

## Review

Stephen Denning (2005) *The leader's guide to storytelling: mastering the art and discipline of business narrative*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco

*Sibrenne Wagenaar*

Stephen Denning starts his book with the notion that 'the best way to communicate with people you are trying to lead is very often through a story.' His book shows how storytelling can help deal with difficult challenges faced by leadership. 'Leader' in this context is anyone who wants to lead from whatever position they are in, anyone who sees a better way to do things and wants the organisation to change. Combining those two worlds of storytelling and leadership is a big challenge.

In the first two chapters, Denning focuses on what it means to tell the right story, and what key elements are in telling the story right. Different narratives are useful for different purposes of leadership. When you want to spark action, you tell a story of a successful change implemented in the past. When you want to stimulate your team to share knowledge, your story should focus on problems, with an explanation of possible solutions. And with a story that recounts a situation that listeners have also experienced and that prompts them to share their own stories about the topic, you stimulate collaboration. Knowing which pattern is suitable for which task is key in using storytelling effectively. Denning distinguishes between eight different narrative patterns. Later on I will give a short summary of each of these patterns.

Denning sees storytelling as performance art, of which we all master the basics. He refers to the informal social settings where we constantly use stories. In other words, learning to tell stories is more about reminding ourselves of something we already know how to do. It is a matter of transposing the skills we apply effortlessly in a social setting to formal settings. According to Denning, the main elements that are important in forming the social act of storytelling are:

- *Style*: A plain, simple, and direct style is most suitable for the organisations of today. Customize the style for particular settings. Keep the story focused, simple. Make the story transparent as if listeners look at the subject through a perfectly clean window. Tell the story as if you were talking to one person. This may give your speech a rhythm of conversation and spontaneity. And tell the story as something valuable. You know what you are saying to be true. By telling the story as presenting reality instead of trying to persuade, listeners are free to draw their own conclusions.
- *Truth*: As a storyteller, believe in the idea that it is possible to share a truth. Accept the conventions of the story at least for the duration of the performance. In performance, you are certain, fearless, and relentless in presenting things 'as they really are'. It is about presenting the truth as you see it. Treat everyone in the audience as equals – people who can all understand the truth. Don't attempt to persuade by using arguments, but let the listeners see what you are seeing and assume that they will be able to verify and accept it.
- *Preparation*: The essence of good storytelling is careful preparation. Prepare so you don't have to hesitate, revise or backtrack during the performance. The story should appear as if

it could not have been told in another way. Effective storytelling is about a combination of perfection and spontaneity. In the preparation, think about elements to be included, the order of the telling, the particular emphasis. To the listeners, only show the final cut.

- *Delivery*: Much depends on the non-verbal aspects, the tone of voice, the facial expression, the gestures. Try to feel calm and relaxed at the start. Be close to the audience you are presenting your story to as an individual, in a conversation. Use body movements to show your interest in the entire audience. Move toward the audience, look around. Maintain eye-contact. Appropriate gestures and intonation can emphasize key elements. Vary the pace and tone of your story to keep people alert.

At this point the book gave me as a reader the feeling that storytelling was not so easy. That it was a rare skill you really have to practice and practice. And probably it is something that should 'belong' to you, which should fit you. You already need to have a sort of feeling for it. While reading the next eight chapters (every chapter focusing on one narrative pattern), this feeling started to shift. I began to see that stories can be very different. Some stories, like a springboard story (a story you can use to motivate other to action) need to be well prepared. You need to think it through, practice, and perform the story at a specific moment. Other kinds of stories, like introducing yourself or motivating your team to work together are almost already there. It is more about learning to see them and to use those stories in appropriate situations. I realised that to be able to tell a compelling story, you need to know yourself, your values, your way of looking at the world, and your challenges for the future. While reading the book, I started to recognise moments of storytelling done by others. I also started to see possibilities for storytelling in my work and examples of situations where I already used some storytelling.

In the next chapters of the book, Denning describes all eight narrative patterns. From motivating others to action, showing people who you are, to transmitting your or your company's values, sharing knowledge and stimulating collaboration. I very much appreciated the way Denning described those narrative patterns: many examples of stories, concrete suggestions, alternated by deeper thoughts and opinions, and each chapter ending in a practical template to use for crafting a story. It will help you to get a clear view of the kind of story he is talking about and the possible effects it might have in your organisation.

### **1. Motivate others to action – a springboard story**

When, as a leader, you have new ideas you want to implement, storytelling can be of help. This is what Denning calls a 'springboard story'. It helps communicate a complex new idea and ignites action to implement it. It inspires people to implement new ideas in the future and motivates them to take action.

A springboard story is based on an actual example whereby a change was successfully implemented. It is a true story, so specific that people can see the progress they can make by implementing the change idea.

### **2. Show people who you are – an identity story**

Storytelling can also be used to communicate who you are. Denning calls this 'identity stories'. You can use them in situations where you as a manager are asked to take charge of a team, or whereby you need to give a talk to a new audience. Through an identity story you try to convey to the audience that you are someone who might be worth listening to. You don't

communicate your entire lifetime of experiences, Denning says. Your audience can easily determine who you are from a representative selection of your life story.

### **3. Communicate who the company is**

Stories can also be used as a way of advertising, branding, communicating who the company/organisation is. Electronic media make it possible to transmit the story globally and repeat it endlessly. Strong 'brand narratives' we all recognise are the Levi Strauss brand, which conveys the message: '*we don't make jeans, we help people look young and hip*'. Or IBM: '*we don't sell computers, we offer business solutions*'. Denning describes in more detail what a brand is, how strong a promise can be and how hard it is to make changes to a brand. Less attention is paid to how to come up with a 'brand narrative', or what such a story should look like.

### **4. Transmit your values – a values story**

Before using a story as a tool to transmit values, leaders need to think clearly about what kinds of values they are talking about. 'Declaring values that are not consistently acted upon may be worse than not declaring any values at all'. Probably this is the most difficult part! Furthermore, Denning says that you can't dictate values. You can only let the listeners see the point for themselves in the story. A values story should therefore be told in a minimalist fashion. This allows the listeners to imagine the details and be involved more actively. The story should be timeless but believable; moreover, a values story doesn't need to be true or to have actually happened.

### **5. Get people working together**

According to Denning, collaboration rests on values, which need to be shared in order for people to work together effectively. Examining underlying values to discover or generate common values brings the group to a deeper understanding, learning and working together. Storytelling can help in establishing common meaning and transmitting values and can give a team the spark that will help it lift its work to a new level.

### **6. Share knowledge – knowledge sharing stories**

According to Denning, the transmission of knowledge is largely made up of storytelling. He states: 'when a problem arises there is something to tell a story about. Weak signals are the fertile area for knowledge sharing stories. We can learn a great deal from stories about 'near misses'. We can also learn from stories with a positive tone. But negative stories far outnumber positive ones.' Knowledge sharing stories should be about issues and difficulties and how they were dealt with, and why the course of action solved the problem. An important aspect is that these stories need an explanation. Without an explanation, a story about something that has happened is just information.

### **7. Tame the grapevine**

Taming the grapevine is about influencing rumours. Denning looks at rumours, jokes, and anecdotes that go around in organisations as stories in and of themselves. These stories communicate and embody the culture in an organisation. And as a leader you have narrative options for dealing with the 'underground' flow. You can fight story with story, therefore taming the grapevine. The trick is to work with, not against, the flow of the underground river of informal communication that exists in the organisation.

## **8. Create and share your vision.**

The last narrative pattern is about creating a shared vision: telling a story about the future. Something that is not so easy because it requires that you *have* a clear view of the future. And no matter how thoughtfully you look ahead, the future is uncertain and inherently unknowable. There is unpredictability about the future. Because of this uncertainty, choose a story that inspires listeners to think along with you, to start imagining the future for themselves. But beware: people tend to be less willing to believe in future stories, preferring to stay anchored to our past, coupled with a strong desire to hang on to what we know...

The last two chapters of the book are about 'putting it all together', or as I read it, putting storytelling in the work in context. And to be honest, in the beginning I was a bit lost here. Denning goes back to where the book started: leadership. He says, 'in practice, no one faces leadership problems in isolation or in a neat order. Instead, you run into complex situations where multiple challenges appear simultaneously: people need to be persuaded, alliances need to be built, the grapevine needs to be tamed, and knowledge needs to be shared. All at once.'

Having said that, he makes the switch towards transformational innovation as a domain where these kinds of leadership problems occur and where many theories are written and solutions proposed. But none of these theories and solutions solve the problems. Denning's remarks are about using a more organisation-wide approach, less focused on generating ideas, than taking the really good ones and making them actually happen, or looking at innovation as stimulating people to act differently instead of a new way of understanding the problem. Probably my confusion comes from the big step between different narrative patterns, and leadership and innovation. While reading I was trying to find the link with storytelling.

Denning resolves this towards the end of the chapter, stating: 'to solve the problem of innovation, you have to see things from the point of view of participants who are living, breathing, and acting in the world. It is through narrative that we imagine a new story of the future in which we can passionately believe. It is principally by listening to narrative that we learn to adapt the innovation to the evolving realities of the marketplace.' Denning is not so much talking about narrative as a tool for accomplishing a certain purpose, but rather as the basis of an interactive mind-set that involves continuously looking at the world to understand the story that is emerging, and being on the outlook for the possibility of creating a new story that can transform the future. He closes the book by going into the difference between a Napoleonic style of leadership and being a more interactive Tolstoyan leader. This fits into his idea that storytelling is not just a tool but more a way of looking around, seeing things and being in interaction with the world around you... basically, an interactive approach to leadership.

### **My reflection**

In my opinion, Denning makes a convincing case in this book. Moreover, writing a book in which storytelling comes alive for the reader is no mean feat. The book itself is a demonstration of how the performance of a story is crucial. The many interesting examples he gives bring his point alive, putting storytelling in a broader perspective and making it concrete.

When I started to read the book, telling stories was something huge, something special which is totally different from the things I am doing, and hard to learn. During the course of reading the book, my thoughts about storytelling changed from thinking it was difficult, to the

impression that with some practice and feeling for it, it is possible to start using some storytelling in my work, becoming a more interactive leader myself.

Some elements in the book (for example the part about telling your life story) make you think more thoroughly about yourself. What would be your story? Is this story authentic? Or do I allow myself to let my values be defined by others? Or, in what situations am I a leader? Where can I use storytelling? How do I talk about myself at the moment? What would change if I add storytelling to my personal introduction?

Finally, I appreciate the connection between storytelling and leadership Denning makes. It is this broader perspective that differentiates the book from other storytelling guides. But to truly appreciate storytelling as an interactive approach to leadership, rather than just a communication tool, you have to read the whole book.

I would definitely recommend this book to everyone who is interested in storytelling from an organisational point of view, whether you are a leader, or you have moments in your work where you have a leadership role. This book might help you look at the stories you and others are using and help you to see new opportunities for change and innovation.

#### **About the author**



*Sibrenne Wagenaar* studied Educational Science and Technology at the University of Twente in the Netherlands. She worked for eight years with Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company, a consultancy firm that is specialised in the field of learning problems in organisations, strategic human resource development, competence development and knowledge productivity. She is now a learning facilitator at the Knowledge Centre of PSO, an umbrella organisation for capacity building of civil society organisations in developing countries. Her fields of interest are

professionalising people responsible for learning in organisations, making the design process a learning process, competency based learning, and facilitating learning and knowledge sharing in groups. In her work she has a special focus on humanitarian assistance.

E-mail: [Wagenaar@pso.nl](mailto:Wagenaar@pso.nl)