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STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATIONS

Why Storytelling Is Transforming 21st Century Organizations and Management

to think: "Well, that's remarkable how quickly we could respond to that kind of situation in that out-of-the-way part of the world. We need this capability all across the organization." And in effect, they said, "Let's do it! Let's become an agile knowledge sharing organization."

So the outcome of the meeting was not, as some had expected, my court martial or a court of inquiry looking into why there were so many flaws and blemishes in the implementation of knowledge management. Instead, the subsequent strategy meeting confirmed knowledge sharing as a key strategic pillar for the future. And so once again I found that storytelling was not ephemeral and nebulous and worthless, as I had thought in early 1996. Instead, it was a powerful tool to get major change in this large change-resistant organization.

THE FUNCTIONS OF STORIES

As I started looking into the functions that stories play in organizations, I saw that stories could be used for all sorts of things, including

- entertainment;
- conveying information;
- nurturing communities;
- promoting innovation;
- preserving organizations; but also
- changing organizations.

Different purposes require different kinds of stories, and it is the use of stories to *change organizations* that I want to focus on in this chapter. One of the most important things to keep in mind in using stories in organizations is to be clear on the purpose for which the story is being used. Because we human beings find stories such fascinating things, it is all too easy to get interested in the story for its own sake and lose sight of the purpose for which we

set out to use the story. We are talking here about the pattern of story that is useful for communicating complex ideas and sparking change in behavior.

Stories That Change Organizations

How do stories that change organizations work? When I tell the Madagascar story, I say, "Let me tell you something that happened to our task team in Madagascar, and they got advice from someone working in Indonesia, and the Moscow office, and the professor in Toronto, and the retired staff member, and all this came back to Madagascar, and what we learned from the experience went into the knowledge base in Washington." When I say all that, the listeners are physically stationary, sitting in a chair in Washington, DC. But if they have been following the story, in their minds they have been whizzing around the world and back in about 15 seconds.

What we are looking at here is the phenomenon that Carl Jung pointed out, namely, that there are some parts of the human self that are not subject to the laws of time and space. And storytelling, the telling of, and the listening to, a simple story, is one of those things.

With a story, listeners get *inside* the idea. They *live* the idea. They *feel* the idea as much as if they were the task team there in Madagascar, not knowing what to do about some urgent but obscure question and then almost miraculously getting the answer so rapidly. They experience the story as if they had lived it themselves. In the process, the story, and the idea that resides inside it, can become theirs. It's quite unlike experiencing an abstract explanation of a complex concept. It's different from experiencing it as an external observer, standing back like a scientist in a white coat and appraising the experience, or like some kind of voyeur or as a critic, but rather as a participant, someone who is actually living and experiencing and feeling the story.

What the Story Explains

What is it that is being explained by the story? As we all know by now, knowledge management is a complex idea. I don't know whether it has 10 dimensions, or 20 dimensions, but it's certainly got lots of dimensions that need to be mastered if it is going to be implemented successfully across a large organization. Let's say for the sake of argument that knowledge management has 16 dimensions.[4]

If I say to an audience, "Let me explain to you in detail and depth right now each and every one of the 16 dimensions of knowledge management," I find that the audience is already looking at their watches and thinking, "How do I get out of this meeting without causing a big incident?" No one looks forward to a comprehensive explanation of knowledge management's 16 dimensions.

If I say to the audience, "Let me show you a chart," they usually look dazed.

Many people ask me: "Why doesn't a chart work? Surely a picture is worth a thousand words?" My reply is that we need to think about what a picture can and cannot do. In particular, we need to consider whether it is even theoretically possible that a chart could convey a complicated idea like knowledge management with perhaps 16 dimensions. The underlying problem is that depicting a 16-dimensional idea is very difficult, if not impossible, to do in a drawing. Two, or 3, or 4 dimensions can be depicted in a drawing, but with 16 dimensions, one really needs to be a professional mathematician to be able to grasp it.

But if I say to an audience, "Let me tell you what happened in Zambia just a few months ago," that is to say, a story, the immediate reaction of the audience is, "Yes, I'd like to hear about it." They're not sure what story I'm going to throw at them, but they've heard so many interesting stories in their lives, they have a positive attitude and expectation to the prospect of hearing a new story. I may lose their interest if I tell them a boring story, or if I tell an interesting story poorly, but their initial attitude and expectation toward hearing a story is positive. So if I offer to tell a story, then I start out, unlike an abstract explanation or the chart, with some initial interest on the part of the listeners.

Some of you may be asking yourselves, "How could this possibly work? How could a 29 word story like the Zambia story possibly convey to an audience a 16-dimensional concept like knowledge management? That's one dimension for every two words. How is that possible?"

The reality is that if you adopt the traditional view of communications, it's not possible. The traditional view of communications runs something like this:

> *I am talking to an audience. So my head must be full of stuff. The audience is sitting there more or less silent, apparently listening, so their heads must essentially be empty. And the object of my communication is to download the stuff that is in my full brain into their empty heads.*

In other words, communication is some kind of computer download. It's not too far removed from what Larry Prusak called the Monty Python theory of learning, in which the listeners' heads are split open and "knowledge" is poured into it.

There are many things wrong with this picture, and, overall, it is total nonsense. It's not simply that I don't happen to have all the answers about the 16 dimensions of knowledge management to give to the audience. And even if I did, I couldn't transmit them to the audience in the time that they have available. More fundamentally, the flaw is that that the audience's heads are not empty. Their heads are full of understanding about how the world works, where Zambia is, what malaria is, what the World Wide Web is, and so on. All of those things are there in their minds. And all I need is a tiny fuse of a story that can link up with all of this tacit understanding that they have in their minds. If I can succeed in igniting that understanding, then suddenly a new pattern of understanding can flash into their

minds, and they can see at once how the world fits together in quite a different way from what they had previously been thinking.

The Little Voice in the Head

For each member of the audience, there are actually two listeners. When I look at the audience, I see the physical person in front of me, but there is also a second listener who is known as "the little voice in the head." We all know what the little voice in the head is. And if you're asking yourself, "What is Steve talking about? What on earth does he mean by 'the little voice in the head?'" Well, that's exactly the little voice that I mean!

It's extraordinary how little has been written on the phenomenon of inward speech, this discourse that we conduct incessantly with ourselves. George Steiner points out that it remains largely *terra incognita* in linguistics, in poetics, in epistemology, even though this unvoiced soliloquy far exceeds in volume language used for outward communication.[5]

But incessant it is. So for every physical person in the audience, there are not one but two listeners. I may be talking to the audience about Zambia. But the little voice in the head of the listener may well be saying, "I've got all these problems back in my office, my in-box is filling up, I've got e-mail to answer. How can I slip out of here!" So the little voice may not be listening at all to what I am talking about and may be distracting the listener from paying any real attention to what I am saying.

The conventional view of communications is simply to ignore the little voice in the head. The approach is to hope that the little voice stays quiet and that my message will somehow get through. Unfortunately, the little voice in the head often *doesn't stay quiet*. Often, the little voice in the head gets busy, and before the speaker knows it, or even guesses it, the listener is getting a whole new—and often unwelcome—perspective on what the speaker is talking about.

So I am suggesting something different. I am saying: don't *ignore* the little voice in the head. Instead *work with* it. *Engage* it. And the way that you engage the little voice in the head is to give it something to do. You tell a story in a way that elicits a second story from the little voice in the head.

And so when I say to the audience, "Let me tell you about something that happened in Zambia, I am hoping that the little voice in the head is saying, "We're working in highways. Why couldn't we do this in highways?" Or if you are working in finance, "Why don't we do this in finance?" Or if you are working in Asia, "Why don't we try this in Asia?" In effect, the little voice starts to imagine a new story, a new set of actions for the listener, a new future. And if things are going well, the little voice in the head starts to flesh out the picture. It starts to say: "Of course, we would have to have a community. And we would need to get organized. And we would need budgets to make it happen. And we would have to get more people involved. So why don't we do it? Why don't we get on with making this happen?"

And when this phenomenon occurs, the little voice is already racing ahead to figure out how to implement the change idea in the organization. And because the listeners have created the idea, they like it. They created the idea. It's their own wonderful idea!

The Knowing–Doing Gap

There's a lot of talk these days about closing the knowing-doing gap, and a best-selling book has been written about it.[6] People know what to do, but they don't do it! It's a big problem in organizations today. Well, I'm talking, not so much about *closing* the knowing-doing gap, as *eliminating* the knowing-doing gap. How could this be?

If I say to people, "I want you to launch tomorrow morning a knowledge-sharing program in your unit with the following 16 dimensions," then this idea, *my* idea, is coming at the listeners like a missile. It's *a strange, foreign idea*, and it's entering *their* territory, and they are

starting to think, "How can I somehow deal with this incoming missile? How can I get out of its path?" And so here we are, right in the middle of the knowing-doing gap.

But if I say, "Let me tell you about something that happened in Madagascar just a little while ago," then something different happens. Then the listener may start to imagine, "Well, if that's how it worked in Madagascar, which was pretty neat, maybe we could start to do the same thing in my unit." And so the little voice is starting to make the idea the listener's idea. And of course, we all love our own ideas. And the little voice is starting to think through implementation, even while the speaker is still speaking. So there is no knowing-doing gap. There is nothing to get in the way of implementing the idea.

Telling the Same Story

When you tell a story that resonates with the listener, you find that people start to tell the same story. In the Fall of 1998, shortly after I told a story about knowledge sharing in the context of Pakistan highways to the president of the World Bank,[7] I was in a meeting, about a month later, a very large meeting in the World Bank, with several hundred people, lots of outsiders, a big high-profile occasion, and someone else told the same story—the Pakistan highways story. And as it happened, the president of the World Bank was there, and the presenter made his presentation and in the course of it, told the Pakistan story. And immediately after the presentation was over, the president of the World Bank intervened and said, "Well, you told the Pakistan highways story, but you didn't tell it in the right way. Let me tell you the Pakistan highway story the way it is meant to be told." And he proceeded to tell the Pakistan story the way he thought it should be told. And he told it very well. He told with verve, with flair, and with passion.

This happened in part because that story, the Pakistan highways story, which he had heard a month previously, had become part of him. It had become a lens through which he saw the world, himself, and the organization of which he was president. It had become part of his very sense of identity, and his sense of the organization's identity. So for someone to tell the story in a way that was different from the way that he had understood it was to create a view of the world that was at odds with his. The only way to remove the distortion and make his world look right again was to re-tell the story in the way it should be told. He couldn't let the situation go by without intervening and remedying the distortion of perspective that telling the story in a different way had created.

This phenomenon is captured in this wonderful Brazilian proverb: "When we dream alone, it's just a dream. But when we dream together, it is the beginning of a new reality."

So we are talking about launching a process of collective dreaming together, with a group of people imagining what the world *could* be like. And if you can get that process going, and if the audience has the power to realize the dream, then before you know it, the dream starts to become a reality.

We often imagine that practical reality of large organizations is hard and intractable and difficult to change. What we don't always realize is that ideas can be more powerful than this apparently hard intractable reality. If we can get the ideas going in the right way, the existing reality succumbs to it and the dream becomes the new reality.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS?

What are the limitations to using a story to spark change? We thought: if one story is good, many stories must be even better. So we recruited a couple of people, and they put together 25 wonderful stories, and we put them in a booklet and put them in newsletters and distributed them all over the organization. What was the result? As far as we could see, they had absolutely no impact. No excitement. No interest. No sign of any new activity. No discernible impact on the organization at all.

So then we said, "Well, fine, so print doesn't work. How about video? Surely video will work. Let's try video." And so we put together a video that told these same stories that had been so effective in oral presentations. And the truth is that most of those videos ended up sitting on the shelf in my office in the World Bank. They also had no discernible impact in the organization.

What we discovered was that there is huge divide between the things that are visible and discernible in the organization, that is, the facts, the actions, the policies, the processes, the things that are invisible and intangible—the values, the attitudes, the narratives, the life narratives, the underlying assumptions. We spend most of our time in organizations talking and thinking about the visible and discernible things, the facts, and the actions and the processes, even though it is the invisible values and attitudes and narratives that are actually driving most of what is going on.

In effect, when we issued those booklets and videos we didn't get to realm of values and attitudes and narratives. The booklets and videos simply became part of the visible and discernible things in the organization. They became additional artifacts. They were simply more of the stuff that is lying around in any organization in huge quantities. They never entered the invisible realm of values and attitudes and narratives that are driving an organization.

In the written word, there is often a disconnect between the speaker and the spoken. Often the reader is not quite sure who is saying the words. So the words tend to lack authenticity. In many organizations, lack of authenticity is a huge problem for the management. When the managers issue a written statement, the readers often have little sense of genuineness or integrity in what is written, and little confidence that even the author of the words believes what is written. The words are a mere blur spewed forth by "the system."

But if I am telling you a story, face to face, eyeball to eyeball, it's me and you interacting: then something quite different is going on. The listeners can see me and feel me and listen to me and can tell if I really mean what I am saying. They may or may not end up believing me,

but at least they can tell if it's authentic. And so we found that it was oral storytelling that in fact had the large impact, not putting stories into booklets and videos. We discovered that it wasn't *story* that was having the impact, but *storytelling*.

This doesn't mean that you can't achieve big effects with books and videos, but they work in different kinds of ways. At the Smithsonian symposium in April 2001, we showed some videos of real lives, told in a different way, and they had a large impact.[8]

And of course, lengthy written stories like novels have always communicated stories in their own way, often very powerfully. A book may take 8 hours or longer to read. But in an organizational setting, you don't have 8 hours of the listener's time. You may have no more than minutes, or even seconds, to get your point across. In this context, a book is too slow, whereas an oral story can get the job done in that short timeframe. So it's not that videos and books don't work. It's just that they work in different kinds of ways from oral storytelling.

DO ALL STORIES WORK THIS WAY?

Do all stories work this way? No, they don't. The stories that worked for us to spring the listeners to a new level of understanding had a very similar pattern.

The stories had to be *understandable* to the audience that hears them. If the audience hears the Madagascar story, they have to know that there is a country called Madagascar. They have to know that there are tax systems with certain kind of issues. They have to know e-mail exists and so on. They have to know these things to understand the story.

And the story needs to be *told from the perspective of a single protagonist*, a single individual who is in a situation that is typical of that organization. For us in the World Bank, the typical predicament is someone in operations who is in an out-of-the-way part of the world

and desperately needs the answer to a problem. If it is an oil company, it would be an oil driller. If it is a sales organization, it would be a salesman. Someone whom everyone in that organization can instantly understand, empathize with, resonate with their dilemma, and understand what that person is going through.

The story needs to have a certain *strangeness* or *incongruity*. It needs to be somewhat odd but also *plausible*. "That's remarkable that you could get an answer to a question like that in such a short timeframe—within 48 hours, even though you're in Madagascar. But it's plausible. It could have happened. The tax administration community exists. E-mail exists. The Web exists. Yes, indeed, this could have happened in the way that the story is being told."

And the story needs to *embody the change idea as fully as possible*. If the listeners have followed the Madagascar story, they have experienced the main elements of knowledge sharing in the World Bank. They have experienced the full gamut of the idea.

The story should be as *recent as possible*. "This happened last week" conveys a sense of urgency. Older stories can also work, but fresh is better.

The Story Must Be True

And in my experience, it is essential that the story be based on a true story. When *The New York Times* wrote an article about my book, *The Springboard*, their headline was: "Storytelling only works if the tale is true." And I agree with this. The truth of the story is a key part of getting the springboard effect. It's the truth of the story that helps give it salience. If, by contrast, I tell a fictional story about what might happen if we were to implement knowledge management, the reaction tends to be: "That will never happen around here!" But when the story has actually happened not long ago to one of our task teams, then the listeners have to deal with this. They have to reckon with something that has actually happened. So I agree with *The New York Times*, the truth of the story is crucial. It's the same thing

you heard from your mother. "Do not tell a lie!" It's not a good idea to go round saying things that aren't true.

The Story Is Told in a Minimalist Fashion

The story also needs to be told as simply as possible. In other words, I don't use the standard tricks of an entertainment storyteller. In the Zambia story, I talk about "a health worker in Zambia." I don't tell the audience whether the health worker in Zambia was a man or a woman. I don't tell them whether it was a doctor or a nurse. I don't give them the color of the hair or the eyes. I don't tell them whether it was hot or cold, quiet or noisy. I don't tell them whether the air was fresh or dusty. All of the tricks that would embed the audience in the granular reality of the situation in Zambia, I set aside. All of the things that get involved in the situation of that health worker in Zambia, I set aside, because I have a different objective. I don't want them too interested in Zambia. My objective is to create a space for the little voice in the head to tell a new story, that is, to generate a new narrative based on the listener's context and drawing on the listener's intelligence. If I get the audience too interested in the situation in Zambia, they may never get around to inventing their own stories. The kind of story is thus quite different from telling a story for entertainment purposes. I give them just enough detail to follow the story, but not enough to get them thinking too much about the details of the explicit story. So I tell the story in a very minimalist fashion.

The Story Must Have a Happy Ending

Finally, Hollywood is right. For a story to spark action, it must have a happy ending. I have had no success in telling a story: "Let me tell you about an organization that didn't implement knowledge management and it went bankrupt." The story with a negative outcome has never been successful for me.

Recent neurological research suggests why this is so. Over the last couple of hundred years or so, most of the attention on the brain has been focused on the cortex, that is to say, the human brain. But in the last few decades, attention has turned to other parts of the brain that hadn't been accessible in the past. In particular, we have been looking at the mammal brain and the limbic system, as well as the reptile brain, which we all have and which sits just under the mammal brain. These mammal and reptile brains are not very smart, but they are very quick and they make a lot of noise. They are also hooked to the rest of the body and when they get excited, they can get the whole body in a considerable uproar with the blood pumping and adrenaline levels up and so on.

So if I tell the audience a story with an unhappy ending, for instance, "That company that went bankrupt because it didn't implement knowledge management!" what seems to be happening is that this ancient part of the brain, the limbic system, kicks in and the message is: "Trouble! Something bad is happening! Do something! Fight! Flight!" Now the human brain, the cortex, can intervene and override these primitive organs and in effect say something like, "Now calm down, reptile brain, let's analyze this. We may be able to learn something from this unfortunate but instructive experience." But by the time the commotion is over, and the body has gotten back to normal, the opportunity to invent a new future may have passed. Learning may take place, but no rapid action ensues. There is no springboard effect. The cortex is recovering from another encounter with the reptile brain.

But by contrast, if I tell a story with a happy ending, what seems to be happening is that the limbic system kicks in with something called an "endogenous opiate reward" for the human brain, the cortex. It pumps a substance called dopamine into the cortex. Basically, it puts the human brain on drugs. This leads to "a warm and floaty feeling," the kind of mildly euphoric feeling that you have after you have just seen a wonderful movie. And this is the perfect frame of mind

to be thinking about a new future, a new identity for yourself or your organization.

The Storyteller Has to Let Go of Control

There are other limitations to getting the springboard effect. One is that you have to let go of control. Suppose I tell you stories like Zambia or Madagascar and then I go on to say, "And now this is what it means for you in your unit. Let me tell you what you have to do tomorrow morning." Then, I am right back in the command-and-control mode. So I have to stand back to a certain extent and trust that the story will ignite the listeners' own creativity. And I have to have the self-control to avoid imposing my views on the listener. I am not in a battle to impose my idea. I have to let the listeners make up their own minds. This is hard to do. Imposing order is bred into us. So giving up control is not a trivial thing, particularly if you have been a manager for many years and have been in the habit of giving directions and making decisions and taking charge.

Some Groups Are Immune

There are some groups on whom this kind of storytelling doesn't work very well. Old-style Soviets or accountants can be a problem. Anyone in fact who is intent on imposing their view of the world on others will immediately sense in this kind of a story a quickening of the pulse and a spurt of energy and a vision of a different kind of organization, and will at once sense that some kind of destabilizing virus is entering the environment. Warning signals go off in the brain that there is a risk of unpredictability, a risk of loss of control. For the freedom-lover, this will be welcome. But the control-minded person will typically set out to find and resist the virus in order to reestablish control and predictability. Usually they can't find the virus, because they never suspect that the destabilizing element could possibly be anything as simple and innocuous as a mere story. They know that stories are ephemeral and subjective and

anecdotal and are not to be taken seriously. But they themselves may resist the spell of the story for their own conduct, because they sense that something is amiss in their calm and controlled world. And so a springboard story doesn't necessarily work on everyone. With some groups, you don't get the "spring."

The Storyteller Must Believe

For the story to have the springboard effect, it has to be performed with feeling. It has to be performed with passion. The storyteller must tell the story as though she had actually lived the experience herself, as though she had been that task team leader in Madagascar, desperate to get the answer to a difficult question. This is because what is rubbing off on the listeners is not just the intellectual content of the story: it is the feeling in the story that is communicated to the listener. It is the emotion that makes the connection between the storyteller and the listener. This is what catches the listeners' attention, and gives the story its "spring" and pushes the listeners to reinvent a new story in their own contexts, and fill in the gaps to make it happen.

The Marriage of Narrative and Analysis

It is important to keep in mind that storytelling is not a panacea. I am not saying to forget about analysis of costs and benefits and risks and timelines and all the structural things that you will need to do to implement a complex idea in a large organization. What I am saying is: do all the analysis, but use the narrative to get people *inside* the idea, so that they *live* the idea, so that they *feel* the idea, so that they *understand* how the idea might work. And once they are *inside* the idea, and once they have felt it and understood it, then you can move on and share with them the analysis.

So you marry the narrative with the analysis. Once listeners have lived the idea through a story, they are able to perform the analysis in a more balanced way, looking at both costs and benefits. Often the analysis that is performed on new ideas in organizations is

focused on the costs and risks and difficulties, the disruptions and dislocations, because that is what people are immediately aware of when they hear about something that will require change. It often happens that the analysts fail to think through what the benefits might be, because they are so preoccupied with the negative side of the equation. A story can help listeners analyze both costs and benefits in an even-handed manner.

Finding the Right Story

People often ask me: how do you find the right story? What I did at the World Bank was to wander around the organization and ask people for examples where the kind of change I wanted had already happened, at least in part. In fact, I never "found" a story lying there, like a stone on the path that I could just pick up and use. What I found was not a complete ready-to-perform story. Instead, what I found were more like leads. I would find fragments that might be turned into stories.

For instance, when I first heard about that Madagascar story, it was an e-mail describing a small part of the eventual story, and I rejected it. I said to myself, "That will never work. It doesn't have this. It doesn't have that. It doesn't have the elements that I need." Initially, I couldn't see the story that would eventually emerge. But then I ran out of leads. I ended up rejecting all of the potential leads that I had on hand. And so I went back to the reject pile and started asking more questions about these leads, including the e-mail about Madagascar. "Was anything else going on when you got that answer?" I asked. And so it turned out that there was more than one piece of advice. "Oh yes, there was the retired guy." And then when I asked further, I heard, "And oh yes, there was professor from Toronto." And so finally I began to see how I might weave these leads into a story. Once I had enough material to do a story, then I had to perfect it. The way that story sounds now is not the way it sounded when I first tried to tell it. When an audience hears it now, it sounds as though that's the only way to tell it. But

there were many test runs. It's only through practice that you get the story to come out right.

We Are All Storytellers

Who can be a springboard storyteller? Who can get this springboard effect? Does it require special talents or background? I was walking out of a presentation at a conference a while back, following some participants who didn't realize that I was right behind them. I heard one say to his colleague, "You know this was all very interesting, but it's no use to me. I couldn't tell a story if my life depended on it. So this storytelling tool is no use to me. I am not a storyteller."

By way of reply, I'd like to cite my wife who considers my actitivies as a storyteller somewhat ironic. She says, "This is crazy. Look at yourself, Steve. Monosyllabic. Quiet. Reserved. Never saying a word at the dinner table. Never regaling me with stories. But here you are going round the world, apparently making a living out of telling stories, and now what's worse, teaching others how to tell stories. If you can tell stories, anybody can!"

And indeed that's the point. We are all storytellers. We spend most of our lives, wittingly or unwittingly, telling stories. In fact, it's not something we have to learn, it's something we do, day in and day out, every day. It's something that we are able to do at the age of 2. Jerome Bruner has documented how little children at this age, as soon as they can start to talk, show that they understand the stories that their families tell them, and they start to tell their own stories, and also start to tell stories to themselves as part of their first efforts to make sense of their lives. It happens so easily and so spontaneously and so pervasively that some scientists believe that storytelling is hard-wired into our brains.

It is only several years later that we start having abstract language beaten into our brains by schoolteachers and the education system. Abstract language doesn't occur spontaneously in children. It is something that they have to be systematically taught. Given the struggle that most of us have to master abstract reasoning, it

seems unlikely that it is hard-wired in our brains. It has to be learned. And most of us do learn it, but with an immense effort, almost like learning a foreign language. Abstract concepts have to be taught to us, and it is generally a slow, hard process. Some of us eventually get quite good at this abstract language, this foreign language. But whenever we get a chance, whenever we are relaxing with our friends, or outside of school or work, we lapse back into our native language of narrative at the first opportunity. We are at home in our native language of storytelling. When we exchange stories, we find ourselves refreshed. It is energizing, unlike the foreign language of abstractions, which most of us find so tiring. So why not communicate with people in their native language?

BECOMING A BETTER STORYTELLER

So everyone can tell stories. Everyone already knows how to tell stories, since we do it every day of our lives, even if we are as unaware of it as fish may be unaware of the water they swim in.

What often happens, though, when you ask someone to tell a story in front of an audience, is that there is a tendency to freeze, and the speaker becomes tongue-tied, and forgets what he or she knows how to do very well. It is like asking someone to describe how to ride a bicycle or throw a ball. We are all able to do this, but we have difficulty explaining how we do it. And if asked to perform it after being required to provide an explanation, we may become self-unconscious and momentarily forget how to do something that we already know.

It's also the case that stories have been so disparaged for several thousand years, ever since Plato's Republic, that we usually haven't thought much about using stories for a serious purpose. Once we understand that how stories work and how they can be used to achieve a useful purpose, then we can start to use our natural talents as storytellers and focus them in new and more effective ways to get specific results.

And we can all get better at storytelling. Much better. Particularly at using stories intelligently and explicitly to get effects that we explicitly plan for and intend. As in any field of human activity, understanding how and why storytelling works, and learning what kinds of stories work in different situations, and what kinds of effects different kinds of stories have, can enable us to be more adept in our own practice of storytelling.

But the main way to improve our ability to tell stories is of course to practice. Practice, practice, practice, and then more practice. And find a safe space to practice. You don't want to be telling a story for the first time to the executive committee of a large organization, because it is likely to have some unexpected effects.

When I told the Madagascar story to the senior management of the World Bank in January 2000, I had already told the story many times to different audiences, and in the process, I had refined and honed and perfected the story so that it had exactly the effect that I intended with a wide range of different listeners. When I told the story in that high-profile high-risk situation, I was extremely confident that it would have the effect that it did. And of course, that confidence in knowing the story well also helps the storyteller to be convincing and effective in telling the story.

So practice, practice, practice, particularly in low-risk situations. One can do this with a friend, or a colleague, or a spouse, until one is comfortable with the performance.

Once one has mastered the technique, one can relax as the storyteller and simply enjoy the performance. All the tension of presenting abstract material tends to disappear because there are none of the adversarial implications of trying to get the listener to accept *my* analysis of the situation. Storytelling is like a dance, in which I invite the listeners to come with me, arm-in-arm, and together we explore a story. It is as though the storyteller and the listener are walking down a path together exploring and co-creating the setting and the trajectory of the story. Whether anything comes of it will depend, not on the story that I tell, but rather on the story

that the listeners tell themselves. It is *their own* story that will be liberating, energizing, and exciting.

Stephen Denning: Reflections

When we organized the original Smithsonian Associates' symposium in April 2001, we felt that the event could well have lasting consequences. It has certainly had lasting consequences for me.

THE GROWTH OF ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING

The symposium led to my becoming involved on a full-time basis in the emerging world of organizational storytelling. When I left the World Bank in December of 2000, I assumed that, since I was known in the field of knowledge management, that people would be interested in me as an expert in knowledge management, with perhaps a bit of storytelling on the side. To my surprise it's turned out over the last 3 years that there has been more corporate interest in organizational storytelling. I had never expected that companies all around the world, including firms like GE, McDonalds, and IBM, would be interested in organizational storytelling. And The Smithsonian Associates' event in 2001 was one of the catalysts for that.

Why are they interested in storytelling? The most frequent area in which I am asked for help, is "How do I get change? How do I spark change? How do I communicate a complex new idea? How do I get people to embrace that complex new idea and get on with implementation enthusiastically and energetically? In effect, how do I take this organization by the scruff of the neck and hurl it into the future, so that everyone actually wants to be part of that future?" The kind of executives who approach me are typically people who are just below the top of the organization—people who know what's wrong, who know what to do, but somehow

can't seem to connect with the people who have the control of the organization. So that is the area where there is greatest interest in getting help.

Other areas that are of interest include storytelling to build communities, and storytelling that transmits values. After Enron and the other corporate scandals, people can see the importance of values: how do you instill in the organization the values that ensure that accounts can be trusted and that systems will be failsafe? But the most important area is that of getting change: how do you persuade people to change? That's the principal reason that people come to me for help, and generally it's because they've tried everything else and nothing else works. Often they're at the end of the road, and they're desperate, just as I was, back in 1996, and willing to try anything.

An Example of the Use of Organizational Storytelling

In my work, I've seen a number of examples of the successful use of storytelling to effect change in an organization. One was with a major oil company in which one of the senior engineers was trying to persuade the organization to implement a different way of building a deep-sea well, a way of building it in 4 months instead of the usual 12 to 18 months. He had been tasked with developing this methodology, and he was expecting that when it was introduced people would say "Wow, that's terrific, let's do it!" With such capital-intensive projects, the methodology had the potential to save a great deal of money. And he thought that the case would be obvious. But it was the opposite: everyone had reasons why this thing would not and could not and should not be implemented in this particular case. I mean "Why us?" And "Where else have you tried this?" After 6 months, he actually got a decision to implement it, but he could see that if this was the way it was going to be implemented across the organization, then most of the time-savings and cost-savings were going to be lost in arguments about how and whether to do it.

He got himself put on a task force on how the company could learn faster. The task force made an interim report to their senior management about the problems they had faced and what needed to be done. But the report with the standard reasons and charts and slides didn't connect with the management. It was just another change proposal. And the task force realized that they had to reach the management on a different level: they had to grasp that the company had to be run in a different way. So they decided to make the final presentation in the form of story about the difficulties of getting the new standard methodology for building deep-sea wells accepted and how it had eventually succeeded: "But just imagine—just imagine, if we'd got on the same page on Day 1 instead of Day 183!"

When the engineer made the presentation, he was holding his breath because he knew that suggesting to management that a company should be run in a different way can be a dangerous occupation. But what happened was this: the CEO paused and said, "You know, that reminds me of when I was a young engineer." And this sparked a whole set of stories by the top management team about how they had been dealing with these kind of problems when they were earlier in their career, and there was a burst of energy—"Why don't we do this; why don't we make this happen?" And suddenly they had grasped the point: 'This means us! We have to change! We have to run this company differently." And so the whole thing took off with a lot of momentum. He was amazed at the difference between making the presentation in the regular way when it was "just another change proposal" and telling it in the form of a story and it suddenly connects with the managers on a personal level, so that it becomes their own story.

The Field Has Widened and Deepened

Another thing that's happened since 2001 is that the whole field of organizational storytelling has widened and deepened, both for me

and for everyone. I was talking in *The Springboard,* and at the Smithsonian symposium itself, about one highly valuable kind of organizational storytelling. But since then, I've come across at least six other kinds of storytelling that are highly useful in business. Back in April 2001, it wasn't so clear to me that the different purposes one might have in telling stories have different types of narrative patterns associated with them. And much of my time and energy in the last year has been spent in delineating these different narrative patterns—how they work and why they work, why they're different from each other. It's now much clearer to me that understanding the differences between the patterns can dramatically enhance your chances of telling a story that will have the effect that you intend.

Many of the mistakes that I see in people trying to use storytelling as tool for leadership is that they don't understand the different patterns associated with different purposes. So they read the *Harvard Business Review* and they conclude that "storytelling's hot" and then they think, "Well, I'll try telling a story." But if they haven't thought through what kind of a story and the purpose of telling it, then there is a significant risk that they'll end up with a story with the wrong pattern.

For instance, they'll tell a negative story with the object of trying to get people into action. Suppose they're trying to introduce knowledge management, they might tell a story in the form, "I know a firm that went bankrupt because it didn't implement knowledge management." That kind of story is a typical first stab at this, but basically it's highly unlikely to get people moving rapidly into action to adopt knowledge management, because its tone is negative.

To get people into action you need to reverse the tonality and turn it into a positive springboard story: "I know a firm that solved its problem by implementing knowledge management." This is not to say that the story about the firm that went bankrupt can't be a useful story for imparting knowledge and understanding about knowledge

management. But it's not very likely to get people rapidly into action, for which you need a story with a positive tone. So, this has led from "Storytelling 101," where people start to see the importance of storytelling for leadership in organizations, to "Storytelling 102," where they start to examine the different purposes for which you can use storytelling in organizations and the different patterns of narrative that correspond to those purposes.

THE LIMITS OF STORYTELLING'S EFFECTIVENESS

A question that I'm asked frequently is: does storytelling work in every part of the world? Is this culturally specific? My take is that there are cultural differences, but they are much less significant than the similarities. We have yet to find a culture that does not revolve around storytelling. It may exist, but we haven't found it yet. Different cultures do have different emphases.

For instance, there are studies showing that on average men respond better to images and women to words.[9] It has also been suggested that people from Asia respond more holistically to communications, whereas people in the West tend to look at the issues piece by piece.[10] These studies suggest differences, but the much more important point is that all cultures revolve around stories. There are some nuances or emphases in some cultures, and certain types of stories flourish more in some cultures than in others. But the deeper message is that stories flourish everywhere.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING

A different question that's sometimes asked has to do with the effectiveness of storytelling via e-mail or other virtual communication media. If you're sharing information, then electronic media can do a very good job. It works as well on the Web as anywhere else, probably better. If you want a stock price, the weather report, a train timetable—these things you can get on the Web easily and quickly and

accurately, and it's wonderful. It has certainly simplified life a great deal, having quick access to information like that. But if you're getting into deeper kinds of questions, if you're doing what I'm trying to do—persuade a change-resistant organization to change; if you're trying to talk to people who, when you start communicating with them aren't interested at all in what you have to say, then you're in a different ballgame. I've not seen virtual communications able to deal at all with that kind of a situation. I've not seen any instance where anyone has been able to effect significant change with a skeptical audience by sending an e-mail and asking people to visit a website. And the reason is that it's difficult to do anyway. Even if you're there in person, it's going to be a difficult challenge. But if you're not there in person, it's not really possible.

For one thing there isn't enough bandwidth. Studies have been done showing what is the impact of storytelling and where does it come from. These studies indicate that somewhere around 10 percent of the communication comes from the content, and around 90 percent comes from the tone of voice, the gesture, the look in the eye, and all of that. In virtual communication you're missing most of that 90 percent—you're dealing with the 10 percent, and there simply isn't enough bandwidth to connect with the person, to make it happen.

Another aspect is that storytelling in person is intensely interactive, whereas virtual communication is passive. When you tell a story in person, you get all sorts of cues in terms of expressions and body language from the audience as to how they are responding to the story, and you adjust the story to take that into account. In a virtual encounter, that kind of feedback is absent and so the experience becomes something very different.

I'm not saying you can't get a lot of information from the Web. I am a great fan of the Web and it's wonderful; but if you're trying to do something difficult like take a change-resistant organization up by the scruff of the neck and hurl it into the future, then I've got a very simple, two-word piece of advice: Be there!

CHAPTER ENDNOTES

[1] Walden.

[2] Some examples from the period at the start of the 21st century were: the head of Mattel lasted 37 months; Lucent, 36 months; Campbell Soup, 33 months; Coca-Cola, 28 months; Covad, 28 months; Procter & Gamble, 17 months; Maytag, 15 months; Xerox, 13 months.

[3] Sun-Tzu: *The Art of War* (trans. Ralph D. Sawyer. Westview, 1994).

[4] These might include for instance, knowledge strategy, knowledge leadership, communities of practice, help desks, knowledge bases, knowledge capture, knowledge storage, knowledge authentication, knowledge dissemination, knowledge taxonomies, quality assurance, procedures for removing obsolete knowledge, budget, incentives, and measurement.

[5] George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001) page 85. An early reference to it lies in Plato's Theaetetus, Plato, *The Theaetetus of Plato* (trans. M.J. Levett, Hackett, Indianopolis, 1990) where thoughts are likened to birds in an aviary. There is an excellent discussion in Sven Birkerts, in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, (Boston, Faber and Faber, 1994).

[6] Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton, *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action* (Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

[7] Stephen Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (Boston, Butterworth & Heinemann, 2000) page 165.

[8] Groh Productions: *The Art of Possibility*, with Ben Zander.

[9] Neurological research indicating that women concentrate more on verbal information in each film and men focus more on the visual content can be found summarized at: "QEEG Correlates of Film Presentations: Experiment 2: Gender effects in topographic EEG" at http://www.skiltopo.com/papers/applied/articles/dak-diss4.htm March 8, 2004.

[10] Richard Nisbett: *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently and Why* (New York, Free Press, 2003).