

TELLING STORIES

Struggling to engage employees with tired communication strategies? Is the office grapevine running rampant? It may be time to think outside the square and introduce organisational storytelling to the workplace

Once upon a time, one of Queensland's major banks was holding a conference on communication skills. During the conference it was pre-arranged that a state manager would present an award to one of the regional managers. At the arranged time, the state manager stood up, announced the recipient of the award, and proceeded to provide feedback to the recipient in the form of 'dot points', similar to a Powerpoint presentation. An interested observer to this process was Darryl Bellingham, professional storyteller. For Bellingham, the reaction in the room was typical of countless scenes he has witnessed before: instant switch-off and disengagement from the audience.

"You could almost draw the dots in the air and you could see the energy of the group start to fall away," he says. "People were getting frustrated, because here was a senior manager, who'd been told to give

feedback, and everyone could sense it wasn't working.

"I asked them to stop and then give that feedback as a story – to tell the award recipient a story about what she just got the award for. So she did, and as she did the opposite happened: the energy started to increase, and people started to feel good about themselves. The award recipient had tears rolling down her cheeks because she was getting real acknowledgement. In a lot of ways this sums up the value of narrative communication," Bellingham notes.

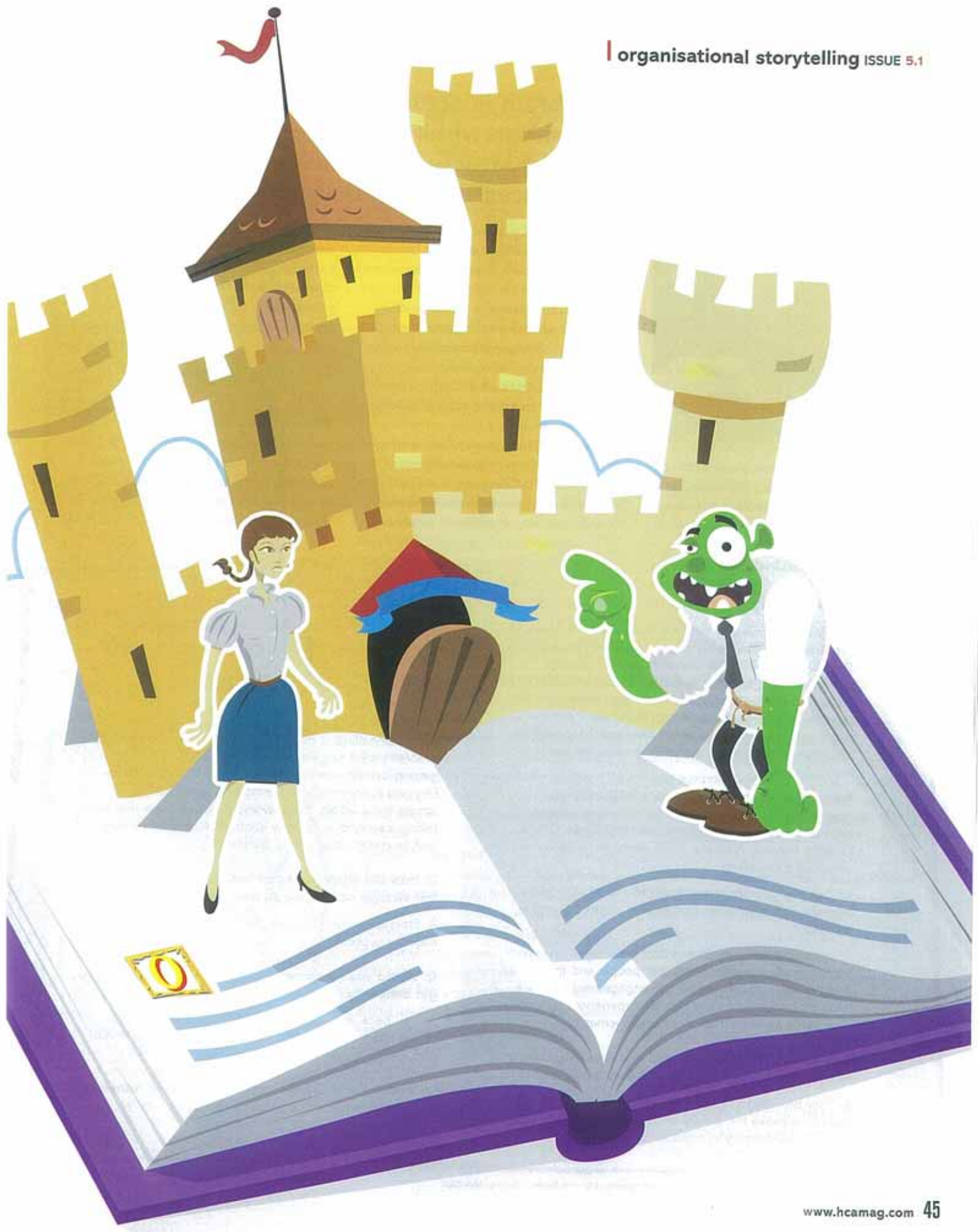
An ancient tradition

Humans have been using oral stories in social settings for thousands of years, and stories have been used in business settings for almost as long. For most business leaders, however, the man who has re-energised the concept of storytelling in the workplace for the 21st century has been Stephen Denning.

From 1996 to 2000, Denning was the program director of knowledge management at the World Bank, where he spearheaded the organisational knowledge sharing program. He has since worked with some of the world's largest organisations, including Coca-Cola Amatil, IBM and McDonald's. Closer to home he has worked with the Australian Federal Treasury.

"Organisational storytelling is the explicit use of narrative and story to achieve constructive purposes in an organisation," Denning tells *Human Capital*. "Leaders have always used story. What is new is, firstly, the explicit recognition of the role of story in organisations, and secondly, the discovery of specific narrative patterns associated with different business objectives."

Organisational storytelling can be used in countless ways, as Denning outlines: "Organisations can benefit by



Darryl Bellingham



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current wrenching transitions. To deal with this organisational white water, story can be used to spark change, communicate who you are, or what the brand is, or to transmit values, or to get people working together, or share knowledge, or tame the grapevine, or lead people into the future.

“These are the central leadership challenges in organisations today, and abstract methods are not good at handling them,” he says.

For Bellingham, storytelling is simply the most effective way to communicate, in any situation. “Our brain is actually hardwired to receive information within the code that we call narrative structure.

“When we receive information in that way, our brain starts to slip into our narrative communication process and we receive all sorts of things: information, values, and emotions. It also helps to personalise experiences,” he says.

The right story at the right time

When it comes to storytelling, one size most certainly does not fit all. It is important to adapt the story being told for the setting in which it is being told, as well as for the audience receiving it. “Organisational storytelling is storytelling

using narrative in any situation where change is involved – which is essentially the situation of most organisations today as the global economy goes through its

Case study

A major department of National Australia Bank (NAB) was preparing to embark on a large-scale change initiative. The business unit leader knew his department had low employee engagement and wanted to understand how he could help his staff engage with the new initiatives. The services of an organisational storyteller were engaged, and it soon became apparent to the leadership team at NAB that organisational storytelling could be a useful leadership skill.

Following a series of workshops, a NAB employee opinion survey showed a 14% increase in employee engagement results. HC interviewed Phil Davis, GM of Lending Services Australia, NAB, about his experience with corporate storytelling.

Q: Can you provide some background on why you thought organisational storytelling might be useful for NAB?

A: I'm interested in the connection between communication mediums with our people and the impact good communication has on our engagement scores. I think it's important to use real life experiences to assist in expressing an issue that needs improvement.

Q: You engaged One Thousand and One Organisational Storytellers to help out. How did they assist?

A: They provided a structure for telling a story that can be used to improve the quality of the communication process – that is, consistency in approach.

Q: How effective has it been for your employee engagement issues? Does your staff get behind new initiatives now?

A: It's hard to measure and isolate. I've used it along with other strategies. Our engagement scores in Lending Services were better than most. When I've used storytelling, it helps create the image and thought process I want to generate with my people. The staff is getting behind new initiatives, though. A recent Trade Day had everyone participating and demonstrated a strong bond across the business. Each business unit was telling a story in some way about what their team does and its contribution to our business.

Q: How did other managers feel about it? Did they feel strange not relying so much on facts and figures?

A: Storytelling isn't for everyone, and it didn't have majority support.

Q: Would you recommend to HR in other companies to get behind this as a way of engaging employees?

A: Yes, because it helps people to join the dots, and makes the link between what's happening on the street and what's happening in the business much clearer.

Q: Would you use these techniques again for other aspects of corporate communication?

A: Yes I would.

Source: Table excerpted from "Telling Tales" by Stephen Denning, Harvard Business Review, May 2004

Become a master storyteller

Everyone can tell a story, but the four key elements of storytelling performance are:

Style

- Tell your story as if you were talking to a single individual
- Keep your story focused, simple and clear
- Present the story as something valuable in itself
- Be yourself

Truth

- Proceed on the basis that it is possible to tell the truth
- Tell the truth as you see it

Preparation

- Be rehearsed but spontaneous
- Choose the shape of your story and stick to it

Delivery

- Be ready to perform
- Get out from behind the podium
- Connect with all parts of your audience
- Speak in an impromptu manner
- Use gesture
- Be lively
- Use visual aids judiciously
- Be comfortable in your own style
- Know your audience



with a business purpose, and the type of story you tell will depend on your business purpose," says Gabrielle Dolan, director of Victoria-based One Thousand & One Organisational Storytelling.

"If you need to motivate people into action, you'll tell a certain type of story. If you need to fast-track trust and respect, you'll tell a certain type of story. If you want to stop rumours, you'll use a certain type of story.

"Normally we rely on communication being put forward with facts and logic, but if you're asking people to change and continuously change, you also need to engage people emotionally. That's why we say the logic and the facts are really important but alone they will not achieve transformation or change. They might achieve begrudging acceptance but that's about it. The logic combined with the story is a powerful combination," she adds.

Another type of story can focus on knowledge sharing. As an example, compliance issues may be particularly boring – especially in industries like finance – but it is important that people understand the rules and why they apply. "It's all about how an organisation gets it out there in a way that people understand, as opposed to just having employees read about it and ticking the box, saying they've done it," Dolan notes.

Bellingham uses an analogy to demonstrate how a story should be used. He likens a story to a roadmap, perhaps for a trip from Sydney to Brisbane. If you were to use a map that illustrated every single creek and curve in the road it would be an impossibly large and unwieldy document. "You need the roadmap that has just the right amount of information," he says.

"Similarly, you can tell a whole range of stories in a range of different ways with different amounts of information depending on the context and the audience. We can do that because our brains are hardwired to accept and process narrative information really easily."

HR's role

As the principal designers and developers of leadership programs, HR plays a critical role in successfully implementing storytelling into a workplace. Dolan feels that if there are organisations running

leadership programs without some component or modules of storytelling, they are not providing the right service.

How should HR professionals use organisational storytelling? Just like anyone else, according to Denning. "Organisational storytelling is for anyone in an organisation who wants to drive change. If HR wants to drive change, and be effective at it, they have little choice [but to use it]."

Misconceptions

One of the greatest misconceptions around storytelling is that it takes longer to get the message across – an important consideration when facing a roomful of time-poor executives.

"Time constraints are a red herring," Denning says. "A story communicates more succinctly and rapidly than abstract communication, as well as more effectively in most change situations."

Dolan agrees, but notes that a combination of hard facts and narrative storytelling is the key. "When we talk people through the process they realise you can tell a story in about 30 or 60 seconds that is more powerful and gets across your message more effectively than if you used Powerpoint presentations for half an hour.

"Of course, people will still want the data – you don't go to a board meeting and just tell a story and purely rely on the emotion. You need to still have your facts and figures, the data, your due diligence. But when combined with some elements of storytelling it can be a powerful combination," she says.

A major challenge is convincing others of the power of storytelling. When faced with executives or board members who are not interested in storytelling, "my general advice is: don't talk to them about it. Simply do it. Do it to them. Do it for them. Do it with them", Denning says. "Eventually they'll see the obvious evidence with their own eyes, and figure out that it's more effective than boring people to death with command and control and endless abstractions."

The dark side of stories

Stories can also be used to impart bad news. As Bellingham notes, what else does a policeman do when he has to tell



Gabrielle Dolan

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vacuum, or where storytelling is stifled. However, it shares many of the same characteristics as storytelling.

“Organisational storytelling is purposeful storytelling; gossip is thoughtless exchange of stories in informal settings,” says Denning.

“Organisational storytelling can be used to redirect negative gossip if the gossip is untrue or unreasonable – that’s what taming the grapevine is all about.

“Organisational storytelling uses the grapevine, because the

grapevine will transmit all interesting stories from whatever source. So if management tells an interesting story, the grapevine will transmit it, often very rapidly and powerfully. This will happen whether management is aware of it or not. Everything the manager says or does will be transmitted, along with additional comment,” he says.

Dolan notes that invariably the grapevine is used to spread negative stories, but suggests that organisations can counter that by getting good stories out there. The first step is to actually

someone about a terrible accident? He goes and tells that sad story. However, stories can also be used for a negative end result as well.



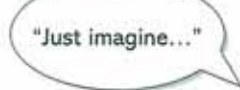


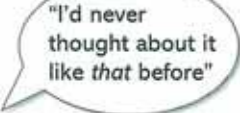

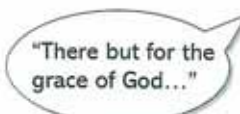
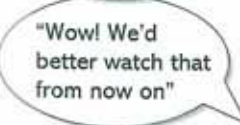
Bellingham cites an example: “At a Chicago police station some time ago there was some research conducted into why women weren’t getting anywhere within that police station. The researcher discovered that there was a story being told to new recruits, especially to the female recruits. It was about how a new recruit goes into an alley without any backup, and has to confront this strong, violent 250-pound madman, and then gets beaten up. It was being told as a way for the established hierarchy within the police force to keep the women in place and effectively out of the police force.

“So how do you change that? You have to firstly acknowledge that this story exists, and then tell stories about how women have contributed to that police force – but they must be real stories. That’s the thing about office gossip– it’s often where someone has been hurt or not acknowledged, and then they start attacking with stories that are true or not true. But they’re getting them out there, and that’s what does the damage.”

Taming the grapevine

One area in which storytelling can be particularly effective is when the office grapevine is moving into overdrive. Office gossip is usually the result of information

Purposeful storytelling

If your objective is:	You will need a story that:	In telling it, you will need to:	Your story will inspire such phrases as:
 <p>Sparking action</p>	Describes how a successful change was implemented in the past, but allows listeners to imagine how it might work in their situation	Avoid excessive detail that will take the audience’s mind off its own challenge	 
 <p>Taming the grapevine</p>	Highlights, often through the use of gentle humour, some aspect of a rumour that reveals it to be untrue or unreasonable	Avoid the temptation to be mean-spirited – and be sure that the rumour is indeed false!	 
 <p>Sharing knowledge</p>	Focuses on mistakes made and shows, in some detail, how they were corrected, with an explanation of why the solution worked	Solicit alternative (and possibly better) solutions	 

Story killers

When does storytelling get frowned upon or discouraged in the workplace?

- When stories are gossip
- When there is no time
- When there is nothing but 'bad news' stories
- When stories sound like corporate spin



listen to it. If there is nothing but negative stories, clearly something is wrong. If there is a nice blend of good and bad, something is being done right. "What business leaders tend to do is ignore a story

or deny it outright, and they need to be more truthful about a situation. Don't fight against the grapevine, use that powerful medium," she says. "You're not going to be able to kill it so why not use it? Target the connectors; get them involved in the change. Normally they have a lot of networks, and word will spread rapidly."

Technology has effectively become grapevine fertiliser, opening up new ways to spread the word. Blogs, podcasts and other digital technologies lend themselves perfectly to stories.

"We work with clients to look at the way they communicate and engage their employees, not only in the content – getting them to use more stories – but also the medium. The CEO could have a blog, for example, where they can get the word out there and people can respond to it. But the CEO can't have a blog and then

use the same old rhetoric and corporate speak that we do now – it just doesn't work," Dolan says.

"Savvy managers can take advantage of the grapevine and disseminate stories that are grapevine ready – in a form that the grapevine will find easy to transmit, rather than forcing the grapevine to embody them in a new story," Denning concludes.

Happily ever after?

"People know that the current methods of communication and engaging employees aren't working, so they're looking for something different," Dolan says.

"Organisational storytelling is definitely a leadership competency and it's a fantastic communication technique as well."

With large corporates such as NAB (see p46) and major state government departments leading the way, now may be time to open the book in your organisation and start telling some stories. **HC**



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