

# A story tells the story



By Gabrielle Dolan

*Employee engagement seems to be one of the hottest business issues at the moment. Unfortunately for business, the conversations are centred on how it can be improved, with very few being able to boast about high levels.*

More concerning for Australian companies is that Australia regularly ranks below the US, Europe and Asia when it comes to employee engagement. The reason employee engagement is such an issue is that business leaders rightly understand the link between employee engagement and organisational performance.

Recent research shows that lack of employee engagement costs the Australian economy \$31.5 billion a year. Gallup's research shows that a high level of employee engagement means that employees are more likely to stay with the company. Employee satisfaction increases, productivity increases, and stress, and even theft, are reduced. Basically, an engaged employee is willing to go that extra mile when required.

The response from organisations has been to introduce a variety of policies

and initiatives to increase employee engagement. These range from flexible working conditions to open space offices and purchased leave. These are all fabulous initiatives but are they are addressing employee engagement? In most cases, no – these conditions are simply minimum basic requirements that employees expect.

## DISENGAGED EMPLOYEES ARE UNCONNECTED

For people to be engaged, they need to feel a connection. A connection to their company, a connection to their leaders and a connection to the people they work with and serve. As a business leader, how do you create that connection?

While there is no silver bullet for such a complex issue as employee engagement, perhaps the emerging discipline of Organisational Storytelling can provide some solutions.

Organisational Storytelling is emerging as a key leadership competency of the 21st Century, and an effective way to influence, motivate and inspire people. It is being led by the likes of Stephen Denning, an ex-senior executive at World Bank. Storytelling is growing in momentum as the benefits are better understood.

Denning has many supporters of his work, and his extensive client list of Coca Cola

Amatil, McDonalds, IBM and the Australian Federal Treasury, also adds credibility to his work.

What is Organisational Storytelling? Basically, it is storytelling with a business focus. The main purpose of Organisational Storytelling is to engage, educate and motivate people.

Traditionally, the business world has attempted to do this by presenting facts, analysis and logical reasoning, with heavy reliance on media such as PowerPoint and emails. Leaders, however, are becoming increasingly frustrated with these forms of communication. Regardless of how compelling the reason, or how often it is communicated, it just does not have the impact needed.

Storytelling has the ability to achieve this impact and engage people, whereas logic and bullet points fail, time after time.

### A story tells the story

Consider the Head of Payroll in a large company who needed to convince her senior leadership team of her decision to outsource payroll. Traditionally this would have been attempted by presenting all the issues, facts and logical reasons in a detailed report, accompanied by the inevitable PowerPoint presentation.

Her argument becomes so much more powerful and convincing when she also tells her senior leadership team the story about a part-time worker she met the other day in accounts. This worker goes shopping with her two young children every Thursday morning after pay day. The frustration she felt when the week before, at the checkout, her transaction did not go through, because she had not been paid on time (again).

The Head of Payroll goes on to tell the leadership team how the lady was so frustrated and embarrassed that she just left her groceries there, went to her car and cried, saying "They can't even get my pay right".

The leadership team support the decision to outsource, not only because it makes financially good business sense, but because they want to make a difference. They don't want any employee to have to feel that frustration and level of distrust, simply because they cannot get their payroll system right.

Organisational Storytelling does not advocate that a good story replaces logic and reason; it says that logic and reason combined with a relevant story is an extremely powerful combination.

A variety of purposes can be furthered by Organisational Storytelling. You may need to influence people, like the Head of

Payroll had to do in the previous example, or you may want to increase employee engagement, deliver memorable presentations or increase your ability to lead people....storytelling can help with all of that.

Take a moment to reflect on what moves you, what motivates you and what you remember from the numerous presentations you have been to...chances are it is the story, example or anecdote you have been told.

### **GIVING PEOPLE A WAY TO CONNECT**

The reason that stories work is that they give people the space to make the story relevant to themselves, to make the connection. This is especially useful when attempting to engage people in times of major change.

Some of the new technologies that are emerging almost serendipitously provide new avenues for storytelling. These technologies, such as podcasts, digital stories, wikis and blogs, are a perfect medium for telling and transmitting a story. They can reach out to a demographically and geographically diverse employee base, quickly and effectively. Media such as blogs and wikis give your employees a voice and allow them to connect.

Stories communicated face-to-face or through blogs, digital stories and similar

media can provide organisations with new opportunities to communicate and educate employees in a real, engaging and effective way.

The bringing together of these technologies with the power of Organisational Storytelling is what we call s-learning, which means learning through story.

Faced with low employee engagement, business leaders, change managers and communications specialists should consider an s-learning strategy. Stories offer an uncomplicated and direct pathway to common organisational values and commitment, and an understanding of change.

Gabrielle Dolan is co-founder and director of One Thousand & One, a company that specialises in bringing the disciplines and applications of Organisational Storytelling into organisations. She is also about to embark on her PhD in Organisational Storytelling.

Gabrielle presented a session on Digital Storytelling at the AITD National Conference in Sydney in April.

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