STORYTELLING FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it.
Albert Einstein

My aim here is not to teach the method that everyone ought to follow in order to conduct his reason well, but solely to reveal how I have tried to conduct my own.
Renı Descartes, Discours de la mıthode

Why storytelling?
Nothing else worked.
Charts left listeners bemused.
Prose remained unread.
Dialogue was 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, I found that storytelling was the only thing that worked.

This book is thus the story of how I stumbled upon the power of storytelling. I have to thank colleagues for prodding me onwards.

How do you get managements to understand a radical new idea? How do you transmit concepts, attitudes, and skills that are barely understood in the first place? How do you talk to the members of an organization and explain that what they have done for the past years, or even decades, has to be jettisoned? How do you instill positive new attitudes to changes that are complex, difficult, disruptive, strange and counter-intuitive. How do you get, not just acceptance, but enthusiasm and forward motion?

These pointed questions were put to me by colleagues facing fundamental shifts in their business environments, in organizations that were proving immovable. Where top managements didn t grasp the need for change, the consequences for the firm were potentially disastrous. Where top managements themselves were pushing change, comply or say goodbye was becoming the order of the day, with organizations going through painful periods of coercive persuasion, or starting with new populations of staff and managers who held different assumptions in the first place. The unattractiveness and inefficiency of such practices were striking.

ANOTHER WAY: STORYTELLING

This book is the story of how I chanced upon another way, that of catalyzing change through storytelling. I found that a certain sort of story enables change by providing direct access to the living part of the organization. It communicates complicated change ideas while generating momentum towards rapid implementation. It helps an organization reinvent itself.

Storytelling gets inside the minds of the individuals who collectively make up the organization and affects how they think, worry, wonder, agonize and dream about themselves and in the process create and recreate their organization. Storytelling enables the individuals in an organization to see themselves and the organization in a different light, and accordingly take decisions and change their behavior in accordance with these new perceptions, insights and identities.

The attractions of narrative are obvious. Storytelling is natural and easy and entertaining and energizing. Stories help us understand complexity. Stories can enhance or change perceptions. Stories are easy to remember. Stories are inherently non-adversarial and non-hierarchical. They bypass normal defense mechanisms and engage our feelings. With all these strengths, I began looking into why the potential of storytelling had such little recognition.

I quickly found that I was living in an age when storytelling was suspect. Scientists derided it. Philosophers threatened to censor it. Logicians had difficulty in depicting it. Management theorists generally ignored it. And storytelling ⊢s bad press was not new. It had been disreputable for several millennia, ever since Plato identified poets and storytellers as dangerous fellows who put unreliable knowledge into the heads of children and hence would be subject to strict censorship in The Republic.

The antagonism towards storytelling may have reached a peak in the twentieth century with the determined effort to reduce all knowledge to analytic propositions, and ultimately physics or mathematics. In the process, we discovered the limits of analytic thinking. We learnt of Godel ⊢s proof of the incompleteness of arithmetic, and began to absorb the implications of the indeterminacy of quantum physics and complexity theory, but many years of schooling had instilled in us a continuing itch for reductionist simplicity. This itch reflects what Freeman Dyson calls the Napoleonic approach, and leads to hierarchy, procedures, rules and a distinctive form of myopia. It doesn ⊢t help us much in coping with a rapidly changing world, where innovation is the key to success.

THE TOLSTOYAN APPROACH

Innovation what Dyson calls the creative chaos and freedom of the Tolstoyan approach swims in the richness and complexity of living. It breeds on the connections between things. As participants, we can grasp the inter-relatedness of things in the world and so are able to connect them in new ways much more readily than when we are seeing them as an external observer through the window of rigid analytic propositions.

I found that the resistance to rethinking the role of storytelling was considerable. Academics suggested that even doing research on storytelling might drag the world back into the Dark Ages of myth and fable from which science had only recently extricated us. When I advocated storytelling, I often found myself at odds with those in authority teachers, leaders, managers who, ever since Plato, had been busy trying to hammer the square pegs of analytical thought into the round holes in our brains. The pain and wasted time of these efforts were enormous.

When I saw how easily round-edged stories could slide into our minds, I found myself wondering whether our brains might not be hard-wired to absorb stories. For purely pragmatic reasons, I ended up following what Plato, as one of the greatest storytellers of all time, actually practiced ‼ and told stories.

The standard management manual, written in the rigid grip of theory, relies almost entirely on analytic thinking. Fix the systems. Re-engineer processes. Enhance quality. Streamline procedures. Re-form and flatten the organizational structure. Analyze things in terms of grids and charts. Develop plans in which individuals are programmed to operate like so many obedient computers. Hone our interpersonal mechanics and build skill inventories. Bring to our difficulties a fix-it attitude, as though our past errors can be easily corrected with straightforward explanations.

The cheerful optimism of this thinking sheds little light on why some organizations flourish and grow and are widely admired, and then suddenly collapse with the abruptness of a punctured balloon, or why some managements endure the most severe tribulations and difficulties, while others stumble at even a mild bump. The mechanistic analysis that we have applied to these problems has not always been of much help to us. It doesn t fit the complexity, the mess, the jumble, the clutter, the chaos, the confusion, the living core of modern organizations. And it rarely succeeds in persuading organizations to change.

This book is about understanding relationships through stories, from the point of view of a participant who is living, breathing and acting in the world. It shows how storytelling is able to assist in mobilizing large numbers of managers and employees to understand complex and difficult changes. It tells how storytelling can enable a leap in understanding so that the audience intuitively grasps what the change involves, why it might be desirable as well as pointing to how an organization or community might change.

STORYTELLING COMPLEMENTS ABSTRACT ANALYSIS

Storytelling doesn t replace analytical thinking. It supplements it by enabling us to imagine new perspectives and new worlds, and is ideally suited to communicating change and stimulating innovation. Abstract analysis is easier to understand when seen through the lens of a well-chosen story and can of course be used to make explicit the implications of a story. This book does not recommend abandoning abstract thinking, nor does it suggest that we should give up the advances that have emerged through experimentation and science. I discuss here the discovery of the power of storytelling and the mechanisms by which it operates, thus remedying the neglect of storytelling, but not so as to jettison analytic thinking. I propose marrying the communicative

and imaginative strengths of storytelling with the advantages of abstract and scientific analysis. Chapter 10 of this book examines the various options that are available to achieve a good marriage. Chapter 11 explores the difficulties that a cognitive scientist encounters in understanding the marriage. The final chapter discusses how the marriage of narrative and analysis itself evolves as a change idea becomes accepted by an organization.

THE USE OF STORIES TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Despite the academic hostility to narrative, storytelling is pervasive in our lives. It has been at the heart of our communications since the beginning of the human race. Through stories, our values and principles have been passed from one generation to another. Stories provide continuity in our lives, conveying a sense of where we have come from, our history and our heritage. Stories are immediate and unique. They celebrate how previous generations dealt with dilemmas in their lives. Storytelling brings people together in a common perspective, and stretches everyone ├ s capacity to empathize with others and share experience. In this way stories have been used to strengthen culture. This book however is not so much about using stories to preserve organizations: it is about using stories to change them.

It ├ s about a particular kind of story, which I will christen here, the springboard story. By a springboard story, I mean a story which enables a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an organization or community or complex system may change.

A springboard story has an impact not so much through transferring large amounts of information, but through catalyzing understanding. It can enable listeners to visualize from a story in one context what is involved in a large-scale transformation in an analogous context. It can enable them to grasp the idea as a whole not only very simply and quickly, but also in a non-threatening way. In effect, it invites them to see analogies from their own backgrounds, their own contexts, their own fields of expertise.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SPRINGBOARD STORIES

I found that not all stories had the springboard effect. In this book, I describe why springboard stories worked well with particular audiences ‼ and why they didn ├ t with others ‼ and the principles that can help us choose stories that will work with audiences to achieve a particular effect.

The stories that were successful for me all had certain characteristics. They were stories that were told from the perspective of a single protagonist who was in a predicament that was prototypical of the organization ├ s business The predicament of the explicit story was familiar to the particular audience, and indeed, it was the very predicament that the change proposal was meant to solve. The stories had a degree of strangeness or incongruity for the listeners, so that it captured their attention and stimulated their imaginations. Yet at the same time, the stories were plausible, even eerily familiar, almost like a premonition of what the future was going to be like. I took steps to ensure that story embodied the change proposal to the fullest extent possible,

using real examples from within the organization, and sometimes extrapolating into the future to complete the picture. The stories were told as simply and as briefly as possible.

Speed and conciseness of style were keys, because as an instigator of change, I was less interested in conveying the details of what exactly happened in the explicit story than I was in sparking new stories in the minds of the listeners which they would invent in the context of their own environments. For the same reason, the stories all had happy endings : this seemed to make it easy for the listeners to make the imaginative leap from the explicit story that I was telling, to the implicit story that I was trying to elicit in their minds. Chapters 8-10 are explicitly focused on crafting, building and performing springboard stories.

CLOSING THE KNOWING-DOING GAP THROUGH STORYTELLING

Just think if we were able to operate in this way, and get these kinds of benefits at that kind of speed! Wouldn ├ t that be exciting! What kind of organization we could become! By stimulating the listeners to think actively about the implications, they can understand what it will be like to be doing things in a different way. When a springboard story does its job, the listeners ├ minds race ahead, to imagine the further implications of elaborating the same idea in other contexts, more intimately known to the listeners. In this way, through extrapolation from the narrative, the re-creation of the change idea can be successfully brought to birth, with the concept of it planted in listeners ├ minds, not as a vague, abstract, inert thing, but an idea that is pulsing, kicking, breathing, exciting ‖ and alive.

Often the changes that need to be implemented in large organizations are complicated, and have many dimensions and facets. Not all of them are fully understood when the management embarks on the change process. Resistance is inevitable when a bold new change idea emerges. The dilemma for managements in such situations is how to turn resistance into enthusiasm when even they only partially understand the idea themselves. Often the attempt to explain the idea can kill enthusiasm before it even begins implementation. The book shows how stories can avoid this dilemma by having the listeners themselves fill in the blanks as the change process proceeds.

DO STORIES ALWAYS WORK?

Storytelling is not a panacea for eliciting change in organizations. It can only be as good as the underlying idea being conveyed. If that idea is bad, storytelling may well reveal its inadequacy. But even when the underlying idea is good, there are times when storytelling is ineffective. The book describes occasions when the listeners simply didn ├ t grasp the concept at all. There were people for instance who listened to my stories, and instead of comprehending the underlying change idea, instead pressed me with questions for more detail. When this happened, I knew that we were getting into a discussion of the explicit story. These were interesting issues, but they also indicated that the story had failed to elicit the implicit story, and so spring the listener to a new level of understanding of the possibilities of knowledge sharing and of the organizational change being envisaged.

THE IMPACT OF STORYTELLING

The book shows how when a story works well with its audience, it embeds a way of looking at the world in the listeners' minds, so as to induce in their thinking a mental geography of the organization and the world with new planes of order and opportunity. Each time we enter the word-woven magic of a story, our lives are enlarged, as we give ourselves to another mode of knowing. In the process, an understanding of the potential of the change idea can erupt into the collective consciousness, producing a sudden coalescence of vision in the minds of listeners. The provenance of these thoughts — in this instance, the story — is not even very important. What matters is the fact that they happen and their inherent quality and where they are headed next. The spark that starts the fire is less significant than the conflagration that then takes place.

THE FORCE OF ORAL STORYTELLING

In this book, I describe the success that I had with telling stories face-to-face with listeners in a live performance, along with the very limited success that I experienced in using stories in print or video. Others may have more success with print and video than I had. I am simply reporting here what I encountered. In effect, my experience was that storytelling, more than stories per se, was having the impact. The look of the eye, the intonation of the voice, the way the body was held, the import of a subtle pause, and my own response to the audience's responses — all these aspects seemed to make an immense contribution to the meaning of a story for my audiences. I devote a chapter of this book to discuss how to use the performance of storytelling for maximum effect. While it may seem paradoxical that I, who spent much of my professional life exploiting and promoting the strengths of electronic technology, now found myself relying on the ancient art of face-to-face storytelling, but that's what happened. Oral storytelling enabled me to use the uniquely focused dynamics of direct address, knitting question to answer and living voice to living reception.

Readers will need to keep oral dimension of storytelling in mind as they read this book, since some of the stories told in print in this book, when read in the cold white light of the printed page, may seem so brief and undramatic and apparently bland that it may not be easy to see how they could have had the impact that they had. The options for me as author were either to report the stories verbatim as they were told, or to adjust and embellish the stories with literary techniques to make them more suitable for written transmission. I have opted for the former approach, so as to make transparent the mechanics of storytelling. Thus the reader will need to remember when reading the stories that they were told in person, and read them as one reads a text of a theatrical performance, adding — in their imagination — the sound of the storyteller's voice and the presentation setting.