

STORYTELLING IN BUSINESS

"Storytelling gets inside the minds of the individuals who collectively make up the organisation and affects how they think, worry, wonder, agonize, and dream about themselves and in the process create - and re-create - their organisation." Stephen Denning, *The Springboard*, 2001.

We heard a story about Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Before he designed the Clifton suspension bridge, he had himself hauled across the Clifton gorge in a barrel. He experienced the gap for himself before putting his mind to how it might be bridged. With this experience of the gorge, he was able to create the bridge in his imagination. Everything begins in the imagination.

This page of the website is about how the imagination, and especially the art of storytelling, can be at the service of organisations.

BENEFITS OF STORYTELLING IN BUSINESS

Colonel Eli Lilly opened his business at 15 W. Pearl St., in downtown Indianapolis, in the Midwest, on May 10, 1876. His staff of three included a drug compounder, a bottler and finisher, and his 14-year-old son Josiah K. Lilly, Sr. The business is now a global, research-based company. A 38-year-old pharmaceutical chemist and a veteran of the Civil War, Colonel Lilly was frustrated by the poorly prepared, often ineffective medicines of his day. Consequently, he made these commitments to himself and to society:

He would found a company that manufactured pharmaceutical products of the highest possible quality.

His company would develop only medicines that would be dispensed at the suggestion of physicians rather than by eloquent sideshow hucksters.

Lilly pharmaceuticals would be based on the best science of the day.

Although his business flourished, Colonel Lilly wasn't satisfied with the traditional methods of testing the quality of his products. In 1886, he hired a young chemist to function as a full-time scientist, using and improving upon the newest techniques for quality evaluation. Together, they laid the foundation for the Lilly tradition: a dedication that first concentrated on the quality of existing products and later expanded to include the discovery and development of new and better pharmaceuticals.

Colonel Lilly's son Josiah K. Lilly Sr. and two grandsons later served as president of the company. And each contributed a distinctive approach to management. Together these management styles established a corporate culture in which Lilly employees were viewed as the company's most valuable assets, a belief that is still the cornerstone of the company's corporate philosophy.

David England reports: As I sit in reception at Eli Lilly, I read this story, prominently displayed in the company's corporate brochure. I realise this is not simply a piece of history. The story openly communicates corporate values, philosophy and culture. These intangible qualities define the company in a way which more visible but ever-changing characteristics - product catalogues, production processes, advertisements, financial performance - never can. These qualities are the 'cornerstone' of the company. The story communicates this using vivid, inspiring and memorable images, the Civil War colonel, humble origins in downtown Indianapolis, eloquent sideshow hucksters versus social and quality commitment ...

The benefit of the story is that so much is communicated about the company in a mere 250 words.

Every organisation has a story, though not all have a story expressed so explicitly, clearly and succinctly as Eli Lilly, and the story of many organisations remains implicit. Nevertheless, every organisation has a story - albeit implicit - which strongly influences its corporate values, philosophy and culture. For many organisations, as Bob Marley sings (quoting someone?), 'The stone which the builder refused has become the head corner stone.'

The benefit of discovering the organisation's story is that this uncovers the organisation's cornerstone, those powerful yet intangible qualities, values, philosophy and culture, which subtly determine the organisation's character. There may be work to do to uncover the organisation's story. Once achieved, a number of benefits flow from this:

The story provides clarity in developing corporate image, branding and mission statement in line with corporate philosophy. Eli Lilly is an example.

The story helps to facilitate change when the embedded culture is revisited. Moreover, the organisation's story is the story we tell ourselves and others, and sometimes the story needs to be worked on and changed to facilitate change in response to a changing environment.

The story fosters a sense of community and esprit de corps amongst members of the organisation. The story is a beacon which aligns members with corporate values and standards in their dealings with customers and suppliers.

Broadening the argument, Steve Denning (2001), discussing the benefits of a 'springboard story,' says, 'A tiny story is less a vehicle for communication of large amounts of information and more a tiny fuse that ignites a new story in the listeners' minds, which establishes new connections and patterns in the listeners' existing information, attitudes, and perceptions. The new story helps rearrange the huge amount of tacit knowledge already with the listeners so that they can understand the connections between things in a difference sense. The listeners generate a new story.'

In other words, the benefit of the story and the power of the story as a means of communication is that it offers a vision - in Steve Denning's case the vision of communities of practitioners where there is a safe space for knowledge sharing - whilst leaving the listener free to arrive at their own meaning of the vision and how to apply it to meet their local conditions, their own rendering of the story. The story is a container for whatever meaning it has for each listener.

Much more can be said about the benefits of storytelling in organisations. There is an excellent website called Golden Fleece which lists a wide range of benefits. When used effectively, it points out, storytelling offers numerous advantages over more traditional organisational communication techniques:

Stories communicate ideas holistically, conveying a rich yet clear message, and so they are an excellent way of communicating complicated ideas and concepts in an easy-to-understand form.

Stories therefore allow people to convey tacit knowledge that might otherwise be difficult to articulate; in addition, because stories are told with feeling, they can allow people to communicate more than they realise they know.

Storytelling provides the context in which knowledge arises as well as the knowledge itself, and hence can increase the likelihood of accurate and meaningful knowledge transfer.

Stories are an excellent vehicle for learning, as true learning requires interest, which abstract principles and impersonal procedures rarely provide.

Stories are memorable - their messages tend to 'stick' and they get passed on.

Stories can provide a 'living, breathing' example of how to do something and why it works rather than telling people what to do, hence people are more open to their lessons.

Stories therefore often lead to direct action - they can help to close the 'knowing-doing gap' (the difference between knowing how to do something and actually doing it).

Storytelling can help to make organisational communication more 'human' - not only do they use natural day-to-day language, but they also elicit an emotional response as well as thoughts and actions.

Stories can nurture a sense of community and help to build relationships.

People enjoy sharing stories - stories enliven and entertain.

The Golden Fleece site elucidates these benefits in greater detail.

STORYTELLING IN BUSINESS, SPRINGBOARD STORIES

Stephen Denning introduces the concept of a 'springboard story' in his essential book, *The Spring-board: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*.

"By a springboard story," he says, "I mean a story that enables a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an organization or community or complex system may change." Moreover, it is not simply organisations which are changed by storytelling, it is the people who work in them. Stephen Denning says, "The stories that were successful for me all had certain characteristics. They were stories that were told from the perspective of a single protagonist who was in a predicament that was prototypical of the organization's business."

Knowledge Sharing

This springboard story is taken from Stephen Denning's book, *The Springboard*. Faced with the uphill task of advocating the concept of knowledge sharing within the World Bank, the story of a health worker in Kamina succeeded in igniting action throughout the organisation.

"Clearly the twenty-first century is going to be different. But how? The story of the health worker in Zambia offers the possibility of viewing the future, which, I suggest, is going to be like today.

"Thus, in June 1995 a health worker in Kamana, Zambia, logged on to the Centre for Disease Control Web site and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria.

"This true story happened, not in June 2015 but in June 1995. This is not a rich country: it is Zambia, one of the least developed countries in the world. It is not even the capital of the country: it is six hundred kilometres away. But the most striking aspect of the picture is this: our organization isn't in it. Our organization doesn't have its know-how and expertise organized in such a way that someone like the health worker in Zambia can have access to it. But just imagine if it had!"

Morale Building (contributed by David England)

We undertook a project with the managers of a health department in Scotland at a time when morale in the department was at an all-time low. What emerged was this: the managers told and retold a story about how their great ideas for the future development of the department were constantly being blocked either by external events or by an unresponsive senior management. The general mood was of despondency and low energy.

Part way into the project, we invited the group to find a metaphor for their department. After a lot of thought and discussion, during which many images were rejected, they came up with a stunning metaphor. The department was like

a greyhound in a trap, eager to be released, bursting with suppressed energy. The group spoke heatedly about how 'they' - the senior management - kept them in the cage.

After prolonged discussion, the group came around to realising just how much they had made the trap for themselves by repeatedly telling themselves a negative story about their predicament. Then they began to work on their new story - their springboard story - about how they release themselves from the trap, release their pent up energy and race to win.

The group was then able to move on to formulate plans to put their great ideas for the future development of the department into practice. Three months later we were invited to hear their presentation to their Chief Executive. They were confident and assured, their plans were accepted and being implemented, they had even applied for a health service excellence award. Moreover, when a health trust wide reorganisation was sprung upon them, they already had a good story to tell and were many lengths ahead of other departments.

STORYTELLING IN BUSINESS, USING TRADITIONAL STORIES

There are times when a well chosen traditional story can reach into the heart of the issue. Here are some examples.

Storytelling And The Power Of Self Reflection (contributed by David England)

I coached a senior manager who never stopped to think. He stormed through life, from meeting to meeting, handing out his instructions, pushing people, never delegating, never relaxing, never giving praise, as hard on himself as he was on those working for him.

As we worked together, he told me about his hard management style and its origins in his life experience, his life story. I mirrored his story back to him. He told me how he managed his sons' football team in the same way, and was shocked to realise how hard he was on his own sons, always pushing them, never giving praise. How hard on himself.

When I spoke about being self-reflective in his work, he had no idea what I was talking about. This is a story I used with him.

In China, in the days of the mandarins, there was a young artist named Tao Zu, reputed to be the finest up-and-coming artist in the land. The Emperor of China wanted a drawing of a crab. He approached the young artist. Tao Zu, on hearing the request, accepted the commission, saying he needed a large country house, twelve servants and five years in order to complete the drawing. These were granted.

After five years the Emperor visited Tao Zu. The drawing had not been made. "I need another five years with the country house and the twelve servants," said the young artist. This was granted.

Another five years went by and again the Emperor visited. Tao Zu took a piece of parchment and a pen with black ink, and in a flourish drew the most perfect crab that had ever been seen.

One day he rang me in great excitement, "I've learnt how to be self-reflective," he said. Subsequently, when he was promoted to regional director, he told me how essential it was to be self-reflective and considerate of others, and said, "I couldn't do this job without a team of self-motivated decision takers working for me."

[Storytelling And Attitudes \(contributed by David England\)](#)

Having right relationships with others is crucial to healthy organisational life. Here is a story I use about our attitudes to other people:

There was once a traveller journeying from one village to the next, when he met an old saddhu sitting by the roadside.

"What are the people like in the next village?" the traveller asked the saddhu. "Well," replied the saddhu, "what were they like in the last village?" "They were unfriendly, surly, uncooperative and greedy," said the traveller. "You'll find they are much the same in the next village," said the saddhu.

A short time later, another traveller journeyed along the same road. Meeting the saddhu, he asked, "What are the people like in the next village?" "Well," replied the saddhu, "what were they like in the last village?" "They were friendly, pleasant natured, cooperative and generous," said the traveller. "You'll find they are much the same in the next village," said the saddhu.