

THE STRATEGIC USE OF STORIES IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“The universe is made of stories not atoms.”

Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980) – *The Speed of Darkness*

Effective organizational communication and learning depends upon stories. We will use stories as a way of understanding the underlying principles of communication and learning. As we move through the book we will begin with a theoretical examination based on analyses of two new frameworks. The first framework demonstrates the functions of stories and the impact of their unique effects. The second framework will uncover areas of organizational communication that go unnoticed and which require strategic attention. Building upon these two frameworks, we leverage both of them to look at organizational learning. We continue with interviews conducted with organizational leaders, and conclude with a collection of personal and organizational activities based on a behaviorally derived competency map.

I must begin with a word of caution. Over the years there has been a fair amount written about stories. For an excellent list of books and articles be sure to review the Suggested Readings at the end of this book. Much has been said and much has been claimed about the nature of stories. We will be taking a novel approach. I am not working with stories in the manner many of you may be accustomed. We will probe deeper than all the obvious benefits of stories such as persuasion and entertainment. Telling stories and crafting stories is only the tip of the iceberg and while they are valid uses of stories there have been lots of good books already written on these aspects of stories. As we decipher the power of stories to shed new light on organizational communication and its links to organizational learning we will focus on the necessity of eliciting stories rather than telling them. I will show you the importance of eliciting stories and how listening to them is critical for the success of your organization. It is a nuance that can be lost; however this book offers a unique twist on the phenomenon of stories that is misunderstood or overlooked.

There is a rich tradition of narrative in the social sciences. Without the hard work of these scientists we would not have developed many of the psychological and therapeutic understandings we have today. A large number of these conclusions have found their way into other disciplines such as comparative literary theory and organizational behavior. However, to claim that everything can be reduced to narrative or story moves in a direction counter to where we are heading in this book. I am not interested in understanding how we craft meaning. This is a topic that is best left to others more qualified than myself. I plan to examine how understanding the mechanisms of stories enables us to gain new insights into better ways of communicating and actualizing the promises of creating a continuously learning organization. This is first and foremost a business book. We are interested in identifying specific ways that communication and

learning can be used strategically by organizations to gain competitive advantage. Everything else needs to be left for another time and place.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into three sections. Each section is written in a different style appropriate to the goals and materials of the section. Chapter 2 develops a working model of stories and employs an exploratory style to whet your appetite. If we are to use stories as a metaphor we must first understand how they function. Nine functions of stories are discussed. The nine functions of stories are:

1. Stories empower a speaker
2. Stories create an environment
3. Stories bind and bond individuals
4. Stories require active listening
5. Stories negotiate differences
6. Stories encode information
7. Stories acts as tools for thinking
8. Stories can be used as weapons
9. Stories are medicine for healing

Each function includes at least one example. The examples are taken from a variety of disciplines including literature, psychology, and business. My intention is that through a variety of examples I will succeed in engaging your imaginations. Some of the examples may speak more to you than others. This is by design. One of the examples I use to illustrate the function of “Stories Require Active Listening,” is a folk tale and longer in its telling than the other examples. It serves an important purpose and it is the only story of its kind in the book. The tone of Chapter 3 shifts from conversational to theoretical. Chapter 3 introduces a framework called the Communications Matrix to analyze organizational communication. The framework identifies major gaps in organization’s communication structures and points out how these gaps can be turned into new opportunities that can be seized by a simple strategy that I call *push-to-pull-to-push*. The strategy is derived from the functions of stories and the impact of their unique effects. Chapter 4 uses the case study of Dreyer’s Ice Cream to see how things discussed in Chapter 3 fit together.

Chapter 5 builds upon the principles of communication identified in Chapter 3 to understand organizational learning. Communication is demonstrated to be the cornerstone of learning and knowledge, which in this book we will refer to as collective experience. Chapter 6 provides the case studies of DTE Energy and Jeff Bukantz to illustrate the points discussed on learning and knowledge.

Section Two of the book leaves the rigor of theoretical treatments and offers a series of five interviews with organizational leaders. Here the style shifts to conversational. Chapter 7 provides a background on the interviews, description of the methodologies used to conduct them, and a summary of the key themes found in the interview. Chapters 8-12 are the interviews. These are presented as dialogues. They are to be read as conversations and serve three purposes. They examine to what degree people are aware of stories in communication and learning, they model how to elicit stories and use them in informal modes of communication, and the interviews uncover communication and learning competencies individuals need to develop.

Each interview is preceded by a short introduction and summary of its major themes. I encourage you to resist the temptation to read the summaries and skim the actual interviews. The style of communication

modeled in the interviews is as important if not more important than the major themes and findings that emerge from them.

Section Three puts everything together. Written in a familiar style, Section Three presents a map of competencies composed of three areas termed rings. Each ring consists of three competencies making a total of nine competencies in the map. Rather than focus on organizational initiatives aimed at improving communication and learning, Section Three focuses its attention on how to develop the competencies in employees. The competency map dissects the specific “story,” behaviors and skills required to be a successful communicator and learner. An extensive list of exercises for developing each competency is offered in every chapter. Chapter 13 synthesizes the first two sections of the book and presents the competency map.

Chapter 14 explores the first ring of the map called the Core, which describes how we open ourselves to be aware and sensitive to stories. The three competencies in the Core are Observing, Listening, and Eliciting. Practicing mindfulness to become aware of the stories implicit in others’ words and actions is the Observing competency. Absorbing stories and invoking the imagination to enter them in a fundamental and deep way is the Listening Competency. And asking questions and finding ways to pull stories from others is the Eliciting competency,

The second area of the competency map called the Process Ring is the subject of Chapter 15. The three competencies in the Process Ring are Reflecting, Synthesizing, and Indexing. Reviewing experiences with circumspection and extracting knowledge from them is the Reflecting competency. Finding patterns in new experiences and creating connections between them and old ones is the Synthesizing competency. And developing a flexible, vast, mental schema for retrieval of experiences, and knowledge is the Indexing competency.

Chapter 16 works through the last ring of the competency map called the Interaction Ring. The three competencies in the Interaction Ring are Selecting, Telling, and Modeling. Picking a story that is appropriate to the situation at hand and that clearly communicates concepts, ideas, or feelings are the Selecting competency. Relaying a story with authenticity that paints a vivid, engaging picture for listeners is the Telling competency. And being aware of ones actions and using them to create lasting impressions in the eyes of others and employing a variety of analogical techniques to bring an idea or concept alive is the Modeling competency. Chapter 17 is a summary of the book. Two figures are used to show how all the chapters tie together and recapitulate the book’s major points.