

Just a Good Story?: Shaping Organizational Learning Through Storytelling

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Organizational learning is a complex phenomenon, the collective nature of which makes it difficult to study and examine. Organizational stories are cultural forms that facilitate the sensemaking processes and capabilities of the individuals and teams that form the collective organization. This paper utilizes literature to suggest possible impacts of stories on organizational learning, and offer some suggestions for future areas of research and study on using stories to facilitate organizational learning.

Keywords: Stories, Organizational Learning, Leadership

Organizational learning is a complex phenomenon, the collective nature of which makes it difficult to study and examine. There are multiple methods to decode and interpret how and why organizations learn and the impact that learning has on an organization. Sensemaking is an integral medium for organizational learning and it is through the sensemaking process that organizations reflect upon knowledge and store that knowledge in the organization's collective memory. Organizational stories are cultural forms that facilitate the sensemaking processes and capabilities of the individuals and teams that form the collective organization. Stories help shape the organizational reality and the perceptions of that reality for organization members. Organizational stories offer clues about organizational realities; as well as reveal how organizational members understand their environment, the culture of that environment and the complexities happening in that environment. Thus, one way in which to examine and understand organizational learning is through the study of the role stories play in those learning processes. Tyler (2004) argues for the use of stories in learning and understanding organizational realities and complexities, "Striped of their stories people would be something less than they are, and so would the organizations in which they work. . . . As organizations become increasingly chaotic in their operations and relationships, the process of listening to and exchanging stories may support the capacity of people to understand and anticipate increasing levels of complexity" (p. 16). This paper utilizes literature to first give a brief overview and definition of organizational learning utilizing Schwandt and Marquardt's (2000) organizational learning model focusing heavily on the role of the meaning and memory subsystem. Then, this paper will overview stories as a cultural form and will then suggest some possible impacts of stories on organizational culture, leadership and learning, and in conclusion the paper will offer some suggestions for future areas of research and study around stories and how they interact with organizational learning.

Problem Statement

Given that stories are key cultural manifestations for facilitating sensemaking and that sensemaking is integral to organizational learning, this paper presents the argument that through the stories organizational leaders choose to tell, they either facilitate or hinder the organizational learning process.

Theoretical Framework

David Schwandt and Michael Marquardt (2000) developed a model that attempts to structure and provide in-depth understanding of how organizational learning is managed and enacted within organizations. Their four-part model consists of four sub-systems that facilitate organizational learning: environmental interface; action and reflection; meaning and memory; and dissemination and diffusion (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000). They postulate that the cultural aspects of organizations and the sensemaking processes that foster those cultural aspects have a great impact on organizational learning and are housed in the meaning and memory subsystem (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000). Thus, one would expect to find the meaning and memory subsystem rife with cultural forms and manifestations, such as rituals, rites, symbols and -- most relevant for this paper -- stories, that both hinder and help organizational learning process.

Methodology

This paper utilized a thorough literature review to build and support the arguments presented. The author searched

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various social science literature databases, such as Cambridge Scientific Abstracts, for journal articles and books that provided both support and refutation of the points presented in this work. In addition, the author consulted with well-known scholars in the fields of organizational communication, culture, learning and behavior, and Human Resource Development (HRD) to ensure that the literature reviewed was thorough and appropriate. Literature was included based on the following criteria: it provided depth of understanding on the topics of organizational learning and culture, storytelling and stories, and leadership; utilized a rigorous and thorough methodology; presented supporting or dissenting arguments on the topics covered here; and provided new insights to support the arguments presented by the author.

Results and Findings

Organizational Learning

While organizational learning may seem like a relatively intuitive concept to understand, it is much more complex and one has the ability to underestimate the intricacies of fostering and facilitating, or even just understanding, organizational learning. Schwandt and Marquardt (2000) developed a four-part model to try to structure and further define and explain organizational learning processes. Their model consists of four subsystems: environmental interface, action/reflection; meaning and memory; dissemination and diffusion (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000). These four subsystems are dynamic in nature and interact with each other through what Schwandt and Marquardt (2000) term media of interchange. These media of interchange link the four systems together and provide a means for the processes involved in each subsystem to be linked (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000).

This paper will focus on the processes and functions of the meaning and memory subsystem, but before overviewing that system it is important to briefly review the other sub-systems in the model. It is impossible to understand one sub-system without having an understanding of how the rest of the model works. All four subsystems are linked and the interaction of these systems stimulates organizational learning and when a pathology or dysfunction happens in one sub-system it has the ability to undermine the entire organizational learning process (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000). “The environmental interface sub-system represents the adaptation function. This subsystem contains those aspects of the action system that are aimed at allowing or disallowing information to enter the learning system. This function is manifested in organizational actions that scan or test their environment and select inputs to the organization” (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000, p. 62). The environmental interface subsystem provides information about the organizations environment to the other three subsystems (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000). The next subsystem is the action/reflection subsystem. “The Action/Reflection subsystem represents the goal attainment function. . . This function is manifested in organizational actions such as experimentation, research, evaluations, critical thinking, decision-making and problem-solving processes, and clarifying discussions. Its major concern is the production of knowledge that will add to the survival of the organization” (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000, p. 62-63). At its most basic level the Action/Reflection subsystem allows the organization to process information and make decisions about how to deal with the information gained through the Environmental Interface subsystem. The remaining subsystem, outside of meaning and memory, is the Dissemination and Diffusion subsystem. “The dissemination and diffusion subsystem represents the Integration function. This function is manifested in the implementation of organizational, roles, leadership processes, structural manipulations, and communications that enhance the movement of information and knowledge” (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000, p. 63). It is through the dissemination and diffusion subsystem that information is shared with the organization and embedded within the organization. The final subsystem, meaning and memory will be the focus of the rest of this paper.

Meaning and memory. The final subsystem in Schwandt and Marquardt’s model is the meaning and memory subsystem. It is the home of the cultural aspects of the organization and when looking at leadership and stories and their impact on organizational learning it is the sub-system of focus because it is out of the meaning and memory subsystem that cultural forms and manifestations, such as stories, arise. Stories, and the sensemaking processes they help facilitate, are created and embedded within this subsystem.

“The Meaning and Memory subsystem represents the Pattern Maintenance function. This function refers to the aspect of actions that aims at or consists of maintaining the general learning system’s patterns of actions; as such it forms the fundamental source of tension, the “code” which gives rise to learning and action. It creates and stores the meaning or sensemaking control processes for the learning system. This function is manifested in organizational actions such as processes, comparisons, making of policy and procedures, creation of symbols reflecting organizational values, language, artifacts, basic assumptions, and the storing and retrieval of knowledge” (Schwandt

and Marquardt, 2000, p. 63). At the most basic level it is within this subsystem that a map for understanding the cultural terrain of the organization is created and allows individuals to understand the culture of the organization.

Leadership

Leader's roles in organizational learning. Just as organizational learning is a complex phenomena, so too is leadership. Again, while we intuitively know what leadership is and what we think a good or bad leader does, is and what characteristics he or she possesses, leadership is difficult at best to define and most challenging to foster and develop. So, when studying leadership and its link to culture and organizational learning, the waters become even more muddied. To add clarity for the purposes of this discussion, this work will utilize the body of theories and practices compiled and defined by Martin Sashkin (2004) as transformational leadership. Utilizing the initial 1978 work of James MacGregor Burns on transformational leadership as a foundation, Peter Northouse (2004) defines transformational leadership as, "transformational leadership refers to the process whereby an individual engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower" (p. 170). This is in contrast to traditional views on transactional leadership that focus on the interchange between leaders and followers (Northouse, 2004). Transformational leadership's focus is on inspiring and engaging followers through a leader's charisma and vision to enact major change (Northouse, 2004).

Transformational leadership ties nicely to culture and organizational learning because it focuses on articulating vision through a variety of means including cultural forms. Bennis highlights the need of a transformational leader to communicate with followers a clear direction and to focus on the activity of creating meaning for those followers (Sashkin, 2004). One way to accomplish this inspiration and meaning creation, whether in organizational learning or in other arenas, is by utilizing cultural forms such as stories.

Schein (1992) in his early work on culture and leadership drives home this point. While his work has later been criticized for its functionalist, variable views on culture and leadership (Alvesson, 2002), it still offers valuable initial insights into the link between culture, organizational processes and leadership. Schein (1992) highlights that, "Cultures basically spring from three sources: (1) the beliefs, values, and assumptions of founders of organizations; (2) the learning experiences of group members as their organization evolves; and (3) new beliefs, values and assumptions brought in by new members and leaders" (p. 211). In this quote, Schein highlights not only the link to culture formation and leadership but he also highlights the role of leadership and culture on organizational learning. As we look further at how leadership, culture and organizational learning are linked it is valuable to keep in mind the direct impact each has on the other.

Stories

Given that stories are a powerful tool that leaders can utilize to impact culture, before we turn to a discussion on their role in organizational learning, it is important to further define what stories actually are according to organizational culture research and literature.

Defining stories. What is a story? Most people know intuitively what a story is, however in the field of organizational culture research there is much debate about how to define and study the cultural form of stories in organizations. As Callahan, Whitener & Sandlin (2006) state, "Storytelling has been a vehicle for teaching, learning and sense making throughout history . . . One of the primary reasons stories are so effective for teaching is people understand, communicate, and make sense of concepts through the use of tropes, or metaphors (Hamilton, 2003)" (p. 2). Thus, while at first glance stories seem like an easy concept to define and study, it is actually complex. While we all know what a story is, the issue becomes how does one study a story and what purpose does it serve and whose purpose does that story serve. It is important to briefly look at how different researchers are defining stories, the ways stories are studied and briefly ask why there is so much variance and debate in the field.

Martin (2002) defines stories as having "two elements: a narrative, describing a sequence of events, and a set of meanings or interpretations – the morals to the story" (p. 71). She further goes on to define stories as having the following elements: known by a large number of people within an organization or group; focused on a single event sequence; has central characters as members of the organization; and is ostensibly true (Martin, 2002). She also cautions against confusing stories with "organizational sagas, myths and personal anecdotes" (Martin, 2002, p. 72).

Boje (1991) challenges Martin's definition of stories. He believes that to truly understand the role the story is playing one must look at how it is performed and enacted in context, not as a reified narrative to be deconstructed outside of its lived and socially-created context (Boje, 1991). He goes on to argue, "Text research does not capture basic aspects of the situated language performance, such as how the story is introduced into ongoing interaction, how listeners react to the story, and how the story affects subsequent dialogue" (Boje, 1991, p.110). Boje (1991) argues that without the context of the story, much of the understanding of how the story was utilized is lost and thus the value of examining the story is lost. As the preferred sense-making device for individuals and groups within organizations, stories serve a chief role in understanding member and group interactions (Boje, 1991). Chambers (1984) agrees with Boje, to an extent, "Relevance is . . . ultimately, the perception of a relationship between story

discourse and story situation” (p. 20). Boje (1991) further defines story as performance as, “a process in which people interact to incorporate new tales continuously into the corporate culture” (p. 110).

Another way to define stories can be found in Trice and Beyer’s seminal work on cultural forms. They define stories as, “dramatizing more ordinary, everyday events within organizations in order to convey important cultural meanings. Many stories are highly distorted and humorous accounts of true events; sometimes they are wholly invented. They often portray the enactment of ideologies in an extreme instance” (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 79). Trice and Beyer (1991) distinguish stories as different from narratives, which encompass all categories of stories, legends, sagas and myths.

Brown (1990) defines stories very concisely for her study of prison guards. She highlights that stories have a sense of temporality, exhibit a grammar, ring true to organizational members, and have relevance to the membership of the organization. She takes a very similar stance to Martin in believing that stories are objects that can be studied and she argues that stories are “a dominant narrative form of an organization’s discourse” (Brown, 1990, p. 162). In addition to these viewpoints on stories, Feldman (1990) argues “stories are socially constructed accounts of past sequences of events that are of importance to organizational members” (p. 812). He goes on to point out that “explanations of past events are included that can be more or less found among multiple organizational members and are more or less consistent. The vital point is not in the telling or transmitting, but in the constructing and creating” (Feldman, 1990, p.812). Thus, while he agrees with Boje that context is important, Feldman (1990) believes that to truly understand the role and function of stories, one must take a step beyond how the story is performed and examine how that story was created. He highlights that “the concept of stories is expanded to include not only accounts of the organization’s past told to organizational members to transmit a moral imperative (Martin, 1982), but any explanation of past events that can be shared. The moral is built into the story’s construction; the degree of transmission is secondary” (Feldman, 1990, p. 812).

Stories, Leadership, & Organizational Learning

Thus while stories are defined and depicted in multiple ways by cultural resources, they play multiple roles: stories serve a variety of purposes for individuals, groups and organizations; they span organizational boundaries (Martin, et al. 1983); and have the ability to unite or divide individuals and groups within a given organization (Boje, 1991; Feldman, 1990; O’Connor, 2000,). Thus the role stories play in organizational learning processes is just as varied as the role of the story itself. Some of these roles as they relate to organizational learning are: stories as sensemaking devices for organizational members; as a political tool to enact organizational learning; leadership utilizing stories to enact and shape learning and change and as a control mechanism; as a way to shape, define and discover values; as a behavioral predictor; and as a way to diffuse conflict and negotiate conflicting realities (Boje, 1991; Brown, 1990; Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Currie and Brown, 2003; Eisenberg & Riley 2001; Feldman, 1990; Martin, et al., 1983; O’Connor 2000; Taylor, 1999).

Before examining stories role in organizational learning, it is important to highlight one point. Most studies of stories examining their impact on organizational processes and culture, view organizational cultures in a variable way as something to be shaped and manipulated in order to meet a performance outcome or goal or to create a certain type of culture. In other words, stories are another tool in the leaders’ “toolkit” they have the potential to utilize to gain desired results (Alvesson, 2002). While there is much debate if this is possible, it is beyond the scope of this paper to tackle such a dense and much-debated subject. Therefore, it is important to note that while looking at culture and stories as tool to shape and enact change and learning has many problems with it, many researchers still utilize it in this way to study culture and change. Thus, the themes that we see in the literature arise, in part, from the choice of the author to view change and stories in a variable way.

It is also important to note here that many people confuse organizational learning with organizational change and/or development. This is compounded by the fact that a majority of the literature surrounding stories, leadership, and organizational influence focuses primarily on organizational change. There is very little literature and research concerning organizational learning. Many authors make the argument that leaders can create more productive organizations by manipulating culture as a tool and creating a “strong” culture in which people want to work (Alvesson, 2002). The danger in this view is that it underestimates the complexity of culture and cultural manifestations (Alvesson, 2002; Martin, 2002). This view is focusing on impacting organizations through change and development. However, organizational learning is different than change. While it has the potential to be the same, one of the main distinctions is that it is a conscious process that should be facilitated through leader actions. Thus, while it is currently unclear what potential impact stories have on organizational learning processes, this paper argues that it is possible to utilize stories in both positive and negative ways to influence organizational learning. To link stories to organizational learning the following sections of this paper will focus on key areas in which stories can be used as a tool to impact organizational learning processes both by leaders and as one of the set of cultural manifestations present in the meaning and memory subsystem.

As a sensemaking device. The first way in which stories have the potential to impact organizational learning is as a sensemaking device. Sensemaking is the process by which we make sense of the world that we live in (Weick, 1995). Taylor (1999) further explains sensemaking, "In order to make sense of our world we select certain information to pay attention to and then decide how to interpret that information" (p. 525). One way in which we make sense of the organization realities we work and participate in is through stories and narratives (Boje, 1991; Brown, 1990; Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Currie and Brown, 2003; Feldman, 1990; O'Connor 2000; Taylor, 1999). This no more vital and important during times of turbulence and change when the predictable becomes unpredictable and individuals and groups within organizations are forced to make sense of a new organizational reality. Feldman (1990) highlights this point, "new meanings are created by and have to be created for changing circumstances" (p. 814). Taylor (1999) goes on to stress "the stories people tell about organizational change reflect their sensemaking of that change" (p.527), and Boyce (1995) adds that stories are the primary way in which organizations collectively make sense of their reality. Boje (1991) argues that story performance is a primary means of sensemaking and Brown (1990) further highlights that stories "help bring coherence to the organizational system" (p. 175). While how stories should be defined and studied during organizational processes is a much-debated topic, the idea that stories help people make sense of their organizational reality is much agreed upon -- especially during times of major change and learning. Thus, the next step is to utilize stories in a meaningful way to help enact and manage organizational learning process. If through stories we make sense of our organizational realities, it follows that stories could also be utilized as a means to make sense of and facilitate organizational learning processes.

As a political agenda. A second way in which stories can facilitate organizational learning is through the use of stories to shape political agendas that impact organizational learning processes. Another common theme found in the literature on organizations and stories is the use of stories to advance a political agenda and as a political tool. Currie and Brown (2003) argue that "narratives are significant vehicles for the expression of political activity and one means by which ideas and practices are legitimated, especially during periods of change" (p. 564). They believe that organizations are "socially constructed arenas in which groups struggle to maintain and protect their perceived interests through the active deployment of meaning" (Currie and Brown, 2003, p. 581). Therefore, they argue that stories are a primary political tool and those particular individuals and groups within an organization can be written out or silenced in a story and by extension written out and "silenced" with the organizations political and social reality (Currie and Brown, 2003). In other words, by leaving people and groups out of the stories you tell as a political leader you are effectively undermining their power and writing their role out of the organization (Currie and Brown, 2003). Feldman (1990) also highlights this point,

Stories are part of the battle to interpret, and thus influence what goes on consciously and unconsciously in the decision-making processes. . . . Stories have been found to be a means for self-enhancing or distancing oneself from events and politics (Martin et al., 1983) . . . Stories can be used to attack or protect any particular group or individual (p. 813).

In addition to leaving players out of a story, another way in which stories during times of change become politicized is that only certain individuals within the organization are "privileged" to hear the story, as well as different versions of the same story are told to different audiences and constituencies within the organization (Boje, 1991). Boje (1991) argues that "the completeness of the storytelling itself will vary from one sector and level of the organization to the next. One story will take a more abbreviated form with those in-the-know, who are expected to know the particulars, but the same story will be told with a lot more detail to newcomers, outsiders, and most likely to researchers" (p. 110).

Hand-in-hand with this concept is what Boje (1991) refers to as "entitlement" rights, knowing who can be told a particular story and when they can be told that story. By both withholding of parts of the story from particular audiences and by choosing who and who cannot hear the story – the story becomes a powerful political tool especially during times of unpredictability, turbulence and change. Boje (1991) sums up the political aspect of stories and change, "being a player in the storytelling organization is being skilled enough to manage the person-to-person interaction to get the story line woven into the ongoing turn-by-turn dialogue using a broad class of (storytelling) behaviors . . ." (p. 111). Feldman (1990) summarizes the political nature of stories nicely, "Stories, then, work to integrate, in a politically expedient way, the complex and conflicting nature of organizations process and actions" (p.813)

The potential political nature of stories and the storytelling process has direct implications for organizational learning and leaders attempting to shape learning process at a systematic level. If a leader or a group in power within an organization chooses to withhold a particular story or to tell a particular story to advance a political agenda, through that withholding or sharing process, he or she has the power to control the flow of information both at a diffusion and dissemination level. This has the potential to foster or hinder the organizational learning system through the control of information flow. Thus stories have power and the leaders who tell them have power and

ultimately that power can effect the organization in many ways – one of which is the organization’s learning process. Thus, when utilizing stories as a tool to shape learning processes at a systematic level, a leader should be aware of their potential positive and negative impact on the organization in many aspects including the organizations ability to learn.

As a leader’s tool to shape change and culture. A third way in which stories have the potential to impact organizational learning is as a leadership tool. One of the dominate themes about stories, culture, change and leadership is how leaders can use stories to shape and manipulate cultural and organizational change, as well as organizational learning in general. This topic stems from a functionalist tradition of a variable view of culture as a tool to manage change and performance (Alvesson, 2002; Martin, 2002). However, this is an idea that dominates both popular and academic literature. This view has been heavily criticized as functionalist, reductionist and impossible to support because a direct link to cultural manipulation and organizational change is challenging at best to accomplish (Alvesson, 2002; Martin, 2002). While researchers believe that stories impact change, the major question of this line of study is can they be manipulated to encourage and produce desirable performance outcomes and behaviors (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). Feldman (1991) states that “through the use of symbols (stories) we create a particular representation of reality; and, as we saw (in his study), pictures of reality encourage certain kinds of behavior and discourage others” (p.813).

However as earlier stated, it is important to remember that organizational change and organizational learning are inherently different processes. Organizational learning by its nature is a process designed to be consciously structured, developed and manipulated. While some organizational change and development efforts are consciously designed processes, organizational learning -- while organic-- has an intentionality embedded in the process that distinguishes it from organizational change. Thus, it is not as problematic to examine how cultural manifestations can be utilized as part of an overall strategic effort to enhance, foster and develop organizational learning processes and systems.

Brown and Humphreys (2003) assert that their study of a UK-based college merger has the following implication for leadership and change management through the use of stories:

‘successful’ leadership of change fundamentally requires the molding and manipulating of people’s understandings rather than of material things. In particular, our article suggests that senior managers need to work a provide other groups with a narrative that contains explanations for current events and future projections. These accounts need to both serve the needs of management and be sufficiently plausible for others such that they do not feel motivated to question them. (p. 139)

Eisenberg and Riley (2001) highlight that, “As long as organizational culture is approached cognitively in terms of shared meanings and assumptions, one is invariably tempted to try and alter these cognitions directly in a change effort and to be met with predictably high levels of resistance” (p.310). Further illustrating this point is Taylor (1999), who asserts that understanding differing perceptions of the organization by examining the organizational stories, is the first step in being able to “effectively manage the meaning of the change for the entire organization” (p. 525). He goes on to state later in his article, “the more leaders know about sensemaking processes, the easier it will be to manage the sensemaking process in their followers” (Taylor, 1999, p. 536). However he does later say that the organizational sensemaking process is too complex for a leader to manage every aspect of it (Taylor, 1999).

In addition to the perspective of shaping, changing and managing perception through the use of stories, is the related leadership concept of using stories as a control mechanism. Brown (1990) highlights the research stream that says, “stories operate as a sort of third-order control that shapes and gives coherence to the assumptions and values that direct organizational members. Martin, et al. (1983) points out that a major theme that runs through stories that are common among all organizations is control, which she argues stems for our desire to control events and occurrence outside of our ability to do so. Boje (1991) implies that by training managers to be better storytellers, organizations can assist managers and followers to cope with rapid change and teach managers how ultimately control behavior through the use of stories. Feldman (1990) also highlights that one of the most common links between leaders, stories and organizational change is to teach leaders how to use stories as a form of control. While control is often thought of as a negative concept, it is a necessity of organizational reality. As it relates to organizational learning, it plays a key role in facilitating organizational learning processes and if leaders can utilize stories to lessen the negative impact of control in learning processes, this work argues that has the potential to mitigate some of the negative aspects of control. Both as a control mechanism and as a tool to manage organizational processes in general and organizational learning processes in particular, this literature indicates a powerful role that stories have the potential to plan.

As a value indicator. A fourth area in which stories have the potential to impact organizational learning is as a value indicator. Another link to organizational learning and leadership that emerged was utilizing stories to uncover value systems in organizations and to shape values. Martin, et al. (1983) highlight that, “Morals to stories implicitly

communicate the distinctive values that make a given organization a special place to work” (p.440). Brown (1990) states that stories house the values of the organization and its members and that those stories reinforce and recreate those value systems. In addition, she points out that stories also allow for expression of alternative value systems of groups, sub-cultures and individuals that may co-exist with the dominant value system within the organization. (Brown, 1990). Thus if leaders can harness the power of stories, they have the potential to create and understand a value system within an organization that prioritizes both individual and organizational learning.

As a prediction mechanism. A fifth arena that impacts organizational learning is utilizing stories as a predictive device. In addition to offering clues to and being a vehicle to shape values and value systems, stories also offer the ability to predict rewards and consequences for organizational behaviors. This is a key point for leaders to understand as the attempt to use stories as a tool to facilitate organizational learning. In addition, stories provide a way to predict possible outcomes of organizational changes (Brown and Humphreys, 2003). Boje (1991) points out that stories, “allow people to predict what may happen if a similar incident should recur. A story contains a blueprint that can be used to predict future organizational behavior” (p. 121). He later states that stories allow stakeholders within the organization to “predict, empower, and even fashion change” (Boje, 1991, p.124). Currie and Brown (2003) point out that stories facilitate prediction and comprehension during times of change and allow people to organize their experiences in such a way that helps them predict future consequences. Stories as predictive devices are key when individuals are dealing with unpredictable change environments. During times of both organizational change and organizational learning, unpredictability is the norm. Any vehicle that lessens the “pain” and negative consequences of that unpredictability could be viewed as a positive. Thus, it is valuable to note the role stories play as predictive devices (Currie and Brown, 2003). If a leader can utilize stories as part of organizational learning efforts to assist in reducing uncertainty and help individuals and groups predict consequences and outcomes, then he or she has a potentially powerful tool to help shape perceptions and effectiveness of organizational learning efforts. Thus through the stories a leader either chooses or chooses not to tell, he or she -- this work would argue -- has the ability to reduce environmental uncertainty that could potentially derail and undermine organizational learning efforts.

As a conflict manager. A final way in which leaders can use stories in organizational learning processes deals with diffusing conflict situations and managing conflicting realities. Implementing major organizational learning processes often brings in conflict differing value systems and realities at the organizational level, the sub-group level and the individual level. Stories help make sense of and mediate those conflicts. Feldman (1990) explicates the role of stories during conflict, “organizational stories have liminal (betwixt and between) characteristics that make possible the creation of cultural constructs by which conflict is mediated in the process of organizational change” (p.810). Finally, Martin, et al. (1983) sums up the role of stories in managing conflict, “Common organizational stories may serve as a pressure valve, releasing tension that could not otherwise be dissipated, except by abolishing some of the basic attributes of most organizations, such as inequalities in power, the capacity to survive, and the desire to control outcomes” (p. 449). Thus as leaders try to facilitate organizational learning, conflict inevitability follows and if that conflict can be managed in a positive way through the use of stories it is valuable to examine how.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A potential theory of Leadership, Stories, and Organizational Learning

It is not the attempt of this paper to produce a proven theory of utilizing stories as a tool to facilitate organizational learning, only to make some initial suggestions for links that have the potential to begin developing a theory. However, to sum up the argument made here, leaders are powerful vehicles for learning and change within organizations. One way in which leaders make an impact at multiple levels is through culture. Whether one believes culture can be manipulated or not, it is hard to argue that leaders have some influence on and have an impact on the culture of an organization.

Stories and storytelling are powerful cultural manifestations, inherent in which is a variable, “tool” view. By their very nature stories have the power to influence, shape perceptions, act as predictive devices and deliver information. The use of stories as an individual or group has the potential incredible power to impact culture in both a positive and negative way. Further, culture plays an essential role in impacting organizational learning process through its power to facilitate sensemaking and effect the balance of the entire organizational learning system. Thus, the argument of this work is that leaders have the power to facilitate, or hinder, organizational learning through the stories they choose to tell or not tell because those stories effect, either directly or indirectly, the cultural sensemaking processes housed in the meaning and memory subsystem of the organizational learning system, in

multiple ways and on multiple levels, of the organization and through this ultimately shape the character and function of the organizational learning system as a whole.

Call for Future Research and Contributions to the field of HRD

Given that this is not a proven theory and the inner workings of the theory need to be explicated and tested, much future research is needed. This paper offers an initial, “baby” step towards thinking about leadership, stories and organizational learning. Initial research on the impact of stories in organizational learning could take multiple qualitative and quantitative forms and needs to be conducted in a variety of organizations at varying sizes, with varying structures, designs and functions. The next step is linking the leader’s role to this process and attempting to flush out how the role the leader plays in the story telling effects the organizational learning processes and system. Again, this needs to be done in a mixed method format. If as leaders we are mindful and conscious of how we affect individuals, groups and organizations, it is important to attempt to understand how we have the potential to shape and effect culture and learning processes through the information we provide in the sometimes seemingly “harmless” stories we tell.

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