

Storytelling: An Integral Facet in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling has a long-standing history, with many cultures possessing vital traditions in oral narratives. The use of storytelling has traversed traditional boundaries, moving from telling stories in the home with family to stories being used in organizations by managers and CEOs. Storytelling is utilized in organizations large and small, family-owned and multinational; many institutions of higher education have even begun to offer courses in storytelling in their management programs (Smith, 2012). Storytelling has become a process that assists individuals and organizations in aligning ideas, culture, and teaching in dynamic environments. This paper will explore and review the importance of incorporating storytelling into organization culture; no matter the organization.

Keywords: storytelling, culture, organization, business

“The narrative way of thinking is internal and immersive and self-forgetting and attached to the full richness of tacit understanding. Through a story, life invites us to come inside as a participant” Stephen Denning, *The Springboard*

By no means is storytelling a new concept; early stories told of hunts, movement of tribes and clans, and origins of people. Stories and storytelling have evolved over time. Some stories inform about an event that occurred with friends or family, some are from books we've read, and others teach a moral or offer a specific point of view. From parent to child, from teacher to student, from Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to employee; stories can entertain, convey information, nurture communities, promote innovation, preserve organizations, and change organizations (Brown, Denning, Groh, Prusak, p. 355). Stories and storytelling have evolved into an effective medium to increase organization and individual effectiveness.

The so-called “soft skills” have become more and more important for individuals to possess in organizations today. The soft skills include teamwork, time-management, communication, ethics, and diversity (Mitchell, et al, p. 43). It is important to possess specific technical ability and educational attainment to perform the job, it is equally important to possess the soft skills to achieve organizational and personal success. Storytelling would be considered a soft-skill that utilizes both verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Yet, it should be kept in mind that storytelling should not be instituted as part of a trend. It is not a cure-all for an organizations ills; telling a story or two isn't going to endear a CEO or manager to workers or produce an immediate increase in production. That being said; it is a skill that all executives should possess to increase organizational effectiveness. Storytelling in organizations are initiated inside ...it's a process that unties and bonds people with a sense of a human experience; defining who we are. According to Driscoll and McKee (p. 214), “an organizational culture that embraces both ethical and spiritual values will in turn reach out to external stakeholders, thereby transforming other organizational stories as well.”

Looking at the history of storytelling in organizations; stories have always been utilized; albeit not necessarily as a “business or organizational tool”. “Early studies related to organizational storytelling and narratives provided a social constructivist perspective in the research of Berger and Luckmann (1967), leading to integral concepts of the importance of the story in organizational culture” (Kowalewski and Waukau-Villagomez, 2011, p. 83). However, it wasn't until 2001 that storytelling found its true niche when an inaugural symposium specific to organizational storytelling was held in Washington, DC. One individual who has emerged at the center of storytelling is Steve Denning, one of the original planners/presenters for the 2001 Washington, DC conference. Denning is one of the leading advocates in the area of storytelling in organizations today (storyatwork.com).

This initial conference and those that followed provided the impetus for storytelling to be given the credit it deserved. Support of storytelling from management and leadership has yet to be fully accepted in organizations. The use of stories in organizations gained momentum, and individuals began to understand that time and energy were necessary to learn to tell these stories to impact their organization (Denning, 2001). According to Denning, it's storytelling, not the story that leads to change (2011). This symposium in Washington was specifically related to storytelling, addressing organizational storytelling versus the traditional idea of storytelling. Individuals from across the United States (US) attended this event, many leaving this symposium to begin storytelling "clubs" in their hometowns. Following this inaugural symposium conferences, websites, articles, books soon became prolific in regard to the use of stories and how to tell stories in organizations. The stories the attendees discussed were not your traditional bedtime fare.

Storytelling can sway an individual to feel empathy and emotion toward incorporating change, fostering goodwill, soliciting financial or volunteer assistance (Driscoll, 2007). They pull people, soliciting emotion. Stories used in organizations should cause a spark or stimulus. This stimulus can act as a catalyst for change; for change that incites initiative and ideas. Storytelling, done well, pulls the listener into the story. The idea of using a story is to literally move the listener. To move the listener to be receptive to change, to assist in a new initiative, to "see" the vision of the leader of that organization. "Good stories are the ultimate form of persuasion. They inspire, influence, reveal, connect and motivate people to action" (storyatwork.com). It's important to know that not all stories should be utilized in organizations and that it's important to "choose" the correct story for the situation and listener. According to Phoel, (2006), telling the story right includes:

- Speak as one person to another
- Present the truth as you see it
- It's counterintuitive but true: spontaneity is rehearsed
- Relive your story as you tell it (p, 4)

There is no organization that could not utilize stories; whether business, education, health care, or in government; large or small, private or public. Stories have the ability to become part of the identity of an organization. Most organizations have policy handbooks; yet many topics regarding the culture of an organization are passed by employee to employee utilizing specific stories related to issues that their organization faced and the outcome. Stories that permeate an organization, that explains successes and failures...build camaraderie and strengthen the ties between employees. One of the most important areas in organizational use of storytelling relates to culture.

Organizational culture can be defined as, "the shared values, principles, traditions, and ways of doing things that influence the way organizational members act"(Robbins, 2011, p. 52). Strong organizations have cultures that employees feel a part of, where they have a vested interest. Strong values and a history (short or long) can be detailed by the stories told in these organizations. According to Robbins (2011), as a culture becomes stronger and stronger, the more it affects the traditional management functions that include planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (p. 53). Today, it is the synergy of an organization that impacts success.

There are differences between traditional storytelling and the storytelling utilized in organizations (Denning, 2011; Phoel, 2006). In traditional storytelling the stories are longer; more involved, and are specific. For the most part, there isn't the time to tell a long story; and those listening are much more interested in getting to the point of the story. They don't want to sit and listen to a fifteen minute movement by movement chronicle of events; in organizations it's "get to the point-time is money philosophy". Interpersonal communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal are an integral tool in the arsenal of organizational leaders in a robust way (Denning, 2001).

When evaluating storytelling from an organizational viewpoint, stories can fulfill multiple outcomes. They can promote cultural norms utilizing stories to tell the story of what is acceptable or unacceptable within organizations. Stories can provide an oral history of an organization; how and why it was started, and explains how the organization became what it is today. These would be considered transformational stories. Purposeful action, action with a purpose can also be a result of utilizing stories in an organization. Stories can spur individuals to action; Storytelling humanizes individuals and the organizations they work for. Stories allow employees to "see" the bigger picture permitting understanding of strategy, increasing communication, and fostering a strong organizational culture.

Storytelling provides a forum for individuals to present additional explanation; offering the listener an opportunity to hear the narrator from a different point of view. This narrative delivers a conversational format where the teller can provide clarification and description of the message. In a college classroom, storytelling can provide further explanation of policies noted in a syllabi. For example, the following story can reiterate the policy of “no late assignments”,

“In the fall of 1971, Bob McDonald joined the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York. Along with the traditional hazing a first-year cadet experiences, Bob learned quickly there were only four acceptable responses when addressed by a superior officer: “Yes, sir”; “No, sir”; “I don’t understand, sir”; and “No excuse, sir.” As Bob explains it, “Imagine I’ve shined my shoes, my trousers are pressed, and I go out to formation. While in line, one of my classmates rushes past and steps in a puddle, splashing mud all over my shoes and trousers. Then an upperclassman walks by and notices. ‘McDonald! Why are you in formation with mud all over your shoes and trousers?’ “As a West Point cadet, I go through all four possible answers in my head. ‘Yes, sir’ would just restate the obvious, so that doesn’t seem appropriate. And it would probably get me yelled at even more. I couldn’t say ‘No, sir’ because it was clearly true. I’d get thrown out of the academy for lying. ‘I don’t understand, sir’ would just make me look stupid. As a new cadet I was doing enough of that already. The only answer I had left was the fourth one, and it’s the most powerful one of all—‘No excuse, sir.’ Even though something happened to me that was outside my control, I wasn’t supposed to make any excuses. I was supposed to say, ‘No excuse, sir. It won’t happen again.’ That’s how a West Point cadet takes responsibility, which is an important part of character.”
(Smith, 2012, p. 23-24)

Following the telling of this story, the instructor can provide further explanation related to the concept that in the world of business, employers don’t want to hear employee excuses for not completing reports or assignments. The classroom can become the mechanism for teaching lifelong lessons.

Conclusion

Storytelling in organizations has become a necessary skill that leaders in companies should possess. Stories engage individuals; producing much needed inspiration, enthusiasm, understanding, and vision. Utilizing storytelling supports communication; developing dialogue in multiple directions (top-bottom, bottom-up, side-side) promoting an ongoing evolution and framework to build upon. Storytelling adds chapters to an organizations story; adding a sense of pride.

Even though stories have such a long history, Driscoll & McKee (2006) articulate how little attention has been expended on organizational storytelling in academic literature through 2006. Since 2006, there has been an escalation in the interest given to the association between storytelling and successful leadership with both academics and practitioners (Driscoll et al, p. 205). Storytelling promotes a connection to the larger community of the workforce. According to McKee (2007), “the images and metaphors that are used in organizational storytelling influence our individual worldview and redefine organizational values”. The narrative provides the “voice” for the teller and for the organization.

Storytelling and stories in organizations are progressively becoming more widely utilized in organizations to manage a broad arrange of issues by leaders. No longer are stories told only at bedtime, but also on manufacturing floors and in board rooms producing a workforce with a stronger sense of organizational culture and awareness. In leadership, the use of stories might be considered a “soft” skill. Yet, storytelling is an important ability to possess to lead organizations into the future successfully. Stories involve permitting the listener the opportunity to hear how real people relate and handle challenges, opportunities, and failures impact everyday life.

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