

FIRST PERSON

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In 1998, I made a pilgrimage to the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee, seeking some enlightenment. Several years earlier, as the program director of knowledge management at the World Bank, I had stumbled onto the power of storytelling. Despite a career of scoffing at such touchy-feely stuff—like most business executives, I knew that analytical was good, anecdotal was bad—I had changed my thinking because I'd seen stories help galvanize an organization around a defined business goal.

In the mid-1990s, that goal was to get people at the World Bank to support efforts at knowledge management—a pretty foreign notion within the organization at the time. I offered people cogent arguments about the need to gather the knowledge that was scattered throughout the organization. They didn't listen. I gave PowerPoint presentations that compellingly demonstrated the importance of sharing and leveraging this information. My audiences merely looked dazed. In desperation, I was ready to try almost anything.

Then in 1996 I began telling people a story:

In June of 1995, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia went to the Web site of the Centers for Disease Control and got the answer to a question about the treatment for malaria. Remember that this was in Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world, and it happened in a tiny place 600 kilometers from the capital city. But the most striking thing about this picture, at least for us, is that the World Bank isn't in it. Despite our know-how on all kinds of poverty-related issues, that knowledge isn't available to the millions of people who could use it. Imagine if it were. Think what an organization we could become.

This simple story helped World Bank staff and managers envision a different kind of future for the organization. When knowledge management later became an official corporate priority, I used similar stories to maintain the momentum. So I began to wonder how the tool of narrative might be put to work even more effectively. Being a typically rational

manager, I decided to consult the experts.

At the International Storytelling Center, I told the Zambia story to a professional storyteller, J.G. “Paw-Paw” Pinkerton, and asked the master what he thought. You can imagine my chagrin when he said he didn’t hear a story at all. There was no real telling. There was no plot. There was no building up of the characters. Who was this health worker in Zambia? And what was her world like? What did it feel like to be in the exotic environment of Zambia, facing the problems she faced? My anecdote, he said, was a pathetic thing, not a story at all. I needed to start from scratch if I hoped to turn it into a “real story.”

Was I surprised? Well, not exactly. The story was pretty bland. There was a problem with this advice from the expert, though. I knew in my heart it was wrong. And with that realization, I was on the brink of an important insight: Beware the well-told story!

The Power of Narrative

But let’s back up a bit. Do stories really have a role to play in the business world? Believe me, I’m familiar with the skepticism about them. When you talk about “storytelling” to a group of hardheaded executives, you’d better be prepared for some eye rolling. If the group is polite as well as tough, don’t be surprised if the eyes simply glaze over.

That’s because most executives operate with a particular—and generally justified—mindset. Analysis is what drives business thinking. It cuts through the fog of myth, gossip, and speculation to get to the hard facts. It goes wherever the observations and premises and conclusions take it, undistorted by the hopes or fears of the analyst. Its strength lies in its objectivity, its impersonality, its heartlessness.

Yet this strength is also a weakness. Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart. And that’s where we must go if we are to motivate people not only to take action but to do so with energy and enthusiasm. At a time when corporate survival often requires disruptive change, leadership involves inspiring 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 the most logical arguments usually won’t do the trick.

But effective storytelling often does. In fact,

in certain situations nothing else works. Although good business arguments 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 can translate those dry and abstract numbers into compelling pictures of a leader’s goals. I saw this happen at the World Bank—by 2000, we were increasingly recognized as leaders in the area of knowledge management—and have seen it in numerous other large organizations since then.

So why was I having problems with the advice I had received from the professional storyteller in Jonesborough?

A “Poorly Told” Story

The timing of my trip to Tennessee was fortunate. If I had sought expert advice two years earlier, I might have taken the master’s recommendations without question. But I’d had some time to approach the idea of organizational storytelling with a beginner’s mind, free of strictures about “the right way” to tell a story.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t follow Paw-Paw Pinkerton’s recommendations. I saw immediately how to flesh out my modest anecdote about the health worker in Zambia: You’d dramatically depict her life, the scourge of malaria that she faced in her work, and perhaps the pain and suffering of the patient she was treating that day. You’d describe the extraordinary set of events that had led to her being seated in front of a computer screen deep in the hinterland of Zambia. You’d describe the false leads she had followed before she came across the CDC Web site. You’d build up to the moment of triumph when she found the answer to her question about malaria and vividly describe how that answer was about to transform the life of her patient. The story would be a veritable epic.

This “maximalist” account would be more engrossing than my relatively dry anecdote. But I had learned enough by then to realize that telling the story in this way to a corporate audience would not galvanize implementation of a strange new idea like knowledge management. I knew that in the modern workplace, people had neither the time nor the patience—remember executives’ general skepticism about storytelling in the first place—to absorb a richly de-

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tailed narrative. If I was going to hold the attention of my audience, I had to make my point in seconds, not in minutes.

There was another problem. Even if my audience did take the time to listen to a fully developed tale, my telling it in that fashion would not allow listeners the mental space to relate the story to their own quite different worlds. Although I was describing a health worker in Zambia, I wanted everyone to focus not on Zambia but on their own situations. I hoped they would think, “If the CDC can reach a health worker in Zambia, why can’t the World Bank? Why don’t we put our knowledge on the Web and broaden our scope?” But if my listeners were immersed in a saga about that health worker and her patient, they might not have any attention left to ask themselves these questions—or to provide answers. In other words, I didn’t want my audience too interested in Zambia. A minimalist narrative was effective, in fact, because it lacked detail and texture. The same characteristic that the professional storyteller saw as a flaw was, for my purposes, a strength.

On my return from Jonesborough, I educated myself about the principles of traditional storytelling. More than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, said stories should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. They should include complex characters as well as a plot that incorporates a reversal of fortune and a lesson learned. Furthermore, the storyteller should be so engaged with the story—visualizing the action, feeling what the characters feel—that the listeners become drawn into the narrative’s world. Aristotle’s formula has proved successful over the ages, from *The Arabian Nights* to *The Decameron* to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and most Hollywood screenplays.

Despite the narrative power of the traditional story, I knew that it probably wouldn’t spark action in an organization. In retrospect, though, I realize that my insight blinded me to something else. Believing that this wonderful and rich tradition had no place in the time-constrained world of modern business was as wrongheaded as thinking that all stories had to be full of detail and color. I would later see that the well-told story is relevant in a modern organization. Indeed, a number of surprises about the use of storytelling in organizations awaited me.

Tales of Success and Failure

In December 2000, I left the World Bank and began to consult with companies on their knowledge management and, by extension, their use of organizational stories. As part of this work, I once found myself in London with Dave Snowden, a director of IBM’s Institute of Knowledge Management, teaching a master class on storytelling to around 70 executives from private- and public-sector organizations.

During the class’s morning session, I spoke about my experience at the World Bank and how a positive orientation was essential if a narrative like the one about Zambia was to be effective. But in the afternoon, to my dismay, my fellow presenter emphatically asserted the opposite. At IBM and elsewhere, Dave had found purely positive stories to be problematic. They were, he said, like the Janet and John children’s stories in the United Kingdom or the Dick and Jane stories in the United States: The characters were so good they made you feel queasy. The naughtiest thing Janet and John would do was spill a bottle of water in the yard. Then they would go and tell their mother about it and promise never to do it again. Janet would volunteer to help out with the cleanup and John would offer to help wash the car. These stories for children reflected a desire to show things as they should be rather than as they are. In a corporate environment, Dave told his audience, listeners would respond to such rosy tales by conjuring up negative “antistories” about what must have actually happened. His message: Beware the positive story!

After the workshop, Dave and I discussed why his stories focused on the negative while mine accentuated the positive. I could see he had a point, that negative stories can be more powerful than positive ones. I’d used negative stories myself when trying to teach people the nitty-gritty of any subject. The fact is, people learn more from their mistakes than from their successes.

Eventually, however, it dawned on me that our points of view were complementary and that our stories served different purposes: My stories were crafted to motivate people, and Dave’s were designed to share knowledge. His stories might describe how and why a team failed to accomplish an objective, with the aim of helping others avoid the same mistakes. (To elicit such stories, Dave often had to start by getting people to talk about their successes,

Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart—and that’s where we must go to motivate people.

A Storytelling Catalog

Storytelling is an increasingly accepted way to achieve management goals. But leaders need to use a variety of narrative patterns for different aims.

Sparking Action. Leadership is, above all, about getting people to change. To achieve that goal, you need to communicate the sometimes complex nature of the changes required and inspire an often skeptical organization to enthusiastically carry them out. This is the place for what I call a “springboard story,” one that enables listeners to visualize the transformation needed in their circumstances and then to act on that realization.

Such a story is based on an actual event, preferably recent enough to seem relevant. It has a single protagonist with whom members of the target audience can identify. And there is an authentically happy ending, in which a change has at least in part been successfully implemented. (There is also an implicit alternate ending, an unhappy one that would have resulted had the change not occurred.)

The story has enough detail to be intelligible and credible but—and this is key—not so much texture that the audience becomes completely wrapped up in it. If that happens, people won’t have the mental space to create an analogous scenario for change in their own organization. For example, if you want to get an organization to embrace a new technology, you might tell stories about individuals elsewhere who have successfully implemented it, without dwelling on the specifics.

Communicating Who You Are. You aren’t likely to lead people through wrenching change if they don’t trust you. And if they’re to trust you, they have to know you: who you are, where you’ve come from, and why you hold the views you do. Ideally, they’ll end up not only understanding you but also empathizing with you.

Stories for this purpose are usually based on a life event that reveals some strength or vulnerability and shows what the speaker took from the experience. For example, Jack Welch’s success in making Gen-

eral Electric a winner was undoubtedly aided by his ability to tell his own story, which includes a tongue-lashing he once received from his mother after he hurled a hockey stick across the ice in response to a disappointing loss. “You punk!” she said, as Welch tells it in his memoir *Jack: Straight from the Gut*. “If you don’t know how to lose, you’ll never know how to win.”

Unlike a story designed to spark action, this kind is typically well told, with colorful detail and context. So the speaker needs to ensure that the audience has enough time and interest to hear the story.

Transmitting Values. Stories can be effective tools for ingraining values within an organization, particularly those that help forestall problems by clearly establishing limits on destructive behavior. A story of this type ensures that the audience understands “how things are done around here.”

These narratives often take the form of a parable. Religious leaders have used them for thousands of years to communicate values. The stories are usually set in some kind of generic past and have few context-setting details—though the context needs to seem relevant to the listeners. The “facts” of such tales can be hypothetical, but they must be believable. For example, a story might tell the sad fate of someone who failed to see the conflict of interest in not disclosing his or her financial interest in a company supplier.

Of course, narratives alone cannot establish values in an organization. Leaders need to live the values on a daily basis.

Fostering Collaboration. Every management textbook talks about the value of getting people to work together. But the only advice most of them offer on making that happen in real-life work environments is “Encourage conversations.” Yes, but how?

One approach is to generate a common narrative around a group’s concerns and goals, beginning with a story told by one member of the group. Ideally, that first story sparks another, which sparks another. If the process continues, group members

develop a shared perspective, one that creates a sense of community. The first story must be emotionally moving enough to unleash the narrative impulse in others and to create a readiness to hear more stories. It could, for example, vividly describe how the speaker had grappled with a difficult work situation.

For this process to occur, it is best if the group has an open agenda that allows the stories to surface organically. It is also desirable to have a plan ready so that the energy generated by the positive experience of sharing stories can be immediately channeled into action.

Taming the Grapevine. Rumors flow incessantly through every organization. “Have you heard the latest?” is a refrain that’s difficult for managers to deal with. Denying a rumor can give it credibility. Asking how it got started can ensure its spread. Ignoring it risks allowing it to spiral out of control. Rumors about issues central to the future of the organization—takeovers, reorganizations, major managerial changes—can be an enormous distraction (or worse) to employees.

So as an executive, what can you do? One response is to harness the energy of the grapevine to defuse the rumor, using a story to convince listeners that the gossip is either untrue or unreasonable. This kind of story highlights the incongruity between the rumor and reality. You could use gentle satire to mock the rumor, the rumor’s author, or even yourself, in an effort to undermine the rumor’s power. For example, you might deal with a false rumor of “imminent companywide reorganization” by jokingly recounting how the front office’s current struggles involving the seating chart for executive committee meetings would have to be worked out first. Keep in mind, though, that humor can backfire. Mean-spirited teasing can generate a well-deserved backlash.

The trick is to work with, not against, the flow of the vast underground river of informal communication that exists in every organization. Of course, you can’t ridicule a

rumor into oblivion if it's true or at least reasonable. If that's the case, there is little you can do but admit the substance of the rumor, put it in perspective, and move on.

Sharing Knowledge. Much of the intellectual capital of an organization is not written down anywhere but resides in people's minds. Communicating this know-how across an organization and beyond typically occurs informally, through the sharing of stories.

Knowledge-sharing narratives are unusual in that they lack a hero or even a detectable plot. They are more about problems, and how and why they got—or, more likely, didn't get—resolved. They include a description of the problem, the setting, and the solution. Because they highlight a problem—say, the challenge employees face in learning to use a new system—they tend to have a negative tone. And because they often focus in detail on why a particular solution worked, they may be of little interest outside a defined group of people. Though

unashamedly unentertaining and lacking most elements of a conventional story, they are nonetheless the uncelebrated workhorse of organizational narrative.

They present a difficulty, however. In a corporate setting, stories about problems don't flow easily, not only because people fear the consequences of admitting mistakes, but also because, in the flush of success, people tend to forget what they learned along the way. As a result, the knowledge-sharing story cannot be compelled; it has to be teased out. That is, a discussion of successes may be needed in order to get people to talk about what has gone wrong and how it can be fixed.

Leading People into the Future. An important part of a leader's job is preparing others for what lies ahead, whether in the concrete terms of an actual scenario or the more conceptual terms of a vision. A story can help take listeners from where they are now to where they need to be, by making them comfortable with an image of the fu-

ture. The problem, of course, lies in crafting a credible narrative about the future when the future is unknowable.

Thus, if such stories are to serve their purpose, they should whet listeners' imaginative appetite about the future without providing detail that will likely turn out to be inaccurate. Listeners should be able to remold the story in their minds as the future unfolds with all its unexpected twists and turns. And clearly, the story should portray that state in a positive way: People are more likely to overcome uncertainty about change if they are shown what to aim for rather than what to avoid.

Note that telling an evocative narrative about the future requires a high degree of verbal skill, something not every leader possesses. But the springboard story, described above, provides an alternative. Hearing about a change that has already happened elsewhere can help listeners to imagine how it might play out for them in the future.

If your objective is:	You will need a story that:	In telling it, you will need to:	Your story will inspire such responses as:
Sparking action	Describes how a successful change was implemented in the past, but allows listeners to imagine how it might work in their situation.	Avoid excessive detail that will take the audience's mind off its own challenge	"Just imagine..." "What if..."
Communicating who you are	Provides audience-engaging drama and reveals some strength or vulnerability from your past	Include meaningful details, but also make sure the audience has the time and inclination to hear your story.	"I didn't know that about him!" "Now I see what she's driving at."
Transmitting values	Feels familiar to the audience and will prompt discussion about the issues raised by the value being promoted	Use believable (though perhaps hypothetical) characters and situations, and never forget that the story must be consistent with your own actions.	"That's so right!" "Why don't we do that all the time?"
Fostering collaboration	Movingly recounts a situation that listeners have also experienced and that prompts them to share their own stories about the topic.	Ensure that a set agenda doesn't squelch this swapping of stories—and that you have an action plan ready to tap the energy unleashed by this narrative chain reaction.	"That reminds me of the time that I..." "Hey, I've got a story like that."
Taming the grapevine	Highlights, often through the use of gentle humor, some aspect of a rumor that reveals it to be untrue or unlikely.	Avoid the temptation to be mean-spirited, and be sure that the rumor is indeed false	"No kidding!" "I'd never thought about it like that before!"
Sharing knowledge	Focuses on mistakes made and shows in some detail how they were corrected, with an explanation of why the solution worked	Solicit alternative—and possibly better—solutions	"There but for the grace of God..." "Wow! We'd better watch that from now on."
Leading people into the future	Evokes the future you want to create without providing excessive detail that will only turn out to be wrong	Be sure of your storytelling skills (Otherwise, use a story in which the past can serve as a springboard to the future.)	"When do we start?" "Let's do it!"

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even if these accounts were ultimately less useful vehicles for conveying knowledge.) It was then I began to realize that the purpose of telling a story might determine its form.

Granted, even optimistic stories have to be true and believable, since jaded corporate audiences know too well the experience of being presented with half-truths. Stories told in order to spur action need to make good on their promises and contain sufficient evidence of a positive outcome. But stories intended mainly to transfer knowledge must be more than true. Because their objective is to generate understanding and not action, they tend to highlight the pitfalls of ignorance; they are meant not to inspire people but to make them cautious. Just as the minimalist stories that I told to spark action were different from traditional entertainment stories, so effective knowledge-sharing stories would have negative rather than positive overtones.

A Collective Yawn

Once I saw that different narrative forms could further different business goals, I looked for other ways that managers could make stories work for them. A number of distinct story types began to emerge—ones that didn't necessarily follow Aristotelian guidelines but were nonetheless used to good effect in a variety of organizations. (For descriptions of some of them and the purposes for which they might be used, see the sidebar "A Storytelling Catalog.") I continued to come across unexpected insights about the nature of storytelling within organizations.

For instance, if negative stories have their place, so do "boring" ones. In his book *Talking about Machines*, Julian Orr recounts a number of stories that have circulated among Xerox repair technicians. While rich in detail, they are even less storylike than my little anecdote about the health care worker in Zambia. Most of these tales, which present solutions to technical problems, lack a plot and a distinct character. In fact, they are hardly stories at all, with little to hold the interest of anyone except those close to the often esoteric subject matter. Why are they compelling even to this limited audience? Because they are driven by a detailed explanation of the cause-and-effect relationship between an action and its consequence. For example:

You've got a malfunctioning copy machine with an E053 error code, which is sup-

posed to mean a problem in the 24-volt Interlock Power Supply. But you could chase the source of that 24-volt Interlock problem forever, and you'd never, ever find out what it is. If you're lucky enough, you'll eventually get an F066 error code, which indicates the true source of the malfunction—namely, a shorted dicorotron. Apparently, this is happening because the circuitry in the XER board has been changed to prevent the damage that would otherwise occur when a dicorotron shorted. Before the change in circuitry, a shorted dicorotron would have fried the whole XER board. Changing the circuitry has prevented damage to the XER board, but it's created a different issue. Now an E053 error message doesn't give you the true source of the machine's malfunction.

This story, slightly condensed here, doesn't just describe the technician's accurate diagnosis of a problem; it also relates why things happened as they did. So the account, negative in tone and almost unintelligible to an outsider, is both informative and interesting to its intended audience.

As I continued my investigation, one area of particular interest to me was the link between storytelling and leadership. I already knew from personal experience how stories could be used as a catalyst for organizational action. And I had read in two influential books about leadership—*Leading Minds* by Howard Gardner and *The Leadership Engine* by Noel Tichy—how stories could help leaders define their personality for their followers, boosting others' confidence in the leaders' integrity and providing some idea of how they might act in a given situation.

I also had seen leaders using narrative to inculcate a positive set of corporate values and beliefs in the hearts and minds of their employees. Think, for example, of Tyco's effort to repair its battered value system. The company began by creating a straightforward manual that outlined new rules in such areas as sexual harassment, conflicts of interest, and fraud. But Eric Pillmore, senior vice president of corporate governance, quickly figured out that, as written, the booklet would merely gather dust on people's shelves. So he threw out what he had done and started again in an attempt to bring the principles alive through narrative. The story below became part of the revised guide, as a sidebar in the section on sexual ha-

Decision makers display a strong bias toward alternatives that perpetuate the status quo.

harassment and other forms of intimidating behavior in the workplace:

The entire team jokes about Tom being gay. Tom has never complained and doesn't seem to mind, but when Mark is assigned to work with Tom, the jokes turn on Mark. Now that Mark receives the brunt of the jokes, he tells his supervisor he wants to be reassigned. His supervisor complies with Mark's request.

While the guide clearly lays out the company's policy on harassment, the simple narrative helps bring the policy to life and provides a starting point for thinking about and discussing the complex issues involved. Dozens of similar stories illustrate an array of company policies.

An Enticing but Hazy Future

Although these types of stories furthered leadership goals in a relatively predictable way, others I came across were more quirky—particularly ones used to communicate vision. Noel Tichy writes in *The Leadership Engine* about the importance of preparing an organization for change. He notes that “the best way to get humans to venture into unknown terrain is to make that terrain familiar and desirable by taking them there first in their imaginations.” Aha! I thought. Here is a place where storytelling, perhaps the most powerful route to people's imaginations, could prove indispensable.

But as I looked at examples of such stories in a number of arenas, I discovered that most of the successful ones were surprisingly sketchy about the details of the imagined future. Consider Winston Churchill's “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” speech and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech. Neither of these famous addresses came close to describing the future in enough detail that it became, in listeners' minds, “familiar terrain.”

Over time—and, in part, through my work in corporate scenario planning—I realized why. Specific predictions about the future are likely to be proved wrong. Because such predictions almost inevitably differ in major or minor ways from what eventually happens, leaders who proclaim them risk losing people's confidence. Consequently, a story designed to prepare people for change needs to evoke the future and conjure up a direction for getting there—but without being too precise. Think of the corporate future that was laid out in a famous mandate by Jack Welch: “General Electric will be either


number one or number two in the field, or we will exit the sector.” This is a clear, but general, description of where Welch wanted to take the company. Like my Zambia story, although for different reasons, this statement doesn't convey *too* much information.

I also came across stories used in somewhat unusual situations that called for reactive rather than proactive measures. These stories counteracted negative ones that circulated like a virus within an organization and threatened to infect the entire body. Dave Snowden of IBM first pointed out to me how stories could be used in this manner. His hypothesis was that you could attach a positive story to a negative one in order to defuse it, as an antibody would neutralize an antigen.

For example, at an IBM manufacturing site for laptop computers in the United Kingdom, stories circulated among the blue-collar workers about the facility's managers, who were accused of “not doing any real work,” “being overpaid,” and “having no idea what it's like on the manufacturing line.” But an additional story was injected into the mix: One day, a new site director turned up in a white coat, unannounced and unaccompanied, and sat on the line making ThinkPads. He asked workers on the assembly line for help. In response, someone asked him, “Why do you earn so much more than I do?” His simple reply: “If you screw up badly, you lose your job. If I screw up badly, 3,000 people lose their jobs.”

While not a story in the traditional sense, the manager's words—and actions—served as a seed for the story that eventually circulated in opposition to the one about managers' being lazy and overpaid. You can imagine the buzz: “Blimey, you should've seen how he fumbled with those circuit boards. I guess *he'll* never work on the line. But you know, he does have a point about his pay.” The atmosphere at the facility began improving within weeks.

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Much work remains to be done in developing a menu of narrative patterns that can be used for different purposes in an organizational setting. Although the handful of story types that I've identified is no more than a start, I hope it inspires leaders to consider the various ways storytelling might be used. Certainly, the ability to tell the right story at the right time is emerging as an essential leadership skill, one that can help managers cope with, and get business results in, the turbulent world of the twenty-first century. 

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