

'I Wanna Tell You a Story': Leaders as Storytellers

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Abstract

The authors explore the concept of leaders as storytellers and suggest that this approach to leadership is helpful as a way of communicating effectively with people. The authors conclude that story skills are also helpful for people with mental health problems to create their own recovery stories, frontline staff designing their professional development and leaders negotiating organisational change.

Key words

Leaders; storytellers; narrative

Introduction and history

A chief executive of a large and struggling NHS trust recently remarked:

'there is a lot wrong with this organisation, as reflected in our star rating, but there are a lot of good people, and I'm sure we can start turning things around. But what really worries me about the culture, long term, is that no one tells me stories!' (our emphasis).

That was a conversation that had an immediate impact on us, but why? What's so important about stories? Human dilemmas and endeavours have been captured in stories at least from the time of the ancient Greeks. Homer told how people coped in facing the big questions in life in a rapidly changing world. Oliver Taplin, in his exegesis on Homer, states that: *'The Iliad is not so much concerned with what people do, as with the way they do it, above all the way they face suffering and death'* (Taplin in Boardman et al, 1986: 59). Furthermore, Taplin points out that a great deal of the Iliad consists of direct speech, and this is because *'so much of it is spent in argument about values'* (p74). In 350 BC, Aristotle declared that *'every story must have a plot with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, themes, dialogue, rhythm and spectacle'*.

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In the contemporary era, the ubiquitous nature of children's stories by Tolkien, Le Guin, Pullman and Pratchett demonstrates that, even in a digital age, we still need stories to inspire us for and on our journey. As Philip Pullman puts it:

'We need a story, a myth that does what the traditional religious stories did. It must explain. It must satisfy our hunger for a why... and there are two kinds of why. And our story must deal with both. There is the one that asks what brought us here? And the other that asks what are we here for?' (quoted in Coyte et al, 2007: 22).

While Pullman is making a larger point, his questions are also applicable to organisations where staff often enquire about journey and purpose. Similarly, managers and consultants listen to stories and use them too. For example, Peters and Waterman describe how they walked into a hotel in a strange city, late at night. They tell the story which started them on their quest for what makes a company excellent:

'...we braced ourselves for the usual chilly shoulder accorded to late-comers. To our astonishment the concierge looked up, smiled, called us by name, and asked how we were. She remembered our names! We knew in a flash why, in the space of a brief year, Four Seasons had become the "place to stay" in the district and was a rare first-year holder of the venerated 4-star rating.' (Peters & Waterman, 1982: xvii).

Thus began their quest to discover whether the employee at the frontline was courteous, effective and human simply through their own merits, or because the company brought out these qualities.

Disentangling story

In addition to Aristotle's six components, Tanner (2007) has suggested that stories create a universal language, transcend barriers, are inhabited by both hearer and teller and can communicate powerful truths. People like a good story, but might like it for different reasons. It depends where you are and what stirs you. But a good story will serve as a head lifter, will restore eye contact with people who have lost interest and started to stare gloomily at the floor. Almost all good communication, whether it is a private conversation or an academic lecture, seems to be most effective and memorable if it is structured like a story.

The origin of the word leadership comes from the old English *laden*. The Anglo-Saxon *laed* means a path or road, related to the verb *lithan*, to travel or to proceed (see Gilbert, 2005). The Oxford English Dictionary defines lead as: *'to show the way to (an individual or group) by going with or ahead; to guide, control and direct; to direct the course of; to give an example for others to follow'*. John Adair, in 'Inspiring Leadership' (2002), points out that neither the metaphorical basis nor the word itself are unique to the English language. He states that the metaphor of the journey can be found in the Shona language in Zimbabwe, as well as in ancient Persian and Egyptian. Adair makes a similar claim for the Roman word for leader, *dux* from which we derive *education* – leaders being educators as well as direction-finders.

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If good leaders are storymakers, then they should be chosen at least partly on their ability to tell a good story. Tanner (2007) suggests that the effective storyteller blends preparation with improvisation to inhabit the story by animating the characters through facial expression, gestures and role play, tone of voice, silence and passion. Then the listener is drawn in by the security of the story's internal world, engaged by the emotion, captured by the eye contact, inspired and motivated by the vision until they too inhabit the story. Like a gripping novel, the reader continues to think about the plot and the characters long after the final page is turned.

Stories can be helpful at many different levels.

- For the individual, the internal process of sense-making about the world and personal experience is commonly a process of finding and owning a story. Rushing too quickly into sense-making can be destructive, however, and we need to be patient and sit with bewilderment until the story begins to gradually take form and substance. Undue haste can also do harm when potentially new experiences are railroaded into service to support the idea that today's reality is nothing more than a repeat showing of yesterday's story.
- Stepping into the story told by another can expand our own emotional life and add new possibilities for our own story. But telling one's own story requires vulnerability and trust, so it can never be heard where there is suspicion or an imbalance of power.
- Sometimes it is important to construct a new story to replace an old one. Ron Coleman describes his journey of recovery from mental health difficulties as a journey from 'Victim to Victor' (Coleman & Smith, 1997). Whether as mental health service users or individual employees working for a service organisation, each individual has a dynamic, living, mutating story. Teaching story skills to service users will assist with recovery; to frontline staff it will assist with professional development.
- In real world situations, non story and story fragments coexist alongside full stories; a story may be co-authored and it competes with many others, and the stories themselves are usually truncated, simplified versions of real life. The very existence of a beginning, middle and end, limited cast list, plot with traceable cause and effect, rhythm and pattern, excitement and spectacle all show us that this is story rather than reality. While they bring us many welcome gifts, we need to keep in mind that there will come a time when the story must give way to reality.
- Where bureaucracies have grown large and it is possible to travel all day without seeing a single service user, stories about how people have benefited from the provision can help an organisation to remember its value-focus, test whether its proposed changes improve opportunities for service users and retain its 'human-scale' concern for real people rather than bureaucratic systems. Some people who use services are willing to speak or write about their experiences and these stories anchor the organisation.
- Consultants who are listening to an organisation need to spend time hearing a range of story fragments as well as competing but complete stories before they offer their own story of

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how the organisation might improve. Some of the stories they hear may be uncomfortable, nihilistic or horrifying, but it is crucial to hear a story before telling one. Weaving one story out of the myriad of story fragments we find within us and around us is ultimately an exercise of power, for as the saying goes, 'history is always written by the winning side'.

- Leaders and managers have a story to tell. They have lived or learned the history of the organisation that they lead, they understand the present and they are gripped by a compelling vision of the desired future for the organisation which motivates them to work for change. They know where the organisation has been, where it is now and where it is going.

Leadership and story

Not everyone in the organisation has this clarity. For many people involved in complex organisations a variety of disconnected targets appear randomly on the horizon (some of them at opposing points of the compass), while bureaucratic and other changes can sometimes lead round in circles. It is easy to feel like the ancient Israelites who spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness.

Having sat with bewilderment, story fragments and competing accounts, the leader is a storyteller. The leader constantly reminds the people of where they have come from and where they are going. The events occurring today are placed in the context of the story and are thus revealed to be signs of progress or hindrances on the journey, while their meaning is interpreted in the light of the story. Because we are so forgetful and there are so many goals competing for our attention, we are reminded again and again by our leaders about the journey that the organisation is taking towards its destination.

Leaders see everything that happens in the light of this journey. Every potential change must first pass the test of whether it points in the right direction, every new idea can only be adopted if it energises people to travel, and every setback is presented so that it strengthens our resolve to get there anyway. Every discussion about change, news announcement and celebration of success provides a fresh opportunity to explain where we used to be, where we are now and where we are going.

Many of the great world religions prefer stories rather than commands as a means of provoking thoughtful response. Effective parables teach the underpinning values, get translated and retold, but refuse to lie down quietly. They unsettle both speaker and hearer, lodge in the memory as deceptively simple puzzles that tantalise and irritate, like sand in the oyster. Boje (2007) suggests that such stories are more influential than policy and procedure guides.

Misusing story

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Care is needed to ensure that the big story – where the organisation has been and the meaning of what is happening now in the light of the destination – does not slip into command and control or micromanagement. After a party, a few friends stayed behind to help the family clear up. The unspoken but shared understanding of what needed doing (the story) was inhabited by volunteers who tackled just what they fancied and within a few minutes, everything was packed, washed and wiped. This brings story thinking together with complexity rather than using storymaking as another means to exercise power over people's actions or perceptions, as was encouraged in the following advice:

'We set a goal of creating a narrative-rich culture with a ratio of five stories of positive performance and success to every negative one as a way of building a vibrant, high-performing, customer-focused culture'. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005: 4)

So can storymaking be used to oppress? Of course it can. The activity that political commentators refer to as 'spin' means deceiving people that travelling in the wrong direction or hiding the truth about setbacks and disappointments is the best route to get to the right destination. Simplistic managers fail to hear any discussion about the best route and they refuse to listen to any discussion about alternative destinations. They find one or more 'inspirational' stories and repeat them ad nauseam. Bullying bosses suppress competing stories and other interpretations. Senior staff who have lost contact with the work of their frontline colleagues tell a story that nobody understands or with which they feel no resonance. Organisations that are constantly in the turbulence of reorganisation and high staff turnover have dismissed their local historians and forgotten their story. Naively optimistic stories increase distress when the harsh realities of real life intrude. When senior staff merely recite the story of another rather than inhabiting it, they shrink their role to managers rather than leaders.

Stories and the heart

Even when the motive of the leader is pure, stories evoke a response from many people who feel the need to be convinced that this is not just a story, a fable, a fantastic tissue of make-believe. The leader has a continuous task to provide corroborating evidence of the validity and authenticity of the story – evidence that would stand up in court or read as a convincing journalistic narrative. The story is defensible and convincing. Let us return to Homer again:

'For as I detest the doorways of death, I detest that man, who holds of one thing in the depths of his heart, and speaks forth another' (9 312–13).

So humble leaders listen to everyone's voice before deciding on the destination and then continue to listen as the journey progresses, since it is these alternative stories that carry the wisdom to ensure that the organisation achieves progress and not merely change. Good storymakers help others to become storymakers too (Chynoweth, 2007).

Authentic leadership has now become a bit of a buzzword (see George, 2003; Goffee & Jones, 2006) and, of course, this is part of the challenge, in that people may be judged to be someone that they

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are not, or to act in ways which are not authentic for them at all. We like the question that Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones pose on the cover of their book: 'Why Should anyone be Led by You?' Employees in both the private and the public sector are increasingly disinclined to work for people who are not seen to be trustworthy and authentic. In the BBC2 television series with management consultant Gerry Robinson (2006, 2007), Gerry has to persuade the chief executive that getting out to his office and engaging in dialogue with frontline staff is going to improve the organisation. It is clear from the second series that this isn't easy for the chief executive, but people appeared to see his efforts as genuine.

When Peter Gilbert was introducing the NHS and Community Care Act into a Staffordshire county council in 1992/3, he was delighted to receive a letter from the carer of an elderly person who described in graphic terms the service that she had received from the social worker and the respite care facility. Peter used this letter (with permission) in a whole range of staff meetings, because this real story conveyed in ways that no report could do, what needed to happen to make community care a reality. The story galvanised people to take action.

John Kotter, in his book 'Leading Change' (1996) sets out key elements in the effective communication of the vision: simplicity; metaphor, analogy and example; multiple forms; repetition; leadership by example; explanation of seeming inconsistencies; give and take. (p90, see also Chynoweth, 2007).

Conclusion

We conclude that story skills would be helpful to people with mental health problems creating their own recovery stories, frontline staff designing their professional development and leaders negotiating organisational change. It would certainly make a refreshing change from writing policy documents, attending training on risk and updating case files or action plans.

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