

Power of narrative

Understanding narrative, the benefits of applying it and how we can use it for ourselves



Why is it important?

The use of narrative and story-telling is becoming ever-more prevalent within the context of organisational and individual development. Why might this be so?

When reviewing the literature, research shows that employee engagement is at a low ebb:

“Only 13% of employees are engaged at work, with only 1 in 8 being emotionally committed.”

HBR, January, 2015: page 57

Moreover, with a job for life being a more unrealistic expectation, arguably individuals need to be more detached, independent of organisations, and mobile within this changing environment.

This raises questions of how organisations engage with their work-force and how individuals remain resourceful within this context.

Here we find that narrative has a role to play.

What do we mean by narrative?

In its most fundamental form, narrative can be defined as a sequence of text that: defines relationships between items, illustrates a sequence of events, shows cause and effect and identifies priorities (HBR, May, 1998: page 42).

Story-telling is the communication of such narrative and may take numerous forms, including: verbal explanation, pictures, emails, adverts, use of characters.

Given this, cognitive psychologists emphasise that narrative has the power to communicate with relative ease complex scenarios to its audiences.

How can organisations use narrative?

Some of the leading organisations have skilfully employed narrative to its best effect.

Through its ability to create meaning, narrative can engage employees and help them to understand and get behind reasons for change and a way forward whilst fostering a sense of team cohesiveness and organisational belonging.

“By conveying a powerful impression of the process of winning, narrative plans can motivate and mobilise an entire organisation.”

3M Executive (HBR, May, 1998: page 50)

In addition to engagement, narrative can stimulate extraordinary results in numerous other areas: business turnaround (Continental Airlines), new strategic positioning (Apple), product design (Nike), problem-solving (3M) and knowledge-transfer (World Bank).

Moreover, such engagement can be cultivated with investors. Research shows that the performance figures account for no more than 10% of stock price changes. In contrast, softer, narrative-based information holds greater influence within investors' decision-making (HBR, November, 2011: page 60).

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Furthermore story-telling can be used to engage consumers with new products and services.

"Stories about how we arrived at particular designs may be entertaining, but also helps to explain our shoes to retailers, sales reps and consumers."

Nike's Creative Director (HBR, May, 2009: page 93)

How can individuals use narrative?

Narrative also benefits individuals. When wanting to bring about personal change, developing a narrative is an important part of reinvention:

"Develop a narrative that describes your transition in terms of the value it offers others."

HBR, March, 2011: page 80

Moreover, when responding to external changes, for example job loss, the re-crafting of one's own story can support the acceptance and moving on more readily.

What makes for a powerful story?

When designing our stories, there are some principles to follow to help to leverage greater impact:

1. **Three key ingredients** – 3M executives include three elements when crafting a story: explaining the context,

having dramatic conflict and the reaching of resolution

2. **Less is more** – take time to distil the essence of your story to its simplest form. Don't over-complicate it. What is the core storyline to bring meaning to others?
3. **Reinforce the action required** – consider who the story is for and what impact do you want to have. How do you want the audience to be feeling afterwards? What thoughts do you want them to have? What actions do you want them to feel compelled to take?
4. **Repeat stories in different forms** – for narratives to be memorable, we need to hear them on numerous occasions and in different ways

Steve Jobs received accolades for framing the Apple's strategy as a story (Perry, L. 2009: 3). He weaved stories through his emails, TV commercials, keynote speeches reinforcing the key messages. Through employing different techniques including: historical heroes, politicians, metaphors and villains in the form of IBM and Microsoft, employees, investors and consumers were called to action.

"Think Differently" was the coherent narrative that interweaved through the organisational mission and value proposition. Story-telling was regarded an integral part of Apple's strategic approach.

In his time as CEO Steve Jobs transformed Apple's value from \$9bn to \$190bn in 2009 (Perry, L. 2009: 1).

5. **Congruency with values** – the stories that we tell need to be congruent with our own values. Authenticity is a critical ingredient for powerful narratives

Top tip



Consider the stories that you tell to engage others

Reflect on how long you have been sharing these stories

Which ones work for you?
Which ones hold you back?

Consider which stories you need to perpetuate and which to let go of to help you move forward

What are my next steps?

Consider what change you want to instigate in your work or life. Think about how narrative could support you: Who is your audience? What is your plot-line? What is your call for action?



About the writer

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Cathy Brown is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, consultant and author. She runs Evolve Consulting Services Limited which works with individuals, teams and businesses to manage transition and change.

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