

Turning Defences into Resources

Drama, Story and Leadership

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“Business!” cried the ghost... The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”

Charles Dickens
A Christmas Carol

The Challenge

Meet Joe. He's smart, resourceful and heads a business unit that faces a big staff cut. He is willing to invest in whatever it takes - new technology, outsourcing, whatever - but he no longer has a capital budget. He's got to produce more with less. How's he going to do it?

Put yourself in Joe's shoes. You have to reduce headcount by 25%. After last year's downsizing, everyone is already working flat out, looking over their shoulders hoping the next axe won't fall on them. Not to achieve your cost target is career suicide, but so is failure to deliver results. So how are you going to pull the rabbit out of the hat?

Now we are not magicians but we do have a promising approach to Joe's sort of problem – although it's not a conventional business solution. As a theatre director from the US and a psychologist from the UK we came together to look at how leaders handle precisely this kind of challenge. And what we've learned has led us to a powerful set of tools to help leaders deal with them more effectively.

Here's where we start. We ask you to think of a specific change that's challenging you right now and as you read this piece, test out what we're saying about Joe, adjust it a bit and see how it applies to you. We think you'll find this lets you grab something solid here out of what we're sharing, like a key to what you need to do next

The Usual Response

The first thing to notice is that Joe has a "usual response"; one that's served him so well as a manager he no longer thinks there's an alternative: he goes "linear", puts his head into the spread sheet, ups the income line, pares down the cost lines, gets to a "solution" then imposes it. But is his 'usual response' likely to work?

Experience Says 'No'

Ten years ago we collaborated on a research project that led us into deep conversations with change leaders from a wide range of organizations including BAE Systems, Guinness, McKinsey & Company, PwC, The Royal Opera House, Marks and Spencer and the Home Office among others. Our findings threw into bold relief what we knew from a combined 45 years of working with people like Joe in over 80 organisations and 28 different countries. Creating change in a system of people is not like ordinary management. It challenges the most capable leaders in ways they cannot foresee and probably will not like. Change forces people to choose between a familiar but dysfunctional status quo and a future filled with uncertainty and risk. Coping with this dilemma requires more than your 'usual response'. In fact, experience shows that your 'usual response' will probably make things worse. (Heifetz and Linsky)

‘Tame’ v ‘Wicked’ Problems

The world faces us with a few different categories of problems, amongst them “simple” problems like getting a flat tyre on your car (which is annoying but you know what to do) or your computer crashing (when you don’t know what to do but you can call an expert who does). In these examples a known solution is out there somewhere, so you are more or less in control. This simple problem has also been called “closed”, “technical” or “tame” (Revans, Heifetz, Grint).

What hurts Joe is a different sort of problem – one with no known solution. Sometimes called “complex”, “wicked” or “intractable”, it’s a problem that weaves hard facts and difficult emotions together into a dilemma that can’t be easily resolved. How can Joe sack a quarter of his team and still remain effective? In more optimistic moments he may say: “What’s new? No organisation ever has enough resources. I’ll tough it out”. But then up come the impossible questions: “Why do I feel so bad about this? How can I get a grip on all this complexity? How do I deal with the fears of my staff and the inevitable conflict between winners and losers, and worse between losers and losers?”

The dilemma is painful. Joe feels exposed and painted into a corner but he must be seen as confident and decisive for both his bosses and his team. So he buries his doubts and fears. And so does his team. And these disowned emotions, instead of becoming resources that could illuminate the nature of the challenge, go into Shadow. Invisible now, they create ‘defensive routines’ (Argyris) that sabotage Joe’s best efforts and wreak havoc on the organization, like Mr Hyde did with Dr Jekyll.

In the decade of momentous challenges since our original research, many more leaders have experienced “wicked” problems: the dot-com bubble, 9/11, 7/7, the global banking crisis, the worst recession for 50 years or more. Now with deep spending cuts and extreme volatility in our national economies, it is clearer than ever that our well-intentioned actions can have unintended consequences: our bubbles can burst, our old problems can return in a slightly new form, patterns repeat and huge amounts of force and ingenuity cannot solve certain big problems.

A New Level of Thinking

It’s very difficult to step back far enough to notice our “usual response” patterns, and even harder to make the leap to the new “adaptive” response required (Heifetz). Yet until Joe is able to do just that, his problem will remain intractable (Mittleton-Kelly). What he needs is something that will flip him out of his ‘usual response’ and help him unlock a new level of resourcefulness in himself and his team. Our research revealed one such ‘something’ – and it came from an unlikely quarter: Dramatic storytelling.

Our Key Insight

We found that successful change leaders have a keen, intuitive sense that they're part of a larger human drama not just a business process. They don't run from this, but use the emotions, conflicts and crises to catalyse change and shift mindsets. As managers of course they must produce results, but for them the real job is to create leaders: to win people's commitment to take the risks, assume the responsibilities and become the heroes who will bring a new story, and a new future, into being.

This striking insight has simmered in the background of our separate work ever since. Andy has written intensively about the change drama and what he calls *The Four Crises of Leadership* (Harmon, 2009); and created *ChangeDialogue*, an interactive learning process to help people deal more creatively with inner conflict and change. Tony has worked internationally with groups and teams using story as a tool to unlock complex problems in larger organizational systems (as documented in his book *Hippos into Gazelles: How leaders create leaders and elsewhere*). When we met up recently, we realised we'd developed complementary methods for turning defences into resources in both individuals and teams. In the next pages we'll look at some examples of how we are helping leaders work with real world complex challenges and share some of our key concepts and tools. Let's start with Andy's work.

Drama as a Model of Change

When most people think of drama they think of conflict, struggle against the odds and intense emotion. But, as Aristotle noted in *The Poetics*, drama is defined, above all, by **change**. Would we remember Hamlet if he'd left things "rotten in the state of Denmark"? Or Luke Skywalker if he'd never learned to "Use the Force"? I don't think so. It's because their struggles led to what Aristotle called a 'discovery' and 'a change of fortune' that their stories mean something to us. Drama is probably our oldest model of how change operates in human affairs. It shows us how the pressure of both external and internal conflict drives us to a moment of truth where we 'dig deep', discover what we really value and change the way we think, feel and act.

As Tony and I reviewed the transcripts of our interviews with Change Leaders, we saw many typically 'dramatic' story patterns in the conflict and contention of their real life struggles. Eventually I realized that it was possible to use the archetypes and structural motifs of dramatic fiction as a metaphor to give leaders a fresh perspective on the real life challenges they faced. I assembled all these elements into a conceptual framework I call *The Four Crises of Leadership* and although space does not allow me to go into detail here, I'm going to highlight the last and most critical one: *The Crisis of Identity*.

Persona and Shadow

*In the classic Western **High Noon**, at the moment of the climactic shoot out at the end of the story, the young bride of the Marshall faces a crisis. She considers herself a good Quaker. She believes in non-violence. And yet, when her husband's life*

hangs in the balance, she willingly shoots his enemy in the back. She saves her husband's life, but in the process becomes a killer, the very opposite of the 'good Quaker' she believed herself to be. This is a Crisis of Identity. The pressure of the drama forced her to draw on the resources of her 'Shadow' side (Jung) and this changed her sense of who she was and what she was capable of.

When individuals, groups or organizations are under pressure, they are much like dramatic heroes. They develop a surface Persona, a safe, 'good me' that they want to show the world; while underneath, they hide a 'shadow self', an unsafe and often destructive 'bad me' that they deny, disown and 'split-off' as Dr Jekyll did with Mr Hyde. Enron and BP are but two of the most visible, real world examples of the havoc unleashed by a disowned 'Hyde-like-Shadow'. But denial isn't the only option. Many times, the Shadow contains positive or necessary resources that heroes have ignored or rejected, but will ultimately need to use when the going gets really tough – if they have the courage to face up to their dilemmas and push themselves through a 'moment of truth'. Here's the story of a man who did:

A Christmas Carol

*Ebenezer Scrooge is a cynical, 'tight-fisted, covetous old miser', living in a bleak and loveless world. He thinks of himself as a 'realist' and 'man of business', but this Christmas Eve his dreams are haunted by the pain of a personal dilemma he can't bear to be conscious of. **What should he trust: Money or Love?** Marley's Ghost warns him that Money will only lead to eternal torment; on the other hand experience has taught him that Love leads to desertion, loneliness and pain. What kind of choice is that? In the course of one night, author Charles Dickens puts him through a crash course in change management. But this journey doesn't teach Scrooge how to 'work smarter' and become a more effective miser. It doesn't give him tips, tricks or bullet points to 'hang the learning on'. It plunges him into his dilemma and strips away everything he thought was important. As the drama unfolds, he is challenged by a series of ordeals that reveal the consequences of the choices he's made, the love he's rejected, the damage he's done to others and the hell he's created for himself. At last, at the end of the line he reaches a moment of truth. In an archetypal Crisis of Identity he sacrifices his well-defended 'realism' and recovers the love and generosity that he'd denied and pushed into Shadow. Once this happens, he awakens on Christmas day transformed: he makes up with his nephew, promotes Bob Cratchit, saves Tiny Tim and all the bells in London peal for joy.*

Dramatic Dilemmas and Moments of Truth

At the heart of every drama lies a dilemma (Howard), a seemingly impossible choice heroes must make – a choice they cannot bring themselves to even consider until their journey has taken them to the 'end of the line', way outside their comfort zone, where they can see what's really at stake for them and for the world if they fail to make it. All through the story the hero will be pulled in two directions between an old self that feels safe but isn't and a future self that feels unsafe and is. And finally, at the moment of truth, there's no way to escape the risk. The character must choose – and that choice will change who they are and what they do. This is how dramas work, in fiction or in life.

They change us through the ‘discovery’ we make and the resources we draw on at that final ‘moment of truth’.

Creating a Moment of Truth

In my view, bringing a group to this place in their real life story is the most ‘mission critical’ function of Leadership. And the most personally daunting. In the next section of the paper Tony will describe some of the ways in which he has used story and story making to help leaders manage this difficult task. My own contribution comes from a unique facilitation process I have developed called *ChangeDialogue*. It gives people the ability to leave behind their ‘ordinary response’, step into the moment of truth and ‘say the unsayable’ to surface suppressed dissension and conflict – without getting entangled in reprisal or blame. Just as important, the technique creates a safe space for all the voices in the room to speak without regard to their rank in the hierarchy or degree of ‘political correctness’. It helps people, even in large groups, to transform their personal defences into resources and become more aligned and proactive in the face of change.

I once ran a *ChangeDialogue* session for a group of senior directors at a firm that had been recently acquired by a large multinational. Each director stood to receive a large payout in stock options after two years’ service with the new firm. Unfortunately, despite assurances that they’d have real influence, the acquisition reduced them to the status of middlemen, corporate functionaries whose only real value was their ability to leverage former customers into large new sales. They were floundering in this new corporate environment and their performance showed it.

In a session lasting less than two hours, the group was able to come to grips with this dilemma. They brought their suppressed emotions out of the shadows. They shared the fear and intimidation they felt when confronted with the demands of the new corporate systems and their sadness at what they had lost. They realized that the buyout was not only a financial opportunity but also a source of grief – and that they couldn’t have one without the other. In the end, the Multinational’s culture would prevail and their own familiar values would be subsumed. But they weren’t powerless. Although this was not a happy revelation on the surface, it gave them the determination to create something better. In the months after the session, although some chose to leave the company, the group’s performance improved dramatically.

Change Dialogue is not a panacea, but it is a useful antidote to the self-deception and ‘skillful incompetence’ (Argyris) that our Shadows create. It gives you, as a leader, a tool to help you address the dilemmas that undermine performance and it can help you tap your teams’ ability to create a happier ending to their story, even against the odds. Now let’s take a look at Tony’s work.

SpottingThe Rackets

After a gap of several years, Andy found unexpected echoes of his drama metaphor in a book I had written about a real merger in Africa. At the start a leader

knew *what* to aim for and *who* with, but had little idea as to *how*. So, like Joe, he began with a 'usual response' which was to call others as Messenger. As the story unfolded however, he had to shift his role a number of times (to Provocateur, to Colleague, to Coach, to Transformer) in order to bring team members through denial, resistance and confusion finally into action.

Why does a leader meet so much pushback? Andy's drama metaphor helped me to identify below-the-surface struggles of change. Realising that everyone has a shadow part or 'bad me' I noticed that it is not unusual for a person to promise one thing but covertly do the opposite. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson called these contradictory behaviours 'double binds'. Others call them 'self-sealing defensive routines' (Argyris) or 'social defences' (Hirschhorn). I use the term 'rackets'. I do so because, like the notorious 'protection rackets' of Prohibition era Chicago, these powerful defensive habits cover up all sorts of 'illegal' activities behind 'respectable' shop fronts. Using this concept we can see that the "usual response" of a leader like Joe is, in reality, a kind of racket; a habitual behaviour that looks and feels plausible, but actually undermines learning and adaptation. What rackets might you be running that are stopping you and your team?

Releasing a System From Rackets

So having found a racket, what do you do about it? Andy's work says you enter into a dialogue with your disowned ('illegal') voices to find out how they function in your story. So it is with rackets. Interestingly, when we gently clarify why a person is behaving 'illegally' (eg. what are pay-offs and costs) this lets them refocus their commitment to be more realistic, then their leadership tends to return.

Of course when you work with a team the complexity multiplies with simultaneous 'personal' and 'system' rackets. For example, early on in a merger that brought 11 country-based offices in East and West Africa into a single company, we noticed a system racket as the 30 leaders in a Nairobi workshop liked to talk round and round in circles using up the time. With considerable effort we enabled them to come up with a shared vision backed up with detailed work streams containing agreed actions, responsibilities and deadlines. Six months later when, for all sorts of apparently good reasons, few actions had been completed, we learned that pre-existing business commitments in individual countries had in effect become 'system rackets' sabotaging the new merged company.

In general 'system rackets' defend individual interests while blocking the success of the larger 'system' be that a team, or a whole organisation in which inter-dependent members need to coordinate their efforts. Systems rackets are unlikely to be resolved until we bring the racketeers into the same room. But what do you do when you get them there?

One powerful way we used with the Board of an international education body was to hold up a mirror showing how dysfunctional they were being as a Board. When they asked us how to improve, we put in place a strict regime to drive decision-making based

on discussion rounds: instead of making long boring speeches the 12 directors took turns and spoke for only one minute at a time! Surprisingly over the following year this produced dramatic results worth millions to the business, but they resented the regime and only persisted through the stubborn insistence of the boss. Andy would point to this as a *Crisis of Commitment* as if the group were challenging the leader to show he was serious by imposing the policy. For a change like this to persist, the group faces a further *Crisis of Identity* to make the change sustainable.

Propelling Change Through Story

I now realise the tool of story can address the *Crisis of Identity* directly: it causes people to 'self-organise' into a new identity as more effective team members. Six months after the East and West Africa team first met in Nairobi, we reconvened in Douala, Cameroon but half of the 30 people were new. They wore bemused faces and a complaint: "This is like coming into a film half way through!". We responded by inviting the former Nairobi members to summarise the story so far. After this, in each future gathering the story session was requested and through its mixture of repetition and re-writing those present were propelled in a shared journey of change. By bringing out the real story each time, instead of leaving buried what had or had NOT been achieved, the team spoke candidly about their dilemmas, their desired future and the doable actions they could commit to before the next meeting. Their living story was a joint enterprise that was being advanced in the actions and insights of each individual. Unlike a fairy tale, this was a true and real account of what was happening that called them out of their rackets and transformed resistant victims into proactive leaders.

Authors Own the Story and the Change

Members of the group that was writing and living this story came to see themselves as authors of their own destiny: change was no longer imposed on them but something they were taking charge of. When we asked them who they were being they responded: "decision-makers acting with the consent of and on behalf of others". They had become fast and effective together, more like gazelles, transformed from the individualistic, defensive, fierce and hierarchical hippos we had seen at the start. In effect over a couple of years one leader has enrolled 30 in a collective story, and this 30 went on to enrol 500 staff, demonstrating that leaders can create leaders.

Since then I have used story with colleagues in a wide variety of clients ranging from oil and gas producers to international relief organisations. Most recently, the story approach helped to open a new era in a media organisation in London after the double whammy of moving from print to digital during a severe and extended financial downturn. In their gleaming new building and with business picking up one year after a painful downsizing of almost 20%, many people were still in grief, no longer in love with their company, working with heads and hands but without heart.

During a day with 45 senior leaders to weave together their real story of past present and future, participants were surprised by how similarly they felt: sad at the loss of colleagues while also pleased at recent progress and frustrated at colleagues'

unwillingness to move on. They said the day gave them licence to experience all this, talk about it then draw a line and shift their attention forwards. It was genuinely cathartic with a big uplift in energy towards the end. Participants had brought their personal stories to one another, woven a collective story and unlocked the creativity their organisation needed.

Adding to the story's impact was our use of physical movement, drama and ritual. For example participants' emotional baggage was dumped in a big red bag, they literally stepped over a line and faced in a different direction towards a chosen future, then tuned up their collective narrative using immediate feedback from colleagues moving towards or away. Tony has written more about this elsewhere (Goodwin and Page 2011, Page and Vascotto 2011)

Two Different Approaches with Common Roots

Tony's story approach and Andy's drama metaphor share common roots that reach back through Joseph Campbell's work to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Both of our approaches respond to a deep human yearning for truth and sense-making in the struggle of change.

Andy's work enables you to **step inside** the drama to unlock new possibilities. Using *ChangeDialogue*, you're guided through the dilemmas and crises you face as a leader, giving you an experience of the different challenges and obstacles that confront you on the change journey and the inner resources you have to overcome them.

Tony's work allows people to **step outside** the complex problems in which they are locked, work with the other players who are co-creating the problem and collaborate with them to re-write the story. He helps awaken the intelligence of the system by bringing a whole group of inter-dependent individuals together to expand possibilities and coordinate the resources for change.

What we bring clients is neither conventional business wisdom, nor academic research, but practical methods for freeing up resources that are latent in the organization, but trapped by old habitual responses and outmoded beliefs. Using these tools the whole team or 'system' can become greater than the sum of its parts as each member moves out of their 'usual response', joins with other key players in a story that holds them in a collective commitment, lifting them out of their rackets. In short this approach increases whole system intelligence which in turn lifts performance.

Together and separately, this unconventional work brings together the heads, hands and hearts of people who have become divided by the challenge of change. It can help you free the trapped resources you need to address complex problems and release new levels of contribution, intelligence and creativity from yourself, your colleagues and your organisation.

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