



SECTION 6

CREATIVE APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING LEADERS— PUSHING THE BOUNDARY

While it's great to have some tried-and-true methodologies and theories to put into practice, leadership development would never move forward if creative professions weren't always searching for new ways and new metaphors for helping adults learn, think about the world, develop new skills, and practice new behaviors. For leaders, the best insights often come from other places: athletics; poetry, stories, even brain research! In this section, several leading thinkers take us to new places in leadership development and provide some ideas for how we can break out of traditional ways of thinking about learning and search for new models and methods to help leaders grow.

Leader as Storyteller, by Chatham Clarke Sullivan

The Leader as Poet: A Consideration of What Poetry May Have to Offer
Organizational Leadership, by Juan Mobili

Choices in Work and in Life, by Neil M. Johnston

The Leading Brain: An Exercise in Self-Coaching, by Agnes Mura

Leading in the Matrix of Today: Integrating Body/Mind/Spirit, by Ginny
Whitelaw

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Learning from World-Class Athletes in Managing Performance:
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Christian Marcolli

The Shaping of Successful Careers, by Norman Walker



CHAPTER 23

LEADER AS STORYTELLER

Chatham Clarke Sullivan

In Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*, one of his characters joins the CIA for her love of spy novels. To her joy, the job succeeds in placing her in situations that resemble those in the novels she's read. Yet she soon discovers that her participation in the story is only partial. Rather than experience the full arc of the narrative, she plays her part only in the middle chapters. She has missed the beginning of the tale, and won't be there for the end. The incompleteness of the experience leaves her deeply unsatisfied. In *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*, Mailer uses the minor tragedy of this character to reflect on his own thinking about the psychology of story:

“Often, one did not learn how it all turned out. That struck me as being about what life is like: The gun over the mantelpiece does not often get fired. We live in and out of ongoing plots every day of our lives, but they are discontinuous. Our love of plot . . . comes out of our need to find the chain of cause and effect that so often is missing in our own existence.” (Mailer, 2003)

Mailer goes on to distinguish between what he calls Real Life and Plot Life, between the fragmented collection of characters and events that comprise our lives and the linear narrative that coheres, unifies, and gives meaning to our

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experiences. While we might raise the question of whether life plays out like a story or is random and meaningless, Mailer's simple insight feels deeply intuitive: Humans desire a sense of continuity in life, and story provides the primary vehicle for it. Common sense and now modern science tell us the same: stories are the principle form by which we make life intelligible.

The Rise of Story in the Social Sciences and Business

If story is our basic method for sense making, then leaders, as the primary purveyors of meaning in organizations, must be good storytellers. The popular and scholarly writing concur. Over the past several years there has been a profusion of writing on story. In the social sciences, the writing on story is prolific, so much so that it has generated its own label—the so-called “narrative turn.” In the more applied realms of business and management, the trend is similar—storytelling may be on the way to becoming recognized as the preeminent leadership skill. Ironically enough, there is even a story about story. As it goes, six years ago, 3M trained two-dozen rising executives in storytelling as a management tool. So successful were these workshops that today the company teaches over one hundred managers annually. Prompted by their success, Ford, General Electric, IBM, DuPont, and Barclays have followed suit, along with countless other companies (Jones, 2004).

The skeptic in all of us should wonder whether the passion for story borders on faddishness. Perhaps the question is not whether story is in fashion—it clearly is—but whether understanding story actually helps people become better managers. I believe that it does. Story has deep roots in research and powerful, practical implications for how people think and ultimately behave. To take but one tangible example, psychologists have discovered that jurors naturally make sense of a case by constructing stories about what they hear, even if the process occurs unconsciously. Rather than simply iterating facts, trial lawyers who use historical narratives during their opening statements anchor the framework with which the jury later assimilates key information and events of the case. This tactic has been found to be more successful than one in which the lawyer lays out the facts point by point (Pennington & Hastie, 1993). Cognitive psychologists have likewise found that story, parable, and metaphor provide underlying structures for how we store, organize, and remember information. In short, we are now beginning to understand that narrative elements, as well as stories themselves, are crucial elements to the way that we think about and interpret our experience (Schank, 1995; Turner, 1997).

When used authentically, stories also have a natural, timeless feeling to them. Unlike other management fads such as quality circles, reengineering, t-groups, and similar trends, story reaches back as far as we can remember, perhaps as long ago

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as human consciousness itself. Whether through our religions, primitive myths, or historical dramas, we have always understood ourselves, and the world around us, through stories. It is not surprising, first, that scholarly reflection on story is itself quite old. Aristotle proposed a theory of plot 2,300 years ago. We still use it today.

The Modern Organization—A Perfect Setting for Storytelling

We are bound to lose our way when life comes at us in bits and pieces. Story provides the necessary experience of the whole when only the parts are known. The classic example of the importance of this kind of thinking is the proverbial elephant.

“Each person standing at one part of the elephant can make his own limited, analytic assessment of the situation, but we do not obtain an elephant by adding “scaly,” “long and soft,” “massive and cylindrical” together in any conceivable proportion. Without the development of an over-all perspective, we remain lost in our individual investigations. Such a perspective is a province of another mode of knowledge, and cannot be achieved in the same way that individual parts are explored. It does not arise out of a linear sum of independent observations.” (Orenstein, 1972, p. 10)

Perhaps nowhere is the need for this type of thinking more manifest than in many of today’s organizations. The modern organization has grown increasingly complex over since the industrial age. Contemporary organizations look distinctly different from their forebearers. From hospital systems, to pharmaceutical companies, to owner-led businesses, modern organizations feel less like a single coherent body than a band of loosely knit together units, authorities, and relationships. Although these structures have created new possibilities for organizations to meet the demands of an equally complex market, they carry a burden for the individual, as well as the organization. Members of organizations who work across roles, businesses, functions, divisions, and geographies can easily feel beholden to many masters. Relationships intensify, politics become more complicated, and individuals and groups press for, and must accept, the claims, demands, and experiences of more stakeholders (Hirschhorn, 1993). Across this more multidimensional terrain, the pulls for fragmentation are strong while the forces for integration are very weak. Stories provide a natural antidote to this condition. And they do so for both the individual member and the organization-as-a-whole.

Like individuals, organizations create mental frameworks such as stories that allow the collective body to assimilate and consolidate a wide range of diverse

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experiences. Stories make sense of the world, guide action, and allow the individual to understand his or her relation to the whole. Good stories have enough integrity to give the community a sense of its own unity and the mental frameworks needed to interpret multiple, sometimes conflicting realities within and outside organizational boundaries. For without these frameworks, the collective mind loses its capacity to understand, adapt, and take initiative. Interestingly, these frameworks do not always have to be accurate. Take, for example, Karl Weick's famous concept of a cognitive map. Like a story, a cognitive map consists of a configuration of ideas, entities, and relations that enable individuals to interpret their experience and take action. Maps are realistic to the extent that they are logical and useful in that they contain the uncertainties of a particular situation. To illustrate his idea, Weick retells the true story of the Nobel Laureate Albert Szent-Gyorti (Miroslav, 1977, in Weick, 1995):

The young lieutenant of a small Hungarian detachment in the Alps sent a reconnaissance unit out onto the icy wasteland. It began to snow immediately, snowed for two days and the unit did not return.

The lieutenant suffered: he had dispatched his own people to death. But the third day the unit came back. Where had they been? How had they made their way?

Yes, they said, we considered ourselves lost and waited for the end. And then one of us found a map in his pocket. That calmed us down. We pitched camp, lasted out the snowstorm and then with the map we discovered our bearings. And here we are.

The lieutenant borrowed this remarkable map and had a good look at it. It was not a map of the Alps, but of the Pyrenees.

One way of thinking about story, like the Szent-Gyorti's map, is as a frame for making intelligible the uncertainty and complexity of modern organizations. While the modern organization is less fraught with danger than the icy wasteland of the Alps, there is a similar need to integrate the seemingly independent and disconnected experiences parts of the organization have of their past, present, and future.

Leadership and the Strategy Story

Given the importance for people to negotiate a shared interpretation of their work and the organization—to see the whole elephant in Orenstein's language—stories have become recognized as the preferred “sense-making currency” within

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organizations (Boje, 1991). The leader, as the voice of the organization both externally and internally, is by all accounts its chief storyteller. Externally, the CEO must tell the company's story to its shareholders, the financial community, partners, and other stakeholders. Internally, the story is equally significant: How do you provide meaning for, persuade, and inspire, your own people? The storyteller role is also played by senior managers. Unit and business leaders stand on the boundaries of the respective units to define goals among staff and communicate the group's purpose to the larger organization.

Even though they may be good storytellers in the social sphere, leaders often find that learning to craft and execute good organizational stories can be challenging. I see this most often in learning situations. When I teach executive education at the Wharton School, I find that a participant's ability to synthesize an experience or situation into a meaningful, coherent story is not only a powerful persuasion tool, but a form of communication that typically helps the entire class learn. I often discover that the best storytellers are the most influential among their peers. But the ability to tell stories can be quite uneven across a group of managers, even senior executives. With a group of regional executives of a large healthcare company, a colleague and I once asked volunteers to stand up and articulate a story of how their organization provides value to the consumer. We were surprised by their reactions. Few of the participants felt certain enough to stand up, even though the group had been vocal throughout the session, and participants who made the attempt found the impromptu speech a challenging exercise.

Among the most important stories that a leader, particularly an executive, must tell is the *strategy story*. As Barry and Elms (1995) state it, if stories are a preferred "sense making currency" in organizations, then "strategy must rank as one of the most prominent, influential, and costly stories told in organizations." In our work with strategy, we find that stories offer leaders the opportunity to think about strategy in a fundamentally different way. For example, crafting stories of different strategic scenarios is a powerful device to help leaders appreciate and understand the choices they make. A strategy story highlights the underlying economics of the business, the assumptions that the organization has about its environment and itself, the steps that it will take given its choices, and why it will take them. This approach shifts leaders out of the conventional paradigm for thinking about their business while simultaneously giving them a more authentic and natural picture of the organization.

Story is also a natural medium for strategy. At the heart of any good business model is essentially a story about how you provide value to the customer given the context in which you compete. Because a pro forma is only as good as the assumptions that go into it, the essential task of developing the strategy story is marrying the numbers to the narrative. The question isn't just "Do the numbers

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add up?” it is also “Does the story hang together?” (Magretta, 2002). The strategy story is a way for stakeholders to feel, “in their bones” as one of my colleagues likes to say, the implications of their decisions. A narrative articulates how different parts of the system have experienced the past and what the strategy story means for the future. This allows leaders to test whether a strategy will or won’t work and anticipate what will be needed to help others support it.

Given strategy’s prominence within the executive’s needed skill set, learning to tell the strategy story can be a crucial part of leadership development. We have found that telling the strategy story is something you can’t learn from a textbook, but only through experience. The premise of “learning by doing” is crucial for this work. For example, a colleague and I ran a year-long action learning project during which teams of senior managers had to apply their learning to an actual business problem. Each team led a project with significant financial consequences—the stakes were high and the learning very hands-on. The biggest challenge for the teams was presenting a logical, economically sound, and coherent business case about what they planned to do for their projects.

One of my teams, a group of unit managers from a large real estate firm, was having difficulty turning their idea into a compelling case that would gain the support of their executive sponsor. Their idea was ambitious and important: to implement sustainable development methods across all the company’s projects. (Sustainable development is an approach to construction that protects the human, environmental, and communal capital potentially at risk during the building process). At first the team emphasized the abstract qualities and lofty merits of sustainable development; however, they did so as if they were divorced from the very real needs of their own company. For this reason, to the coaches, the CEO, and the participants, the case never fully hung together. While the team’s idea was indisputably potent, the argument was weak. In comparison to the significance of what they were contemplating, the case felt resoundingly academic.

To solve this situation, we asked the team to dig deeper into the issue through the lens of a narrative. What they found upon further diagnosis was a meaningful and compelling story that they could rally around. Here is the story, condensed and disguised:

Over the last five years our company has created some of the most ambitious real estate developments in our geographic region. In fact, in the last five years our projects have become iconic symbols of the city’s growth and ambition. As we and others have prospered, the local real estate market has become a driving force for sustaining the region’s growth. But there’s a rub to our situation. As the region grows, the outside world has begun to look upon our achievements with far greater scrutiny. More than ever before, we must take extra care to assure

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the quality of our construction and its impact on the environment in order to protect our brand and our community. Sustainable development therefore is not only a crucial component of our own success but for the continuing success of the region.

During their narrative diagnosis, the participants began to appreciate how closely tied the image of the city was to their own construction projects, which had played such a significant role in the historical development of the city. The insight for them, now clarified through the story, carried with it a different type of relationship to their project. The team felt in their work the weight of their responsibility for future generations. The story became a meaningful way for the team to understand their own participation in the building of a city. Unlike Mailer's spy, the team experienced how their role fit into the larger and much more important narrative.

Telling a Story: From Simplicity to Complexity

So how does one go about learning how to tell a good story? The simplest expression of narrative useful to leaders consists of three acts (Atkins, 2005; Shaw, Brown, & Bromily, 1998).

Act I. Set the Stage. In Act I the characters and setting are introduced. In the film industry, a key part of the first act is "establishing the shot." If the scene will take place on a battlefield, you may see a shot of a map that then fades into the field where the action takes place. Setting the stage begins with describing the context and naming the protagonist.

Act II. Introduce Dramatic Conflict. In the second act, something changes that produces a clear dramatic conflict for the protagonist, an imbalance in the world that demands attention. Often the second act includes an "inciting incident" that sets the story in motion. Most importantly, the second act highlights the tension between the protagonist's desire for a goal and a force that obstructs it.

Act III. Reach Resolution. The protagonist finds a way to overcome the obstacle or conflict to restore order to the universe. In the process he or she has changed in some important way.

The three acts are a helpful organizing principle for the creation of stories. Yet they are but a foundation for good story telling. As Mailer reminds us, life does not fit neatly into a three-part plot. The challenge of creating organizational stories is that the author must condense the multitude and complexity of a situation into a medium that people can understand, doing so by honoring the many voices and experiences that are part of any story. This requires that leaders "listen in" to

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their organizations and empathize not only with their target audience, but with the different people and groups that make up the story. The American playwright David Ives nicely communicates the need to hear and understand when crafting story:

“I think of theater as an arena for communal empathy. To write for the theater, you have to have a kind of imaginative empathy for people in order to understand how and what they feel. You then bring that to an audience. The audience has to empathize with what you’re saying, and the actors have to empathize with what you’ve written, and all the people who put on a production together have to empathize with each other. I think of theater as this giant civilizing arena where people find a common ground. It’s where, in one way or another, we realize that we’re in the same leaky boat, and we realize it in person.”

Finally, good stories are fundamentally about transformation. Abraham Verghese (2001), the physician author, highlights James Joyce’s belief that every story ultimately requires epiphany, the *raison d’être* of the story itself. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins (1997) suggests, quite beautifully, that the storyteller’s job is therefore to address the *epiphanic*: “Narrative, then, whether in literature or in life, could be said to move through nodes of the epiphanic; it moves toward and then away from moments of recognition, insight, and the sudden apprehension of meaning.”

Cautions to Leaders Learning Storytelling

“We have, as human beings, a storytelling problem. We’re a bit too quick to come up with explanations for things we don’t really have an explanation for.”
(Malcolm Gladwell, 2005)

Storytellers, particularly if they are in positions of power, have the great responsibility to speak the truth. The good storyteller places in high regard the effort to accurately reflect the facts, events, and experiences that comprise a real story. The willingness to do so is not simply an ethical position but a component of good storytelling.

There are two reasons why storytellers should seek the truth. First, most people find that only painting a positive picture of a situation doesn’t ring true (McKee, 2003). This is bad for the teller’s credibility and bad for the story. Spin makes for poor story because it doesn’t capture the uncomfortable tension between the protagonist’s desire and reality, however cruel it may be (McKee, 2003). As everyone knows, it’s exactly this tension that makes for a gripping story. But

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organizational leaders are wary to take these risks, even if they should profit from them. As Robert McKee, the famous screenwriting lecturer has said of executives, “Most companies and executives want to sweep the dirty laundry, the difficulties, the antagonists, and the struggle under the carpet” (p. 7). McKee argues that, as a storyteller, the leader ought to position the problems in the foreground, for the drive for life comes not from its pleasantness, but from the suffering and struggle that forces people to live more deeply.

The second reason for respecting the truth is that stories have a profound effect on framing public discourse. Like a trial lawyer’s opening statement, stories naturally select which pieces of information to highlight and which to exclude. The intentional use of framing and stories to shape, and sometimes manipulate, discourse rarely works over the long term. Not only do these attempts restrict the open flow of information and consequently the range of possible solutions, but people respond strongly when their reality is interpreted for them. One hypothesis of why public dissatisfaction with the Bush Administration so clearly hurt congressional elections is that the Iraq war had lost its narrative. People no longer felt that the story told matched the reality on the ground.

The rule for good storytelling is that leaders should take their time, listen in, and understand the complexity of a situation as the first step for creating their stories. This demands a skill that the poet Keats called “negative capability”: the capacity to be in a state of uncertainty, doubt, and unknowing without reaching immediately for a conclusion. In modern organizations, where we are constantly having to hold multiple, sometimes contradictory, opinions and ideas in our heads at the same time, it is best to appreciate all the data fully before crafting the story. Leaders should spend as much time crafting their stories as telling them.

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