

The storyteller in management practice

Dr Stefanie Reissner and Victoria Pagan

Newcastle University Business School, 5 Barrack Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 4SE

stefanie.reissner@newcastle.ac.uk
victoria.pagan@newcastle.ac.uk

Introduction

The current discourse of storytelling in management practice focuses almost exclusively on managers' / leaders' achievement of a particular business-related outcome through storytelling (e.g. Denning 2004; Brown et al. 2005). There is, however, a lack of attention to the teller's state of being and doing. Hence, better understanding is required about the situations in which the audience does (or does not) respond to storytelling as intended by the storyteller and the reasons why this may be the case.

Research¹ conducted at Newcastle University Business School reveals a number of factors that can enable storytelling in management practice. In contrast to the portrayal in the popular literature, the research reveals that storytelling in management practice is not a magic wand to overcome difficulties in communication between managers and their subordinates. The overarching factor that influences the achievement of business outcomes, this research has identified is the relationship between storyteller (manager) and audience (subordinates). There are three elements that define this relationship with regards to the position of the storyteller: (1) their credibility and authenticity; (2) congruence between their words and actions; and (3) timing of the telling and sensitivity to the audience's needs. It is proposed that knowledge about these factors will aid business leaders and management consultants to decide if, when and how to use storytelling in their practice.

This article offers example evidence of the delivery of, and responses to, storytelling within different organizational contexts. It draws on the full data set of this research, including a case study of a public-private partnership (which we call NorthService Ltd.), a case study of an educational institution (which we call NorthEdu), a series of interviews with reflective storytellers (expert interviews) and discussions with practitioners in dedicated workshops. The research demonstrates how different factors need to come together to make managerial communication through storytelling as effective as portrayed in the literature and provides insights into why this may be the case. Analysis of this research is ongoing, and this paper has been compiled to provoke thought and enable practitioners to consider the implications for their own storytelling.

Storytelling in management practice can include:

- A corporate story told at a whole-organization event (see article 'Manifestations of storytelling in management practice' on this website).
- The use of personal experience as an example to aid personal and professional development.
- Sharing of self to build and maintain professional relationships.

Authenticity and credibility

Research participants have highlighted the need for authenticity and credibility in storytelling in management practice. Their message is clear: if the storyteller (manager) is not perceived by the audience (employees) as authentic (and therefore credible), then the message communicated through storytelling is not perceived as credible either. Referring to a whole-organization event in which senior managers told the corporate story of NorthService Ltd. (see article 'Manifestations of storytelling in management practice' on this website), employee Dan suggested:

It didn't mean anything to me, purely because I know where it's come from.

This short, almost throw-away comment is poignant: Dan's manager is not credible in his eyes, and his storytelling is interpreted through the lens of previous, loaded interactions. The relationship between Dan and his manager seems spoiled; there is little to make amends. Dan is unlikely to respond constructively to his manager's storytelling.

But what makes a storyteller authentic? Research participants overall agree that authenticity is created through the storytellers' investment of themselves into the act of storytelling, or, in workshop participants' words: 'being themselves'. NorthEdu senior manager Dermot reflects on the extent storytellers bring themselves into their communication, particularly when telling stories about themselves:

I usually like to some extent to get people to recognize that we're all human and we all have our frailties by a bit of self-deprecation and a bit of, you know, taking the mickey out of ourselves.

Expert interviewee Harriet, recalling the stories told by a particular teller in her own organization, conceptualizes authenticity slightly differently, but equally powerfully:

Stories are only powerful when they have some kind of emotion with them, and I don't mean tears or anything like that, but where it's coming from the heart.

But authenticity can also come from the extent to which a storyteller engages with the audience's needs, as expert interviewee Dominic suggests:

[Authenticity]'s partly to do with the teller's empathy with their audience and working out what their audience can take, and what the audience has got the patience for and what the audience wants to hear brought forth.

There is less agreement, however, about what makes storytelling in management practice credible. Some storytellers argue that a story has to be told spontaneously to make it credible, while others contend that they practise and rehearse stories before they tell them to their target audience to achieve credibility. Similarly, some storytellers argue that a story has to represent factual truth, while others contend that stories are always embellished to engage different audiences in the message they seek to communicate.

One might think that this is problematic: there seems to be no recipe for creating authenticity and credibility, so what can managers do to improve their practice? The answer is simple: be themselves. The audience will recognize it.

Words and action

Stories are not just told, they need to be lived by the storyteller (manager) as well. Their words must match their actions, and their actions must match their words for the message communicated through storytelling to be acted upon, i.e. for storytelling to be effective. For instance, NorthService senior manager Shaun reflects on his own storytelling practice:

When you are managing people on a day to day basis, you know they will tally in their minds, and say, “well he said last week and he’s actually behaved in a different way this week, so actually that story doesn’t ring true anymore because he’s showing by his own actions that he doesn’t really follow”.

NorthService middle manager Jessica agrees that words and actions must be congruent:

A story no matter how well told for business or anything else is actually going to make no difference [on its own]. It will work if it’s recognized as a genuine part of a whole. And this is kind of coming back in experience of where we started. ... If you think sending people from end of the country to the other to listen to people telling stories is going to somehow mystically change anything, it won’t. Everything ... has to fit with everything else that’s going on and I think most importantly of all, it has to be this thing that fits with the behaviours that you see about the people who are telling the stories.

These short interview excerpts illustrate the importance of congruence between actions and words if the audience (employees) are to accept and respond to their managers’ storytelling in a constructive fashion. Storytelling may be a one-off event, for example, as part of meetings or informal conversation, but the actions supporting the story are part of managers’ behaviour in their daily routine, as NorthEdu senior manager Valentina reflects:

Whatever you say, unless you are actually doing it, you know people won’t believe it, and sometimes you have to do it more than once for them to believe it, I don’t think it’s enough just to say it.

The research findings suggest that believing a story is the first step towards acting upon it to achieve particular business outcomes, as intended by the storyteller (manager).

Timing and sensitivity

Research participants have also highlighted the need for the storyteller (manager) to be sensitive to the needs of the audience (employees) in order to be effective. They have stressed that it is the storyteller’s responsibility to ensure that the audience is ready for a particular story and to adapt their telling accordingly. NorthService line manager Timothy reflects:

If team morale is low and you introduce a sunny vision at the wrong time, that will trigger a negative response. I think you’ve got to be very careful [when using stories]. As a team you will always get the odd individual who is negative, but if the whole team’s morale is down and you try to paint the vision of a brighter future, then you get a very cynical response.

While timing is important in any form of communication, the research indicates that it is even more important in communication through storytelling as tone and imagery are more pronounced. Right timing, however, requires knowledge of the target audience. While this may be relatively easy in close manager-employee relationships (e.g. line managers and their team), it is more difficult in more distant manager-employee relationships (e.g. senior managers and frontline staff). NorthEdu senior manager Rupert explains:

It's clearly much easier to talk to a community you know so the fact that you know I go to a team meeting or I am talking to a bunch of people in the kitchen or we are talking at a general meeting and it's a community I know, and I not only know what we've done, but I know the people who have done it and the one thing I try to take care of when doing the review of what the team's up to.

In addition, workshop participants have highlighted the need for adaptation and improvisation of their storytelling when the audience does not react as expected. Storytellers may wish to (re)consider the language of the story and associated imagery as well as the use of analogies, metaphors or anecdotes according to who is in the room. In short, adaptation and improvisation is about making storytelling relevant to the audience to aid the achievement of business outcomes.

Implications for managers

Storytelling by managers can be an effective means of communicating with their employees, as numerous accounts by former and practising managers published in the popular management literature suggest. However, its effectiveness depends on the working relationships between storytellers (managers) and audience (employees). The research findings indicate that three elements must be present simultaneously to make effective storytelling possible.

Firstly, managers need to ensure authenticity in their storytelling performance. They need to be themselves and tell a story that comes from the heart. Although they have not been able to explain the mechanics in detail, research participants agreed that the emotions of a story that comes from the heart are picked up by the audience and that it helps engaging the audience in the message that the storyteller seeks to communicate in both thinking and behaviour.

Secondly, managers need to reinforce the stories that they tell through their daily actions and interactions with key organizational groups. A good story on its own is not enough, as research participants have repeatedly reminded us. There needs to be congruence between the story (words) and the storyteller's behaviour in daily routines, possibly over a longer period of time.

Thirdly, managers need to be sensitive to the audience's needs when telling stories. The research indicates that line managers tend to be in a better position to judge when to tell a particular story because they know their audience and can pick up the 'mood music' among their team. However, senior managers may find this more difficult, as their busy schedule often means that communication events involving storytelling have to be scheduled and planned in advance without knowledge of any unforeseen circumstances affecting the audience. The storyteller's ability to adapt and improvise is crucial in such situations.

Hence, two things seem to be important in storytelling in management practice: (1) the relationship between storytelling and audience at the time of storytelling and (2) the continuation of this relationship beyond storytelling through congruence between words and actions. Improving storytelling practice, therefore, is less about acquiring skills as a story-writer or story-performer, but more about the underlying relationship with the audience. Managers seeking to become better storytellers, therefore, are advised to gain insights into their authenticity and the resulting credibility of their story. They are also advised to live the story that they tell, and finally, they are advised to choose timing and story content to meet the audience's needs in order to achieve the desired business outcomes.

References and further reading

Brown, J. S., Denning, S., Groh, K. and Prusak, L. (2005). *Storytelling in organizations: Why storytelling is transforming 21st century organization and knowledge management*. Oxford: Elsevier.

Denning, S. (2004) 'Telling tales', *Harvard Business Review*, 82 (5), 123-129.

Simmons, A. (2001) *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling*. New York: Basic Books.

ⁱ We gratefully acknowledge financial support by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under grant No. RES-061-25-0144-A for this research.