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A Natural Fit: Organizational Storytelling in the Library

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New and Noteworthy:

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Consider these two statements:

> "Attendance at the Thursday preschool story hour has increased by 34% since August 2010."

> "Four-year-old Alexandra came to her first preschool story hour in July with her older brother, who often uses the library's computers. Alexandra loves cartoons on TV about princesses, and was happy to learn that the library also has books about princesses! The children's librarian picked out a few princess books just for her to take home after story hour, and now Alexandra comes to the library every week to hear a new story and get new books. "

Both statements get at the same fact, that more children are attending story hour, but which is more interesting and memorable? The first relays a quantitative fact, the second a personal anecdote. Both are true, but the second is more personal. It's fairly easy to relate to a story such as the second example because it's easy to visualize the scenario and attach meaning to it.

Stories help people empathize with and understand each other. Librarians in particular are experts at connecting people with stories that can help them understand themselves and their world better. However, storytelling is not necessarily limited to a children's story hour or an adult book discussion group. Organizational storytelling is an emerging management technique that can help librarians improve their organizations through the power of narrative.

Organizational storytelling may be very loosely defined as the skill of delivering a meaningful story in order to communicate, connect and influence. Stories can be used to teach people in organizations about the corporate culture (i.e., how to navigate the organizational environment), to help people with workplace anxiety and uncertainty, and of course to entertain and build morale. As one key author has described it, organizational storytelling can be seen as "the intersection of leadership and storytelling."[1]

The concept of organizational storytelling began to appear in business and management literature in the mid-1990s. Three authors who have become particularly identified with this field are Stephen Denning, David Boje and Annette Simmons. Works by these authors and others detail how organizational storytelling can impact organizational commitment, change, learning and performance, and knowledge management.[2]

For example, in *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*[3], Denning, a former program director for the World Bank, outlines the importance

of developing a "springboard story," a narrative that encapsulates not only the current state of an organization, but more importantly, possible future directions in which the organization can go. The springboard story is meant to energize listeners to deeper thought and action through not a dry recitation of facts, but rather through meaningful stories. As Denning states in The Springboard, "Storytelling, by drawing on deep streams of meaning, and on patterns of primal narratives of which the listeners are barely aware, catalyzes visions of a different and renewed future."

Storytelling does not come easily to everyone, and several books and articles help to hone library managers' skills in this process. Annette Simmons lists seven "memory joggers" to help librarians gather stories[4], and David M. Armstrong offers an interesting collection of example stories[5] from his own organization, easily found under such headings as "Stories to Inspire Self-Management," "Stories to Make People Brave and Wise, "Stories About Dealing with Troublemakers" and so on. Organizational development consultant Terrence L. Gargiulo has written several business storytelling manuals which offer practical techniques as well.[6]

A somewhat broader management communication manual based on organizational storytelling techniques, again by Stephen Denning, is a practical guide on dealing with "confirmation bias," or the tendency to favor information that support an already-established persona belief, regardless of factual evidence. In *The Secret Language of Leadership*[7], Denning explains why traditional methods of business communication don't necessarily work. Especially useful are the appendices, which offer templates, exercises, and a narrative intelligence quiz.

The applications of organizational storytelling techniques are numerous, and include helping employees weather a crisis[8] as well as jumpstarting team collaboration[9]. Given that the concept has emerged relatively recently, discussion of organizational storytelling in libraries has been sparse up until now. One exception is an interesting *Public Libraries* article by Martha L. Hale focused on using stories to communicate a library's vision to legislators and other key constituencies[10]. Another involves the use of using these techniques to mentor GenX librarians for leadership and management positions in public library organizations[11].

In addition, a recent book published by the American Library Association is a welcome introduction to organizational storytelling to library settings. *Organizational Storytelling for Librarians: Using Stories for Effective Leadership* by Kate Marek serves as a good summary of key works in the field as they can be applied to library settings, and is likely to serve as a foundation for future articles and presentations on this topic[12]. Illustrated with numerous relevant examples, the book is a clear and interesting overview of how narrative can be used in different library settings (primarily public and academic). How do we communicate our libraries' vision and values? How can we effectively navigate change? How can we use stories to build community? This book sparks the discussion of how library managers can begin to think about these key questions, and includes an introduction on building a "skill set" for managerial storytelling.

As librarians, we understand the power of story to change others' lives. What better way to change our own organizational culture than by beginning to tell our own stories?

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[1] Denning, Steve. The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art & Discipline of Business Narrative. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

[2] Basic representative works include: Boje, David M. Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research. London: Sage, 2001; Brown, J.S., Denning, S., Groh, K., and Prusak, L. Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling Is Transforming 21st Century Organizations and Management. Boston: Butterworth Heinemann (2004); Czarniawska, Barbara. Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; Denning, Steve. Squirrel Inc.: A Fable of Leadership Through Storytelling. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004; and Gabriel, Yiannis. Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies. London: Oxford University Press, 2000.

[3] Denning, Stephen. The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations. Boston: Butterworth Heinemann, 2000.

[4] Simmons, Annette. The Story Factor. Basic Books, New York, 2002.

[5] Armstrong, David M. Managing by Storying Around: A New Method of Leadership. Three Rivers, Mich.: Armstrong International, 1999.

[6] Practical guides by Terrence L. Gargiulo include Making Stories: A Practical Guide for Organizational Leaders and Human Resource Specialists. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001; Once Upon a Time: Using Story-Based Activities to Develop Breakthrough Communication Skills. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2007; and Stories at Work: Using Stories to Improve Communication and Build Relationships, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006.

[7] Denning, Stephen. The Secret Language of Leadership: How Leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

[8] Kopp, David M., Nikolovska, Irena, Desiderio, Katie P., and Guterman, Jeffrey T. "'Relax, I Remember the Recession in the Early 1980s…'; Organizational Storytelling as a Crisis Management Tool." Human Resource Development Quarterly 22.3 (Fall 2011): 373-85.

[9] Kahan, Seth. "The Power of Storytelling to JumpStart Collaboration." Journal for Quality and Perception Spring 2006: 23-5.

[10] Hale, Martha L. "Stories in the Workplace." Public Libraries May/June 2003: 166-170.

[11] Doherty, Gail. "Mentoring GenX for Leadership in the Public Library." Public Library Quarterly 25.1-2 (2006); 205-217.

[12] Marek, Kate. Organizational Storytelling for Librarians: Using Stories for Effective Leadership. Chicago: American Library Association, 2011. Another interesting chapter in the book describes how the library buildings in which we work can tell their own story. Beginning with the "library as place" concept, Marek describes four library building projects that reflect a community's needs and values through architecture.