



Strategic Direction

Storytelling to success: effective communications for corporate strategy

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Storytelling to success: effective communications for corporate strategy

In all organizations, storytelling is an integral part of disseminating corporate values and strategies. Storytelling can enhance relationships between all levels of employee, as well as increasing the desire to improve the organization through work. Impression management theory, combined with an interpretivist, qualitative approach to data exposes how storytelling within an organization can both support and subvert corporate strategy. Supportive storytelling is used to better communicate information through an organization through positive stories. Subversive storytelling occurs when either an official corporate message is altered by employees, or an unofficial message is relayed between employees. In all cases, the outcomes can be positive but that requires an understanding of how to deal with subversive storytelling. This is done by identifying what aspect of the organization or corporate strategy is being criticized in the subversive storytelling and using that information to change the central issue.

By looking at two companies working in the UK energy industry, [Spear and Roper \(2016\)](#) are able to identify the benefits of storytelling in improving organizational efficiency and reputation. Good internal communication is the backbone of efficiency within an organization, as the less time spent relaying a message, the more time can be spent in implementation. What also plays a key role is collective sensemaking, whereby employees help each other understand corporate messages or strategy which ultimately enhances the potency of the communication. Storytelling is an ideal method of disseminating large and dense information in a way that can be easily dissected and absorbed within an organization. The ability for employees to understand corporate strategy, whether it involves safety issues or sales techniques, eventually filters into the public sphere, potentially improving the organizations standing.

Delivering corporate strategy through storytelling

Stories in an organization can be seen to be both planned/controllable and unplanned/uncontrollable. For example, official stories that may relate to safety information are planned and controlled by a corporate communication department within an organization. These stories, however, can become adapted and modified by employees who add anecdotal information, and, as such, these stories can become unofficial and uncontrollable. Official stories are therefore a method of controlling what is known and remembered in an organization, whereas unofficial stories can often conflict or challenge an official story.

Official storytelling, through collective sensemaking, can aid management in getting employees to understand corporate strategy and, from this, to connect more substantially with the organization. Communicating the organization's vision alongside personal stories of employees who have added to the organization is an effective way of promoting cohesion and guide employee behavior. To keep employees working to the same goals in a manner approved of by the organization, managers need to continually refer to these

stories. A conflict arises, however, when these official stories are seen as propaganda for the organization. In such instances, employees can present their own versions of the story, creating unofficial/uncontrollable stories that can subvert corporate strategy. If managers are able to identify and address subversive stories then often the root issues can be corrected to the benefit of both the employees who had an issue, and the overall effectiveness of the organization.

Telling the right story

The results of the study by [Spear and Roper \(2016\)](#) showed a remarkably low number of subversive stories (5.9 per cent) of the total 271 recorded stories from the interviews. The most effective use of official/controlled storytelling is from senior management and corporate communication departments. As the originators of all organizational stories, they are least likely to tell subversive stories. Those working in satellite locations or in the lower levels of an organization are highly likely to pass on an official/controlled story, but they are also more likely to subvert the story due to their distance to the story originators. Customer services and operational areas are far less likely to utilize or create official stories, whereas corporate areas of an organization are more likely. This highlights the need for corporate departments to better demonstrate the need for storytelling, as well coordinate its implementation. This is made more difficult by ease of access to intranet and corporate newspapers. Those employees based at a distance from a head office or other office-based environment are less exposed and therefore less likely to use official storytelling and are more likely to use unofficial/uncontrollable storytelling.

Much of the desire by lower level employees to engage in unofficial and subversive storytelling is caused by their feeling of disconnect to central and higher levels of an organization. The limited reach of corporate departments cultivates a need for these lower level employees to challenge official stories and divulge their own stories that contradict corporate strategy. Yet, effective management can identify these stories and, rather than punish, seek to engage the employees and address the central issues. Effective storytelling is seen to make employees more effective workers, as well as increase their feelings of pride toward an organization. Stories can also subtly encourage employees to follow corporate protocols and strategies without creating a combative environment. Seeking subversive stories can highlight areas of an organization that need attention without the need to wait for negative events to expose them in a more damaging way. Critically, organizations should view all employees, irrespective of level, as appropriate and effective storytellers. Storytelling should not be seen as an elite role. It should not be confined to corporate and communications departments. Crucially, storytelling should be seen as a wholly positive method of circulating information as well as identifying areas in need of attention.

Commentary

Corporate success can hinge on effective storytelling which can provide an ideal avenue for the dissemination of strategy and organizational beliefs and values. Research by [Spear and Roper \(2016\)](#) into storytelling in companies in the UK energy market highlights the need for its effective use. There is an inherent divide between levels of employees in an

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organization. This can cause rifts that damage efficiency and public perception of an organization. But, by effectively engaging all levels of employees in storytelling, not just corporate and communications departments, a more cohesive unit can be formed. Storytelling is also a key tool in the quick identification of issues that need managerial attention. While official stories can be subverted by employees, it is important to understand why they have been subverted. In doing so, problems that could be destructive if left unnoticed can be solved but only through management's careful and continued engagement with storytelling at all levels of an organization.

Keywords:
Internal communications,
Strategy,
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Employees,
Impression management

Reference

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