

## The Future is Now: A Tale of Two Stories

Much has been *written*, of late, highlighting the value of *oral* narrative or storytelling as a catalyst for organizational change. These accounts chronicle seasoned raconteurs single handedly inciting enormous transformation in organizations heretofore seemingly unwilling or unable to contemplate the most modest change imitative.

Oxymoronically many written works are describing the power of oral narrative. Witness the likes of *Harvard Business Review*, *The Wall Street Journal* as well as many recent books, all of which focus on the oral component of storytelling. Surely these printed exposés are themselves motivators for change; so why the continued emphasis on the face to face storytelling?

There is no disputing the fact that oral narrative is a powerful form of communicating; however, it is not always feasible. In fact, there are times when the written word packs a more powerful punch. Often it is simply not possible to catch the ear of senior executives simultaneously, or even at all. These are very busy folks, many of which will not take time from their busy schedules to listen to stories. Executives are not alone in this class; other groups including scientists, researchers, and remote employees tend to prefer the written word over the spoken. In these cases the power of the pen offers a persuasive substitute.

This is a tale about two such stories, both of which seemed to sow the seed of change. Of course time will be the real test; however, anecdotal evidence seems to supports the proposition that well written futuristic stories provide an excellent alternative to face to face oral narrative. At least in these two examples, the written story

proved to be a motivator for organizational change.

The first story was developed to excite change in a very large bureaucratic organization – Canada’s Department of National Defence. The leader of the Strategic Knowledge Management cell (yours truly) was keen to explain how and why knowledge management could help the Defence leaders. Clearly it would not be possible to meet face to face with all of the target audience, so what to do? Against the advice of many colleagues, pen was put to paper to create a story that described “Twelve Hours of Knowledge.” The story was an overwhelming success and it was eventually included in the Canadian Military Journal – the journal read by the target audience.



Figure 1 - An example of using a "real" publication for stories

So what made the story a success? Clearly there were a number of critical success factors; however, one of the most important was the “look” of the story. The story was designed to resemble the weekly newspaper of the Canadian Forces entitled *The Maple Leaf*. With the editor’s permission a story was crafted that appeared to be *The Maple Leaf*’s cover story. This allowed the story to be distributed as a “reprint” from the paper.

The “look” was especially useful in capturing people’s attention, countering to some degree the old cliché “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” At least in this case it seems the “cover” was important to many people. Attracting the target audience is just the first step; clearly the content is the vital ingredient. The story must be believable, realistic, and most importantly perceived as achievable.

Although the story was set in the future, it did not rely on futuristic technology, but rather, it described technology that is commonplace today. This was a surprise to many readers as they expected some far-fetched, ridiculously expensive *Star Trek* type technology. Instead the narrative described leadership and culture as the keys to success – another surprise to many readers.

A crucial component of the story’s success was executive support. An early draft of the story caught the attention of one very senior executive who was delighted with the format and the message. His endorsement provided the necessary clout to slay a few less enthusiastic managers, who may have otherwise been able to thwart the distribution of the piece. As is the case with other change initiatives the support of senior executives is critical to the success of motivational stories.

The second story had a similar message but a very different style. In this case the target audience was faculty members at a small Midwest university. A new faculty member (yours truly once again) was charged with the responsibility of integrating knowledge management into the core curriculum of the College of Business. This was no easy task, especially given the number of naysayers who were perfectly content with the status quo. One group believed knowledge management was just a passing fad and they had been involved with enough fads, thank you very much. A second group thought this *KM stuff* was a good idea, just as long as it did not affect them or their courses. The final group (and the majority thankfully) had bought into the idea but did not really know what to do next.



Figure 2 - An example of using a fictitious publication to motivate change

Based on the success of the previous story, another future based story was penned. This time the story was a mock interview with the Dean five years hence. The story was *published* in a trade journal, entitled *KM*

*Today*, shortly after the College was the recipient of the Most Innovative Knowledge Educator (MIKE) award.

In the interview, the Dean described the implementation of the program and how it had improved the quality of education for the students. The final question asked by the interviewer was “What would you do differently?” to which the Dean replies “I wish we would have started sooner.” Grinning, he continued: “the success of the program makes me wish more folks could have benefited, had we started in 2003, we would have helped another cohort. That said I am absolutely delighted with our results.”

Both the trade journal and the award in this story were fictitious, as were the other organizations mentioned in the accompanying stories. However, the Dean was very real and with his permission his style was carefully modeled in the mock interview. This blending of the real and simulated worlds went some way in helping to convince the readers that the story was believable and achievable.

In both cases the written word proved to be a powerful motivator by capturing the imagination and attention of the target audience. Perhaps these types of stories are not well suited to all audiences; however, for some groups the written word is more powerful than even the best oral story. To quote a faculty member who was initially against the change initiate and now a supporter of the idea “Now I get it.” Just four words, but four words that mean one more team member is a supporter . . . those are four important words!

All good stories should end with a moral. The moral of this story is that properly crafted written stories may be a powerful alternative to oral narration. Raconteurs who

hope to motivate change should consider their target audience and then develop a story – either written or oral – that will best serve their needs.

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