



The use of the narrative approach as a means of motivating social workers

Author

Evelyn Chafota, Social Work Team Manager

Communication is key to the success of social work. Here, Evelyn Chafota considers the role of storytelling in creating cultural buy-in...

Long before people could read or write, storytelling was the conduit through which information was shared, and today it seems that our brains are hardwired to listen and respond to stories. Indeed, the narrative approach, or storytelling, is a vital tool that can be employed in different circumstances to convey a message, and the ability of a leader to tell a good story is the vehicle to becoming an effective communicator. There is no single definition of the narrative approach in the literature, but Hinyard and Kreuter¹ have described the term as: "Any cohesive and coherent story with an identifiable beginning, middle and end that provides information about scene, characters and conflict; raises unanswered question or unresolved conflict and provides resolution."

Increasingly clear that the ancient method of communication afforded by storytelling is enjoying something of a renaissance. Boje³ has discussed how organisations have effectively become a "storytelling system", allowing employees to make sense of the events and culture of the organisation through the telling and re-telling of stories.

Storytelling performs an invaluable role within an organisation, and is being increasingly perceived as an important route to share norms and values across generations within an organisation in an effort to facilitate change. Storytelling can be utilised to achieve several different goals. For instance, to inform employees of **what** a change might entail, **why** such a change is desirable and **how** the organisation will change. The narrative approach also offers a means of building trust in the storyteller or the organisation itself with a view to inspiring collaboration. The ability to create a shared vision depends, to some extent, on the level of trust placed in the storyteller by followers. This was demonstrated in a study by Gillespie and Mann⁴ who, in surveying team members, identified that trust in a leader was strongly associated with the leader's ability to communicate a collective vision and build shared values with members of the team. The capacity to provide a good narrative can therefore be harnessed by leaders to shape the way people think.

The narrative approach is potentially more effective within organisations than other forms of communication as the technique naturally increases

It is becoming increasingly clear that the ancient method of communication afforded by storytelling is enjoying something of a renaissance

While organisations, and in particular businesses, have relied upon what Sole and Wilson² describe as harder forms of knowledge that are amenable to classification and categorisation, it is becoming



comprehension among listeners since the storyteller is relating to their own experience, which is more likely to motivate and evoke engagement with the audience. In a test of the reception of nutritional messages, Slater et al⁵ found that conversational formats such as the narrative approach, by being processed in a more automatic and effortless way, were more effective forms of communicating messages compared with a more didactic style (in so far as they are perceived as more believable by the recipient or listener). A narrative communication appears to be processed differently to non-narrative forms of communication because recipients become immersed in the characters, and this subsequently results in a greater impact on attitudes and beliefs. Hence, storytelling within the organisational setting is a much more powerful tool for instigating behavioural change.

On a practical level, an effective storyteller should be able to transform a mundane presentation into a captivating and motivating picture of the organisation's vision. When successful, a good story can thus engender knowledge sharing and leave 'footprints' in the listener's mind that would have a more lasting impact than the original slide deck from the presentation. A good narrative therefore has the potential to provide a more powerful instrument to sway peoples' behaviour without coercion to achieve the desired results.

On a practical level, an effective storyteller should be able to transform a mundane presentation into a captivating and motivating picture of the organisation's vision

The use of storytelling in practice has been recently explored in a study of Finnish managers by Auvinen and Aaltio.⁶ The authors described how managers used storytelling to evoke leadership that was characterised by six areas of influence: motivation, inspiration, defusing conflict, influencing superiors, discovering a focus, and contrasting trust. Based on their findings, the authors argue that storytelling within organisations can be an effective means of building trust between leaders and their subordinates.

As a guide to storytelling, Ramzy⁷ has described, in some detail, Stephen Denning's observations of the business narrative, which is comprised of four key elements:

- **Style** – tell the story as if speaking with an individual

- **Truth** – offer listeners an unobstructed view of the truth so that listeners will see it for what it is
- **Preparation** – choose the shape of the story and stick with it
- **Delivery** – try and connect with the audience such that it becomes a dialogue with equals.

A manager can be transformed into a great leader by articulating their own feelings in a narrative, and through emotion be able to evoke empathy and ultimately solidarity with their workforce

Additionally, the successful use of the narrative approach to knowledge sharing has been attributed by Sole and Wilson² to the following two traits of a story:

- The “streamlined experience” so that it remains simple and designed to articulate specific points and remain devoid of peripheral information
- Stories offer a “surrogate experience” in that, while the listener may not have directly experienced the specific story being told, it is able to resonate with them in so far as they might have encountered a similar situation.

At the fundamental level, leadership is the art of persuasion and thereby igniting people into action, and there are many examples throughout history. For instance, Barrack Obama’s acceptance speech upon re-election in 2008 restored American’s confidence in the nation. Though storytellers aspire to influence and shape followers’ perceptions of reality for the common good, it is also possible for charismatic leaders to utilise stories with a view to manipulation or indoctrination of their followers. This has been recently explored by Takala and Auvinen⁸ using the example of the storytelling by Adolf Hitler, to illustrate how the seductive power of storytelling can be used for destructive ends.

Storytelling in social work

The facility to utilise storytelling is an important leadership attribute which can be used to effect change, yet managers often lack the narrative skills. Common barriers to effectual use of storytelling include the fear that an individual does not have a story to share, a sense of insecurity with sharing personal experiences and a sense that listeners will be unable to relate to their narrative. These barriers can be easily overcome when the leader has conviction in their story, the confidence to deliver the message and a firm belief that people will be interested in what they have to say. Storytelling is most definitely an art and a skill which can be acquired through training and experience. A manager can be transformed into a great leader by articulating their own feelings in a narrative, and through emotion be able to evoke empathy and ultimately solidarity with their workforce, who will then share in the common purpose. Additionally, a good narrative can help to build trust between workers and a manager, removing obstacles and creating unity so that everyone shares the vision of the single story. A top-down approach to storytelling is likely to be effective. In other words, the narrative is initially delivered by senior management who should be visible and regularly communicate the story of the organisation, creating a ripple effect, such that the message is promulgated through the various tiers of management. This can create real dialogue with the staff, reinforcing the single story.

The importance of such unity is most noticeably revealed when local authorities are hampered by budgetary cuts – a prevailing problem in the area of children’s services. A report by the National Audit Office in January 2019 highlighted the current financial crisis, identifying how 91% of local authorities overspent on their children’s social care in 2017-18.⁹ Furthermore, the report noted an increase of 78% between 2010-11 and 2017-18 in the number of children taken into care, which represents the most expensive cases. The



report also makes clear that local authorities have seen their overall real spending power reduce by 28% since 2010 and have responded by reducing spending on non-statutory children's services.

This financial constraint means that many authorities are thus unable to provide adequate services. Nevertheless, having the workforce fully on-board and engaged can engender a communal spirit within an organisation so that everyone makes an effort to cooperate for the common good.

For instance, my own experience has taught me that when local authorities have limited assistant social workers to supervise contact between parents and children in care, the social workers themselves are happy to perform this additional role, despite the extra workload which this entails.

My own experience

When I became a team manager in 2014, the social workers had experienced several different managers in a short space of time, so there was little in the way of a clear focus and also a high level of absenteeism. The change of management was demoralising for the staff and many social workers had left. As a result, the team was underperforming.

a period of only six months, we became one of the best performing teams in the local authority with high scores for each of the performance indicators in visits, assessments and personal education plans (PEPs). It was highly satisfying to me that, in the end, several agency social workers ultimately became permanent members of my team. At the present time the team has remained stable.

My own experience has taught me that by adopting a narrative approach, it was possible to inspire and motivate my team despite the fact that being a social worker can be a highly challenging job. Often workers will need to make home visits outside of the normal working day and sometimes even at the weekend – both of which clearly impact on their own family lives. But social work can also be highly rewarding, and as a manager it is most satisfying to see my team performing well, not just in terms of the key performance indices but in protecting the welfare of the children in their care.

In reality, no amount of storytelling is able to rectify the financial problems of a local authority. But, when faced with an overworked and demoralised team, if a manager is passionate and able to articulate their thoughts then I'd advocate the use of storytelling as a means of boosting team morale. It may not solve all the problems but it might just be enough to provide encouragement to the staff – something that is undoubtedly required during these difficult and demanding times. ■

REFERENCES

1. Hinyard LJ, Kreuter MW. Using narrative communication as a tool for health behaviour change: A conceptual, theoretical and empirical overview. *Health Education & Behaviour* 2007. **34(5)**:777-792
2. Sole D, Wilson DG. Storytelling in organisations: The power and traps of using stories to share knowledge in organisations. *Training and Development* 1999. **53(3)**:1-12
3. Boje DM. The storytelling organisation: A study of story performance in an office supply firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 1991. **36(1)**:106-126
4. Gillespie NA, Mann L. Transformational leadership and shared values: the building blocks of trust. *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 2004. **19(4)**:588-607
5. Slater MD, Buller DB, Waters E et al. A test of conversational and testimonial messages versus didactic presentations of nutrition information. *Journal of Nutrition and Education Behaviour* 2003. **35**:255-259
6. Auvinen T, Aaltio I, Blomqvist K. Constructing leadership by storytelling – the meaning of trust and narratives. *Leadership and Organisational Development Journal* 2013. **34(6)**: 496-514
7. Ramzy A. The leader's guide to storytelling. Mastering the Art and Disciple of business narrative. *Corporate Reputation Review* 2007. **10(2)**:154-157
8. Takala T, Auvinen T. The power of leadership storytelling: case of Adolf Hitler. *Journal of Critical Organisation Inquiry* 2016. **14(1)**: 21-34
9. National Audit Office. Pressures on children's social care. Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Pressures-on-Childrens-Social-Care-Summary.pdf> [Accessed March 2019].

Storytelling is most definitely an art and a skill which can be acquired through training and experience

Subsequent recruitment was particularly difficult and in some instances, I had to resort to using agency staff to fill posts. Furthermore, the lack of permanent staff can be disheartening, with agency staff on short, fixed-term contracts and sometimes difficult to motivate.

In an effort to try and inspire the staff, one of the most influential stories I told was why I wanted to become a social worker. In the past I had been a human rights activist in my home country and campaigned passionately as an advocate for those unable to be heard, despite putting both my own and the lives of my family at risk. This desire to improve the lives of the vulnerable in society became a powerful driver for me to enter the field of social work. Though members of my team couldn't fully comprehend the level of inequality that I had witnessed back home, the concept of helplessness clearly reverberated with them and they became fervent about ensuring that the welfare of children in the city were protected. Over