

WHITE PAPER

THE USE OF STORYTELLING IN DON

Storytelling, the construction of fictional examples to illustrate a point, can be used to effectively transfer knowledge. An organizational story is a detailed narrative of management actions, employee interactions, or other intra-organizational events that are communicated informally within the organization.

A variety of story forms exist naturally throughout organizations, including scenarios and anecdotes. Scenarios are the articulation of possible future states, constructed within the imaginative limits of the author. While scenarios provide an awareness of alternatives – of value in and of itself – they are often used as planning tools for possible future situations. The plan becomes a vehicle to respond to recognized objectives in each scenario. An anecdote is a brief sequence captured in the field or arising from a brainstorming session. To reinforce positive behavior, sensitive managers can seek out and disseminate true anecdotes that embody the value desired in the organization. The capture and distribution of anecdotes across organizations carries high value. Dave Snowden, a consultant and author in Great Britain who has investigated the use of storytelling in organizations for the past dozen years, has discovered that once a critical number of anecdotes are captured from a community, the value set or rules underlying the behavior of that community can be determined. Understanding these values has allowed the utilization of informal as well as formal aspects of the organization.

Conveying information in a story provides a rich context, remaining in the conscious memory longer and creating more memory traces than information not in context. Therefore a story is more likely to be acted upon than normal means of communications. Storytelling, whether in a personal or organizational setting, connects people, develops creativity, and increases confidence. The use of stories in organizations can build descriptive capabilities, increase organizational learning, convey complex meaning, and communicate common values and rule sets.

First, stories have the ability to increase our descriptive capabilities, a strength in this age of uncertainty where we must be able to describe our environment and have the self-awareness to describe our individual capabilities. Description capabilities are essential in strategic thinking and planning, and create a greater awareness of what we could achieve. Fictional stories can be powerful because they provide a mechanism by which an organization can learn from failure without attributing blame. Some organizations actually create characters from archetypes taken from a large number of organizational anecdotes. These characters are used over and over again. Once established, they become a natural vehicle for organizational learning and a repository for organizational memory.

When well constructed, stories can convey a high level of complex meaning. The use of sub-text can convey this meaning without making it obvious. Sub-text is a term that refers to an unstated message not explicit in the dialogue of the story. Analogies are often used to aid in the transfer of particularly complex information and knowledge to give the human mind something to relate to. This form of learning has been used throughout human history to transfer complex concepts and core values.

Finally, because stories communicate common values and rule systems, they provide a mechanism to build organic organizational response to emerging requirements. This means that as new situations and new challenges arise in response to an ever-changing world, a common set of values will drive that response at every level of the organization. Snowden explains that to operate in a highly uncertain environment, we must have common values and rule systems that support networks of communities self-organizing around a common purpose. Stories provide just such a catalyst. Snowden states that in this world, old skills such as story and other models drawn from organic rather than mechanical thinking are survival skills, not nice to haves.

The World Bank has used what they call a Springboard Story over the past several years to move that organization to a knowledge organization. The Springboard Story, a powerful method of communicating knowledge about norms and values, is a transformational story that enables the listener to take a personal leap in understanding how an organization or community or complex system may change. The intent of this type of story is not to transfer information, but to serve as a catalyst for creating understanding within the listener. Steve Denning, a senior leader for World Bank, states that these stories enable listeners to easily and quickly grasp the ideas as a whole in a non-threatening way. In effect, they invite the listener to see analogies from their own histories, their own contexts, and their own fields of expertise.

These Springboard Stories were told from the perspective of a single protagonist who was known to the audience and actually in the predicament being told in the story; there was an element of strangeness or incongruity to the listeners which could capture their attention and imagination; the story had a degree of plausibility and a premonition of what the future might be like; and there was a happy ending. Denning states that happy endings make it easier for listeners to take the imaginative leap from the explicit story to the implicit meaning.

The Undersecretary of the Navy used stories to help Congress visualize the value the Navy Marine Corps Intranet would add to the mission of the Department. One story conveyed how Petty Officer Storm, deployed aboard the USS San Jacinto, was able to reachback vis NMCI to the telemaintenance expert at the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Crane, Indiana, to quickly resolve an equipment failure. Another story tells about the possible presence of a biological agent detected by forward-deployed Gunnery Sgt. Jackson. Jackson uses NMCI to link back to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta and Ft. Dietrick, Maryland, to contact the experts who analyze the threat and download appropriate procedures. Stories are also an integral part of the DON Knowledge Centric Organization Toolkit that has been distributed across government worldwide.

With the advent of the Internet and Intranet, there is a larger opportunity to use stories to bring about change. Electronic media adds moving images and sound as context setters. Hypertext capabilities and collaboration software invites groups, teams and communities to co-create their stories. New multiprocessing skills are required to navigate this new world, skills that include the quick and sure assimilation of and response to fast-flowing images and sounds and sensory assaults.

In summary, when used well storytelling is a powerful transformational tool in organizations, one that all of our managers and leaders across the Department need to utilize.