

The Secret Language of Leadership

Steve Denning: leadership, innovation and business narrative

October 08, 2005

Why storytelling is important

A colleague recently asked me for a quote about why storytelling is important. I came up with the following list of possibilities, that might be of wider interest:

- Storytelling is a key leadership technique because it's quick, powerful, free, natural, refreshing, energizing, collaborative, persuasive, holistic, entertaining, moving, memorable and authentic. Stories help us make sense of organizations.
- Storytelling is more than an essential set of tools to get things done: it's a way for leaders – wherever they may sit – to embody the change they seek. Rather than merely advocating and counter-advocating propositional arguments, which lead to more arguments, leaders establish credibility and authenticity through telling the stories that they are living. When they believe deeply in them, their stories resonate, generating creativity, interaction and transformation.
- Storytelling is often the best way for leaders to communicate with people they are leading. Why? It is inherently well adapted to handling the most intractable leadership challenges of today – sparking change, communicating who you are, enhancing the brand, transmitting values, creating high-performance teams, sharing knowledge, taming the grapevine, leading people in to the future.
- Storytelling translates dry and abstract numbers into compelling pictures of a leader's goals. Although good business cases are developed through the use of numbers, they are typically approved on the basis of a story—that is, a narrative that links a set of events in some kind of causal sequence.
- Storytelling is a crucial tool for management and leadership, because often, nothing else works. Charts leave listeners bemused. Prose remains unread. Dialogue is just too laborious and slow. Time after time, when faced with the task of persuading a group of managers or front-line staff in a large organization to get enthusiastic about a major change, storytelling is the only thing that works.
- Storytelling can inspire people to act in unfamiliar, and often unwelcome, ways. Mind-numbing cascades of numbers or daze-inducing PowerPoint slides won't achieve this goal. Even logical arguments for making the needed changes usually won't do the trick. But effective storytelling often does.
- Storytelling works better than the “Just tell ‘em” approach in most leadership situations. Management fads may come and go, but storytelling is a phenomenon that is fundamental to all nations, societies and cultures, and has been so since time immemorial.
- Narrative is the instrument of continuing creativity, a power that inexorably propels us forward into the future, the unknown, building new worlds and structures.
- Storytelling is part of the creative struggle to generate a new future, as opposed to conventional management approaches that search for virtual certainties anchored in the illusive security of yesterday.
- Narrative can help transform even gargantuan organizations through the unanticipated power of the imagination. It has the capacity to change tangible, hard realities through no more than airy nothings, mere gauzy thoughts.
- Narrative champions freedom, interaction, and organic growth. It operates beyond the scope of simple, linear logic. It is as interested in the unknown as in the known.

- Narrative is a key tool for leadership, because it helps us deal with organizations as living organisms that need to be tended, nurtured and encouraged to grow. It thrives on inspiration rather than administration, fostering change rather than stasis.
- Storytelling liberates innovation, by generating the energy needed to change.
- Narrative helps us make sense of a world that is rapidly mutating, as compared to conventional management, which is more suited to activities that are stable, linear and predictable.
- Narrative is interested in the next generation of change, not just an extrapolation of the present. It copes with swirling, new, emergent phenomena and phase changes that by definition escape the predictable frame of yesterday's conceptions.
- Narrative helps us cope with a future that is evolving unpredictably. Conventional management techniques miss the fact that we cannot measure tomorrow when we don't know what it will involve.
- Narrative is the natural instrument of change, because it draws on the active, living participation of individuals. It dwells in the experience of the people who act, think, talk, discuss, chat, joke, complain, dream, agonize and exult together, and collectively make up the organization. By contrast, conventional management focuses on lifeless elements – mission statements, formal strategies, programs, procedures, processes, systems, budgets, assets – the dead artifacts of the organization.
- Narrative is a tool that gives privileged access to the living part of an organization, and so can be used to elicit decisions to create organizational artifacts and generate support for them.
- Narrative is a tool for the instigators of change, who aim at continuing transformation and the creation of a fruitful tomorrow. Those whose goal is merely that of control will find that storytelling is not a very useful or important tool. For them, the important thing is accommodation to the preoccupations of a well-behaved yesterday.
- Storytelling is more than just a tool. It is beyond any implement—almost a requirement of being alive. Insofar as it has anything to offer, it generates fresh depth and breadth of perception. It enables us to surmount a humdrum world where everything makes sense and is logical, and get to that realm where deeper meaning is revealed.
- When we hear a story that touches us profoundly, our lives are suffused with meaning. As listeners, we have transmitted to us that which matters. Once we make this connection, once a sense of wonder has come upon us, it does not last long, and we inevitably fall back into our daze of everyday living, but with the difference that a radical shift in understanding may have taken place.
- A story is something that comes from outside. But the meaning is something that emerges from within. When a story reaches our hearts with deep meaning, it takes hold of us. Once it does so, we can let it go, and yet it remains with us. We do not weary of this experience.
- Once we have had one story, we are already hungry for another. We want more, in case it too can transmit the magic of connectedness between the self and the universe.
- Through narrative, we can let go the urge to control, and the fear that goes with it, learning that the world has the capacity to organize itself, recognizing that managing includes catalyzing this capacity, as well as sparking, creating, energizing, unifying, generating emergent truths, celebrating the complexity, the fuzziness and the messiness of living.

For more, go to [The Leader's Guide to Storytelling](#)

And my website <http://www.stevedenning.com/>

October 08, 2005 in [Leader's Guide to Storytelling](#) | [Permalink](#)

TrackBack

TrackBack URL for this entry:

<http://www.typepad.com/t/trackback/54739/3327402>

Listed below are links to weblogs that reference [Why storytelling is important](#):

» [Why Storytelling Is Important](#) from elsua: The Knowledge Management Blog

If you have been doing Knowledge Management for some time now you would probably agree on the key role that storytelling could be playing all along in order to allow knowledge workers to share their knowledge and collaborate with others... [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on May 15, 2006 at 06:14 AM

Comments

hello people <http://abga.info>

Posted by: [fgjhg](#) | [June 30, 2007 at 12:55 PM](#)

eCVB1k A number of universities have awarded her honorary degrees, and she earned a prestigious job on the staff of Detroit congressman John Conyers. In 1988 Roxanne Brown noted: "Thirty-two years after she attracted international attention for sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Mrs. Parks's ardent devotion to human rights still burns brightly, like a well-tended torch that ignites her spirit and calls her to service whenever she is needed."

Posted by: [Elizabeth Talor](#) | [July 25, 2007 at 12:50 PM](#)

hi

Posted by: [tahseen](#) | [January 23, 2008 at 07:54 AM](#)