
- Build leadership through wisdom stored forward, by capturing and disseminating learning to the next generation of leaders.
- Enable people to find patterns in their lives, enhancing self-knowledge and a productive interpretation of experiences.
- Inspire alignment in support of a change initiative.

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