

## **Developing a Storytelling Framework for Leadership**

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### **Abstract**

Storytelling is a very old concept of developing culture. Storytelling as a method has more emotional connect with people. Stories also have much more retention as compared to a report of general information. Hence this research paper explores to understand the use of storytelling by leaders of the organization. This being exploratory research, in depth interviews of 27 corporate leaders was conducted, to understand how they use storytelling. The interviews suggest various benefits of using storytelling methods including motivating employees, reducing conflicts, leadership development, team work, establishing organizational culture and so on. The research suggests that storytelling is used widely by the leaders, though it is not an organized process. Hence a framework of storytelling is suggested in the article.

**Key Words:** Storytelling, Leadership, Leadership and storytelling, Storytelling Framework

### **Introduction**

Storytelling is an age old concept. We can trace the history of human mankind and ancient human being through the stories inscriptions on the caves and other folk tales. Not only in India, but we see the use of storytelling across the globe. All the countries have and their cultures have popular stories. In India, some of the popular ancient mythology includes 'The Mahabharata' and 'The Ramanaya'. In India, other folk tales including 'The wisdom of Panchtantra', 'Jataka Tales', 'Vikram Betal' and 'Tenali Rama's Dream' are very widely popular. Similarly, Greek Mythology includes stories of 'Theogony: Clash of the Titans', 'The Three Sisters of Fate', 'Pandora's Box', 'The name giving of Athens' etc. While the Roman empire is flooded with stories of 'Romulus and Remus', 'Numa Pompilius' and 'The Roman Myth of Jupiter and Bee'. Stories have been a stepping stone for the development of any civilization. Storytelling has been used in various different forms to entertain and educate people.

The literature is swamped with various means of communication, be it verbal or non-verbal communication. It is a method used in various professions like politics, journalism, advertisement, education as well as organizational communication. Out of all the methods available, storytelling is one of the age old and the most effective method of communication, in general as well as for organizational communication. Many researchers including (Morgan, 2014), recommended storytelling as a method for leadership. According to the author, leaders will be heard in the organisations only through stories. Also, stories have a long lasting impact and will emotionally connect to the audience. Hence, the leaders can develop stories that can give a clear meaning, reference and goal to the employees. (Sachs, 2012) believed that humans are programmed biologically in a manner in which they are both; the consumers of stories as well as the creators of stories. Hence, we can say that storytelling is an art that can be learnt and executed.

There have been many instances and cases wherein, the organizational leaders have used storytelling method for a variety of purposes like motivating employees, creating an insight, clarifying the goals; cultural changes etc. (Heller, 2001) in the book *Roads to Success* cited many illustrations of use of storytelling methods by

organizational leaders. Like Richard Branson, CEO of Virgin Group, used storytelling approach in order to communicate organization’s vision, mission and philosophies. He also used storytelling approach to let employees know about customers, entrepreneurship, innovation and CSR philosophy of the organization. The book also talks about stories told by Bill Gates, Founder, Microsoft about Paul Allen and his making of MS DOS. Along with conveying knowledge and wisdom, stories can be put into more contemporary use like forming and changing organizational culture (Jay B Barney, 2023). According to the author the stories are much more helpful in changing organisational culture when the leaders follow the following building blocks; being authentic, featuring themselves in the stories, break the past and lay path for the future, appealing emotionally as well as cognitively, being theatrical and empowering employees to follow their own success stories.

**A storytelling catalogue:**

A storytelling catalogue given by (Denning, 2004) gives a catalogue for storytelling

| Objective of the Story         | Need of the story   | Communication requisite  | Inspiring Responses   |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Spark Action</b>            | Describes how a successful change was implemented in the past, but allows listeners to imagine how it might work in their situation | Avoid excessive detail that will take the audience’s mind off its own challenge  | “Just imagine...”<br>“What if...”   |
| <b>Communicate who you are</b> | Provides audience-engaging drama and reveals some strength or vulnerability from your past  | Include meaningful details, but also make sure the audience has the time and inclination to hear your story  | “I didn’t know that about him!”<br>“Now I see what she’s driving at.”         |
| <b>Transmit values</b>         | Feels familiar to the audience and will prompt discussion about the issues raised by the value being promoted                       | Use believable (though perhaps hypothetical) characters and situations, and never forget that the story must be consistent with your own actions                       | “That’s so right!”<br>“Why don’t we do that all the time?”                    |
| <b>Foster collaboration</b>    | Movingly recounts a situation that listeners have also experienced and that prompts them to share their own stories about the topic | Ensure that a set agenda does not squelch this swapping of stories—and that you have an action plan ready to tap the energy unleashed by this narrative chain reaction | “That reminds me of the time that I...”<br>“Hey, I’ve got a story like that.” |
| <b>Tame the grapevine</b>      | Highlights, often through the use of gentle humor, some aspect of a rumor that reveals it to be untrue or unlikely                  | Avoid the temptation to be mean spirited, and be sure that the rumor is indeed false   | “No kidding!”<br>“I’d never thought about it like that before!”               |
| <b>Share knowledge</b>         | Focuses on mistakes made and shows in some detail   | Solicit alternative—and possibly better—solutions  | “There but for the grace of God ...”  |

|                                    |   |   |  |
|------------------------------------|---|---|--|
|                                    | how they were corrected, with an explanation of why the solution worked                                     |   | “Wow! We’d better watch that from now on.” |
| <b>Lead people into the future</b> | Evokes the future you want to create without providing excessive detail that will only turn out to be wrong | Be sure of your storytelling skills (otherwise, use a story in which the past can serve as a springboard to the future) | “When do we start?”<br>“Let’s do it!”      |

Source: Steven Denning. 2004. Telling Tales. Harvard Business Review. May: 122–129.

**Literature Review:**

The research article (Gandhi L, 2021) concluded that story telling is important for the organization. They concluded that the story telling should be managed in a way of two-way communication. Moreover, they recommended the use of social media and chat boxes in order to communicate stories in more effective manner. The authors insisted the use of storytelling art in building and changing corporate culture. According to the authors stories are more engaging and can emotionally connect to the employees as well as the other readers. Moreover, stories have been a major part of people’s lives and are something which the readers will hold on to in long run. According to the authors storytelling is a can also work as a confidence building instrument for the employees. Finally, the use of storytelling should be a well planned and executed strategy at various stages of career lifecycle of employees to create a positive attitude, motivate employees and inculcate organizational leadership and culture.

(Mladkova, 2013) attempts to connect the link between leadership and storytelling. According to the author, storytelling is great instrument for leaders in many of their roles. Effective storytelling helps in communicating their vision to the organization and the team members, conflict resolution, team building and creating a positive work environment in the organization. According to the author, an effective leader uses more stories as compared to an ineffective leader.

The research done by (Aidman & Long, 2017) accentuated on the importance of storytelling in the leadership in educational institutions. According to the authors, the main objective of using storytelling strategy is to build leadership and transmitting culture. The authors have also argued using storytelling method in order to clarity expectation from employees, communicate ideas, increase knowledge, skills and improve expectations as well as for professional development of the employees.

According to (Lin-Ping Lee, 2013) storytelling is an integral part of knowledge management. Storytelling helps in communicating ideas, values, experiences and knowledge to internal as well as external stakeholders. According to the authors, storytelling frameworks includes six factors; background of the story, core of the story, structure of the story, type of story, knowledge embodied in the story and function of the story. The stories should include these elements along with the organizational context. When it comes to delivering the story, the authors have included factors like delivered message, undelivered message and unintended or

triggered message. According to the authors, all the factors should be thoroughly considered while strategizing storytelling in order to bring organizational change. The authors also urge to use different types and context of stories for different audience. The recommend to deliver the stories in a clear and coherent manner to the audience.

(Sandra Morgan, 1997) in their research have developed a rationale of using storytelling as a powerful method of training and developing employees. According to the researchers stories help in having an emotional connect with the organization culture and the complexities of the organization culture. They have also suggested a framework of storytelling used as training should include setting of the story, build-up, climax, learning and the impact of the story.

The research by (Hsiu-Ping Yueh, 2019) aimed at developing a scale to measure the effectiveness of storytelling with reference to agricultural marketing and to explore the four structural-model with reference to storytelling. According to the researchers, the concept of storytelling is innovative and more effective as compared to advertisement. The authors recommend organizations to use storytelling in as an advertising strategy.

The article by (Serrant, 2008) argues storytelling as one of the most effective tools having various advantages including connecting people and ideas, enhancing imagination and creativity, developing sense of description and knowledge of the surrounding, communicating messages in an effective manner and inspire organization cultural change. The author also gives a few elements of a good organizational story, which includes exploiting a particular opportunity, including personal and humane element, include a character that is directly involved in the story, connect with the organizational strategy, could include both successful and unsuccessful ideas, and provide solutions to the problems that are encountered by the employees. The author also argues that storytelling will be effective only if the employees demonstrate willingness to grasp the story, in the other cases, report or analysis of a problem will be more effective.

The research done by (Klagge, 2016) described storytelling as a method used to create values, belief system and culture in an organization. A proper use of storytelling methods in the organization can lead to healthy work practices and a positive organizational environment. According to the researcher, the storytelling method can help communicate the vision and mission of the organization and how do they achieve them in an extremely interesting and understandable method.

Research was conducted by (Tommi Auvinen, 2013) in order to understand the use of storytelling method to promote organizational aims, developing leadership and influence and motivate the employees. According to the researchers, the managers used stories in order to improve six areas of leadership vis-à-vis motivation, inspiring subordinates, resolving conflicts, influencing their superiors, engaging employees in the areas that

need focus and building trust amongst the leaders and subordinates. The researchers also recommended the use of storytelling method at the management development programmes.

In an article by (Fleming, 2001) on Narrative leadership: using the power of stories, the author suggests three components of storytelling in order to use storytelling strategically. The first component is: diagnosing – when is the storytelling exactly used. The second component is communicating; the communication of the story should be in such a way that it is easily understood and accepted by the employees. The third component is adapting – the way in which the employees get adapted to the core of the story. The authors concluded by the remark stating that the leaders can use storytelling effectively in order to change the ambiguity situation to opportunity grabbing situation through storytelling narrative. The authors also added that storytelling help the organization to transform itself into learning organizations.

In the research done by (Johannes Stark, 2001), the researchers created an intention – perception model of storytelling and leadership. The researchers found that the leaders used storytelling approach for transformation, relationship building and information sharing with the subordinates. According to the research, the employees perceived storytelling positively with transformation; including motivation, inspiration and encouraging change. The employees also perceived storytelling positively with information; attention to information and reduced complexity of the information. The employees perceived storytelling negatively, with trust building and relationship building, within the organization.

According to (Thompson, 2018) students can acquire leadership skills through storytelling. According to the researcher, the leaders should build their leadership abilities through storytelling. The leaders can follow the method of effective storytelling by; developing and recognizing important stories, identifying situations to communicate the stories, avoiding manipulating through stories and finally practicing storytelling.

According to (Vanessa Boris, 2018) a good story has the capacity to engage and involve listeners in head as well as heart. According to the authors, stories can help the leaders in creating connection with the employees, employee engagement, aligning the employees' task with the organizational goal, enabling retrieval, promote harmony and exchange of ideas and crate a risk free experiment. The authors also give suggestions and recommendations to implement effective leadership through storytelling. The recommendations include creating a story bank, recording stories and using social media to engage the employees and other readers create forums for participating in storytelling and include real examples to make stories realistic.

Hence, we can summarize that storytelling has many advantages in the organizational context including emotional connect, better communication, developing and changing organizational culture, motivating and influencing employees, emphasizing on team work as well as fostering innovation and entrepreneurship amongst employees.

## Research Purpose

This paper is an exploratory research to find out the use of storytelling method used by leaders and sharing a framework for effective storytelling.

## Research Methodology

The research was exploratory in order to find out the use of storytelling methods used by leaders. The data was collected through in-depth interviews. 27 corporate leaders at a good position were interviewed to understand the use of storytelling.

## Findings and Discussion

For the data collection, 27 in-depth interviews were conducted. The designation of the interviewees varied from Vice President, President, Associate Director and Director. All the interviewees were in a leadership role. According to the data collected, all the leaders used storytelling as a part of their leadership role. The leaders used storytelling mostly during conducting trainings or during meetings.

The leaders use storytelling method very frequently, based on the situation. Most of the leaders feel that storytelling is a great way to engage the subordinates. The leaders used storytelling for the following functions:

- Motivating the employees to achieve a difficult target.
- Developing leadership skills amongst the employees.
- Explain a complex task or idea in a simple way.
- Give a larger picture of the organization, its values, its philosophies and vision.
- Formation and changing the organizational culture.
- Reduce conflicts and improve team work and collaborations amongst the employees.
- Women empowerment and motivating women employees.
- Helping employees to invent and reinvent themselves and connect themselves to their own goals.

Though leaders do realize the importance of storytelling, and its importance, storytelling is mostly used in organizations in a very informal manner. The stories are mostly based on the leader's own experiences and challenges. Most of the stories are not documented and depends on the knowledge of the leader, while some of them are published in the organization's in-house publication. The stories are not developed, shared with other leaders, formally communicated, taken feedback and measure the effectiveness for the same. Hence we can say that, the storytelling method of leadership has yet to emerge as a formal policy and process.

## Framework for Effective Storytelling

According to the findings, the following model is developed in order to formalize enhance the effectiveness of storytelling. The companies should follow the following steps: i) Creating a story bank ii) Improvising the

stories iii) Classifying stories according to objectives iv) Train the leaders v) Storytelling activity vi) collecting feedback vii) Measuring effectiveness of storytelling

**Figure I: Storytelling Framework**



- **Creating a Story Bank:** The HR department should formalize the storytelling method of effective leadership. The same can start with creating a story bank. Inputs about various stories should be taken for all the leaders of the organization, the trainers, the employees as well as anyone interested. Moreover, the story bank should be monitored and revised on a continuous basis.
- **Improvisation of the stories** should be done, once the raw stories are collected. Developing stories with a proper authenticity, plot and characters will help the storytellers to use the method more effectively.
- The next step should be categorising the stories which can be used of various objectives. The stories can be categorised according to the objective and use of story like knowledge sharing, motivation and inspiration, transmitting values, reducing conflicts and enhancing teamwork and collaboration, organisational culture change, sharing the organizational philosophies and values etc.
- The leaders, trainers as well as other employees can be trained about the importance, techniques and advantages of storytelling.
- A proper premise should be set while the leader is using storytelling. Also, the leader should use more than one method of storytelling; including, oral storytelling, publishing in the in-house magazines, in house radio, website of the organization as well as on social media.
- A proper method of two way communication for storytelling should be formulated in so that the impact of storytelling can be measure.
- Finally, the organization should measure the effectiveness of storytelling, by observing the reaction of the employees, measuring the learning through storytelling, measuring the change in behaviour after the impact on performance after storytelling activity.

Hence there should be an organized effort rather than an informal way of learning.

## Conclusion

This paper is an exploratory research in order to find out the use of storytelling and propose a framework for storytelling. According to the research, the use of storytelling is done by almost all the leaders. The leaders use the storytelling method for various purposes like motivating and inspiring employees, motivating the employees, developing leadership skills, explain a complex task or idea, share the organizational values, philosophies and vision, formation and changing the organizational culture, Reduce conflicts and improve team work and collaborations, Women empowerment etc.

It was clear through the interviews with the leaders that storytelling was widely used by the leaders. Storytelling is an integral part of forming organization culture, which is also supported by (Kouzes J, 2002) in their book. Not only that, storytelling can be advantageous to leaders in many ways. The storytelling though is frequently used, is a very informal process. Hence this paper suggests a framework formalizing and making storytelling more effective.

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