



## Power of storytelling

■ BY MANAVI PATHAK

When we think of the words 'storytelling' and 'business management', they somehow do not mesh well in our minds. Storytelling conjures up words such as myth, fiction and gossip. Whereas, the word 'management' brings images of deliberate decision-making, rational planning and control. Most consider telling stories as neither professional nor technical; rather, treat it as something personal, subjective and ephemeral. The lack of appreciation for storytelling at the workplace can be partly attributed to the dominant view on the nature of useful knowledge in business management. Traditionally, management education has put too much emphasis on the tools of rationality, while underestimating the role that intuition, improvisation and stories play.

Up till now, storytelling has attracted limited attention in the field of management and organizational studies. There is increasing interest in knowledge-creating organization and knowledge management which has given impetus to storytelling in organizations. In tandem with the increasing enthusiasm shared among managers, scholars and consultants have begun to acknowledge the persuasive power of storytelling. A flood of articles and books are now touting the importance of storytelling as an important tool for leadership development, change management, culture transmission. What is going on?

### Case for storytelling

In an era of accelerating economic and social change, the communication challenges facing managers are much more difficult than what was a decade ago. According to Devdutt Pattanaik, Mythologist and Storyteller, "The imperative for faster innovation, emergence of global network of partners, rapidly

growing role of intangibles, increasing ownership of means of production by knowledge workers, escalating power of customers in the marketplace and burgeoning diversity, all these forces imply a capacity to communicate in a compelling manner." Smart managers are often heard asking, how many people do we need in our organization who can communicate compellingly, who can engage and inspire staff and clients to embrace change with enduring enthusiasm. The answer is 'everyone'. It is because the capacity to communicate difficult change message offers immediate impact on the bottom line.

In the current scenario, the command and control approach is unlikely to generate positive response in employees, let alone the marketplace. The era when top managers could simply give orders and expect the work to be done is long gone. Neither does it prove effective to give people reasons why they should change if they already have different opinions. This is a phenomenon, psychologists call 'confirmation bias'. When we already have an opinion and receive inconsistent information, we question the new information and not our pre-existing opinion.

As a result, leaders turn to storytelling to overcome barriers to communication. Since time immemorial, human beings have used stories to spread religions, win support for political agendas or launch wars. Managers think in stories, they remember in stories, they plan in stories, they express hopes fears and dreams in stories. Moreover, storytelling is not a rare skill possessed by a few people who possess the gift of gab. Leadership storytelling involves taking a capacity that people already have and applying it for constructive purposes.

### Stories as tools

Some of the most successful company use

storytelling intentionally as a leadership tool. Some have high level a corporate storyteller whose job is to capture and share important stories. At Nike, in fact, all senior executive are designed corporate storytellers. P&G has hired Hollywood movie directors to teach senior executives how to lead better with storytelling.

Why is the art of storytelling so important to business leaders? It is because we can't just order people to 'be more creative' or to 'get motivated' or to 'start loving your job'. The human brain doesn't work that way. However, you can lead them with a good story. You can even successfully order people to 'follow the rules' because nobody reads the rule-book. People will eagerly read a story about a guy who broke the rules and got fired, or a woman who followed the rules and got a raise. That method proves to be more effective than reading the rulebook anyway. Another barrier to telling stories at work is not having stories to tell. Read up stories about how other leaders have helped navigate various challenges they face at work. If something memorable or teachable happens to you, please pay attention and make a note of it. Some leaders get so enthusiastic about storytelling that they spend an inordinate amount of time sitting telling stories infinitum. Fun, perhaps, but not particularly useful. Eventually, employees say, "When are we going to get any work done?". Storytelling is a tool and not a goal. It must focus on business objectives. Beware of the myths of organizational storytelling including this one. Story telling is an ancient art that hasn't changed much in several thousand years. The goal of an organization is to establish a storytelling culture. Organizational storytelling is about bringing people together and getting them to tell their stories. Leadership 'storytelling' is about mastering a well-told story with the sight, sound and smell of the context fully articulated. Stephen Denning, author of *The secret language of leadership: How leaders use narrative to inspire action*, says, once you have effective stories, keep them alive and vibrant. Make them a part

of the company culture through a repository of stories where people can record their stories, from which others can draw when they need stories. He further adds, make it easy for people to tell stories by providing images and background. An effective CEO often uses an emotional narrative about the company's

## Lessons in leadership storytelling

**Learn the narrative pattern relevant to the business:** Only a fairly narrow range of stories have the capacity to communicate a complex idea such as knowledge management and spark action. The stories that have this capacity have an underlying narrative pattern. Understanding the narrative pattern remains a key in getting business benefit from storytelling.

**Be authentic and truthful:** Leaders have little success with stories about imaginary events. Hard-edged business audience typically respond, "this will never happen here". That can be the end of discussion unless the storyteller can point out that it has already happened there. Moreover, the story needs to be factually accurate as far as it goes and authentically true when people check it out. Leaders who do not tell authentic stories become known as people who 'just tell stories'.

**Story listening as important as story telling:** The term 'storytelling' implies that the activity is about telling people stories. In fact, the effectiveness of storytelling in organizations depends as much on story listening as it does on storytelling. That's because an effective communication begins 'where the audience is' and not 'where you are' as a communicator. Unless you know where people come from and what stories they are living, it is going to be very difficult to craft and perform a story that will resonate with them. As a result, knowing the audience, mingling in their world and listening to their stories are precursors to effective storytelling.

**Beware of prevailing myths of organizational storytelling:** Many books and articles on the use of stories in organizations mistakenly equate organizational storytelling with entertainment storytelling.

*Adapted from : Stephen Denning (The Secret Language of Leadership: How leaders Use Narrative to Inspire Action)*

mission to attract investors and partners, to set lofty goals and to inspire employees. Sometimes, a well-crafted story can transform a seemingly hopeless situation to an unexpected triumph. So, let's begin, tell me your story. HC

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