

# STORYTELLING - AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR MOVING THE NEEDLE TOWARDS ENGAGED LEARNING

Sandra Morgan  
University of Hartford  
morgan@hartford.edu

Khushwant K.S. Pittenger  
Ashland University  
kpitten@ashland.edu

Nancy McIntyre  
West Virginia University  
Nancy.McIntyre@mail.wvu.edu

## ABSTRACT

*Storytelling is an effective tool in conveying complex ideas, values, priorities, desired behaviors and shared lessons in a memorable and interesting way to organizational participants and students alike. It is now considered a very desirable competency for leaders and managers in the 21st century organization especially for knowledge management. The paper proposes a short activity using visual media for session participants to practice the art and science of storytelling. The participants will glean personal takeaways for their students and/or peers through facilitated debriefing and group discussion.*

## INTRODUCTION

Evolutionary processes have wired the human brain for storytelling. Historic records of indigenous people indicate ancient cultures used storytelling to entertain and teach (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). Stories told orally in traditional ways, in paintings on the cave walls, animal skins, and totem poles, as well as ancient dances were used to evoke strong emotions from love to empowerment. It is not surprising that storytelling has become an intentional tool in the modern management literature for various applications such as knowledge management (Lukosch, Klebl & Buttler, 2011), organizational change and development (Brown, Denning, Groh & Prusak, 2005) and students' engagement in their own learning (Frances, 2009; Drape, Levy & Blass, 2009). Brown, et al. (2005) believe storytelling is transforming the 21st century organization and management. In light of such claims, educators need to apply storytelling in business education and training to prepare current or potential leaders and managers. This paper provides an activity and opportunity to learn the use of storytelling in the classroom or the boardroom.

## A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Storytelling obviously has ancient roots as noted in the introductory paragraph. In the modern history, storytelling flourished in the realm of librarians, clergy and folk tale tellers. Business, nonprofit and medical professionals "discovered" the value of storytelling in the mid-to-late 1990's and adapted it for use in management and leadership development programs (Ready, 2002). Neuhauser's 1993 book provides a comprehensive overview of storytelling for business leaders, using numerous business examples. One early academic to embrace storytelling and study it in business organizations was David M. Boje (Boje, 1991). His more recent book, *Storytelling Organizations* (Boje, 2009), explores how narrative and storytelling is an important part of an organization's strategy, development and learning processes.

A focused review in the popular management literature over the last three decades suggests that the use of storytelling has been prevalent even when this literature does not use the term formally. Collins (2013) critically analyzed popular management literature through application of academic literature on organizational storytelling. He sees the literature such as Peters and Waterman's Excellence Project (1982) using stories as a tool for "sense-giving." In the sense-giving perspective, organizational stories are resources for managers to use in shaping others' behavior much like the ancients did. According to Collins (2013) advocates of the "sense-making" perspective (e.g., Gabriel, 2000) find the use of storytelling in the sense-giving perspective objectionable. They view stories as a resource to be used by individual organization members to bring shape and meaning to their own lives. The debate about the use of stories as a tool for "sense-giving" or "sense-making" only highlights the attractiveness of storytelling in organizations regardless of the perspective.

In trade publications, which subscribe to the sense-giving perspective, storytelling is considered an inexpensive way for leaders to convey complex ideas including values, priorities, desired behaviors as well as shared lessons (Hicks, 2000). Tom Terez

(2002) advocates storytelling for employee management in Workforce. He thinks stories stir our emotions in a way that logic and facts cannot. Denning credits storytelling as a helpful technique for promoting change in the World Bank (Melymuka, 2004; Brown, et al.). He too notes that his stories inspired and motivated people when cold and hard logic failed. Ready (2002) reports positive experiences using storytelling in leadership development programs. Masalimova, Usak & Shaidullina (2016) consider storytelling as a prominent tool for corporate training across the globe. In their international comparative analysis of various corporate training tools, they note that storytelling facilitates the period of adaptation and promotes loyalty of new colleague to the company. They do note, however, that storytelling requires high levels of qualifications, knowledge and skills. Tool kits for storytelling are being promoted in trade publications such as *Training & Development*.

In the realm of academics, storytelling has been a focus in many management conferences (e.g., Eastern Academy of Management, Organization Behavior Teaching Conference). However, ABSEL archived Proceedings note only 3 papers related to storytelling. Morgan and Dennehy (2004) provide a trio of storytelling activities for management students and/or participants in leadership development programs. In their 1995 ABSEL conference paper, Morgan and Dennehy present a model and examples of organizational storytelling, discuss classroom use of stories and outline ways to overcome obstacles to using storytelling as a pedagogical technique. Denning (2004) provides readers of *Harvard Business Review* with an understanding of storytelling's value to organizations in "Telling Tales." Other academic literature, such as Allcorn and Stein (2016), focuses on the sense-making aspects of storytelling. They use a psychoanalytically-informed lens that they say sheds light on the essence of stories and their meanings within interpersonal space in organizations. They advocate the use of interaction between storyteller and story-listener to use storytelling in organizations for people to understand themselves and be understood. They consider storytelling to be a way for people to understand their workplace. While storytellers provide the content, listeners provide the context that can impact the level of support experienced by the storyteller. Other literature related to business education shares similar perspective. Frances (2009) notes that, through group dialogue on a common non-accounting story, accounting students created common meanings and understandings and experienced deeper learning. Lukosch, Klebl & Buttler (2011, pg. 619) noted similar benefits for learners as well. According to them, "by telling stories, students make sense of experience, develop understanding of complex issues and share insights and meaning."

In light of this literature review, using storytelling in teaching and training business leaders and managers is important whether they use stories to make-sense or give-sense. For educators and trainers, storytelling is useful for imparting complex content as well as providing a tool for future use by the learners. With that goal in mind, the activity described in the following pages is designed to involve participants in the roles of both storytellers and listeners and then to reflect on their experience through facilitated discussion and debriefing.

## STORYTELLING – THE ACTIVITY

**Objective:** To engage participants in active storytelling and listening, then reflecting on the experience

**Materials Needed:** Assorted photos from magazines depicting a variety of scenes, from human to non-human, from landscapes to microscopic close-ups, from animals to airplanes; handout with brief instructions (or instructions written on board or easel); handout (given part way through the activity) of a story framework; storytelling bibliography

**Time Needed:** 45 minutes to an hour to allow for paired storytelling and in-depth processing

**Process:**

- 1) Introduction by facilitator and activity design details and guidelines; provide handout, if used
- 2) Select a partner (or partners assigned by activity facilitator); pairs, with no more than one trio if necessary
- 3) Decide which partner will go first
- 4) Each participant goes to tables where the photos are spread out and chooses a picture that "speaks" to her/him; the chosen photo should not be shared (i.e., hold with picture side facing your body and then keep it face down on your table)
- 5) First member of pair tells a story to the partner based on his/her photo; partner may ask questions when the story is done and the pair may discuss the story. When all discussion is done, it is permissible to show the photo to partner and continue talking about the photo/story. (total time: about 5-7 minutes)
- 6) Facilitator asks what went well, who heard a good story, and if that teller is willing to share (and one or two others, depending on time available). (5 minutes)
- 7) Facilitator tells a story (McDonald's story) and discusses the format and details. Then he/she presents a story framework (5 steps) around which to build a good story. Handout of the story framework is passed out. (5-7 minutes)
- 8) Second partner then tells her/his story; pair discusses it; picture is shared and more discussion. (8-12 minutes—I expect longer here because of the added framework).

- 9) (Optional step) Repeat step 6 for second story.
- 10) Facilitator leads a debriefing session about the difference between creating, telling and listening to the first and second stories: how does teller feel the story came across, how easy/hard was it to create a story, what was difficult for the listener, what types of discussion followed the stories, what would they change if preparing a story to tell to employees? (This could start in pairs and smaller groups and move to large group sharing. 15 minutes.)
- 11) Evaluation—what did you like, what would you change about the activity, how can you use it in a class or training session?

## **MATERIALS FOR: STORYTELLING – THE ACTIVITY**

### **Handout 1: Story Components**

- Setting
- Build-up (“trouble’s coming”)
- Crisis or climax
- Learning
- New behavior or awareness

### **Handout 2: Effective stories**

- Context-specific
- Level appropriate
- Told by respected role models
- Have drama
- Have high learning value

### **Handout 3: Short Storytelling Bibliography:**

Denning, Steve (2004). Telling tales. *Harvard Business Review*, May.

Morgan, Sandra and Dennehy, Robert F. (2004). Using stories to reframe the social construction of reality: A trio of activities. *Journal of Management Education*, 28(3), 372-389.  
(A set of storytelling activities to use with students and/or leadership development programs.)

Neuhauser, Peg C. (1993). *Corporate legends & lore: The power of storytelling as a management tool*. New York: McGraw-Hill. (Fabulous and comprehensive overview of storytelling for business.)

Ready, Douglas A. (2002). How storytelling builds next generation leaders. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Summer, 63-69. (Using storytelling as a leadership tool.)

[www.Getstoried.com](http://www.getstoried.com) Website and blog by Michael Margolis. Useful information and opportunities for workshops and webinars.

[www.storynet.org](http://www.storynet.org) Website with links to storytelling groups, programs and conferences in all states.

## REFERENCES

- Allcorn, S., & Stein, H. (2016). Organizations and their people. *Organizational & Social Dynamics*, 16(1), 19-38.
- Boje, D.M. (2009). *Storytelling organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Boje, D.M. (1991). The storytelling organization: A study of storytelling performance in an office supply firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36, 106-126.
- Brown, J. S., Denning, S., Groh, K., & Prusak, L. (2005). *Storytelling in Organizations: Why storytelling is transforming 21st century organizations and management*. Burlington, MA, USA and Oxford, UK.
- Collins, D. (2013). In search of popular management: Sensemaking, sensegiving and storytelling in the excellence project. *Culture and Organization*, 19(1), 42-61
- Denning, S. (2004). Telling tales. *Harvard Business Review*, May.
- Drape, T.G., Levy, D.A., & Blass, F.R. (2009). Linking stories with on-line threaded discussions for critical thinking in the management curriculum. *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 36, 28-32.
- Gabriel, Y. (2000). *Storytelling in organizations: Facts, fiction and fantasies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frances, M. (2009). The storytelling project: Innovating to engage students in their learning. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 28(4), 357-369.
- Hicks, S. (2000). Leadership through Storytelling. *Training and Development*, November, 63-64.
- Lawrence, R.L., & Paige, D.S. (2016). What our ancestors knew: Teaching and learning through storytelling. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 149, 63-72.
- Lukosch, S., Klebl, M., & Buttler, T. (2011). Utilizing verbally told stories for informal knowledge management. *Group Decision & Negotiation*, 20, 615-642.
- Masalimova, A.R., Usak M., & Shaidullina, A.R. (2016). Advantages and disadvantages of national and international corporate training techniques in adult education. *Current Science*, 111(9), 1480-1485.
- Melymuka, K. (2004). Tall Tales. *Computer World*, 38(19) 35.
- Morgan, S.W., & Dennehy, R.F. (1995) Organizational storytelling in the business classroom. *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 22, 160-165.
- Morgan, S., & Dennehy, R.F. (2004). Using stories to reframe the social construction of reality: A trio of activities. *Journal of Management Education*, 28(3) 372-389.
- Neuhauser, P.C. (1993). *Corporate legends & lore: The power of storytelling as a management tool*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Peters, T., & Waterman, R. (1982). *In search of excellence: Lessons from America's best run companies*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Ready, D. A. (2002). How storytelling builds next generation leaders. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Summer, 63-69.
- Terez, T. (2002). The business of storytelling. *Workforce*, 81(5), 22-24.