REVISED AND UPDATED

The LEADER'S GUIDE *to* Storytelling

MASTERING THE ART *and* DISCIPLINE *of* BUSINESS NARRATIVE

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Preface

Much has happened in the five years since the first edition of this book provided the basic building blocks of leadership storytelling.

Since the first edition, the importance of storytelling as a leadership tool has become generally accepted, even in big organizations. The days are gone when I would be recruited by a nervous executive to hold a storytelling workshop for a major corporation with a euphemistic label like “strategic change management.” Now executives tell me, “Let's call it what it is: storytelling!”

This reflects the fact that storytelling has gained recognition as a core competence of leadership. It is now standard practice to include a section on storytelling in books on leadership and change management, such as *A Whole New Mind* (2006) by Dan Pink, *The Leadership Challenge* (2008) by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, *Made to Stick* (2008) by Chip Heath and Dan Heath, and *Getting Change Right* (2010) by Seth Kahan.

The concept of leadership has itself also evolved. Chapter Twelve of the first edition of this book argued that storytelling is more than simply a communication tool and implied the emergence of a different kind of leader—someone who engages in interactive conversations rather than merely telling people what to do. It suggested that storytelling goes beyond the use of individual stories for specific purposes and implied a different way of thinking, speaking, and acting in the workplace.

I developed these ideas further in my book *The Secret Language of Leadership: How Leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative* (2007), which examined what this different way of thinking, speaking, and acting entailed. It explored in more detail how storytelling tools could be deployed to meet the specific challenges of leadership. It

showed how the leadership communication triad, “get attention–stimulate desire for change–reinforce with reasons,” could be used as a template to deal with virtually any leadership challenge. Chapter Two of this edition has been updated to reflect these discoveries.

Since 2005, a massive rethinking of management itself has also gotten under way. In 2009, the Shift Index quantified with startling clarity the long-term decline of management: the rate of return on assets of U.S. firms is now only a quarter of what it was in 1965; the life expectancy of a firm in the Fortune 500 has declined to less than fifteen years and heading toward five years unless something changes; executive turnover is accelerating; only one in five workers is fully engaged in his or her work[1]. The dysfunctionality of traditional management was further underscored by the Kauffman Foundation's discovery that established firms in the United States created no net new jobs between 1980 and 2005; virtually all net new jobs were created by firms that were five years old or less.[2]

The standard practices of management are increasingly seen as anachronistic. “Tomorrow's business imperatives,” Gary Hamel wrote in *Harvard Business Review* in 2009, “lie outside the performance envelope of today's bureaucracy-infused management practices… Equipping organizations to tackle the future would require a management revolution no less momentous than the one that spawned modern industry.”[3]

Chapter Eleven of the first edition of this book began to explore through the lens of disruptive innovation what this management revolution might involve. I argued that leadership storytelling is part of the answer. Since then, I have come to see more clearly what management actions in addition to storytelling are needed to create an organization that promotes continuous innovation on a sustained basis. In effect, storytelling is not just a core competence of

leadership: it is also central component of management itself. My new book, *The Leader's Guide to Radical Management: Reinventing the Workplace for the Twenty-First Century* (2010), spells this out in more detail, and Chapter Eleven of this book has been updated to reflect these insights.

This book thus provides the building blocks of storytelling for two of my other books. *The Secret Language of Leadership* (2007) shows how storytelling is a central component of leadership. *The Leader's Guide to Radical Management* (2010) shows how storytelling is a core competence of management itself.

The importance of storytelling in branding and marketing has also been reinforced by the explosion of social media. In 2005, when the first edition of this book was published, Facebook and YouTube had just been created, and Twitter did not exist. Today these three Web sites have hundreds of millions of participants, who are telling stories about their lives and the products and services that they use. This phenomenon has had a dramatic impact on practices in branding and marketing, as the ongoing shift in power from seller to buyer has dramatically accelerated. Understanding and mastering the elements of interactive storytelling in this sphere has become even more important than before. Chapter Five of this edition has been updated to incorporate the implications of these developments.

Stories are trapdoors, escape hatches, portals through which we can expand our lives and learn about other worlds. They offer guideposts to what is important in life. They generate meaning. They embody our values. They give us the clues from which we can discover what ultimately matters. In the past five years, I have learned much from studying both the power and the limits of storytelling. I am happy to have the opportunity to share those learnings here with you.

Stephen Denning

December 2010
Washington, D.C.

Introduction

This book is an account of a simple but powerful idea: the best way to communicate with people you are trying to lead is often through a story. The impulse here is practical and pedagogical. The book shows how to use storytelling to deal with the most difficult challenges that leaders today face.

The Different Worlds of Leadership and Storytelling

Storytelling and leadership are both performance arts, and like all other performance arts, they involve at least as much doing as thinking. In such matters, performers always know more than they can tell. I have tried to convey here as much as I can of what works—and what doesn't—at the intersection of the two different worlds of leadership and storytelling.

For the first several decades of my working life, I remained firmly in the world of leadership and management. I was a manager in a large international organization. The organization happened to be the World Bank, but had it been any other large, modern organization, the discourse would have been essentially the same: rates of return, cost-benefit analyses, risk assessments, performance targets, budgets, work programs, the bottom line—you name it.

The organization happened to be located in the United States of America, but the talk would have been the same if it had been situated in any other country. The forces of globalization have rendered the discourse of management and organizations thoroughly international. It's a world almost totally focused on analysis and abstractions. The virtues of sharpness, rigor, clarity, explicitness, and

crispness are everywhere celebrated. It's a world that is heavy with practical import: the fate of nations and, indeed, the economic welfare of the entire human race are said to rest on the effectiveness of the discourse.

It was the force of circumstance rather than temperament that led me away from the world of the boardroom, the negotiation table, and the computerized spreadsheet to a radically different world: the ancient performance art of storytelling. At the time, I was facing a leadership challenge for which the traditional tools of management were impotent. In trying to communicate a new idea to a skeptical audience, I found that the virtues of sharpness and rigor weren't working. Having spent my life believing in the dream of reason, I was startled to find that an appropriately told story had the power to do what rigorous analysis couldn't: to communicate a strange new idea and move people to enthusiastic action.

Initially the idea that storytelling might be a powerful tool for management and leadership was so counterintuitive and contrary to my entire education and work-life experience that I had difficulty in believing the evidence of my own eyes. In fact, it took me several years to admit to myself that I was being successful through telling stories.

“Soft.” “Fuzzy.” “Emotional.” “Fluffy.” “Anecdotal.” “Irrational.” “Fantasy.” “Fairy stories.” “Primitive.” “Childish.” These were just some of the terms that the advocates of conventional management hurled at leadership storytelling. They saw it as contaminating the world of pure reason with the poison of emotions and feeling, thereby dragging society back into the Dark Ages. It took a certain amount of intellectual courage to brave this disdain and suggest that the world of rational management might have much to learn from the ancient tradition of narrative.[1]

To build up intellectual stamina to face these challenges, I spent time in the radically different world of storytelling. Not that I was made to feel particularly welcome there. On the contrary, I was initially greeted as an interloper—someone who risked sullying the noble tales of glorious heroes and beautiful heroines, the figures who made the imagination soar and the heart leap, with the shallow, mean, and dirty world of business, commerce, and making money. To some, I was borrowing the magic language of narrative to accomplish something for which a tersely worded “fit-in-or-you're fired” memo might be more suitable. Not everyone could see that I was trying to subvert the “fit-in-or-you're-fired” approach to solving human problems.

What made my reception worse was that I didn't enter the world of storytelling on bended knee in a mood of respectful submission to drink from the ancient fonts of wisdom and accept without question what had been known for millennia about the elements of a well-told story. Instead I arrived with an iconoclastic attitude, suggesting that perhaps it was time to reexamine the Aristotle's eternal verities of storytelling. I implied that it might be healthy to throw back the curtains and open the windows and get some fresh air and light on some of these dusty old traditions. To the world of storytelling, this was heresy of the gravest kind. The suggestion that the ancient world of storytelling might actually have something to learn from organizations was as absurd as it was horrifying.

The Intersection of Leadership and Storytelling

The result was that for some years, I found myself uneasily inhabiting these two different worlds—each profoundly suspicious of the other, each using discourse that supported

the validity of its own assumptions and conduct, each seemingly unable or unwilling to grapple with what it might learn from the other. Storytellers could talk to storytellers and managers could talk to managers, but managers and storytellers couldn't make much sense of one another. And what little they did understand of the other side's discourse, they didn't much like. As I gradually learned to converse, more or less successfully, in both worlds, I found myself in the role of go-between—someone who reported back from the other world, much as in the thirteenth century Marco Polo reported on his trip to China, telling astonished Venetians that there were strange and wonderful things in that distant world if you took the trouble to go there and check it out. Just as Marco Polo discovered, the very strangeness of my tale rendered my credibility questionable.

Occasionally when I would make a report to managers of what was going on in the world of storytelling, or to storytellers what was happening in the land of management, one of them would say, “How interesting!” And that is one of the points of this book: to point out matters of profound interest to both the world of storytelling and the world of leadership. So when in this book I take potshots of various kinds at both the world of management and the world of storytelling, please see that they are fragments of a lover's quarrel. If I didn't care deeply about both these worlds, it wouldn't be worth the hassle to undertake the role of dual ambassador.[2]

One of the factors driving me was the awareness that the average manager was not having extravagant success in meeting current leadership challenges. Let me cite just a few statistics:

- Study after study concludes that only 10 percent of all publicly traded companies have proved themselves able

to sustain for more than a few years a growth trajectory that creates above-average shareholder returns.[3]

- Repeated studies indicate that somewhat less than 10 percent of major innovations in large corporations—the ones on which the future is said to depend—are successful.[4]
- The multibillion-dollar activity of mergers and acquisitions enjoys a success rate, in terms of adding value to the acquiring company, of around 15 percent.[5]
- The rate of return on assets of U.S. firms has declined by 75 percent since 1965.[6]
- The life expectancy of firms in the Fortune 500 has declined to fifteen years and is heading toward five years if trends continue.[7]
- Only one in five workers is fully engaged in his or her work.[8]

To grasp the significance of these figures, you need only ask yourself this: If your airline's flights arrived only 10 to 15 percent of the time, would you be getting on that plane? If your surgical operation was successful only 10 to 15 percent of the time, would you be undergoing that operation? Managers thus have little reason to be complacent about their current mode of getting results.[9]

Nor was it obvious that the storytellers I met had any reason to be happier with their overall situation. Many of them were entangled in one way or another with the world of organizations. Often storytelling for them was a part-time avocation because it didn't generate sufficient revenue to make ends meet: they had day jobs to fill the gap. And those few who were involved full time in storytelling found themselves willy-nilly in the world of commerce.

But storytellers tended to keep the two worlds separate. They were just as unhappy as anyone else with the command-and-control management practices widespread in organizations, but the storytellers had no idea how to

change them. They tended to live bifurcated lives: left-brained workers by day, right-brained storytellers by night. They couldn't see a way to bring their right-brained storytelling capacity into the workplace, and it was not clear that they even wanted to.

Just as the left-brained managers were reluctant to contaminate the rationalism of management with impassioned narratives, so storytellers were reluctant to risk dirtying the world of storytelling by immersing it in the world of commerce.

As I moved uneasily between these two different worlds, it was apparent to me that each of them had something to offer to the other. When I saw how storytellers could hold an audience totally engrossed in what was being said, I could see that this capacity is what analytical managers often lack: their brilliant plans often leave audiences confused and dazed. I also saw how slighted storytellers felt when the world of organizations didn't take them seriously. By clarifying the theory and practice of storytelling, I felt that I could show that storytelling had much to offer to organizations. By taking a clear-sighted view of what storytelling could and couldn't do, I believed I could help it assume its rightful place as an equal partner with analysis as a key leadership discipline. Storytellers would get the respect they want and deserve. Leaders would be able to connect with their audiences as human beings.

And of course what both worlds of storytelling and organization have been overlooking is that storytelling already plays a huge role in the world of organizations and business and politics today. One has only to glance at the business section of the newspaper to see that organizations are chockablock with stories that have massive financial impact.[10] Stories are the only way to make sense of a rapidly morphing global economy with multiple wrenching transitions under way simultaneously.

The choice for leaders in business and organizations is not whether to be involved in storytelling—they can hardly do otherwise—but whether to use storytelling unwittingly and clumsily—or intelligently and skillfully. Management fads may come and go, but storytelling is fundamental to all nations, societies, and cultures and has been so since time immemorial.

And it's not just leaders in business and politics who can benefit from a greater capability to use story. Anyone who has a new idea and wants to change the world will do better by telling stories than by offering any number of reasons. It is equally applicable to those outside organizations, such as schoolteachers, health workers, therapists, family members, professional colleagues—in short, anyone who wants to change the minds of those around them.

The Role of Storytelling

In one sense, telling a story is simply giving an example. The commonsense view is that it is “glaringly obvious, and something we all know instinctively. A good example may make something easier to understand, and easier to remember.”[11]

So what? We can, the thinking goes, recognize the power of giving an example and go on managing the way we've always been managing without significant change. No big deal.

And yet it turns out to be a very big deal indeed, with storytelling being such a sizable part of the modern economy. Deidre McCloskey has calculated that persuasion constitutes more than a quarter of the U.S. gross national product (GNP).[12] If storytelling is—conservatively—at least half of persuasion, then storytelling amounts to 14 percent of GNP, or more than $1 trillion. But it's not just the size of

the phenomenon. There's something qualitatively different going on here.

What's New in Storytelling

To clear away some of the underbrush, let me start with some basics. In my experience, the following propositions do not seem particularly controversial to most people:

- Storytelling is an ancient art that hasn't changed much in several thousand years.
- The effective use of storytelling in organizations involves crafting and performing a well-made story with a hero or heroine, a plot, a turning point, and a resolution.
- A storyteller catches and holds the attention of an audience by evoking the sights and sounds and smells of the context in which the story took place.
- A well-made story is effective regardless of the purpose for which the story is being told.
- Storytelling is a rare skill in which relatively few human beings excel.

All these propositions, widely regarded as noncontroversial, are wrong. They constitute some of the popular misconceptions about storytelling. One of the purposes of this book is to explode these myths and expose what's really involved in using story for leadership in organizations.[13]

For one thing, it turns out that different narrative patterns are useful for the different purposes of leadership. Knowing which pattern is suitable for which task is a key to the effective use of storytelling. Ignorance of the different narrative patterns makes it likely that aspiring leaders will stumble onto an inappropriate narrative pattern for the task at hand and fail to attain their chosen goal.

It also transpires that some of the most valuable stories in organizations don't fit the pattern of a well-made story. For instance, a springboard story that communicates a complex idea and sparks action generally lacks a plot and a turning point. A story that shares knowledge is about problems, solutions, and explanations and often lacks a hero or heroine. The stories that are most effective in a modern organization do not necessarily follow the rules laid down in Aristotle's *Poetics*. They often reflect an ancient but different tradition of storytelling in a minimalist fashion, which is reflected in the parables of the Bible and European folk tales.[14]

Just as the human race began to make rapid progress in the physical sciences when people stopped believing what Aristotle had written and started observing with their own eyes whether two stones of different weights fall at the same or different speeds, so in the field of organizational storytelling, we begin to make progress when we stop looking at the world through the lens of Aristotle's teaching and start using the evidence of our own eyes and ears to examine what stories are actually told in organizations and what effect they have.

Moreover, the idea that storytelling is a kind of rare skill possessed by relatively few human beings is utter nonsense. Human beings master the basics of storytelling as young children and retain this capability throughout their lives. One has only to watch what goes in an informal social setting—a restaurant, a coffee break, a party—to see that all human beings know how to tell stories. Storytelling is an activity that everyone practices incessantly. It is so pervasive that it is almost invisible. We are like fish swimming in a sea of narratives. It is usually only when we are asked to stand up before an audience and talk in a formal setting that the indoctrination of our schooling takes over and a tangle of abstractions tumbles from our mouths.

Learning to tell stories is less a task of learning something new and more one of reminding ourselves of something we already know. It's a matter of transposing the skills we apply effortlessly in a social situation to formal settings.

This book is about providing leaders at all levels in the organization with usable tools for communication—narratives that help tackle the most difficult challenges of leadership. The book has a strong focus on what works, but it also conveys enough theoretical background to give you an understanding of why some stories work for some purposes but not for others.

The Emerging Leadership Discipline of Narrative

Five years ago, when I published *The Springboard,* I was thinking of springboard stories as a tool, a remarkably useful tool but no more than a single tool.

By 2003, when I was finishing writing *Squirrel Inc.,* I could see that storytelling was more than one tool: it was at least a whole array of tools that could help achieve multiple purposes such as sparking people into action, communicating who you are or what your company is, transmitting values, sharing knowledge, taming the grapevine, and leading into the future.

In 2005, writing the first edition of *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling,* I sensed that narrative was even more than that. But what? A clue came recently when I was rereading Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline.*[15] At the end, Senge hints at the possibility of a sixth discipline—“perhaps one or two developments emerging in seemingly unlikely places, will lead to a wholly new discipline that we cannot even grasp today.” The sixth discipline would be something invisible to

conventional management thinking because it would be at odds with its fundamental assumptions.

Thus, it would be not a single gadget or technique or tool but rather a discipline, that is, “a body of theory and technique that must be studied and mastered to be put into practice. A discipline is a developmental path for acquiring certain skills or competencies. As with any discipline, from playing the piano to electrical engineering, some people have an innate ‘gift’ but anyone can develop proficiency through practice.”[16]

Given the limited progress being made on innovation even using the five disciplines Senge talked about, this passage got me wondering whether storytelling might not be the missing sixth discipline. Certainly it has the characteristics that Senge envisaged for a discipline: something “where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together.” And it has to do with “how we think, what we truly want, and how we interact and learn with one another.”[17] So could narrative be the missing sixth discipline?

Five years ago, I simply didn't know enough to call organizational storytelling a discipline: an emerging practice maybe, but not a discipline. Now I can draw on the work of practitioners like Madelyn Blair, Evelyn Clark, Seth Kahan, Gary Klein, Doug Lipman, Carol Pearson, Annette Simmons, Dave Snowden, and Victoria Ward, among many others. I can also see the wonderful work emerging from academia.[18] As I become more and more aware that I'm just scratching the surface of a subject that is broad and deep, I'm inclined to think that narrative is indeed an emerging discipline.

The Nature of Leadership

This book talks more about leadership than management. Traditional management has focused more on means than on ends. Traditional managers usually take an agreed-on set of assumptions and goals and seek to implement efficient and effective ways of achieving those goals. They decide what to do, on the basis of agreed-on hypotheses, generally proceeding deductively.

Leadership deals with ends more than means. It concerns issues where there is no agreement on underlying assumptions and goals—or where there is a broad agreement, but the assumptions and goals are heading for failure. In fact, the principal task of leadership is to create a new consensus about the goals to be pursued and how to achieve them.

Leadership is essentially a task of persuasion—of winning people's minds and hearts. Typically it proceeds inductively by argument from one or more examples toward a more general conclusion about the goals and assumptions we should adopt toward the matter in question. Storytelling is thus inherently suited to the task of leadership.

The Marriage of Narrative and Analysis

This is not to say that abstract reason and analysis aren't also important. Storytelling doesn't replace analytical thinking. It supplements it by enabling us to imagine new perspectives and is ideally suited to communicating change and stimulating innovation. Abstract analysis is easier to understand when seen through the lens of a well-chosen story.

The physical sciences have had an aversion to anything to do with storytelling in part because it deals with such murky things as intentions, emotions, and matters of the heart. Yet

in the past couple of decades, most of the human sciences have grasped the centrality of narrative to human affairs. Narrative has come to be influential in vast regions of psychology, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, political theory, literary studies, religious studies, psychotherapy, and even medicine.[19] Management is among the last of the disciplines to recognize the central significance of narrative to the issues that it deals with.

The Performance of the Story

The basics of leadership storytelling can be mastered quickly. Mastery of the discipline, however, takes a lifetime. Storytelling is a performance art. It's one thing to realize that you need to link the story with the change idea; it's another thing to do it, time after time without fail, like the swing of a professional golfer who always performs flawlessly. You will not become a master storyteller simply by reading this book. You will have to put the ideas into practice so that you get into a groove.

Finally, keep in mind that the stories in this book are for the most part intended to be performed. Some of the stories included here, when read on the printed page, may seem so brief and bland that it is hard to imagine how they could have impact. Remember that everything is transformed in performance. Small things make a big difference. The look of the eye, the intonation of the voice, the way the body is held, the import of a subtle pause, the teller's response to the audience's responses—all these aspects make a huge contribution to the meaning of a story for audiences. Chapter Two discusses how to perform a story for maximum effect.

A Different Kind of Leader

Throughout this book, I make the case, step by step, that if you consistently use the narrative tools described here, you will acquire new capabilities. Because you communicate who you are and what you stand for, others come to know you and respect you for that. Because you are attentive to the world as it is, your ideas are sound. Because you speak the truth, you are believed. Because you make your values explicit and your actions are consistent with those values, your values become contagious and others start to share them. Because you listen to the world, the world listens to you. Because you are open to innovation, happy accidents happen. Because you bring meaning into the world of work, you are able to get superior results. Chapter Twelve explores the implications of this kind of leadership for organizations.

Let's Go!

The challenges of leadership are difficult, volatile, and sometimes daunting. This book doesn't shy away from those difficulties. And yet it offers a note of hope. Leadership is not an innate set of skills that a few gifted individuals receive at birth. Narrative patterns can be learned by anyone who wants to lead from whatever position they are in—whether CEO, middle management, or on the front lines of an organization, or outside any organizations altogether—anyone who sees a better way to do things and wants the organization to change.

Organizations often seem immovable. They are not. With the right kind of story at the right time, they are stunningly vulnerable to a new idea. And this book provides you with a guide to finding and telling the right story at the right time.

A Definition of *Story* and *Narrative*

In this book, *narrative* and *story* are used as synonyms, in a broad sense of an account of a set of events that are causally related. Such a simple,

commonsense notion is, however, controversial. Here I have space only to allude to some of the issues.

The Definition of “Story” and “Narrative”

What is a story? What is a narrative? Are they the same or different?

This book follows common usage and treats *story* and *narrative* as synonyms, to mean *an account of events that are causally connected in some way.*

Some practitioners have suggested different definitions. Some suggest that *story* should be defined in the narrower sense of a well-told story, with a protagonist, a plot, and a turning point leading to a resolution, while *narrative* might be a better choice in the broader sense I use. According to this view, locutions that lack the traditional elements of a well-told story are not so much stories as ideas for possible stories yet to be told or fragments of stories.[20]

Others have suggested that *story* should be used in a broader sense, while *narrative* should be restricted to the narrower sense of “a story as told by a narrator.” According to this view, “narrative = story + theme”: the theme is a layer added to the story to instruct, provide an emotional connection, or impart a deeper meaning.[21]

In common usage, both *story* and *narrative* are inclusive. Polkinghorne and others have suggested that we accept this broad meaning and treat the two terms as synonyms.[22] Within the broad field of story, it's possible to distinguish classically structured stories, well-made stories, minimalist stories, antistories, fragmentary stories, stories with no ending, stories with multiple endings, stories with multiple beginnings, stories with endings that circle back to the beginning, comedies, tragedies, detective stories, romances, folk tales, novels, theater, movies, television mini-series, and so on, without the need to get into theological discussions as to what is truly a story.

In common usage, *story* is a large tent, with many variations within it. Some variations are more useful for some purposes than others. There are probably many variations that haven't yet been identified. If we start out with predetermined ideas of what a “real story” is, you may end up missing useful forms of narrative.

The Internal and External Aspects of a Story

It is also important to keep in mind that story has an external and an internal aspect. Story in its external aspect is something to be observed, analyzed, and dissected into its component parts. In its internal aspect, it is something that is experienced, lived as a participant. This book explores both dimensions of story. The value of the external view of story is that it is stable and clear. Its drawback is that it stands outside the experience of the story itself. The value of the internal view of story is

that it is fresh and immediate and participative. Its weakness is that it is elusive and kaleidoscopic and vulnerable to abuse.[23]

The Position Adopted in This Book

This book sees story as independent of the media by which it is transmitted. A story can be transmitted by words, pictures, video, or mime. While recognizing the suitability of language to communicate narrative, it is possible to study narrative in its nonverbal manifestations without requiring verbal narration.[24]

In examining the phenomenon of story and storytelling, both the external and internal aspects of story need to be taken into account.[25]