STORYTELLING AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR ESTABLISHING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE FOCUSED ON CHANGES IN SPORT ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

The concept of organizational culture as a context in which information, ideas, beliefs and ideologies of different organizations are exchanged, in which there are also political changes, is in the recent years receiving more attention, both in theory and in practice. More attention is paid to the skills and abilities of the organizations to make changes in order to provide internal coherence, identity and image communication and the expected outcomes. The economic sustainability, which is difficult to predict, is more easily provided if the organization has culture directed towards changes and if storytelling techniques are used to communicate the changes. Among other things, this led researchers and practitioners to direct themselves more to the study of the influence of the organizational culture and storytelling, as a communicational technique, to the organizational sustainability and changes. We believe that the most efficient and economical way for making organizational changes, and creating changes of the oriented organizational culture is by storytelling as a communication tool.

Keywords: Organizational culture, communication, storytelling, organizational changes

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Introduction

Much of the academic literature regarding organizational communications deals with organizational culture since it enables seeing different issues in this area – from the fields of human resources, organizational behavior, to organizational changes and economic and ecological efficiency. However, there is little theoretical underpinning on what actually constitutes a sustainability-oriented culture change? Furthermore, there are only generic prescriptions in the academic literature on how organizations can realize and implement the changes of their cultures and other aspects of work (for example Halme [1]). There are also studies that have criticized the existing models and theories of organizational culture and changes, mostly because of an over-reliance on simplified formulae and a lack of insight into how cultural changes might occur [2], Newton and Harte, (1997). These models often do not address how cultural change should be initiated, monitored or imposed as the subject of managerial intervention and control. On the other side, storytelling, as a technique of communication that shapes, distributes and changes the organizational culture, organizational values and ideologies is, unfortunately, not even mentioned in this context. In order to establish and study the possible relation between the organizational culture, its forms and variations, and storytelling as a technique of communication and organizational changes, we...
will firstly make a summary and a theoretical view, including the definitions, of the concepts that we are going to use in this paper.

The Concept of Organizational Culture and Storytelling

The concept of organizational culture first emerged by the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s [3], [4], [5], [6] and soon became one of the most influential, but also most controversial concepts in management research and practice [7], [8]. The concept of organizational culture has been interpreted very differently which led to the fact that even nowadays there is no consensus regarding its definition [9]. The culture theorists have suggested various definitions ranging from the notions of accepted behavioral rules, norms and rituals [10], to shared values, ideologies and beliefs [6] and, on an underlying level, shared patterns of meaning or understanding [11], [12]. Everybody agrees that an organizational culture includes all the members of an organization, motivates and develops on all levels (including the existence of subcultures), and is based on the broad history which is realized in the material aspects (artefacts) of an organization (e.g., its name, products, buildings, logotype and other symbols including its top managers). Thus, in addition to the intangible things such as values, ideologies and beliefs, the organizational culture also implies material aspects that are very important for the corporate identity concept. However, while the studies of the corporate identity focus on the idea how those material aspects express the key idea of an organization towards the outer factors, the organizational culture studies deal with the question how they are realized and how they are interpreted by the members of the organization.

Despite different interpretations and different culture dimensions, there are many common themes and similarities in the organizational culture research [13]. First, concepts that are used to identify and define organizational culture often overlap in different studies; therefore, several scholars have tried to develop frameworks to categorize important dimensions and to provide a conceptual foundation for the study of organizational culture [3], [14], [15], [16].

Second, the values, ideologies and beliefs are considered important for understanding an organization’s culture and have been regarded as a reliable representation [17], [18].

Storytelling as a communication tool is in managerial literature frequently understood as the use of narratives, or the skill of telling stories, in the areas that originally were not considered to be narrow areas of its application, at least not until the 20th century.

Storytelling has steadily increased over the last few decades in management, in all its communication spheres, managerial processes and systems. Although it is not the subject of our discussion, we find it very interesting that the influence and the connection between the narrative (story) and management, human potential, or its role and influence within an organization, were rarely brought together until the second half of the 20th century.

Storytelling is the art of using language, and storytelling as a communication tool is the means to achieve certain communication goals. Storytelling is directed at the audience which is expected to generate emotional connections with the story, to acquire certain values or change behavior.

Stories are, in the context of organizational culture building, actually building blocks of knowledge, the grounds for remembering old and learning new things. Stories connect us with our being, with the past, include us in the current social, cultural, organizational and other contexts, lead us into the future, teach us, make us predict possible consequences of our and other people’s actions. Storytelling is a leadership skill which is developed within the context of dominant organizational culture and which basically develops the individual’s ability to find and tell a personal story. This skill acts in at least two directions: emphasizes the values
that people should believe in and evokes feelings that encourages them to make changes and to be active.

Among the first ones who connects storytelling on one side and managing, leadership and organizational context on the other is David M. Boje [19] who recognizes that the story (narrative) and its importance in management have been strongly influenced by: 1) development of logical and scientific thinking in management, especially in human resources area and 2) information technologies in communication processes (in all areas, including management).

Furthermore, the role and the importance of the story, narrative, through the prism of the importance of myths and legends in organizations, and its ability to strengthen organizational performances is recognized by Weick and Browning [20], Dennehi [21], Gabrijel [22], Tailor et al., (2002), Denning [23], Boje, 2006.

In the work Storytelling in Organizations: The power and traps of using stories to share knowledge in organizations, authors Sole and Gray Wilson show the importance of storytelling for conveying knowledge in organizations and of different strategies, identifying:

Storytelling: sharing of knowledge and experiences through narrative and anecdotes in order to communicate complex ideas, concepts and causal connections. Modeling: sharing of knowledge and experience through exposure to both the conscious and unconscious behavior of others, particularly “experts”. Examples of modeling include mentoring, apprenticeship, symbolic conduct and specific demonstrations and opportunities for observation.

Simulations: sharing of knowledge and experience through experiential situations that recreate the complexities of action. Examples of simulations include case studies, role playing and technology-supported simulations.

Codified resources: sharing of knowledge through reference to formal, systematic and structured sources. Examples include standard operating procedures, manuals, instructions, textbooks, memos or data bases in which knowledge has been formally codified.

Symbolic objects: sharing of knowledge through access to images, diagrams or objects which represent or illustrate the underlying knowledge or ideas. Examples include a map of a city, signs, logos or prototype car.

**The Purpose of Storytelling as a Communication Tool**

In academic literature we find several characteristic storytelling types most frequently shown as case studies in organizations. Without a thorough analysis of the leaders who were the narrative generators, it seems that a leader type determines to a large extent the narrative that would be structured in business.

Authors Sintonen, T. & Auvinen, T. [24], by studying the case of a crisis situation observe that when a leader takes upon himself the role of a storyteller, the narrative has multilevel concept goals, interprets the organization’s past, and not present state, and is directed towards the future of the employees’ children. They conclude that such leadership has used a discourse power of a combined storytelling. The other group of authors, Auvinen, T., Aaltio, I. & Blomqvist, K. M. [25], notice that leaders tell stories in order to build a culture and a relationship based on trust, to enforce self reflection of the employees and to emphasize the need for advanced training. More managers can take part in building a narrative and in its presentation, with the previously determined goals that they want to achieve with storytelling: employee motivation, inspirational conflict resolution, finding the focus of the problem and building trust, acquisition of new corporate values and readiness to changes. The authors believe that stories can be an efficient method of the influence on employees, and even a good precondition for building trust between managers and employees. Auvinen, T., Lämsä, A-M.,
Sintonen, T. & Takala, T. [26], observe that a narrative is used for manipulation and in this case storytelling is an integral part of leadership.

The authors identify four types of narrative that correspond to leader (manager) types, connecting it to the organizational culture type: humorous, pseudo-participative, seductive and pseudo-empathetic. There is the question of ethics that has been excluded from the narrative, and the managers often explained that organizational culture is such that they are often forced to be manipulative.

In the qualitative research done by Sintonen, T. and Auvinen, T. (2011), the authors emphasize the power of the story, particularly its visual character, but also suggest that the used methodology was not always able to explain all aspects of the narrative influence, since the qualitative data contain a set of discourse aspects that are difficult to be investigated without adequate quantitative analyses. They also suggest that visualization additionally supports the result communication. The author Auvinen, T. (2012), focuses on the model of organizational reality in which we have “the ghost leader” whose influence, authority and function are unquestioned, and that are based on a structured and placed narrative. The author says that the role of storytelling is crucial in the formation of such leaders and such organizational cultures. In addition, he believes that this kind of leaders, with a well thought out storytelling, maintain their power and the existing organizational culture even with the support of informal leaders in the organization. The researches have studied the role of storytelling in problem solving [27], organizational reconstruction (McWhinney & Battista [28], socialization of new employees Louis [29], Brown [30], collective positioning (McWhinney & Battista [28], Boyce [31], self-training Boje [32], [33] lifelong learning Helmer [34], introduction of innovations and new product developments Zien [35]. All mentioned above only illustrates the possibilities of the use of storytelling in different domains. Many researchers prove that stories can be a very powerful way of presenting and passing a complex and multi-dimensional idea, value, belief or ideology [36]. The task and the role of storytelling is to contribute to the inner consensus regarding the organization’s identity, to forming organizational culture as a context for everyday work and to individual and group initiatives for changes within the organization.

**Conclusion**

Based on the researches in communication management and organization management, and also based on the analysis of relevant academic literature, we believe that it is possible to connect the use of storytelling to the models of organizational culture on the basis of the competing values framework (CVF) and that storytelling can be a very efficient communication tool for creating an organizational culture directed towards changes. Storytelling achieves great effects in communication processes of an organization when it is directed towards specific organizational culture. It was the subject of discussion of Sole and Wilson [37] at the end of the 20th century who concluded that storytelling is a means to: 1) Share norms and values: Stories (narratives) powerfully convey norms and values across generations within the organization. They derive from the organization’s past, but can also describe its future (Denning, 2001). Buckler and Zien [38] argue that the most important thing is that storytelling offers a compelling context and a robust vision, with the emphasis on the organization’s tradition which is in the context of the future, thus facilitating the identification of future steps and goals. Brown [30] notes that employees tend to express understanding of the organization and that they are committed to the use of stories. Furthermore, she says that the extent of an employee’s familiarity with the organization’s narrative might indicate the employee’s acceptance of the organizational norms and values [30], 2) Develop trust and commitment: Stories successfully communicate the competences and commitments within the
organization. Revealing personal stories can expose one’s own competences and commitment, signal one’s trust or willingness to be vulnerable to others and to organization Chasin et al., [39]. At work, stories of commendation or complaint about other people communicate their personal reliability and trustworthiness to others. Similarly, stories about the organization and management can convey information about the organization’s trustworthiness vis-à-vis its employees, which can reinforce or undermine employee commitment. Wilkins [40] notes that generating commitment is a key function of organizational stories and legends. 3) Share tacit knowledge: Stories enable a useful exchange of the embedded and highly contextual knowledge (tacit knowledge) that can help to solve the most difficult problems in the organization, even the resistance to changes. The Institute for Knowledge Management Boje, [41] describes a story as “a tiny fuse that detonates tacit understanding in the mind of the listener”. Often the canonical wisdom and knowledge of the organization which is built into formal processes is insufficient to solve the problems that arise in the real world. In such circumstances, the tacit knowledge and experience-based knowledge come to the fore instead. 4) Facilitate unlearning: Brown (in Denning, 2002) claims that storytelling is essential for accelerating environmental transformation in organizations – internal and external.

Employees create culture in which they learn not only how to learn, but also how to make decisions or why something has been decided, to rethink how, and even why certain activities have been undertaken. Acknowledging that there is a tacit knowledge and experience employees lose “taken-for-granted dimension” about issues that are not clear to them. Thus, storytelling becomes one of the communication tools that helps us unlearn out of date practices and ineffective mental frames which shape a new perspective with employees. Rational arguments have support in emotional or intuitive elements of tacit understanding. Stories are very effective in achieving this goal. 5) Generate emotional connection: Denning [42] notes that stories have the inherent capacity to direct a person to engage his emotions because they are structured to talk about the unexpected, or talk differently. Stories of the unexpected naturally prompt emotional responses since they suggest the potential threat, but at the same time offer a way of understanding and responding to the receiver’s needs. This emotional response makes knowledge “sticky” [43], [44], [37] Stories are particularly relevant for communicating complex knowledge within organizations, including awareness of values and norms both collective and organizational, and of details and solutions to complicated problems.

In organizational culture as a context of everyday practice and business, knowledge is frequently defined as “the capacity for effective action” [45], [46], [47]. Thus, knowledge per se is not a direct goal of organizations in sport, until the moment of its application when it becomes a new organization’s value, whether quantitative (economic) or qualitative – the one expressed through accepting organizational identity, cohesion, broad consensus, understanding or trust. In communication context, the ultimate purpose is to create organizational culture directed towards changes using storytelling as an efficient technique of organizational communicaiton.

REFERENCES


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