

Story listeners in management practice

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'Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.'

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), political theorist

Introduction

Storytelling has become a popular tool in the management communication toolbox (e.g. Syedain 2007) with an increasing number of business managers and management consultants being convinced of its power and effectiveness to achieve tangible business outcomes (e.g. Brown 2005). However, current publications rely heavily on the authors' conceptualization of and experiences with storytelling in their own practice as well as the assumption that what works for them will work for others, too. Such a portrayal may be somewhat simplistic.

Researchⁱ conducted at Newcastle University Business School indicates that storytelling in management practice is a two-way process, and this article explores the resulting implications. This article draws on responses from conversations with reflective storytellers (expert interviewees) and discussions from dedicated practitioner workshops organized as part of the research. Analysis of this research is on-going. The findings in this paper have been compiled to provoke thought and enable practitioners to consider the implications for their own storytelling rather than a guide to better storytelling.

The influence of the listener

Storytelling is not, as the term suggests, uni-directional and linear, the story travelling unaffected from teller (managers) to audience (employees). Rather, in expert interviewee Verena's words (a consultant):

It's a human exchange. ... It's something that happens between people, you know, there's a teller, there's a listener, there is a moment of different kinds of understanding and that's a consequence of the space in between.

Expert interviewee Dominic (a former manager and professor emeritus) expands:

A story almost demands a higher level of activity from the audience than a propositional thing, because if it's propositional they can listen to the propositions and agree or disagree, or they can note them down and reflect on them, or note them down and just leave it until it's revision time. Whereas, the story is, once again, it's us in the moment, if they're going to engage, there's no real option but to engage now.

Hence, storytelling is a two-way process of communication from storyteller to audience AND audience to storyteller which involves the understandings of both teller and audience and the ways in which they make sense of organizational realities. Once a story is told, the storyteller loses control over it, and each listener takes control of what they have heard and how it relates to their expectations and previous experiences. The achievement of business outcomes facilitated through storytelling is, therefore, a diffuse rather than a directive process.

Extending this theme, storytelling is not just about the storyteller or the story itself as the effect of the story relies upon the listener, i.e. what they hear and what they do as a result. Indeed, there is a risk that storytellers get overly excited about a story and neglect the audience as a result, as expert interviewee Terence (a facilitator and coach) explains:

I think one of the [mistakes] is an over-enthusiasm for the story itself, when, you know, it's something about a technique. But the effect of the technique is something that people want to have, they don't always care about the thing itself. To name it is important to people, but if I get over-enthusiastic about the story itself, then it takes me away from an interest in the other person, the organization, the team I'm working with.

Terence suggests that over-excitement about the story takes attention away from achieving business outcomes and channels it towards more selfish goals. It is less about 'telling a story', but more about offering a story as a point of entering into conversation – either verbally or non-verbally through engaging the audience.

In order for managers to use storytelling for the achievement of business outcomes, they must know their audience to engage them in the message they are seeking to communicate (see also article 'The storyteller in management practice' on this website). While this may be comparatively easy between line manager and subordinate in relation to personal and professional development needs, it is more difficult for managers addressing large and diverse audience, such as in whole-organization events communicating the organization's vision and mission in story form (see article 'Manifestations of storytelling in management practice' on this website).

Storytelling and the wider system of communication

Research participants have stressed storytelling is not a one-off event, but part of a wider system of communication, interaction and engagement within an organization. It involves listening to organizational actors' stories, interpreting these stories, and feeding them back through further storytelling. Research participants have stressed the need for organizational actors to engage with their stories in a joint sensemaking process. Expert interviewee Cornelia (an independent researcher) explains:

I usually have to do a bit of educating to help people understand that if they include these people [without power and money] in the sense making, one way or another everyone will benefit because the people who participate will get a chance to think about the issues. ... You will use their minds to help you. ... It's a kind of self-discovery [within the organization].

While Cornelia and other expert interviewees have developed such an approach of working with stories as a methodology for their work as independent researchers, consultants and facilitators, the research suggests that stories travel naturally through an organization. Expert interviewee Dominic (a former manager and professor emeritus) explains:

It's the nature of human beings as *homo narrans narratur*, that people are both storytellers and stories. So I'll be telling a story, they'll be creating their own story out of it because quite a few of the people present in the room will, as they listen to the story, they're actually beginning to think about how they might tell it to someone else. And that's another continuous act, ... you also listen to it with an intention of passing it on.

The difference between such a natural travel of stories and the more methodical approach described by Cornelia above is that managers may not naturally be part of further discussions and joint interpretations after the story has been told. Managers may tell stories to encourage actions and behaviours that will achieve business outcomes. Indeed, this may be one of the key challenges facing managers seeking to use storytelling as part of a wider system of communication, interaction and engagement: how to become part of the conversations and stories that constitute the fabric of an organization and turn the stories told by managers into reality.

Implications for managers

The current portrayal of storytelling in management practice is exuberant with a focus on the storyteller's agency and the content of a story, but this research has demonstrated that such a portrayal is at best partial. Storytelling, it seems, is most effective when it is conceptualized and operationalized as a two-way process – even though the term itself may be contrary.

Indeed, research participants have emphasized that storytelling is about the audience; it is almost a service to the audience rendered by the storyteller. The storyteller has a duty to both tailor storytelling to the audience's needs and engage in self-discovery of the stories circulating in the organization.

Hence, storytelling in management practice is not about a heroic leader who merely needs to tell a story to make organizational actors do what they want them to do. Story listeners in management have to be given opportunities to listen to their managers stories and be listened to – both in formal events and information conversations – to engage in joint discussion and interpretation.

References and further reading

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