

Corporate Storytelling

The skills involved in telling a Good Story are considered of growing importance. Not just in the fields of advertising and communication, but for leadership and management as well. And why not? For Great Stories established civilizations, built nations, lead armies to victory, and created bonds between tribes. And with the Power of the Story we can create markets, build brands, lead organisations and connect people. How do we do it? How do you disclose the power of a story and use it to support your organisation or brand? What is a good corporate story?

In general, the Power of the Story is that it touches Man in his full being. Rationally, because the story has an explanatory, clarifying function. Emotionally, because it brings about emotional tension and emotional release. Physically, because the Story effects the heart rate, blood pressure and breathing, and psychologically because the Story can be an eye-opener that changes thoughts and feelings. A Good Story both informs and inspires, comforts and encourages, motivates and mobilizes.

Within the context of Corporate Storytelling, the Power of the Story has more specific functions. Organizations such as 3M, Xerox, IBM, NASA, Intel and Microsoft actively use storytelling techniques 'to handle complex management issues'. In Harvard Business Review we can read that the ability to tell a Good Story is one of the most important talents Leaders of the future need. "...few talents are more important to managerial success than knowing how to tell a good story. If the story is good enough, it can also lift individuals and organizations to take the risks that keep life an adventure."(Micheal @Michael?) Hattersley, Jan. 1997 V2n1)

Between the lines we can also find the requirements good corporate narrative has to meet. "It should handle complex management issues, lift individuals and organizations to take the risks that keep life an adventure."

This single phrase contains a whole world of wisdom. We'll take a look at it step by step.

"It should handle complex management issues..."

Even today there are certain tribes in Africa where the Chief sends for the Storyteller if he has a problem. The Chief explains his problem, and the Storyteller racks his mind to see if he can think of a story that shows the problem from a different angle. The Story doesn't solve the problem, but gives the Chief the insight he needs in order to solve it. And that is what a good story does; it gives insight. That is why 3M uses the Power of the Story for business planning and strategy. Storytelling has always been part of their tradition and culture. They proudly tell about one of their scientists who, during religious services, wished he had a bookmark that would not fall from his hymnbook. And that's how they got the idea and started to produce Post-it Notes. At 3M, the story is used to replace the usual bullet points. The advantage of a presentation with bullet points is its speed. But its great disadvantage is that it's no more than a list of 'to do's', lacking clear logic, objectives or motivation. Writing is thinking and writing in bullet points allows our thinking to jump. "Transforming a business plan from a list of bullet points into a story tells everyone not only what the goals are but also how to reach them."

"...lift individuals and organizations..."

A good corporate story has an individual, as well as a collective function. The story should make the Individual feel he is part of a social/cultural body in which he believes and to which he makes an important contribution because he thinks its objectives are worthwhile. The story containing no more than the 'go for it together' and 'we're all on the same side' ingredients is not adequate; it simply melts together the individual and the group, while the most important thing people want is recognition of their unique, individual dignity.

The story should make the group feel that they're part of a historical cycle, with a beginning, a middle and an end. A good corporate story answers the fundamental questions of life, such as 'Where do we come from?' 'How did we get here?' 'Where do we stand?' and 'How do we continue?' In other words: a myth about the origin (a mythical beginning or some legendary founding fathers), a myth about the quest (the quest for the Holy Grail, the famous history of the beginning, when

enormous obstacles have been removed and capital blunders were made) and a myth about the destiny (a glorious future, the Holy Grail, the Promised Land).

(3) *"...to take the risks..."*

Most people are afraid. Afraid of the unknown. Afraid in the dark. Afraid of dragons on their path. People are afraid of change, even if it's change for the sake of something considerably better. And yet, success consists of this very same change, meeting the unknown, jumping into the deep end and fighting dragons. But people have dreams and ambitions, wishes and desires. A good storyteller respects human nature. A good story incorporates fear and desire in such a way that following one's fears leads to ruin, but following one's desires leads to success. Because every organization has its Holy Grail and its demons.

(4) *"...that keep life an adventure."*

This single part of the phrase conceals two fundamental prerequisites for both success and happiness. The first is that work is a part of life, and not the other way round. Troubled leaders and dysfunctional organizations should realize right now that the final analysis is not about what you've achieved, but about the way you've lived. Do we act out of fear and greed, or out of love and generosity? Are we true to ourselves or do we belie the person we actually are? Do we make use of our talents or do we waste them? Are we on our way or on a side track?

There is no reason whatsoever to suppose that an organization of humans does not follow the same psychological rules as the humans who take part. Every organization has a soul.

The second prerequisite is in the word 'adventure'. The origin of the word is Latin, 'avenir', the things to come, the future. So, an adventure has something to do with the future, not with the past. Adventures as a story type are the opposite of tragedies. In tragedies, the present deeds are determined by a cause in the past. In an adventure, the present deeds are determined by a goal in the future. To see life as an adventure means we do not see life as a tragedy, and we do not see ourselves as a victim of circumstances. This means our deeds are not determined by causes in the past, but by goals in the future. And that's what makes us free people, and Heroes. Because the past is fixed, but we determine the future. "The best way to predict the future is to create it."

Conclusion

A good corporate story is a powerful instrument. It shows complex questions from a different angle. It transforms meaningless 'to do' lists nobody knows what to do with into meaningful stories showing the way and the goal. It recognizes the individual and makes him feel he's a valuable part of a valuable whole. It incorporates the collective into a historical cycle, and thus it gives the organization a 'raison d'être', as well as a Holy Grail. It transforms attitudes by putting things into a wholesome perspective. And, last but not least, a good corporate story generates corporate pride. For in a story of ourselves the Hero is us.