Teaching Storytelling as a Leadership Practice

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Teaching Storytelling as a Leadership Practice

Abstract
The ability to tell stories can be an important leadership attribute and skill to master in order to be an effective leader (Baldoni, 2003; Denning, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Storytelling is a central component of effective communication for student leaders and a skill to master for future leadership success. This session addresses active learning, group discussion and reflective practice as a way to teach storytelling as a leadership skill. In this workshop, leadership faculty will demonstrate three brief interactive teaching activities designed to help students understand how to develop stories, identity situations in which to tell stories, and also practice the art of leadership storytelling. Participants will leave with multiple pedagogical methods to teach storytelling as a leadership skill to students in leadership education programs. Participants that attend the session will also have a chance to practice their own storytelling skills.

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Teaching Storytelling as a Leadership Practice

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Abstract

The ability to tell stories can be an important leadership attribute and skill to master in order to be an effective leader (Baldoni, 2003; Denning, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Storytelling is a central component of effective communication for student leaders and a skill to master for future leadership success. This session addresses active learning, group discussion and reflective practice as a way to teach storytelling as a leadership skill. In this workshop, leadership faculty will demonstrate three brief interactive teaching activities designed to help students understand how to develop stories, identity situations in which to tell stories, and also practice the art of leadership storytelling. Participants will leave with multiple pedagogical methods to teach storytelling as a leadership skill to students in leadership education programs. Participants that attend the session will also have a chance to practice their own storytelling skills.

Introduction

Storytelling has been linked to leadership by a variety of scholars in the leadership literature (Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist, 2013; Bolman and Deal, 2013; Boje 2001; Denning, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Weick, 2000). Yet, what is not as common in the research are the different pedagogies used in teaching students this emerging leadership skill. The purpose of the session is to provide different instructional strategies to introduce storytelling as a leadership practice to students enrolled in leadership education programs.

Background

Storytelling was one of the first communication strategies used by mankind and is still used in a variety of cultures to pass down traditions, customs, and memories. The role of storytelling in leadership has been connected to leadership effectiveness for over 15 years (Boje 2001; Denning, 2001; Weick, 2000). While storytelling may be a more common word with leadership practitioners and consultants, storytelling has also been used interchangeably with “narrative” in much of the scholarly research. For the purpose of this paper the terms story and narrative will be used synonymously and mean “an account of a set of events that are casually related” (Denning, 2012, p.13).

The importance of storytelling has been studied in a variety of different ways. The organizational and knowledge management literature has found that storytelling can applied as a practice for shared learning and the development of mutual understanding (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Von Krough, Ishijo, & Nonaka, 2000). Storytelling has also been highlighted in the literature on adult learning by Bandura (1977) and Weick (2000) in that stories can serve as models of excellence. These models allow adults to see themselves in a narrative and mentally rehearse or visualize themselves performing the behavior highlighted in the story (Tyler, 2000). The management research has found narrative to have a role in developing organizational culture.
(Dailey & Browning, 2014; Parada & Viladas, 2010), strategic management (Sonenshein, 2010), commitment (McCarthy, 2008), employee loyalty (Gill, 2011), and entrepreneurship (Volker, Phillips, & Anderson, 2011).

The significance of storytelling in the leadership literature has shown that leaders can use storytelling for a variety of leadership purposes in organizations. Kouzes and Posner (2012) shared that stories can serve as a mental map that help people know what is important and how things are done in an organization. In an explorative study, Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist, (2013) found that leaders use stories to motivate, inspire, reduce conflict, build trust, influence superiors, and establish a clear direction. Storytelling can also help leaders be more strategic and maintain employee loyalty when guiding an organization through difficult changes (Boal & Scultz, 2007; Gill 2011). Executive leaders who tell stories can also change the way people think, create a shared vision, as well as grant comfort and hope (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

Stories can have a powerful and inspiring effect on an organization, if applied in a purposeful manner. Purposeful storytelling can translate a boring PowerPoint full of abstract information into a compelling picture of the goals of a leader or an organization. Yet, often times stories can fail because they do not meet the needs of the audience, do not create a clear context or purpose, or the story is inconsistent with what people know to be true (Randall & Harms, 2012). Effective leaders don’t order people to “get motivated”, “get results”, or “be creative”, but they can lead followers to these outcomes through purposeful storytelling. A leader that knows which stories to tell to get their leadership message across in a meaningful way can be more effective at achieving their strategic goals.

A recent tool developed by Stephen Denning (2011) has helped leaders better understand how to use storytelling to motivate others to achieve organizational goals. Denning created a list of eight story categories or “narrative patterns” that can be used to deliver a leadership message. These categories match a story to the communication objectives of a leader with tips on how to tell the stories and possible ways the story may be received by the audience. Leaders that understand how to use Denning’s categories can reduce the risk of telling what may be a good story, but one that is shared at the wrong time and to the wrong audience.

The ability to tell stories is an important leadership attribute and skill to master in order to be an effective leader (Baldoni, 2003; Denning, 2011). Yet, common barriers that may prevent people from telling stories is the fear that they don’t have any stories to share, as well as not feeling comfortable in telling personal stories. Sharing a story can be risky as some stories could flop and also reduce the credibility of the leader. Therefore helping students in leadership education programs learn where to find stories, create their own leadership stories, match their stories to a purpose, and practice storytelling techniques can support students in overcoming these perceived challenges. This session will provide faculty of leadership education programs with strategies to teach effective storytelling as a leadership skill.

**Description of Practice**

Please see appendices for lesson plan and student worksheets.
Discussion of Outcomes/Results

The pedagogies shared in this session have been used on three occasions in a public and human relations course for a doctorate in executive leadership program. More than half of the candidates that participated in this experience stated in required course reflection papers that the storytelling activity was valuable to their leadership development. Following the course, faculty observed several students tell purposeful stories during visits to the student’s place of employment. Several students incorporated leadership stories in their group presentations in subsequent leadership courses. In addition, some students shared that by developing their own leadership stories and practicing telling those stories provided them with more confidence in public speaking. These activities have also been used in a higher education professional development workshop for faculty and staff where the presenter received positive feedback and was asked to return.

Recommendations/Implications

Many different pedagogies are used to help learners acquire leadership skills and practices in leadership education courses (Jenkins, 2012). This session addresses active learning, group discussion, and reflective practice as a way to teach purposeful storytelling as a leadership skill to students. In this session, leadership faculty will demonstrate brief interactive teaching activities designed to help students understand how to develop stories, identity situations in which to tell stories, and also practice the art of leadership storytelling. The activities in this session provides students a chance to practice a new leadership communication skill to help inform strategic planning and decision-making, and implement effective communication strategies. Students are able to actively integrate the leadership concepts covered in class and through their readings into practice while in a safe and comfortable classroom environment.

References


Appendix A
Activity: What’s Your Story?

Objectives:
1. To learn a new leadership communication skill to help inform strategic planning and decision-making, and implement effective communication strategies.
2. To integrate the human relation concepts covered in class and the required readings into practice.
3. To practice the “art of storytelling” and story listening.
4. To gain feedback on our leadership storytelling skills.

Time: 60-90 minutes (depending on class size)

Materials: Timers for each group

Instructions/Guidelines:
1. Students must have already completed Worksheets 1 and 2 prior to participating in this activity.
2. Break class into groups of 4-5 people.
3. Each person has 5 minutes to tell one of the stories they created from Worksheet 1 to their small group. Use a timer to ensure each participant is allowed a chance to share their story.
4. Following each story, group members are allowed 5 minutes to provide comments based on the following recommended feedback questions.
   - What your story tells me about you is…..
   - What I like about your story…..
   - What your story helps me remember…..
   - The impact I can see your story having in a (describe a specific situation) is…..
5. Groups will have 50 minutes to share all stories and hear feedback from group members.
6. Following small group storytelling, a class reflection is held on the storytelling exercise using the following questions as a way to start the discussion:

   - Given the story categories developed by Denning, what type of stories were told?
   - As a listener, what did you learn from hearing other stories?
   - As the storyteller, what did you learn from telling your story?
   - How could the story you shared or heard be connected to your role as a leader in your organization?
   - Were there common leadership themes that ran through the stories in your group?

Course Learning Objectives:
1. Synthesize theories and best practices in public and human relations to inform strategic planning and decision-making, and implement effective communication strategies.
2. Apply best leadership practices in public and human relations.
**Assessment:** Following this activity, students are asked to submit a “Reflection Paper” that includes a statement on something they found personally and/or professionally relevant from the storytelling experience. The paper should not be a reiteration of the class events, but instead a true reflection on how the activity did or did not inform their leadership communications.

**Appendix B**

**Worksheet 1**

**Locating Leadership Stories**

**Instructions:** Create at least three different stories based on the resources below and submit to the instructor by (INSERT RELEVANT DATE). Please select one story and be prepared to share that story to a small group during class.

**Who-am-I Stories:** What qualities earn you the right to influence others? What are your gifts? What did your parents or grandparents teach you? Can you describe a time or place that has evidence you have these qualities? People need to know who you are before they can trust you.

**Teaching Stories:** What skills or knowledge do you want to teach others? What skills need improved? What were the past, future, present consequences for not reaching a goal?

**Vision Stories:** What is your vision and the obstacles in reaching this vision? What is the vision of the organization? Who inspires you and what is their story? Can you describe the “desired state” of a goal as a place/time/condition worthy of sacrifice. This type of story can cast light on the future and encourages others to move forward.

**Value-in-Action Stories:** What are your values? When did you make the “right” decision during tough circumstances? How did you make that decision? What was the outcome? If you want to encourage a value in others, tell a story that illustrates what that value means in action.
Stories from your past. Your challenges, successes, failures. What are the times in your life you felt the most inspired? What’s the most difficult experience you’ve ever been through? What’s the best/worst working relationship you have ever had?

Stories you see happen around you. Your community, organization, family, etc. Stories about an unexpected lesson or an unexpected way it was taught whether happening to you or someone else.

Stories that other people tell you. Take note when you hear a good story. Ask others inspiring questions. At Mary Kay Cosmetics sales staff are asked “How has Mary Kay business enriched your life?” They receive a vast supply of great stories.

Stories from strangers. Search the internet and media. Be sure to credit the source where you found it.


**Leadership Lesson Story**

Think about an experience you have had that contains a striking lesson about leadership (this can be in a past or current setting). The following five steps will guide you through how to write a story about this experience.

1. Identify the actors. Name the person or the people in the story.
2. Paint the scene. Where and when did this happen? What are the circumstances?
3. Describe the actions: Relate as much detail as you can about what happened and what the people involved did.
4. Tell how it ended. Never leave your audience hanging. What happened as a result of the actions?
5. Possibly think about including a surprise. Every great story includes some kind of surprise – perhaps an element of amazement. What makes this story particularly interesting, unique, memorable, funny, or surprising?
6. What’s an opportunity coming up for you to tell this story?


### Appendix C
### Worksheet 2

**Linking Stories to Purpose Using Narrative Patterns**

**Instructions:** Please select a narrative pattern constructed by Denning (2012) for each of your stories from Worksheet 1. Write your story title or theme in the relative narrative pattern box. If there is not a narrative pattern that matches your story, please create a new narrative pattern or purpose for that story.

| Motivating Others to Action: Ignite action and implement new ideas |
| Build Trust: Communicate who you are |
| Build Your Brand: Who Your Organization Is |
| Transmit Values: Instill Organizational Values |
| Get Others Working Together: Get Things Done Collaboratively |
| Share Knowledge |
| Tame the Grapevine |
| Create and Share Your Vision: Lead People into the Future |