

» Not everything is about storytelling: what is the role of stories in organizations?

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There is no doubt that over the past years the concept of “storytelling” has joined several fields of the organizational life. This concept actually has some magnetism for those seeking to communicate in an impressive and innovative way using stories as a powerful and mobilizing branding tool — placing attributes behind the company’s services and goods —, as well as turning the company’s values, mission and vision tangible, strengthening the company’s identity and culture.

Stories are used in very different ways —not only the two contexts above mentioned —, **and the power of storytelling resides in the capacity of stories to involve, approach and humanize communication.** Specially, in a communication that is currently getting colder, more distant and mediated, which is exactly the case of the internal communication of organizations...

Finding a meaning and building commitment are the most common dimensions those who want to involve through their stories and inspire through their words are looking for. This might be one of the reasons to explain the power of stories in storytelling.

As any other tool, the storytelling is contingent and therefore it must adapt to the situations and the organizational moments and it should only be used as another communication tool as any of the others that are currently available for organizations.

In this article, we present three sections where we explain why not everything that is done in organizations is considered storytelling and we will show as well, six contexts where stories make sense within the companies.

WHY STORYTELLING IS NOT EVERYTHING?

The first point we must highlight is the “good” use of stories in the organizational life: “the storytelling tool must not be seen as a panacea. When seen as a “miracle tool” it could become a passing fad. As it happens with other management tools, storytelling can help building an important part of the organizational capacities but only when used together with other tools and the hard work coming from their correct use”. This aspect leads us to write “tendency” between quotation marks: as any other narrative technique it has its own limitations and it must not be seen as a general solution for all the organization’s communication problems. As any other tool, it is a contingent technique. This fact clearly explains the idea that “telling stories in management is something relational, contextual and located”. For this reason, storytelling is always something personalized and individual, always adapted to the storyteller and the listeners. “For the story to be effective and valid so it meets the goals of the storyteller, we need a range of factors (dynamics)”.

The second point is also related to the common classification as an “emerging” tool. We want to make clear that the use of stories as a communication tool is not something new. In fact, it is probably the oldest tool used by human beings since its origins come from the oral tradition. What is new is the potential of the organizational communication through stories. There is actually a growing concern about humanizing communication between people, especially the cold, distant and technological communication inside companies. “Our organizations need a compensation. The organization’s members need to feel bound to a greater story with a greater meaning or purpose”.

The third section deals with the importance we want to give to oral stories in contrast with written stories. We must show that the real power of a story comes, especially, from the “storytelling”. That means the capacity of orally reproducing an episode. “It is important that stories are not only written but also orally shared, ideally face to face with the collaborators”. The process within storytelling is key to break the contemporary sensorial experience overloaded with writing and images. We stop to listen, to hear and we are linked to the other in that moment of sharing. It is very likely that our involvement with the other person and the message

¹ Ready, D. A. (2002). How Storytelling Builds Next-Generation Leaders. MIT Sloan Management Review, 43(4), 63–69

² Reissner, S., & Pagan, V. (2013). Storytelling in Management Practice - Dynamics and Implications. New York: Routledge

³ Driscoll, C., & McKee, M. (2007). Restorying a Culture of Ethical and Spiritual Values: A Role for Leader Storytelling. Journal of Business Ethics, 73(2), 205–217

⁴ Ibidem



is higher when the communication comes from a "fresh" or cool source since it will ask for something more from the listener. Thinking along the same line as Marshall McLuhan, the spoken word gives us back the community's experience, belief, spontaneity and authenticity, which provides a richer, complex and holistic view of the world⁵.

Are not all of them key pieces to understand the relational phenomenon that stories provide?

SO, WHAT CAN THE ROLE OF STORIES IN ORGANIZATIONS BE?

The truth is the solution is not always a story and not everything that is done in organizational communication is storytelling. We have recalled this statement to try to find out the role of stories in organizations...

Both, the literature search and a field study carried out by a Portuguese company have been essential to reach the following conclusions. Down below we present the six conclusions, which will help us understand the real role of stories in organizations nowadays.

1 It is difficult to measure and control the real impact of storytelling in organizations' lives. The first conclusion is related to the difficulty of measuring the effective impact of the use of storytelling in the organizational life. The reason for this is the lack of indicators and objective metrics that allow controlling the impact of the use of stories on organizations, due to the subjective and indirect nature of this methodology. However, we must highlight that the fact of not being able to be measured or being directly objective does not mean that is not efficient or relevant for the organizations. Researches on the field have proved it...

2 Stories are everywhere and are unpredictable regarding the organizational life. The second conclusion is basically a lesson. We started this study thinking that stories have a specific time and space in organizations and we have concluded that stories have a permanent and unconscious presence. These sharing acts are everywhere and are natural demonstrations of any phenomenon or socialization context; and organizations are not excluded. The challenge is now to make these sharing acts intentional and make them strategic specially when related to the organizations' management of interpersonal relationships. If there was something we needed to improve regarding corporate communication, two of the main points would be proximity and building commitment.

3 Storytelling should not be used as a surgical tool, immediate or linked to big events or the institutional communication's folklore. Storytelling should be seeing as a way of being present in the management of the interpersonal relationships of the organization. In the third place, it is more and more obvious that the storytelling tool should not be a punctual, immediate or folkloric initiative. When talking about interpersonal relationships the reason is quite obvious: it is a constant effort, along the time and above all genuine. It is not by chance that we mention the word effort. In fact, stories need sensitivity and acumen in order to interact and communicate. Stories require an empathetic effort.

“When we are telling a story we stop to listen, to hear and we are linked to the other in that moment of sharing”

Its use must be seeing as a way of living communication and the interpersonal relationships. In short, it is not an option for all organizations and it does not match all profiles. However, is another possible way to live and communicate for companies nowadays.

4 Storytelling is more than a tool or a technique. It is mainly a methodology or a communication competence. The fourth conclusion concerns a relevant discussion: is it storytelling a tool or an art? Thinking that storytelling is a tool is wrong since it comes from a "controlled" and superficial perspective which tends to focus on the effects and results of a technique. Storytelling is an innovative way to address situations in the companies as a tool. There are few options to measure the instant effect

of a story and it is very unlikely that the same pattern of story can be useful for different contexts and different people! Stories are contingent, contextual and unpredictable; and that makes them unique! For this reason, classifying storytelling as an art enables to place stories in a relational process, wider, not only focused on the storyteller but also on the audience, their expectations, perceptions and answers. Overall, it is a dynamic that includes the storyteller, the story itself, the narrative act, the audience and the actions that may occur. In fact, this perspective is not focused on the tool itself but on the competence, that means the ability to control the technique. A good communicator has to be able to tell a story but also to pick the correct moment, understand the context, the audience, manage their expectations and approach them. The basic competences in interpersonal communication are, precisely, understanding, involvement and commitment with the other. Is not that what stories offer?

5 Not only managers and leaders can use storytelling for communication. This tool can be used by all the actors of the organization. In this fifth point, it is important that we finish with an idea that is recurrent in literature. Stories are not only for leaders and for managers. Storytelling is a methodology or process that can be used by and for all actors of the organization. Stories are happening all the time and in all spheres of the organization and can have a meaning in numerous contexts. One of these contexts can be leadership, but it is important to make clear the limitations of stories since they do not work in all aspects of management: storytelling can be understood as a different methodology with regard to the paradigms of mainstream management as far as the organization's actors are involved in a negotiation process of the organizational meaning.

6 Stories are, at the same time, content and shape, which means authenticity and performance. To finish with, and still related to leadership, it is important to mention an important aspect for all processes of storytelling: the ability to combine the format and content, adding action and living examples to the story, which always takes us to the simple (but truthful) idea of Gandhi: "my life is my message". There are not good leadership stories which are not a living example and real organizational symbols and values.

Stories do not become science because they do not match all the purposes of an organization. However, they can be strategic when used with transparency, integrity, carefully and with the right intention.

⁵ McLuhan, M. (2008). Compreender os meios de comunicação - As extensões do homem. Lisboa: Relógio D'Água



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* This article is a synthesis of a Masters' in Communication, Organization and Leadership project of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, which aimed to carry out a critical analysis of the use of stories in organizations and set a project for the implementation of storytelling for internal communications. The fieldwork was carried out through the analysis of an organizational conversation methodology based on the technique of the "world café" and deep interviews to collaborators of the Communication Directorates and HR of a telecommunications company in Portugal.

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