

Teaching Storytelling as a Leadership Practice

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Abstract

The ability to tell stories can be an important leadership attribute and skill to master in order to be a successful leader (Baldoni, 2003; Denning, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Storytelling is a central component of effective communication for leaders and a skill to master for future leadership success. This paper supports active learning, group discussion and reflective practice as a way to teach storytelling as a leadership skill. Leadership educators need to help students understand how to develop stories, identify situations in which to tell stories, and also practice the art of leadership storytelling. This idea brief presents multiple pedagogical methods to teach storytelling as a leadership practice to college students in leadership programs.

Introduction

Storytelling has been linked to leadership by a variety of scholars in the leadership literature (Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist, 2013; Bolman and Deal, 2013; Boje 2001; Denning, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Weick, 2000). Yet, what is not as common in the research are the different pedagogies used in teaching college students this emerging leadership skill. The purpose of this paper to present different instructional strategies to introduce storytelling as a leadership practice to students enrolled in undergraduate or graduate leadership programs.

Background

Storytelling was one of the first communication strategies used by mankind and is still used in a variety of cultures to pass down traditions, customs, and memories. The role of storytelling in leadership has been connected to leadership effectiveness for over 15 years (Boje 2001; Denning, 2001; Weick, 2000). While storytelling may be a more common word with leadership practitioners and consultants, storytelling has also been used interchangeably with “narrative” in much of the scholarly research. For the purpose of this paper the terms story and narrative will be used synonymously and broadly mean “an account of a set of events that are casually related” (Denning, 2012, p.13).

The importance of storytelling has been studied in a variety of different ways. The organizational and knowledge management literature has found that storytelling can be applied as a practice for shared learning and the development of mutual understanding (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Von Krogh, Ishijo, & Nonaka, 2000). Storytelling has also been highlighted in the adult learning literature by Bandura (1977) and Weick (2000) in that stories can serve as models of excellence. These models allow adults to see themselves in a narrative and mentally rehearse or visualize themselves performing the behavior highlighted in the story (Tyler, 2007). The management research has found narrative to have a role in developing organizational culture (Brady & Haley, 2013, Dailey & Browning, 2014; Parada & Viladas, 2010), strategic management (Sonenshein, 2010), employee loyalty (Gill, 2011), organizational commitment

(McCarthy, 2008), and entrepreneurship (Volker, Phillips, & Anderson, 2011).

The significance of storytelling in the leadership literature has shown that leaders can use storytelling for a variety of leadership purposes in organizations. Kouzes and Posner (2012) shared that stories can serve as a mental map that help people know what is important and how things are done in an organization. In an explorative study, Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist, (2013) found that leaders use stories to motivate, inspire, reduce conflict, build trust, influence superiors, and establish a clear direction. Storytelling can also help leaders be more strategic and maintain employee loyalty when guiding an organization through difficult changes (Boal & Scultz, 2007; Gill 2011). Executive leaders who tell stories can also change the way people think, create a shared vision, as well as grant comfort and hope (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

Stories can have a powerful and inspiring effect on an organization, if applied in a purposeful manner. Purposeful storytelling can translate a dry PowerPoint full of dull information or data into a compelling picture of the goals of a leader or an organization (Carringer, 2010). Yet, often times stories fail because they do not meet the needs of the audience, do not create a clear context or purpose, or the story is inconsistent with what people know to be true (Randall & Harms, 2012). Effective leaders don't order people to "get motivated", "get results", or "be creative", but they can lead followers to these outcomes through purposeful storytelling. A leader that knows which stories to tell to get their leadership message across in a meaningful way can be more effective at achieving their strategic goals. It is also important leaders do not use stories as a way to manipulate others or their organization and learn the most ethical context and motive for when to tell a leadership story (Auvinen, Lamasa, Sintonen, & Takala, 2012).

The ability to tell stories is an important leadership practice yet a skill that can also be challenging for some leaders (Baltoni, 2003; Denning, 2011). Common barriers that may prevent people from telling stories is the fear that they don't have any stories to share, or not feeling comfortable in telling personal stories. Sharing a story can be risky as some stories could fail and also reduce the credibility of the leader. Yet, leaders that know how to reflect on their life experiences in order to identify stories that shaped who they are today can lead to an increase in their ability to communicate more authentically to others (Auvinen, Lamasa, Sintonen, and Takala, 2013). Therefore helping college students in leadership education programs learn where to find stories, create their own leadership stories, match their stories to a purpose, and practice storytelling techniques can support students in overcoming these perceived challenges and be more effective leaders and communicators. This paper presents several strategies on teaching effective storytelling as a leadership practice in undergraduate and graduate leadership education programs.

Description of Practice

Storytelling is a core component of a doctoral public and human relations course in an executive leadership program at a small private college in the northeast region of the United States. One of the main learning objectives of the course is for students to synthesize theories and best practices in public and human relations to inform strategic planning, decision making, and implement effective leadership communications. By the time students reach this course they

have already completed two seminal leadership courses of the program and are expected to have a solid foundation of leadership theories and practices. The students in the program are all executive leaders working in a variety of fields and have at least 3 years of successful leadership experience. The program follows a cohort model with students attending class every other Friday and Saturday for 28 to 32 months. The pedagogies shared in this paper have been used in five public and human relations courses since 2012.

The purpose of teaching storytelling as a leadership practice for the doctoral course is to help students implement effective leadership communication strategies. Storytelling is presented as a leadership communication skill that can help leaders achieve a variety of organizational and personal goals. Constructing a leadership story, connecting the leadership story to purpose, and telling the leadership story are the three main topics related to storytelling in the course. Three lessons are presented over four weekends but can easily be adapted to different course schedules and level of leadership experience of the students.

Constructing a story is the first topic on storytelling and begins with providing an overview and history of storytelling and then it is connected to leadership. This is first done through the students reading the Denning (2011) text as well a variety of articles and TED Talks related to storytelling. Faculty need to be prepared to share their purposeful stories and how they are connected to leadership. Group discussions related to the readings and TED Talks are conducted to stimulate discussion and examples on how others have seen storytelling connected to leadership. Following this summary and discussion, students are asked to think about how and where to locate leadership stories. Some questions students are given to prompt reflection and recognition of possible stories are:

1. What people have had a significant impact on your life and why?
2. What hardships have you faced and overcome? How can others learn from those experiences?
3. Do you have any experiences in which you observed at work? What can others learn from those stories?
4. What do you know about life *now* that you wish you had known in high school?
5. What do you know about your career *now* that you wish you had known on your first day of work?
6. What is the best piece of advice you could give to a person in your profession?
7. Is there a story someone else shared with you that made a difference in your life and stuck with you overtime?

Other strategies students use to identify story ideas is by thinking about different qualities they have as a leader, skills they want to teach others, visions of the organization, times when they had to make a tough decision, or stories that were told by others that made an impact (Simmons 2007; Smith, 2012). After students have some time to think about possible story ideas, they are then encouraged to share their emerging stories with a small group. Often times a group discussion on emerging stories may spark memories with other students on potential stories. During this time students are also encouraged to create a journal for their stories as a leadership resource and tool. Many times students have several story ideas but not always the time to craft the story during the course. The storytelling journal allows them to keep track of their ideas to use for future leadership experiences. Once students have generated at least three

stories and they select one story to expand on for the next course. Students are expected to bring a draft of their complete story to share with their peers in the next course.

The second storytelling topic centers on connecting a story to a leadership purpose. For this topic faculty focus on helping students understand how to link a story to a narrative category or leadership purpose. Denning (2011) created narrative patterns which he suggested helps leaders better understand how to use storytelling to motivate others to achieve organizational goals. The narrative patterns can be used to deliver a leadership message with a purpose and according to Denning (2011), stories can fall under the following eight patterns: a) motivate others to action; b) build trust; c) build your brand; d) transmit values; e) getting others to work together; f) share knowledge; g) tame the grapevine; and h) lead people into the future. These narrative patterns help students match a story to the communication or leadership objectives and provide tips on how to tell the stories and possible ways the story may be received by the audience. Leaders that understand how to use the story categories developed by Denning (2011) may reduce the risk of telling what may be a good story, but one that is shared at the wrong time and to the wrong audience. Students have also found that their story is connected more to leadership purposes suggested by leadership frameworks such as The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2012) rather than a narrative pattern.

To teach students how to connect their story to a purpose they required to transcribe one of their stories and link it to a narrative patterns or a leadership purpose or framework. The assignment is typewritten story of no more than 500 words which generally equips to a 3 minute story when spoken aloud. The goal of this assignment is to write a concise and developed story, identify when and why their story should be told, and who should be the audience. Before submitting their assignment, students are given an opportunity to share their story with a small group to receive additional feedback. In every class there has always been several students that are not sure the purpose of their story until they share their thoughts with other students in the class and receive feedback.

Delivering the story is the third storytelling topic for the doctoral course. Once students have received feedback from faculty on their written story, the next assignment is to practice delivering their stories to their peers. Learning any new skill requires practice, and storytelling is no different. According to Denning (2011), a leader needs to know how to pull their audience into a story using appropriate emotion and body language. Leaders need to remember that when telling a story there are always two listeners; the listener that is visible and the one that is not (Denning, 2011). The leader must speak to both audiences when creating and sharing a story in order to capture the attention of their listeners.

Since the class is offered every other weekend for two months, “Friday Night Storytelling” sessions were created to serve as opportunities for students to practice telling one of their stories in small groups. This provides them with a chance to get constructive feedback and eventually refine a story so that it has a purpose, drama or interest, and a clear point. Also, by telling their stories to a small group, students are provided a safe place to rehearse their story before presenting it to the entire class. The objectives of students sharing their stories are to gain feedback on leadership storytelling, integrate leadership concepts into personal stories, and to learn from the leadership experiences from their classmates.

During “Friday Night Storytelling” the class is divided into groups of four to five students. Given the time constraints of the class, each student has 5 minutes to tell one story and an additional 5 minutes is provided for feedback from group members. Each group is provided with a timer to ensure the time requirement is followed and that each person has a chance to share their story. To guide the small group feedback so that it is intentional and helpful to the storyteller the following reflection prompts are provided to students:

1. What your story tells me about you is.....
2. What I like about your story.....
3. What your story helps me remember....
4. The impact I can see your story having in a (describe a specific situation) is....
5. What’s the most genuine moment in the story?
6. What information is unclear or missing?
7. What details have the most impact?
8. How well does the point of the story relate to you?
9. How could the application be stronger?
10. When would this story be useful to tell?

The entire storytelling night takes about 60-90 minutes and followed by a class reflection about the experience. Some of the questions that are posed during the class reflection are based on what the group learned about leadership and their classmate, the type of narrative patterns told, the challenges the storyteller faced in telling their story, and what feedback shared was helpful. Often times the class discussion centers around what common public relations or leadership themes were represented in the stories that were told. Students are provided two nights to practice telling their story and providing feedback to others.

Following the last “Friday Night Storytelling session” students are assigned the second typewritten report that includes a story of no more than 500 words and answers the questions listed below.

1. Which of the Denning (2013) narrative patterns does your story most reflect and why?
2. How would you describe the situation/setting/purpose for which you would tell the story?
3. How can you ensure the story you tell is authentic and not intended to manipulate others?
4. How can telling purposeful stories help you become a more effective leader and communicator?

On the last day of class each student is invited to share their story with the entire class. This exercise is to provide students an opportunity to tell their story to a large audience. During this exercise students provide the context and purpose of their story before sharing it with the group. While time may not allow for this activity this exercise has been a very inspiring exercise and allowed the students an opportunity to get to know each other better and develop a stronger degree of group cohesiveness.

Discussion of Outcomes. The pedagogies shared in this session have been developed and enhanced over the past five years in a public and human relations course for a doctorate in executive leadership program. Over the two month course, students develop at least two leadership stories and are provided with three opportunities to practice telling their stories. Students receive feedback from their peers and faculty regarding the content, purpose and

delivery of their leadership story. Many former students expressed how by sharing their stories, receiving constructive feedback, and listening to the stories of other students provided them with a new leadership practice. Faculty observed some students continuing to use purposeful leadership stories in group presentations in other courses, at community events, and at their place of employment.

After each of the four weekends of the public and human relations course, students submit a “Reflection Paper” that includes a summary on something they found personally and/or professionally relevant from the class. The paper is not a reiteration of the class events, but instead an authentic reflection on what they learned and how it will inform their leadership development. Of the 84 students that have completed this course in the past four years, over 75% provided positive feedback in at least one of the required reflection papers on how the storytelling activity was a valuable experience for their leadership communications. Some students shared in their reflection papers that developing their own leadership stories and practicing telling those stories provided them with more confidence in public speaking. Many students expressed how telling more purposeful stories could help them establish trust with members of their organization.

Reflections of the Practitioner. The storytelling exercise were adopted in a public and human relations course of an executive leadership doctorate program with students that had already completed two upper level leadership courses and had at least 3 years of successful leadership experience. Their prior foundation of leadership concepts showed to be valuable for students when developing stories and providing feedback to others in the class. Given they knew leadership theories they could provide feedback on the different themes presented in stories such as practicing servant leadership or transformational leadership. Students were also able to actively integrate the leadership communication concepts covered in a public and humans relations class into their stories and deliver them in a safe and comfortable classroom environment. Faculty observed students identifying situations in which they could use storytelling to deliver their leadership message rather than sending an e-mail or delivering a PowerPoint presentation. In the future faculty plan to collect data from alumni on how they use stories in their leadership communications to better understand the outcomes of teaching storytelling as a leadership practice.

Recommendations/Implications

Storytelling can be an effective leadership skill, yet often times leadership education programs fall short of teaching students “how” to tell purposeful leadership stories. The exercises shared in this paper provide pedagogies for how students can construct stories and then why and when to share those stories to deliver an inspiring and memorable leadership message. A recommendation for faculty thinking about adding storytelling to their leadership development courses is to consider how to integrate technology. For example, it may be useful for students to record their story so they can observe assess their public speaking skills. Based on student recommendations, faculty plan on integrating more technology into the course. This can be done by adding Voice Threading (<https://voicethread.com/about/features/>) which is a tool that can transforms different media, such as video, to provide a more collaborative and interactive environment for students and faculty. For the purposes of teaching storytelling as a leadership

practice, using VoiceThreading will allow students an opportunity to assess how they deliver a story which is just as important as the content and purpose of the leadership story. Several students in previous courses chose to record themselves telling stories to better prepare themselves for presenting their story in class. Technology can be integrated in a variety of ways for the purposes of teaching storytelling based on faculty experience and available technological tools at an institution.

Many different pedagogies are used to help learners acquire leadership skills and practices in leadership education courses (Jenkins, 2012). This paper addresses active learning, group discussion, and reflective practice as a way to teach purposeful storytelling as a leadership practice to students. The hope is that more leadership faculty will demonstrate brief interactive teaching activities to help leadership education students better understand how to: a) develop and recognize leadership stories; b) identify leadership situations in which to tell stories; c) avoid telling stories as a way to manipulate others; and d) practice the art of leadership storytelling. Leadership education programs that include teaching storytelling as a leadership practice can provide students with an opportunities to learn and practice a communication skill that can help them be more effective leaders.

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