

Making the most of story-work

by Shawn Callahan

In using story-work to build a brand, engage employees, or for one of its many other purposes, organisations nearly always focus on storytelling. The meme is strong because the act of storytelling is so powerful. But to focus solely on this one aspect of story-work severely limits the benefits. The most valuable application of this technique combines storytelling with story-listening and story-triggering. Together, these processes create the conditions for enduring and healthy change.

Story-listening

Back in 2005, I introduced the readers of the Anecdote blog to the concept of **story-listening**¹ (it might even have been the first time the term was used). **Story-listening is the process of eliciting and collecting stories, helping groups to draw meaning from those stories, and then, most importantly from a business perspective, creating opportunities for the stories to inspire employees to take positive, transformational action.**

Story-listening may sound passive, but it does not involve people merely sitting back and listening to their company's stories in the same way that they might enjoy their favourite podcasts. It is all about helping those who can most influence change understand what's really happening in their organisation, and then inspiring them to do something about it. All good business story-work is purposeful.

Let me give you an example. Earlier this year, one of Australia's biggest accounting firms contacted Anecdote for help. They'd just done their employee engagement survey, and while many parts of the business were in good shape,



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there were several areas that revealed a need for improvement. The problem, however, was that the survey results didn't make it clear what might be creating the lower engagement scores. Broad themes like reward and recognition, communication and leadership behaviour had been flagged, but the organisation remained uncertain as to exactly which behaviours needed changing – or, for that matter, which behaviours were working nicely.

We started the project by collecting stories from a good cross-section of the firm and managing them in our **Zahmoo**² story bank. We then assembled a group of influential employees from across the business, and ran a workshop to help them work out for themselves the patterns of behaviour they wanted to reinforce and the conduct they wanted to correct – the stories we'd collected gave the employees many concrete examples of specific behaviours that either helped or hindered employee engagement. Once the important patterns were identified, we helped the group to design targeted interventions that would prompt constructive, lasting change.

All the stories you hear at work reflect your organisation's culture. You cannot change this culture without changing the stories being told and retold in your workplace. Then, once you've initiated new behaviours, new stories will flow. Story-listening helps you become aware of the current corporate narratives – it helps you to clearly hear the dominant stories, the prevalent archetypes, the repeating plot lines. Most importantly, because you are working with stories, your feelings are engaged, and these feelings inspire you to take action.

Story-listening gives you the essential ingredients for change: decision-makers who both understand what's going on and who are emotionally moved to make a difference.

Story-triggering

We all act in accordance with our beliefs, attitudes and values, which together form our view of life – or in terms of organisational culture, our view of work. This view is shaped and reshaped by what happens to us and how we interpret those experiences, and we reinforce those interpretations by telling ourselves stories and acting in accordance with them.

One of the first projects we did at Anecdote was to investigate the issue of trust in a bank's call centre. The call centre manager told us that when she'd first joined the section, she'd held the strong belief that all she had to do to get something done was to simply ask someone to do it and get their verbal agreement. But within her first week on the job, a colleague pulled her aside and advised her that, to get anything done, she should really email the person she was tasking and document her request, cc-ing all the relevant managers to ensure there was an obvious paper trail. At first this seemed crazy to the manager, and it offended her belief in the personal, friendly and trusting management style she had cultivated over many years, so she refused to adopt this approach. However,

within another three weeks, after a series of incidents, the manager was emailing all of her tasking requests.

The dominant story at this call centre was that if you just relied on face-to-face requests, your words would be twisted or ignored and the job wouldn't get done, so you needed to maintain a paper trail as evidence. The centre's manager lived this negative story, multiple times, and eventually adopted it in place of her optimistic personal conviction. This was a sign of a very unhealthy workplace. What needed to happen here was that the employees needed to be subjected to new experiences that generated a fresh, positive governing story, and this is exactly the objective of story-triggering.

The simplest way to trigger such stories is for an organisation's leaders – that is, leaders in the broadest sense of the word – to do remarkable things, things that other people will remark on. We saw this happen at another bank we worked with. The bank's new CEO had noticed that most of the meeting rooms in the company's headquarters were occupied all the time, but that a handful were usually empty. On closer inspection, he noticed that the empty rooms each had a sign on the door which read, *"This room can only be booked by a General Manager."* The CEO asked around to see if this was necessary and quickly decided it wasn't. He then personally went to each GM meeting room and tore down the notices, triggering a story that flew around the organisation.

This might seem like a small act and a trivial story. But, in fact, it fed into a much bigger narrative that the CEO was creating, which went along the lines of: *"We are flattening our organisation and resources will be allocated to whoever needs them to deliver business outcomes, regardless of their level in the company."*

The first step in successful story-triggering is for leaders to be mindful of their actions. Such purposefulness is easier said than done. Often a leader's intent doesn't match the lived experiences and perceptions of her colleagues. She might want to foster collaboration yet is seen as acting in ways that create competition. She will only be able to tell if she is on the right track by becoming aware of the stories that are being told about her; some story-listening might be required here.

The next step is for leaders to identify or engineer opportunities to do something remarkable, and to do it conspicuously. This might be as simple as a leader telling an authentic story that reveals something about them – in particular, something about how they really feel, rather than what they think. If this sounds wishy-washy, it isn't.

In his book *The Political Brain*, neuroscientist and political pundit Drew Westen puts it this way, using the context of political campaigns:

"Campaigns aren't won with bags full of anything [e.g. policy promises]. They are won by candidates who can convince voters, through their words, intonation, body language, and actions, that they share their values, that they understand people like them, and that they inspire the nation or save it from danger."

One CEO we worked with punctuated each sentence of a sustainability policy he was presenting by smacking the projection screen with the back of his hand. By the end of the presentation, no-one was left in any doubt as to the fact that sustainability was important to him.

The psychologists Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey point out in their book *Immunity to Change* that we can also apply the idea of story-triggering at the individual level, helping people to create new stories for themselves which fulfil the prerequisites for behaviour change.

The usefulness of this approach became clear to me while I was conducting a workshop with 80 professors at an Australian university on ways to improve collaboration. As I began to make the point that two important behaviours for good collaboration were to make and keep promises and to speak your mind to colleagues with respect and good intent, I noticed a woman sitting at the back of the room. She had her arms firmly crossed and was shaking her head, clearly very unhappy with what I was saying. So I stopped my presentation and asked the woman if she would like to share what she was thinking with the rest of the group. Practically before I had finished my request, she said, *"There is no way in the world you can be open and honest with a senior professor around here."* Before I could comment, she went on to tell a mini story: *"I once did what you are suggesting and I had to move departments."*

Now, no amount of clever argument or telling of familiar stories would have changed that person's mind. She had obviously had an incredibly bad experience. The only way to help her gain a new insight would be to create an experience with a different result to what she was expecting, and to do this many times over. She would then have a new story that would in turn guide her future behaviour.

Storytelling

There are many ways to apply storytelling to your work setting. You can help your leaders to become better storytellers, and you can also begin to share stories of customer service or safety, or stories that convey your values, brand, service or product. But there is one particular type of storytelling that I'd like to focus on here, that which will help you bring your strategy to life.

As I've said in my paper, *How to make your strategy stick with a strategic story* [<http://www.anecdote.com.au/whitepapers.php?wpid=23>],

the sad reality of strategies is that considerable effort is expended to create them, yet it's often the case that few people in an organisation know them. As a consequence, it is practically impossible for people to act strategically. Without the company strategy in mind, people won't know what to focus on, or what to say 'yes' or 'no' to, and they will become reliant on their managers for direction which, depending on the quality of the manager, can really curtail innovation and effectiveness. This is where strategic stories can help.

There are some misconceptions about strategic stories that we should clear up. Firstly, some people think that a strategic story is merely an immutable single story that must be conveyed unchanged in each telling. Of course, this common misunderstanding is far from the truth. One of our associates once helped a large postal service develop their strategic story, but before he'd had time to organise some sessions to explain how to use it, the story had found its way to the head of the parcels section, who promptly said there was no way he was going to parrot 'this script' or read it out to his guys. Our associate assured him that that wasn't the intention. Rather, the story had been designed to convey the meaning of the postal service's strategy via a mixture of context, emotion and facts, and with that meaning in mind, leaders would be encouraged to tell their own stories to illustrate the company's strategic directions.

A good strategic story is a framework of meaning that explains why an organisation's strategic directions have been selected. But it's also like a chord progression used by a jazz musician, in that within that progression, the musician is free to improvise and adapt the music to suit their needs and the desires of the moment.

Another misconception about strategic stories is that they are crafted by the CEO and her team and communicated to everyone much like Moses heralded the Ten Commandments. On the contrary, it's important that the development of a strategic story is a participatory process that involves as many people as possible, both in its initial crafting and in the sharing of new stories about how the strategy is subsequently being lived out by employees.

Once you've developed a strategic story, you'll find that it wields tremendous power in clarifying a new strategy. Even if you already have a strategy in place, the strategic story process will often reveal misunderstandings about what the strategic directions actually mean, or disagreement among your leaders on what they should be. When we conducted separate interviews with each of the senior partners of a large consulting firm, we found them mostly in agreement about the company's strategic directions. During the strategic story process, however, we discovered major differences of opinion between them which required resolution before the process could be completed. Through some difficult but important conversations, the leaders reached agreement and now have an even stronger resolve to pursue their strategy. Unfortunately, too many organisations avoid these tough discussions or just lack the trigger and then the process to pursue them effectively. Instead, they mistakenly continue working with a completely misaligned view of their strategy.

A strategic story is memorable, adaptable and imbued with meaning. It helps everyone in an organisation to make sense of what's happening in the business. Done well, a strategic story provides a real competitive advantage.

Bringing it all together

The combination of story-listening, story-triggering and storytelling magnifies the impact of story-work far beyond that achieved through the use of a single story approach. Organisations often start with story-listening, to find out what's really happening in the workplace and to help employees work out what they need to do. Then storytelling is used to increase the ability of leaders to connect with their colleagues and inspire them. While we are all natural storytellers – I'm writing this in a cafe and the guys at the next table are sharing one story after another – we often need to build our confidence to tell stories in a work setting. This is because we've become used to merely voicing our opinions at work, rather than showing our hearts. But employees want to know what their leaders stand for, and those leaders' actions and stories are a useful guide. Once an organisation knows what is happening within it, albeit with an awareness that you can never know it all, then story-triggering is used to prompt the telling of new stories that will pave the way for a new means of acting.

If you're already applying a story technique to your organisation, then you're well placed to broaden your approach and gain the benefits of using all three story-work modes. If you're just starting out, then you have a great opportunity to distinguish yourself from your competitors by using a comprehensive story approach to improve the way you work. You'll be amazed at the business results.

¹See http://www.anecdote.com.au/archives/2005/09/how_marketers_c.html

²See <http://www.zahmoo.com>



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