

Chapter 10

The Impact of Storytelling in Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Tell the organizational story! Take the data of the organization and turn it into real people doing real things and you just might influence education. This chapter demonstrates the relevance of the skills of storytelling and its impact on change. Leaders who tell stories compellingly communicate important messages in a memorable way, develop more effective relationships with those they lead, and create an inspirational culture as their organizations go through positive change. Storytelling does not need to be a foreign concept, as we can all search our own history and experiences of important lessons learned that can be communicated in the form of a narrative. The role of stories and storytelling contribute to a positive organizational approach – positive in the sense of positive psychology, positive organizational psychology, and appreciate inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has become the business, science, and brand marketing communications *nom du jour*. Periodicals and journals from *Forbes* to *Business Week* to *Parent* to *Discover* and to *Science* are peppered with recent articles touting the value, power, and effectiveness of storytelling. Storytelling has the power to alter beliefs, values, and behaviors. It exerts powerful influence. And yet, only a tiny fraction of all the ‘stories’ we hear or read accomplish that Herculean feat (Haven, 2007). Hopefully, you are asking why do only 88% to 90% of all the stories we hear / read have no effect on us? One reason is they are not vividly imagined in our mind. Or, they do not engage us on a deep emotional level; thus, not remembered. Possibly because we do not learn from them as they are told.

This chapter looked at not only a small fraction of the science research behind the power of storytelling, but also how to master a specific set of concepts from the world of storytelling and its impact on leading change. Storytelling is not a panacea for change or a substitute for necessary programs, strategies, or budgets; it is a tool that can assist in facilitating change through stories (Brauer, 2014). Change is a

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5667-1.ch010

reality of our lives. Whether in our academic organizations, neighborhoods, or on a global scale, change constantly challenges us to adapt; and, our skill in doing so is a yardstick of our resilience (McLean, 2014). The theme of unprecedented change is profoundly captured by Eamonn Kelly (2006) in his book, *Powerful Times*, wherein he described how we are not in an age of change, but rather in a change of ages. He described this point in history as the greatest period of social change since the Renaissance. From a view of looking backwards into Greek philosophy, Heraclitus believed that the universe was characterized by constant change and in the process of change he provoked questions about the reality of change and those who led the change. Even Plato accounted for both change and stability by assigning them to different realms (Sanders, 1988). So, if we fast forward to today and even though storytellers may stumble and tumble as they learn their craft, it is desperately needed and necessary to lead from this approach in this mind-boggling nutty world (Karlgaard, 2014).

This is not a how-to chapter nor a practical step-by-step guide to the must-have-story based on informational elements that your audiences' story-seeking minds desperately need to find. I anchor this chapter in knowing that a leader's job of being a change agent is not specifically to tell stories. Yet, each story they develop is a powerful tool they can use to better accomplish the change. Denning (2011), expert storyteller and author of the book, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, proposed that stories increase understanding of organizational change that nurtures a collective consciousness and communicates a new reality that will flourish without adversarial debate. Thus, one of the goals of this chapter is to identify the fundamental intent behind telling effective stories that can be used to help transform individuals and organizations. Harris and Kim Barnes (2006) stated storytelling is significant in value by asking a) are stories important; b) how can stories help organizations successfully go through change efforts; and, c) how can a leader tell a story with impact? One answer to those questions is that the power of stories illustrates the important message during a change process that can be told repeatedly. The consistent purpose of storytelling is to encourage change agents to seek out moments to make heroes of others, and consistency in telling the story of the path and progress to all stakeholders going through the change effort. The story teller, if effective, does not dictate the direction of the change, but through the story the storyteller describes a new perspective and raises the excitement of the organizational journey (Ellington, 2016). Though intangible, stories have something solid that helps maintain a sense of commitment and a good story is a significant foundation for everyone in the organization (Karlgaard, 2014).

Storytelling for Positive Organizational Change

Telling stories is a fundamental human activity that all nations, cultures, and organizations have used from the beginning of civilizations. Stories have been around since the dawn of humanity and abilities to share them through language. Political, religious, military and business leaders use stories as a tool of leadership to inspire people toward action and one of the greatest sources of storytelling is our own experiences (Harris & Kim Barnes, 2006). If we reflect here a moment, even our births are stories. Driscoll and McKee (2007) discuss how leader role modeling in authentic storytelling is essential in developing an ethically and spiritually based organizational culture. This authentic leadership integrates a moral component that can transform an organizational culture so members of the organization begin to feel connected to a larger community and a higher purpose (2007). Fisher (1989) defined storytelling as a communication process by which humans break down complex information into narratives that are shared between individuals and amongst groups.

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