

Application of Storytelling in Organizations: A Review of Latest Literature with Implications for India

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Abstract

Storytelling is one of the ancient art forms of communication. Organizational Storytelling is one of the latest management trends, and there has been an increased rise in storytelling research as well as consultation. The application of storytelling lends itself to the study of the latest research in this area. There has been a vast number of studies documenting organizational stories as well as vouching about the effectiveness of storytelling. Studies in organizational stories date back to the early 1980s. Subsequent reviews have tried to analyze or categorize organizational stories. This paper focused more on the application of stories in organizations from a practical point of view. The objective of the paper was to understand the current use of stories in the workplace and recommend its use according to Indian work settings. This paper attempted to review the latest research on organizational storytelling with suggestions to its application in Indian organizations.

Keywords : organizational storytelling, storytelling in organizations, storytelling and management

JEL Classification : D23, I20, I23, O15

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Storytelling has been used in organizations since many years, some of the earliest research in this area dating back to the early 1980s (Weick & Browning, 1984; Wilkins, 1984). Since then, storytelling has evolved from a tool to understand and create culture (Wilkins, 1984) to its uses in sustaining brand management (Herkovitz & Crystal, 2010). Storytelling has helped many large corporations achieve higher levels of effectiveness and communication (Brown, Denning, Groh, & Prusak, 2005). Denning (2001) gave techniques and methods to create organizational stories, as part of knowledge management, that can push companies into action. A critical review of storytelling literature was conducted by Boyce (1996) that focused on social constructivism, organizational symbolism, and critical theory. No significant literature review was found after this one, though research in the area of organizational storytelling has contributed immensely to this field.

Most of the literature on organizational storytelling focuses on a Western perspective and very few research articles have been published about its relevance or significance in the context of Indian organizations. India is a country rich in cultural diversity, and the potential for organizational storytelling is huge. However, no studies in organizational storytelling were found to be conducted in Indian organizations. There is a gap in storytelling literature too, with the latest review being done more than 10 years ago. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to review the latest literature on storytelling and find use for its application in Indian organizations.

Methodology

To achieve the objective of reviewing latest literature, only research articles published after the year 2000 were

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selected. To search for articles, the EBSCO database was used with relevant date and publication type filters. Only research articles published in scholarly journals were selected. Keywords included (but were not limited to) 'storytelling in organizations,' 'storytelling in management,' 'organizational storytelling,' and so forth. The electronic search generated 70 articles. Articles were collected between March and April 2014. Articles were examined for the explicit use of storytelling, and only these were chosen. Articles that used only narratives as a data collection technique were excluded; given that narratives and storytelling, though closely linked, can be used differently.

Organizational Storytelling : Review of Literature

A gap has been found in storytelling literature - in what storytelling really is and practical methods of implementing it; though the gap is closing somewhat at present (Taylor, Fisher, & Dufresne, 2002). This literature review focuses on the practical means of implementing storytelling, and how storytelling can be useful.

✎ **Use of Storytelling in Organizational Culture and Change :** Culture in an organization reflects the basic philosophy of the organization as a collective (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Healthy culture is one that evolves. The dominant culture intensively reflects the core values of the organization, and it is theorized that employees predominantly learn about the organizational culture through four ways: Stories, rituals, material symbols, and language (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Stories are consciously or unconsciously used for the creation of organization culture, and a strong culture is thus a desirable feature of an organization, so that employees can be easily molded accordingly.

Classical management thinkers such as Frederick Taylor have used the power of a story to put across important management theories and practices that have changed not only work processes, but also the manner in which work has been viewed (Hough & White, 2000). Craig (2008) gave the story matrix and the story coach as storytelling tools for changing culture. Through these tools, specific stories can be introduced in the organization and molded accordingly to bring about cultural change. Storytelling can help develop culture by integrating different discourses in the organization towards one story (DeLarge, 2004). Gill (2011) presented heavy evidence from literature, building a case for the use of storytelling for employee engagement; especially during periods of change.

Adamson, Pine, Steenhoven, and Kroupa (2006) gave the example of two organizations; one that used storytelling and one that did not. Evidence from employee engagement surveys comparing the two organizations clearly supported the use of storytelling in successfully engaging employees in the change strategy. Organized and systematic storytelling was found to change negative experiences of employees into positive ones, and this helped garner major community support for a new strategy the organization wanted to adopt. An important method of processing change in a company is to collect stories about change. These stories can be shared within the organization to convince people about the importance or necessity of change. Rhodes (1996) pointed out that it is important to understand what employees feel about a particular change and emphatically and consciously involve stories of suppressed voices so that all sides of the change are projected, thus bringing about increased employee involvement in the change process.

Joyner (2012) relied on a theoretical framework called 'story mining' as an indirect way of eliciting stories by exploring symbols of the story to identify the 'cultural levers' in the organization. Bate (2004) highlighted important stories which led the way for a change in a UK based hospital. The stories people told had a common theme underlying them, and these acted as signals in the change process. Kahan (2006) spoke about the use of storytelling as an effective means of getting hostile or defensive employees to collaborate; particularly in a meeting featuring organizational change as an agenda.

➤ **Use of Storytelling in Managing People** : Storytelling can be used as a strategy to manage people and relationships more effectively. Storytelling can be used to bring people of different cultures closer, thus contributing to healthy team management (Barker & Gower, 2010 ; DeLarge, 2004). Barker and Gower (2010) gave the storytelling model for organizational communication (STMOC) and proposed that cross cultural, value laden, and action oriented storytelling, when applied to the organization diversity continuum model, will lead to social exchange, which will lead to organizational results like increased productivity and better relationships among members. The use and application of storytelling in organizational communication is critical. Denning (2008) highlighted how a story was used to communicate the importance of knowledge-sharing as a key strategy; eventually leading to the successful implementation of the strategy. Kowalewski and Waukau-Villagomez (2011) built a case for storytelling by elaborating on its ability to enable learning through emotionally charging the content with stories.

Storytelling is used by a large number of trainers to connect with the audience and make the training session more effective. An employee of a design firm routinely used stories about the firm and its client interactions during employee training sessions (DeLarge, 2004). Some organizations are consciously training managers in the art of storytelling so that they can conduct storytelling sessions with their subordinates for inspiring commitment around core values (Ohara & Cherniss, 2010).

Storytelling is found to influence positive employee engagement and subsequently decreases employee retention (Silverman, 2006). Gill (2011) presented heavy evidence from literature building - a case for the use of storytelling for employee engagement; especially during periods of change. The study gave the example of two organizations; one that used storytelling and one that did not. Evidence from 'employee engagement surveys' clearly supports the use of storytelling in successfully engaging employees in the change strategy. Silverman (2006) identified companies in which the storytelling technique yielded concrete measurable results in terms of employee retention, employee engagement, employee development, team building, mentoring, and personal values.

Hansen (2007) proposed using stories of how employees respond to organizational changes in resumes, cover letters, and interviews. This can be used as a recruitment filter by HR departments and can help in career advancement for employees. Ralston, Kirkwood, and Burant (2003) stressed that telling good stories about one's work experiences was critical for success in an employment interview, and the stories interviewees tell about their experiences provide useful cues to the employers, which can help in judging the employment potential of the candidate. Kowalewski and Waukau-Villagomez (2011) recommended the use of career narratives for individuals interested in applying for jobs or changing their careers. Their argument was that unlike the formal and stringent rules of writing a resume, a career narrative can give more information and give a positive impact to one's application.

Crisis management is an upcoming field, and storytelling can contribute to its development and application. Pinkerton (2003) advocated the use of positive storytelling to retain nurse managers in organizations. Storytelling is used to successfully engage employees in the organization's strategy and has showed to have a strong link with customer service and revenue ratings (Pounsford, 2007). Kopp, Nikolovska, Desiderio, and Guterman (2011) proposed that storytelling should be used as a crisis-management tool in organizations; storytelling helps people in making sense of a crisis and also elicits how employees respond to changes as a result of the crisis. Stories of how leaders dealt with crisis situations can be used as a basis for inspiring employees continuously and highlight desirable leadership qualities (DeLarge, 2004). Company employees from all levels were interviewed for stories, and it was found that employees who told stories with a positive tone scored higher on organizational commitment.

➤ **Use of Storytelling in Marketing and Brand Management** : Stories can be used during client interactions as a back-up on organizational credibility, to forge a connection with the customers, and help consultants to keep in touch with the realities of the customers rather than viewing them as mere 'market segments' (DeLarge, 2004).

Storytelling is increasingly being used as a marketing strategy. Ardley (2006) recommended using the storytelling approach in charting out a marketing strategy, instead of using bullet point presentations at marketing meetings. The study supported the theory that people make sense of information in the form of rhetoric, therefore, making it easier for them to understand the marketing strategy. A story can be used for strategic marketing of a brand by engaging both customers and employees at an emotional level, and brand equity can be measured by how well people connect to the story behind the brand (Baker & Boyle, 2009). The Internet offers unlimited potential for the promotion of brand stories. Brand stories can be promoted with successful results by using various forms of social media like blogs, social networks, and video-blogging websites like YouTube. Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) used a metaphorical framework - one that can be used to create a story - for promoting a brand image. Corporates can use their official websites to post genuine stories about their corporations, stories that can emote with and engage all stakeholders (Spear & Roper, 2013).

Stories have an immense potential for emotionally connecting to people. This is because most stories have archetypes like the 'hero,' 'heroine,' 'villain,' and so forth that make people relate to them on a personal basis. The challenge or journey undertaken by the hero in the story often can be related to life realities. Herkovitz and Crystal (2010) explained the power of a 'persona' in creating and sustaining a brand. The most powerful of these is identified as the 'mentor- persona'. The brand can be made popular by relating it to mentor archetypes in stories and legends. Though logos and taglines do not create a story in itself, they do contribute in making the brand more memorable.

Randazzo (2006) elaborated how two companies used the 'persuasive power of a story' to turn around the sales of their leading products. Story based advertisements relaying powerful archetypes were used to market these products, leading to a successful turnaround. Experiencing a product helps a consumer to live and retell a story that links the consumer emotionally to the brand through certain universal archetypes such as the 'Hero' (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008). It is now understood that stories can cause automatic awareness and contribution (Woodside, 2010), which is why the logical rational approach in which work is organized is now being questioned (Ardley, 2006; Randazzo, 2006; Weik & Browning, 1986). Testimonials and product experiences of customers can be used as stories in advertising and brand management (McLellan, 2006). An effective way of content marketing is managing to create and advertise stories that directly and indirectly involve the brand. This can be done using various media like mobiles, emails, public relations, and so forth (Pulizzi, 2012). Stories about the logo are effective assessments of customer perspectives and loyalties towards a bank (Pham, Pallares-Venegas, & Teich, 2012).

➤ **Use of Storytelling in Learning and Development :** Stories can be used to inform and connect at the time, thus making a mental-emotional connection to the learning process. Harvard Business School uses case studies as 'stories' for students to work with so they can understand first-hand the challenges and dilemmas faced by managers in today's business world (McLellan 2006). Rosile, Boje, Carlon, Downs, and Saylor (2013) provided a six facet framework or model to develop and use storytelling as part of organizational research design, discussing in detail the benefits and limitations of each. Cognitive research predicts stories to be more memorable than other information and hence, are more retrievable. Therefore, stories can be used by senior managers to mentor new employees, drawing from their vast knowledge and experience, thus contributing to knowledge management (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001).

Substantial evidence has been found that storytelling is significant to the learning process (Taylor et al., 2002). Taylor et al. (2002) expanded on the different types of organizational stories based on aesthetic qualities. This can help distinguish between different types of stories for management learning. They successfully showed how select stories can be used to teach management concepts. Tyler (2007) conducted a naturalistic inquiry on the practical uses of stories among HRD practitioners of profit-making organizations. The study revealed that acceptance of storytelling was quite a challenge among business circles as it was viewed as a 'soft' approach to learning/ training. The study found that the use of positive stories was favored even if negative stories gave

significant lessons. Many HR practitioners have also agreed that the language of storytelling is too simplistic in nature, and there is a need to develop a new language; one that would suit the business settings of organizations.

Katzeff and Ware (2007) used a computerized recording system to collect stories as shared experiences of volunteers of an annual event. These stories, mostly in the form of testimonies, were useful in gaining perspective as to the positive and negative experiences of the event, providing a basis for improvement. Volker, Phillips, and Anderson (2011) gave a story type matrix for distinguishing between different stories told within the organization. The four types of stories were deliberate-real stories, deliberate-imaginary stories, non-deliberate real stories, and non-deliberate imaginary stories. While deliberate stories were often told to make a point or guide an agenda, non-deliberate stories were told for amusement, but reflected the psychological perspective of the storyteller as well.

Implications for India

Research in organizational storytelling in India is clearly inadequate. There is an urgent need for academic research in the areas of organizational storytelling. Though books have been written, highlighting the journeys of some prominent organizations, like Tata or Reliance, there is a general lack of documented organizational stories for the purpose of research. Additionally, India is going through a period of great excitement and change regarding manufacturing and industrialization in response to the Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi's 'Make in India' campaign. Indian industries are, therefore, a fertile ground for organizational storytelling, which has the potential to make culture and strategy changes smoother.

Stories make learning and sense-making easier. Therefore, storytelling has a huge potential in the fields of training and organizational learning. Besides these, storytelling has been used to engage employees, sensitize people to cultural diversity, communicate values effectively, drive leadership, and distinguish between potential job candidates. It has been observed that many trainers make the use of storytelling in their content, but there are hardly any Indian studies on the effectiveness of storytelling as a training method.

Storytelling has a huge scope in marketing and advertisement. Stories about product experiences can highlight brand experience and connect consumers emotionally to a product. In India, Cadbury and Nestle's Maggie have ran advertisement campaigns highlighting consumer stories. Tata Steel and Hero MotoCorp have used the power of the Hero archetype to advertise their brands. For example, Hero's catchy song '*Hum main hain hero*' (there is a hero in each one of us) relies on the universal hero archetype. Tata Steel had a campaign named 'Values stronger than steel,' which highlighted real-life heroic people and their struggles. Advertisements can be made more impactful when portrayed as stories. Storytelling has been found to be quite effective in change, employee engagement, retention, and so forth. Research in the area of human resource development would present useful insights to the increased use of storytelling in people management.

Managerial Implications

An important managerial implication of this study is its potential to highlight storytelling as a management tool. From this perspective, management theories are also stories - about how discoveries were made and experiments were conducted. Important studies like Fayol's experiment and the behavioral studies when taught as stories can make theory learning for students more memorable and interesting. The knowledge of storytelling may be used as a concept of knowledge management. To this end, dedicated research needs to be conducted to establish storytelling as a part of management theory and find a niche for it.

Managers at higher levels in organizations can be trained in storytelling and its application to marketing, change management, employee engagement, leadership, and so forth. Effectiveness of storytelling can thus be

measured to bring this age-old form of communication back into corporate boardrooms. An important step towards this would be introducing 'Storytelling for Management' as a course for students in post-graduate management degree colleges.

Conclusion

Indian organizations are more culturally diverse, and application of storytelling in organizations can yield interesting data, which is bound to be unique. Many of the studies mentioned in this paper can be duplicated in Indian organizations and compared for results. While it has been observed that many trainers use stories and storytelling methods in their content, very little academic research exists to support the use of this method. Academic studies in these areas may highlight the strengths and weaknesses of organizational storytelling, thus boosting its effectiveness. Though this review wishes to highlight the use of storytelling in organizational contexts, it is also leaning in the favor of organizational storytelling. However, one must remember that storytelling is not always effective and may not work in every situation (Denning, 2001). It would be best to experiment and document successful examples of storytelling before labeling it as a 'best practice' in management.

Storytelling is basically an art; a contribution to mankind made by storytellers and dramatic folklorists around the world. However, the latest use of storytelling in organizations has once again highlighted the need and importance of viewing this art under a scientific lens. Organizations are now acknowledging the importance of creative methods and devices to reign in investments and reap good profits. Therefore, in conclusion, moving towards the 'new creative economy' and acknowledging it basically as a 'storytelling economy' (Baker & Boyle, 2009) is just acknowledging another idea whose time has come.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

This review includes research articles that featured only as a part of the EBSCO database. Other electronic and non-electronic databases have not been included, which limits the number of articles on which this review is based. Besides, only articles published during the past 10 years have been included. This once again limits the scope of the paper, as there might be previous studies, which could have offered more perspective and could have widened the scope of the present research paper. Storytelling might be applicable to other areas of management as well- for example, finance, knowledge management, and so forth, but due to fewer studies in these areas, it was difficult to categorize such studies clearly. My understanding about the application of storytelling in management is limited to the explicitly stated use of storytelling, and does not go beyond implicit or implied use of storytelling.

There is a vast scope for research in storytelling in India. There is hardly any research conducted on storytelling in Indian organizations. Indian companies are a fertile ground for stories, considering the cultural diversity of the average workplace. Advancing technological changes and changes in the growing economy are bringing about new challenges in the way people are to be managed. It would be interesting to observe and possibly measure the effect of storytelling on such a workforce. A large number of trainers and organizational consultants rely on storytelling methods as part of their content. Research in this area may be useful to evaluate and/or promote storytelling methods; subsequently, adding to the pool of existing academic knowledge/literature.

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