

Narrative leadership: using the power of stories

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Over the past several decades, leaders and organizations have come to terms with the fact that change really is here to stay. Now it is time to move on. Truly successful leaders and organizations of the future will progress beyond the mere recognition of the constancy of change to cultivating the qualities and skills that can maximize the potential hidden within the change itself. Yesterday's mantra of "Change or die" will evolve into a new mantra for the future: "Live to change." Organizations must stop characterizing change as a mere event to be endured and learn to tap the possibilities that emerge from change as teacher and transformer. Herein lies the future – allowing change to shape the organization so that the organization can shape change.

Change requires leaders and organizations to embrace paradox and process – ambiguity and opportunity. In other words, for organizations to remain open to new possibilities and opportunities, they must learn to capitalize on the role of uncertainty and ambiguity. These forces form a cyclical pattern that successful leaders welcome as they pursue their organization's mission. In addition, it is incumbent on leaders to provide ways for their organizations to navigate and be transformed by this ambiguity-opportunity cycle. In doing so, they create organizations that tap the power of change with flexibility and vigilance.

Two questions emerge at this point. First, how are leaders to create this type of change environment? Second, what tools are already present in the cycle that will assist them in this environmental creation? One of the most

powerful ways for leaders to make sense of the ambiguity-opportunity cycle is to tap the power of one of humanity's oldest art forms – storytelling. Through "sensemaking" and "sensegiving," leaders can use the raw materials of narrative to construct new "organizational sense."

Sensemaking and sensegiving defined

Sensemaking/sensegiving is a process that "involves calling into question an obsolete interpretive scheme, framing a new interpretive scheme in understandable and evocative terms, providing guidance for action toward the incipient change and exerting influence to accomplish it" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1995).

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In this definition, the leader is viewed as both iconoclastic and prescriptive. The leader is iconoclastic, because he or she challenges the organization's cherished beliefs and paradigms. With this challenge comes the invitation to examine outdated organizational constructions of meaning and activity. Beyond challenging these ideas, the leader must also invite employees to jettison some of them. Yet sensemaking/sensegiving does not end here. The leader must

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also be prescriptive, providing the insights and raw materials necessary to reform mindsets and practices essential to the newly emerging opportunities.

The rhythm of “letting go in order to embrace” is one of the most important gifts leaders can offer their organizations. The season of ambiguity invites organizations to let go of the familiar and venture out into new and unknown waters. In helping organizations navigate this ambiguity, leaders are cultivating the organizational competencies that will be required in the “new land” ahead. The message leaders must instill throughout the organization is “The current ambiguity is preparing us for the new opportunity.” This message is not merely an explanation that makes sense of the situation. Ironically, sensemaking/sensegiving does not leave employees intellectually satisfied and existentially secure. Rather it gives the organization permission to embrace the ambiguity with confidence and courage.

Narrative: the foundation of sensegiving/sensemaking

Leaders need concrete tools to help them create a passageway through the ambiguity-opportunity cycle. In sensemaking/sensegiving, leaders often overlook a powerful tool already widely used in their organizations – telling stories. Few tools are as powerful and readily available to the leader as the use of personal and organizational narrative. Learning to listen to, tell and interpret stories within the organization helps leaders to maximize their sensemaking/sensegiving role.

As individuals we all relate to stories because our lives are stories. Every individual life contains characters, plots, scripts and a host of other ingredients found in a good story. When we forget this truth, we lose an important interpretive tool for discerning direction and creating meaning both personally and organizationally. As psychologist Hillman (1996) points out, “We dull our lives by the way we conceive them. We have stopped imagining them with any sort of romance, any fictional flair.” Could this not also be true of organizations? The dull organization has lost its

plot, devalues its characters, and long ago exchanged its narrative urgency for the status quo. A thriving organization sees its mission as an ever-emerging story with all the necessary twists and turns.

Effective leaders understand that organizational narrative provides a “location on the map.” Through storytelling, the leader can help the organization understand where it is within the ambiguity-opportunity cycle and what qualities it will need to undertake the current trek.

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Sensemaking/sensegiving and storytelling: three components

Weiss (1999) has identified three leadership competencies: diagnosing, communicating, and adapting. According to Weiss, these skills can be defined as follows:

- (1) Diagnosing means being able to understand the situation you are trying to influence.
- (2) Communicating clearly means being able to communicate in a way that people can easily understand and accept.
- (3) Adapting means being able to adjust or fit your behavior and your resources to meet the contingencies of the situation.

Narrative can be used to sharpen each of these three competencies. The corporate narrative of any organization provides significant insight into its future effectiveness. Listening and learning from individual and communal stories within the organization provides the much needed context a leader can use to move the organization closer to its vision.

Diagnosing

When corporate stories are told, a leader must seize these moments to point out important lessons learned through the events in the story. This element of storytelling encourages organizational reflection – where are we now? – and momentum – where are we headed?

At a recent farewell party for a key employee in my organization, the story of his hiring and the events surrounding it was told. There were some humorous moments in the story and, as we laughed and renewed specific memories from that time in our history, the story momentarily united the team in a very powerful way. This moment opened a door for sensemaking/sensegiving to occur.

When the story ended, the senior leader’s comments went something like this, “When Dave came to North Way he had just graduated from college. Stepping into this position required him to take quite a risk. It paid off; he has done a great job and influenced many lives.” Then he went on to diagnose something important for the entire team. He said, “Dave is a great example of taking a risk in unfamiliar places. By doing this he has reminded us that we move ahead in life, and as a team, through the courage to step out and embrace a new vision – even when it is a bit scary.”

The comments made by the senior leader reveal how corporate narratives can assist leaders in diagnosing the current condition of the organization for employees and the possibility for future growth and change. In recognizing the power of the “narrative moment,” the leader gave the team an anchor in the midst of the ambiguity it was currently facing. This anchor came from linking Dave’s personal ambiguity-opportunity cycle to a similar cycle the organization was facing. In other words, Dave’s story helped the organization to make “sense” of its own story. Though the moment was brief, it made an important connection that would have otherwise gone unnoticed and untapped.

Communicating

Diagnosis alone is not enough. Leaders must communicate in meaningful ways, or the diagnosis becomes sterile and lifeless. Seizing the “teachable moment” is critical in capturing the power of narrative as a tool for communicating vision and meaning. Leaders can communicate through narrative in two ways: first, by listening to and telling stories; and second, by effectively interpreting these stories to the organization.

Stories are told every day at work. By listening, leaders can learn when and how to use those stories to communicate vision, values and meaning. Listening to work stories provides important information about the people in the organization. It gives leaders clues about how to communicate with different types of people. Listening also enables the leader to craft appropriate metaphors when communicating vision.

Telling and then interpreting stories is another powerful way to communicate meaning and vision. Another important storytelling/interpreting skill is learning to cultivate the art of the “tag back.” Stories that emerge from the history of the organization become powerful tag-back tools for the present and the future. Tagging back creates a more complete perception of the current situation by linking it to the narratives of the past. The power in the tag-back story lies in the fact that the ambiguity-opportunity cycle is already complete. Thus, reviewing past success provides a map for navigating the terrain of the current cycle.

Dave’s farewell story is an example of the tag back. Drawing on the power of the organization’s narrative memories, the senior leader’s tagging back became the invitation to move forward. In tagging back to Dave’s story, the leader turned it into a metaphor capable of

inspiring the organization onward. Finding this narrative link between the story and the current situation is a leadership skill that requires cultivation. Watching for these moments and seizing them with brevity and authenticity are essential to the success of the process.

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Adapting

The final element leaders can stimulate through the use of narrative is organizational adaptability. Stories provide illustrations of how an organization might go about adapting to change and transition. A senior leader I know recently invited members of his organization to see the new vision that was in front of them. To achieve the new vision required reorganization and tremendous organizational flexibility. During the presentation of the new vision to the entire organization, he used the story of Lewis and Clark’s expedition as an example of what the organization would face. As he told of the many unexpected twists and turns in Lewis and Clark’s

campaign, he noted their willingness to adapt along the way. Through the story, he called on his organization to appreciate and cultivate the same disposition.

Using this story gave the organization ways to envision the adapting that was ahead. Along the way, there would be “mountains,” “rivers” and “friends and foes” alike. The senior leader pointed to the common values of the organization as a starting-point for facing the challenges that lay ahead. The organization now embraces the new vision and often refers back to the Lewis and Clark story to “remember” the journey they are on and the values they believe will sustain them. The story has become an adaptive metaphor.

Conclusion

Organizations and individuals must construct and reconstruct meaning. The power of narrative is in its ability to provide leaders with an essential tool by which they can sense-make and sense-give. Whether leading one person or thousands, cultivating the rich soil of narrative enables the leader to locate important themes, communicate those themes, and creatively live them out in daily life. Because the journey from ambiguity to opportunity is ongoing, leaders and organizations can grow competent in negotiating the cycle as they tap the power of narrative. In doing so, everyone learns to appreciate more fully the “organizational adventure” that lies ahead. 

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