



RESEARCH

THE LEADER AS STORY TELLER:  
ENGAGING HEARTS AND MINDS?

Executive Summary

Annette Sinclair

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We develop people who develop organisations.

With 70 years' experience of leadership, organisational development, human resources and coaching, we provide executive education and research to many of the world's leading companies and organisations.

We offer tailored development programmes, qualifications accredited by the University of Sussex, management consultancy, coaching and training courses. Our research services provide a unique combination of research, consultancy and development expertise for organisations who are investigating ways of improving their effectiveness and intelligence.

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Roffey Park funds its own research programme with the aim of meeting one of its charitable objectives: namely to conduct and publish research in support of the health and welfare of people at work. Our research improves the world of work and organisational performance by sharing knowledge of good practice in people management, leadership and organisational development.

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# Executive Summary

Storytelling is receiving increasing attention as a powerful tool for leaders to address some of today's key leadership challenges, including articulating a clear vision and strategy, engaging employees, generating commitment to change and establishing trust in leaders. In this report we draw on existing literature and semi-structured interviews with senior leaders to examine the theory and evidence behind these claims. We also pose challenges to encourage leaders to reflect on how they might use stories or narrative techniques to improve their own effectiveness.

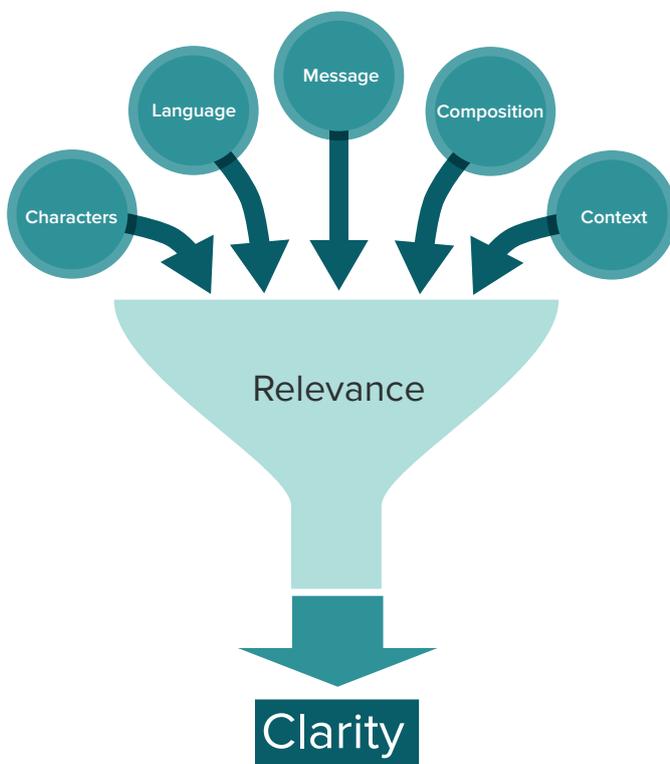
## Part 1: How do stories differ from other forms of communication?

Stories vary in length and breadth. They have different objectives, from the brief anecdote that offers insight, to the more in-depth organisational narrative that aims to engage employees with a vision. What sets them apart from many other forms of communication is that they incorporate a specific context and create meaning through appealing to the imagination and feelings rather than rationality alone.

*'When we show people slides with bullet points on them, what we are actually showing them is a lot of rich information that has been stripped down to its bare minimum for expediency's sake. It's like if I say "Just treat our customers with more empathy" instead of telling the rich story about how we received a letter of thanks from a customer after one of our call centre representatives showed true concern for a child's broken arm.'*<sup>1</sup>

## Part 2: The power of stories – Why stories are particularly effective methods of communication

The narrative techniques used in stories are particularly effective at getting and holding our attention. They can also enhance understanding because they incorporate a context that people can relate to and show the causal links between events. Findings from neuroscience suggest that our brains react differently when we hear a story as opposed to factual information or arguments. The same neurological regions are stimulated when we listen to or read a story as when we experience an event in real life. This connects the story with the listener's own experience and helps make the information in stories more memorable.



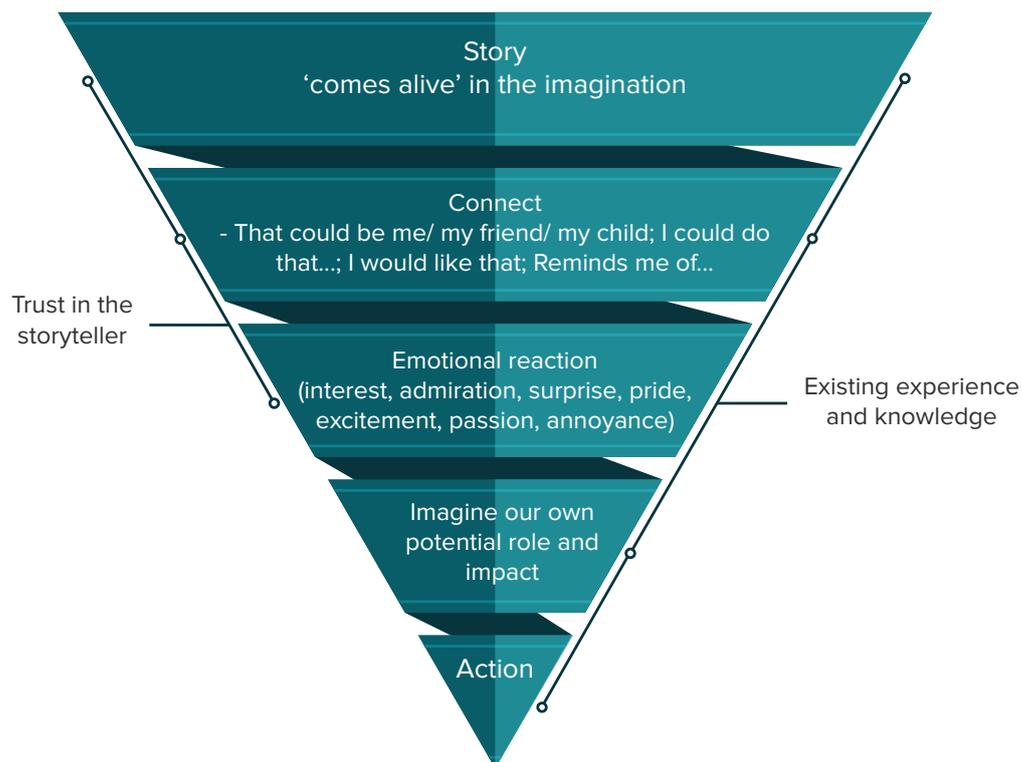
The real power of stories, however, lies in their ability to influence behaviour through appealing to feelings and emotions. Emotions play an important role in decision-making and recent discoveries in neuroscience are proving that even when we think we are making decisions based on 'logic', we are often unconsciously being driven by our emotions. Stories can be particularly effective at bridging the gap between the intellect and the emotions.

We demonstrate, however, that the success of a story depends to a large extent on the skills of the storyteller and, moreover, that people respond differently to stories. We also highlight the dangers of telling stories that are perceived to be 'spin' or manipulative or turn out to be false. We emphasise that the potential of storytelling for effective communication does not diminish the value of facts, data and logical reasoning in decision-making, but conclude that stories can bring facts to life and put information or concepts into a context that is more meaningful for the audience.

Fig 2: Clarity depends on the skills of the storyteller

<sup>1</sup> Wentworth, T., (2014). 'Why storytelling is so powerful in business', Management Today, 19 December: Available at: <http://www.managementtoday.co.uk/opinion/1327156/why-storytelling-so-powerful-business/>

Fig 3: The persuasive power of stories



Do people 'sit up and listen' when you are making important communications? Does the language and imagery you use help bring your communications 'to life'?

How could you incorporate narrative techniques (humour, surprise, challenges, etc..) to help hold people's attention?

How much do you rely on bullet points, facts and figures to convey a message? Do you put these into a context that people can relate to? Do you make explicit the connections between events or suppositions?

Do you clarify abstract values and concepts through examples of what they mean in practice for your organisation and your employees?

How could you employ narrative techniques (i.e. using metaphors and analogies, evoking emotions) to help make a message more memorable?

How could you facilitate the sharing of stories to reinforce key messages?

### Part 3: How and when stories can make leaders more effective

Recent literature, both academic and practical, describes a huge potential range of applications for storytelling within organisations. We draw on this literature and in-depth interviews with senior leaders to show how stories are used to address key leadership challenges including: building credibility and trust in leaders; developing a shared understanding of an organisation's purpose and vision; developing strategy; stimulating engagement and genuine commitment; managing change; and influencing behaviour, values and culture.

We draw out key lessons, in particular, the need for authenticity and alignment between words, actions, systems and processes. We highlight the advantages of asking as well as telling stories and demonstrate that people differ in how they interpret stories and their faith in them, based on their previous experiences.

## Building credibility and trust

What experiences and events have prepared you for your current role? Do you share them with others to enhance your credibility?

What behaviours and values do you think are important in leadership? Can you think of experiences and events that shaped those values? Do you communicate them?

Why do you believe your work has value? Can you think of a time when you felt particularly strongly about the value of your work? Do you share these stories in a way that demonstrates your commitment and belief in your organisation's mission and strategy?

How much of your humanity do you reveal at work? Do you admit to having made mistakes or having struggled with difficult decisions? Do you share these stories and your learning from these events?

Consider yourself from an employees' view. What stories about your beliefs and motivations would they tell from your actions, your words and the stories they hear from others? Would they perceive congruence between your actions and your words?

## Developing a shared understanding of an organisation's purpose and vision

Do people pay attention to your vision? What makes it worthwhile? What stories could bring this to life in a way that is meaningful to employees?

What makes your strategy credible and your vision achievable? Are there stories that demonstrate the strengths of your organisation, how it has adapted to previous challenges, or how other companies have achieved similar goals? Bringing these stories to life will have more impact than simply saying 'X did it so we can too'.

## Developing Strategy

Who contributes to strategic planning efforts in your organisation? How might sharing stories encourage different factions to 'walk the same path'?

Does your strategy provide a specific context and make assumptions explicit?

How could you invite stories to clarify how the strategy might come to life, or what might impede it, in day-to-day operations?

## Stimulating engagement and genuine commitment

How, and how often, do you share tangible stories of how the organisation is achieving its goals, how it makes a difference to real customers, how it accommodates the needs and wants of employees and other stakeholders?

Do you share stories that help employees understand the customer's needs, why they use your products, services, etc.?

Do you frame your plans for the future in a way that provides enough detail and meaning to generate enthusiasm?

Does your vision provide a context or scenario in which employees can see their own role in bringing it to life?

## Managing change

Are you confident that, with due process, the organisation can achieve the change? That it will have positive outcomes? Do you set out the context, the need for change and your vision of the outcome in enough detail to convince employees of your reasoning and share in your excitement?

Have you seen or heard about examples of change similar to that you want to bring about? If they were successful, why? If not, why not, and how would your initiative be different? Would sharing these stories help alleviate any fear or uncertainty around your change initiative?

Do you share stories of how the change is progressing? Do employees share their experience and views of the change in a way that allows concerns to be aired, successes shared and the process to be refined?

## Influencing behaviour, values and culture

Think of the behaviours and values you want to see in your organisation. Can you think of a time someone exhibited that behaviour/value with a positive result? Or a time when someone failed to engage in that behaviour with a negative outcome? Do you share these stories?

How do you share and showcase employee/customer stories consistent with your organisation's values, mission and strategy?

What stories could you tell to demonstrate how your actions are consistent with the values and behaviours you want to see?

What dominant stories in your organisation are not consistent with the values and behaviours you want to see? Are they rooted in the past (how things have been done) or the present (lack of alignment)?

## Part 4: What makes a good story and a good storyteller?

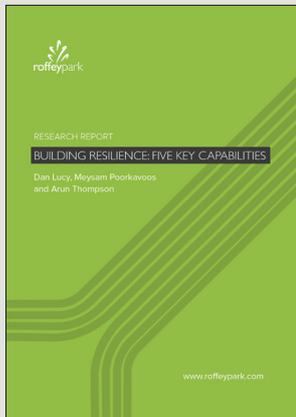
A good story needs to fit the purpose, get and maintain attention, come to life in the imagination, engage people's emotions and be relevant to the audience. We argue that attention to and belief in a story is down to the authenticity of the storyteller and how they deliver it. We highlight the need for storytellers to believe in their story's message, tell stories in a way they are comfortable with, respect and connect with the audience, create opportunities to share and listen to other people's stories and look to the listener/audience for feedback.

We conclude that stories can be a powerful leadership tool, particularly when they become part of on-going interactive communications. However they are most influential when other initiatives and actions are in alignment.

Fig 7: An effective storyteller



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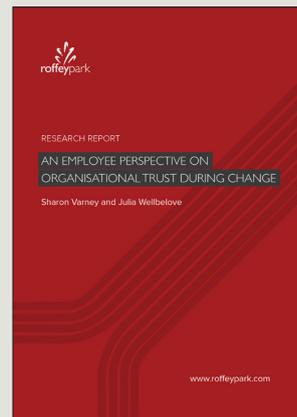
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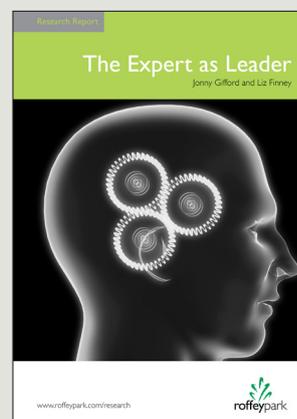
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