

Letting people tell their stories isn't about making them feel "warm and fuzzy." It's about building relationships and insights—and invigorating your organization.

# Renewable Energy

## How Story Can Revitalize Your Organization

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### **An Opening Picture**

The lights are lowered, the spotlight comes on, and the storyteller walks up to the microphone. You sit back and await being entertained. We often think of storytelling as one person telling his/her story at the front of the room, delivering a carefully rehearsed story. For organizations, storytelling is better served another way—by creating a space for members of the organization to tell their stories to each other.

So, let the storyteller at the microphone walk off stage; think instead of a brightly lit room filled with people. They may be dressed in formal suits, casual wear, flannel shirts and jeans, or scrubs. They may be sitting, but for today, let's see them standing. Each is turned to another, either talking to the other or listening intently. There are smiles on some of the faces. There are looks of concern on others. Sometimes, as one ends

his/her talking, the other shakes the speaker's hand in obvious thanks. It's a different picture, but try to see it. Got it in mind?

Now, let's see why this is the better opening picture for the organization that wants to use the power of story to revitalize itself.

### **The Situation**

*"Let us not look back in anger, nor forward in fear, but around in awareness."* —James Thurber

Any executive will tell you that the world today is complex. A global economy may promise wider markets, but it also brings in more forces to address. Real, successful strategies must recognize all of these forces and how they interact. Strategies must be ones that see and respond to the whole situation. Dealing with only parts of global forces doesn't work. The amazing thing is that we are only just now recognizing the complexity of dealing with the whole when faced with

a global market, but the need to see the whole picture has always been an important aspect of success. The smart executive questions how to get as many perspectives in order to get a fix on the whole picture.

*“Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision.”*  
— Peter Senge

To a line manager, the picture is slightly different. He/she tends to view the situation from the perspective of how to move forward with the staff at hand. The line manager continually asks if he/she has the necessary information to make the right decision. Is his/her staff sufficiently motivated and willing to show the initiative to get the job done? Is there clarity of purpose that is uniformly shared so that coherent movement can be assured? In the end, the line manager questions how to gain true coherence to the vision from among his/her staff.

Complexity underlies the need for wholeness. Coherence depends on vision. How does an executive or line manager deal with all of this at every moment? Let’s explore how the narratives of our lives can give insights.

### Words, Words, Words

Our world is filled with words and is formed through the words we use. When growing up, I remember my father telling me again and again, “To thine own self be true.” (Excerpt from Polonius’ long soliloquy to his son, Lear, “This above all: To thine own self be true, for it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man,” from *Hamlet* by Shakespeare.) I never knew the other words from that famous soliloquy until I had grown and gone on to college, but it was too late by then. The world I lived in required me to be true to myself. What always confounded me was the surprise on my father’s face when he saw his children doing amazing things as they lived into being true to themselves. He had created a world for us that even he didn’t imagine. Words indeed have power.

Organizations use words to define themselves to the market and also to themselves. FedEx has a long mission statement, but its power is in the underlying message—peace of mind—that is music to its customers. When faced with the problem of getting some original footage to the editors, I remember choosing FedEx. That footage could never be duplicated. It had to get to its destination. It was worth every penny to believe that it would get there with FedEx.

Wendy’s is committed “to making a better fast-food experience and a better world.” (<http://www.wendys.com>)

What stories could be heard from customers who had a “better” food experience?

Nike’s mission statement is to “bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world.” The company even includes a footnote explaining the word “athlete” that says, “if you have a body, you are an athlete.” (<http://www.nike.com>) These are powerful words to describe that Nike is dedicated to authentic athletic performance. Just look at the ads of Nike and see the story presented, putting the words of its mission into context.

Each of these companies has had some level of success—some might say a very high level of success—in achieving the realization of its words. The remaining questions are, “Does the mission statement mean the same to everyone in the company?” and “How do you get staff to buy in to those words in the first place and move beyond just ‘a job is a job?’” To explore this, let’s look at a very difficult kind of mission statement that millions of people need to embrace in order to make it happen. Let’s take the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

“We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common Defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

The Preamble is the statement of why there is a Constitution at all. It’s like a mission statement, purpose, and vision all wrapped up into one. Certainly these words have inspired people for generations. Does it mean the same thing today as it did 200 years ago? What does it mean to people today? What is the best way to get inside the words to see what they mean to each individual and then to the country as a whole? The answers are in our stories.

In a recent project, individuals were asked to tell a personal story inspired by just one of the words in the preamble. As you read the samples below, notice how the words of such a familiar document suddenly have new life in them.

- One story, inspired by the word *posterity*, is a classic immigrant tale. The story begins, “Isabel was 16 when she said goodbye to her mother for the last time.” It tells of how a young girl chose to leave her mother so that she could have a better life for herself and her family. Three generations hence her *posterity* still benefits from her sacrifice to give them a better life. Suddenly, the word *posterity* takes on more meaning and a personal meaning, as well.

- “When the Berlin Wall fell, I was a young student in Cameroon and felt it was time for democracy there, too...” The story goes on to tell of persecution, escape, and coming to the United States, exemplifying the search for the *blessings of liberty*.
- “In my grandmother’s kitchen, the air was always filled with marvelous smells. It was a place where I could go to fill up on food that spoke of her deep love for me and everyone in the family.” So begins another story inspired by the word *tranquility*. Does tranquility have a new meaning for you now?

What if staff at your organization were able to tell their own stories about the words in your mission statement? What kind of stories might you hear if they told a personal story about the word *inspiration* or perhaps *better* or *peace of mind*. Imagine the variety of meaning. Imagine the depth of understanding that would be created.

Surely, in-depth understanding could come from a serious discussion. Well, of course it could, so why use story to seek meaning? Let’s look at why story possesses such power.

## Stories Possess Power

### Community

Community is about shared stories, and every organization is a community. People who work together form communities. They do it by building relationships with each other and by attempting to define a common ground on which they can stand together. Executives think the common ground is the company’s mission statement, but that is only the beginning. The more viable common ground is the image of the company formed by the words that are used to describe the company, one staff member to another (including the executive). This is best done through stories that exemplify the company.

I’m sure you have heard consultants tell you that they need to know the culture of the place. Culture is contained in the stories of the staff and reflects the stories from within the organization. At Disney, it might begin with, “Did I tell you about the time when Walt...” Walt Disney created a culture that valued creativity, a value of Disney to this very day. The stories about creativity don’t end with stories about Walt either.

### Reminders

Communities tell stories to remind themselves who they are and why they are. When we are under stress, one of our coping mechanisms is to remember times when

we were happy, successful, or at ease. (If you don’t do this, it’s a great idea to try.)

Think of the stories you hear at a wedding. Guests and family members tell stories in an attempt to remember the beginnings of the community gathered as it moves into a new stage created by the life of the newly married couple. The stories remind those present of what came before so that the community can prepare for what is to come. Those stories help to again establish why the community exists in the first place.

How many times have I attended a company celebration, and the only ones who had to chance tell their stories were those at the podium? I would much rather have heard the stories of the audience—the people who actually made it happen. Those stories would add to the celebration through the exciting recognition of each person’s contribution to the overall success. As Lord Chesterfield said, “Many a man would rather you heard his story than granted his request.”

In times of stress, individual success stories are even more important to remember. What might look like an exercise in denial is actually a conscious recognition that we all bring something of value to the table. Otherwise, why would you be at the company? Additionally, these stories create a sense of well-being, an enhanced energy.

### Integration of Life Experience

People don’t really leave their stories behind them when they arrive in the morning. No matter how much we would like to compartmentalize our lives, there is no way it can be done perfectly, nor should it. After all, solving problems needs experience (in knowledge management, it’s called know-how) as well as substantive knowledge (know-what).

Successful strategies used in coaching Little League can bring insights into how to manage a team effort in the office and vice versa. Imagine helping the office team work together. Planning for a wedding is great preparation for managing complex projects at work. Just think of the emotions that must be handled successfully and translate that into the competing views of team members. What energy would be released.

### Abundantly Available

Stories abound. We are born storytellers and tend to forget that we are if we don’t tell our stories often enough. Our lives are filled with events that can be related. As stories are told, we see new aspects of the storyteller and of the message of the story. Even retelling opens new possibilities and new insights as the teller adds to

or subtracts from his/her story. Imagine the insights that can be gained when people tell stories inspired by the words of your mission statement or the words of your vision. Imagine the energy that can be generated.

### **Change and Revitalization**

Story works powerfully for change and revitalization. Not only can stories bring deeper meaning to the words of mission statements and visions, but they also are powerful agents of change. A story gives a message that is contained within its context. For us to learn we must have a context. For example, you must actually ride a bike in order to learn how to ride a bike.

We can apply a new concept when we see how that concept relates to the project or problem at hand. The context gives us a place to hold the information and relate it to the rest of our knowledge. As we listen to the message, the context of the story gives us the opportunity to find a context in the problem or project that is meaningful to us.

Stories have the ability to present the assumptions behind beliefs and assertions without judgment. A person's story is his/her story. There can be no judgment about the story itself. As we listen, we can see deeper into the person's experience and understand him/her better. We may not agree with the revealed assumptions, but there can be no fault in the story itself.

Stories reveal the common ground among us. I have never listened to the stories of a community without seeing a level of coherence among them. When the community has been around awhile, this coherence is very strong. When the community is young, the coherence may be less, but it is still there at some level. Knowing what makes up the common ground strengthens coherence.

You may ask, "But what if the stories are very, very different? After all, we come from so many disciplines, places, ages, experiences." John Seely-Brown has said, "Innovation occurs in the white spaces between disciplines." I love this phrase as it opens up the enormous possibilities of finding new ideas and thoughts when there is indeed space between each of us. It may be harder to find coherence, but the search for it helps to create it, as well as, define it.

### **Tapping This Source of Renewal Energy**

If you are convinced that you would like to use story in your organization as a means of developing a broader sense of the whole and coherence among the participants, here are a few things to keep in mind.

- *Be clear about what you want to explore through story.* You must decide what you want to accomplish. Are you interested in revitalizing the group's commitment to the mission? Then start with the mission statement. Are you interested in building coherence among team members? Then start with the team's aspirations regarding its purpose and objectives. Do you wish to stimulate new ways to bring value to the market? Then start with the customer. I'm sure you get the idea.
- *Make sure that everyone's story can be told.* It is not a matter of having all 3,345 staff members in the same room telling their stories. It is a matter of assuring that everyone understands first that a story can't be told without a listener. So, begin with some simple rules about listening such as don't interrupt while the other person is telling his/her story, don't think about your own story while you are listening to someone else's story, be prepared to offer a title to the teller when he/she completes his/her story. Once people understand that listening is as important as telling the story, social space for telling stories appears as if by magic.
- *Decide how you will elicit the stories.* Phrase the opening question well so that it elicits the kind of story that will serve your final goal best. For example, if you are trying to solve a problem, ask for stories about how problems were solved in the past so that lots and lots of successful strategies can be gathered along with the context in which they worked. (Remember, stories always bring the context along with them.) If you are trying to explore the market, ask for stories from the participants' own lives of customer experiences—stories that stayed in their minds because they'd had such a good experience that they went back to that supplier again and again. (Remember, repeat business is the cheapest business to serve.)
- *Consider how some of the stories can be told to the whole group.* When the group is fewer than 35, small groups can select a story from among those told in their group to be told the whole group. When the group is larger than 35, you need to explore other options. (There are many designs for this. Almost any facilitator can help you.) Just remember that an audience can't hear more than four or five stories in a row.
- *Take time to process the stories.* As we learn new things, talking about what we think we have learned does a great deal to solidify the lessons and even to identify them. Give the group time to talk about what they

have just learned from the stories. The remarkable thing to observe is how quickly the lessons are identified in a conversation about the stories.

- *Consider the types of stories you want.* When you decide that story is something you wish to use to help staff develop coherence about the mission statement, what kinds of stories should be elicited? Keep one thing in mind. Research shows that we act upon what we think about. If we think about how to do things right, we are more likely to do things right. If we think about problems, guess what the result is? This means that the stories should be ones that give life, stories that tell of joys, stories that tell of successes, stories that draw us to them.

Some consider this approach “too soft” to be of value. Problems must be solved, so why spend time on what works? Well, precisely, because it worked and precisely because you are looking for new actions that will lead toward the achievement of the mission (or whatever the goal is). We move toward what we are thinking, so focus the thinking in the right direction. Any Olympic athlete will tell you about thinking through the course by imaging what he/she wants to do in order to help him/her achieve precisely that.

- *Believe in the power of the stories.* My experience indicates that this takes about the time necessary to hear three stories in a row. Suddenly, you begin to feel the power building, and you’ll never forget it.

### Storytelling and Relationships

There is a side benefit of using stories to revitalize things. Because those telling their stories share a small piece of themselves, each person becomes more real to the listeners. (This is another reason to ask for stories that represent something good to you. It’s always easier to tell this kind of story to a stranger.) As each person becomes more “real” to others, a space is created for finding common ground between and among the listeners and the teller.

Building relationships is the first step toward building trust. Imagine the power your organization would have if everyone saw a coherent vision of the mission and trusted each other. I don’t think you could stop that organization.

There are always stories that become the standard bearers. In a small professional community to which I belong, there are four stories that have been told and retold for years. They seem to capture the essence of the group so well that their retelling creates the setting

for serious work to be done in great mutual trust and high coherence.

### A Few Last Words

The various perspectives of multiple stories also produce a wider and wider view of the world. Stories help us see the whole that is so important in today’s world. If you must deal with the whole situation even when the situation is complex, listening to the stories of many people because they come from so many perspectives (each staff member has his/her own perspective) shines light on many more aspects of the whole than any one mind could do. Seeing how one piece of the puzzle really does fit with another can guide strategy development, resulting in strategies that are more effective because they highlight the linkages between pieces and take advantage of the synergies that can be created among them.

Stories are amazing things. We take them for granted just as we take the surrounding air for granted. Stories are all around us just waiting to be brought out and simultaneously drawn in to energize our organizations, oxygenating the life-blood our organizations need to live and thrive.

Eliciting stories and exploring the understandings revealed through them are two ways to use story in your organization. You also can create new “future stories” to describe where you’re going. My focus in this article has been to entice you to listen to the stories inside your organization to discover new possibilities. That’s always the place to start!

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