**The role of storytelling in change management**

One of the most effective ways to communicate organisational change requirements is through storytelling as a means of transmitting the context and the content of the change project to an audience. Stories blend everyday talk to engage the audience. Stories as a form of talk represent the ways in which issues are brought together as a coherent whole. Change themes can be embedded in stories. Stories both inform and structure reality and corporate storytelling is a fundamental linguistic process that contributes to the production of the corporate culture. Stories and storytelling are to be considered as powerful theatrical devices for privileging, teaching, and institutionalising culture.

We all have stories inside of us that we would like to share. In fact, one can argue that our life is one long extended story. So, we all have storytelling capabilities and as a tool for communicating the case for change and for engaging the imaginations of audiences, it can be used to powerful effect. Developed and used purposefully, storytelling can contribute to inclusion and connection, build confidence, and bring about change.

The ability to craft and tell an engaging story is a powerful method for connecting with an audience and getting our ideas across. Sometimes we tell stores of our past so that we may illuminate the present. Sometimes we use stories to point towards the future and to encourage letting go of the present and the past. Stories can be structured around a leader’s vision, mission, and ambition for a business. For example, if we look at extracts of the storytelling techniques used by the great African American Civil Rights Leader Martin Luther King in his famous ‘I had a dream’ speech we can see strong storytelling themes:

“I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character”.

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood”.

“I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering in the heat of injustice and oppression, will one day be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice”.

Dr King was a transformational change leader who had the dream of an integrated America where all human beings were to be treated equally. He used his storytelling powers to ignite the imagination of literately millions of followers from across ethnic backgrounds behind a global civil rights movement. His storytelling was enabled not only by its content, but it was also enabled by the symbolic text and metaphors he employed and his own unique powers of oration and performance. These connections, he enabled through the power of storytelling.

In today’s organisations change managers/ leaders should not ignore the potential of corporate storytelling as a catalyst for generating collaboration between stakeholders.

For example, the change book ‘Who Moved my Cheese’ has the central theme of ‘Change Happens’. It’s an elegant story presented in a thought-provoking way. The tale leads you to consider why change occurs and it has sold over 26 million copies and has been translated into 26 languages. Also the strategy trade book ‘Our Iceberg is Melting’ by Harvard Professor John Kotter has sold over 224,000 copies. ‘Our Iceberg Is Melting’ initially seems to be a simple story of a group of penguins facing a problem; however, imbedded within the story and the characters is an unfolding metaphor about the fear of change and how to motivate people to face a challenging situation and take action for a brighter future.

It’s not uncommon to employ storyboard creators who have artistic skills to facilitate storytelling sessions with staff in organisations. These storytelling sessions involve a facilitator and an artist. The facilitator works with the audience to elicit from them stories of the organisation’s history, emphasising moments of challenge, crises, pride and success and, of course, significant change. Then they do the same exercise with the present and build scenarios of the future drawing on the analysis of change drivers. The artist captures the narratives using images and graphics on white sheets of paper attached to a long wall thus creating a canvas for a graphic story of the organisation’s past, present and plausible future. This exercise is an excellent way to build engagement at the staff level with the case for change, as in many ways the staff are co-authoring it.

**Key Lessons**

Human beings are natural storytellers. As change managers, we need to be able to work with storytelling techniques to engage both the heart and the minds of change participants. Ideally, we want to involve change participants in the crafting of the stories that will inform their future experience of work. Stories need content that is personal and relevant to those who tell them and those who listen to them. They evoke images and feelings that have a powerful influence on the choices people make. Storytelling is not a sanitised monologue, it is a human, emotionally driven, and experientially connected process that aims to draw people into to our subject interpretations and engage them both emotionally and intellectually and at the level of self and group identity.

**No 11: Student Exercise**

[Analyse the video and extracts of the storytelling techniques used by the great African American Civil Rights Leader Martin Luther King in his famous ‘I had a dream’ speech and identify the way in which his words can be considered as storytelling techniques to engage his audience behind the civil rights movement.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP4iY1TtS3s)

Pay attention to:

* Tonality
* Metaphors
* Storylines
* Identity work
* Common-interest
* Body language