

Order out of Chaos

Storytelling for Change Situations

By Andrée Iffrig

"Storytelling is an attempt to deal with and at least partly contain the terrifyingly haphazard quality of life."

Robert Fulford, *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture*, 1999.

As a specialist in curriculum design, I am often presented with the following request from senior management: Design a curriculum so that our employees come to terms with changes we've initiated. Oh, that it was so easy!

If you've been through monumental personal or professional change yourself, then you know that making a transition requires a kind of "coming to terms". It rarely happens overnight. One of the ways we human beings deal with chaos in our midst is by telling stories. Stories help us understand our place in the change drama and, if we are willing to be accountable for our part, they help us adopt new behaviours and outlooks.

Studying architecture almost 30 years ago, I was introduced to the work of Christopher Alexander. Author of the book, *A Pattern Language*, Alexander maintained that most of us long to live in harmonious, hospitable environments. We need a sense of the familiar on a daily basis. He developed a pattern language of design elements for realizing these kinds of environments: at home, the workplace, and in community. What Alexander's pattern language was to architecture and urban design, stories are to the workplace: a way for people to create a sense of belonging to congenial, familiar communities.

In a workplace environment racked by change initiatives, congeniality and familiarity are threatened if not rendered obsolete. A course or two in leadership fundamentals and change management can certainly explain the "how" and "why" of the changes; these, however, are but one piece in the puzzle of recreating the sense of community that is vital to a workforce's ability to move through change. Stories, because they are usually narrated in groups, bring people together to reflect on the change drama. This contributes to building community at the same time as the stories provide inspiration and help people make sense of their situation.

Stories – the key to moving on

Canadian journalist Robert Fulford has observed that we tell stories to look at a situation from this way and that, thinking to come to a conclusion – only to put the story back on the shelf with the situation still unexplained. Stories are metaphors, not simplistic answers to life's unpredictability. That's part of their power. You can narrate a story about a change you're going through, and enable me to step into your story as I relate to your circumstances. It's not that mine are identical, or that either of us is going to change gracefully, but the sense of shared experience is important to our ability to adapt. Reflecting on some of the personal change I've known, there were phases I went through in my transition: from victim of some opponent's unfair behaviour, to beginning to become accountable for how I needed to change, to recognition that the change would be beneficial, to acceptance and moving on. What helped me come to terms was hearing other people's stories about their experiences in similar situations. I felt I wasn't going to have to weather the shift alone.

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Affirmations from a mutual support network helped to keep me vigilant and motivated as I set about making much needed changes. In adopting new behaviours, there were other people whose example I could emulate.

Becoming accountable for my own need to change has been painful, but it has also brought a sense of ownership. No one is making me change: I've decided to change for myself. The question is: can we duplicate this experience in organizations going through change? Leadership is usually the "outside" force driving change. A well-designed curriculum for adult learners can help by raising awareness of the issues behind the change; intelligent curriculum design can also demonstrate the need for individual accountability in making change happen and adopting new behaviour. Smart communications contribute by creating understanding of the benefits of change initiatives.

In the end, these may be insufficient for giving employees a sense of ownership for change. What's missing is a way for people to connect emotionally about the transition. Stories narrated by people at all levels of the organization can spark debate, serve as beacons of light, and reinforce a sense of community at a time of chaos. People can share narratives in a variety of settings: informally during team meetings, and more formally through learning forums like peer mentoring circles and conversation cafés. Management's rationale for the change may have fallen on deaf ears long ago, but your personal account of a change experience may bring the insight I've needed to come to terms.

The stories we choose to tell can also keep us hostage and make transition well nigh impossible. In the summer issue of ***Find Your Voice at Work***, we'll look at self-serving victim stories and how organizations can respond to the creators of these narratives.

Andrée Iffrig confesses to a fondness for storytelling. She is the author of ***Find Your Voice at Work – The Power of Storytelling in the Workplace***. Visit www.find-your-voice.ca to learn more.