

Preface: Stephen Denning

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

This book tells how four busy executives, each coming from a different background, each with a very different perspective, were surprised to find themselves converge on the idea of narrative as an extraordinarily valuable lens for understanding and managing organizations in the 21st century. It reflects a conversation that took place under the auspices of The Smithsonian Associates in April 2001 and the effects that this conversation has stimulated since then.

The authors are four very different people:

- Larry Prusak has a background as a historian and worked as an executive and researcher in a giant computer firm—IBM.
- John Seely Brown is a scientist with a background in mathematics and computer sciences and was the Chief Scientist of the Xerox Corporation until 2002.
- Katalina Groh studied finance and economics and now creates and distributes educational films for her own firm—Groh Productions.
- I was trained as a lawyer and was director of knowledge management at the World Bank.

Although our journeys started from different sources, our four independent journeys ended up in the same place. None of us either by background or inclination expected to be involved in narrative and

storytelling. But each of us noticed the surprising importance and pervasiveness of narrative and storytelling in our respective settings. Each of us was excited that our understanding of narrative could be used to practical advantage.

We all worked in environments where storytelling was widely seen as something frivolous and ephemeral, something relevant mainly to entertainment, or something that only children and primitive societies engage in. Yet each of us became convinced that narrative and storytelling played an enormous role in the modern economy and in organizations in the public and private sector—the serious aspects of 21st century life. In fact, we have come to see that narrative has a hand in practically everything that happens of any significance in human affairs. And each of us is convinced that storytelling will play a larger explicit role in the future than we would have expected only a few years ago.

This book then is the account of the trajectories that we have each followed to discover the importance of storytelling for management and organizations.

HOW THE FIRST SMITHSONIAN ASSOCIATES EVENT STARTED

Late in 2000, a friend introduced me to Mara Mayor, the director of The Smithsonian Associates, and I talked to her about the idea of launching a symposium on organizational storytelling in Washington DC. Her initial reaction was, “This is an unlikely topic. Do you think anyone would attend?”

I told her my story, and she said “Yes, that *is* interesting. Who else could you line up?” After Larry Prusak and John Seely Brown and Katalina Groh had agreed to participate, she agreed to do it. In fact, she actually came and opened the event with the imposing title of: “Storytelling: Passport to the 21st Century.”

I guess we were all wondering how many people would show up for the event. But it turned out that so many people signed up for it, we had to hire a larger auditorium.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2001 SYMPOSIUM

The Smithsonian symposium of 2001 was an exciting event for those who participated in it, and it has continued to have significant ripple effects.

One immediate result of the symposium was the launching of a website that enabled the conversation that took place to reach tens of thousands of people beyond those who were physically present in April 2001.¹

Another direct consequence has been the formation of groups of professionals interested in organizational storytelling. The first of these was in Washington DC. The group, which has come to call itself the Golden Fleece Group, has been meeting on a monthly basis since June 2001. In these meetings, the participants share what they have been doing, or try out new ideas. They also participated in an improv theater event related to another book on storytelling.² Other similar groups have emerged in other parts of the country.³ The groups share views among each other from time to time on topics of common interest.

The Smithsonian symposium itself has also become an annual phenomenon. April in Washington has come to mean organizational storytelling at The Smithsonian Associates. In 2004, the event expanded so that there was a whole weekend of storytelling activities surrounding the symposium at the core. The event now has an international attendance with participants from countries such as Canada, the UK, Denmark, New Zealand, and Brazil.

The message of organizational storytelling is also starting to appear in the management literature. From 2002 onward, the importance of storytelling has been highlighted with articles in Booz Allen's *strategy+business*, the *Harvard Business Review* and the *Wall Street Journal*.⁴

Organizational storytelling is also beginning to appear as an academic topic in universities. For instance, Georgetown University in Washington, DC now has an undergraduate course in storytelling as part of their curriculum. Until recently narrative has typically been

merely an item in a broader knowledge management course or management program; now, it's beginning to be treated as a subject in itself.

THE ROLE OF THIS BOOK

This book is a continuation of the conversation that was launched in 2001. In putting this text before you, we, the authors, believe that the discussion has enduring value. Each chapter includes the presentation that was made in 2001, as well as the reflections of the author, three years later in 2004. We hope that in this format the conversation can reach even more people and stimulate further new discussions and activities in organizational storytelling.

In promoting the cause of narrative, we're obviously not opposed to science. Nor are we proposing to abandon analysis. Where science and analysis can make progress and make a useful contribution, we should use them. Where they can't or don't, they should step aside and let narrative contribute. We're trying to bridge the distance between science and narrative and still retain the value of both. Our aspiration is a marriage of narrative and analysis.

This book doesn't purport to be a comprehensive treatment of organizational storytelling. The authors don't necessarily agree with each other in every detail. Readers will see that some of us are more optimistic about the possibilities for technology than others. Time will tell which leads prove to be the most productive. In presenting different perspectives on issues such as these, we hope to spark some new insights from the reader.

We are less interested in putting forward a theory of narrative than we are in putting before you some idea sparkers and in radiating possibility. We're exploring the thought that narrative has substantial practical value in organizations for dealing with many of the principal challenges facing managers and leaders today.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ <http://www.creatingthe21stcentury.org>
- ² Stephen Denning: *Squirrel Inc.: A Fable of Leadership Through Storytelling*. (Jossey-Bass, May 2004).
- ³ In San Diego, there is the *StoryWork Community of Practice* group and in Boston, there is *Storytelling in Organizations-Boston* (SIO-B).
- ⁴ (1) Bill Birchard: "Once upon a Time" in *strategy+business*, 2nd Quarter 2002. <http://www.strategy-business.com/press/article/18637?pg=0> (March 8, 2004). (2) "Storytelling That Moves People: A Conversation with Screenwriter Coach, Robert McKee." *Harvard Business Review*, June 2003, page 51. (3) Stephen Denning, "Telling Tales" *Harvard Business Review*, May 2004. (4) Julie Bennett: "Spin Straw into Gold with Good Storytelling." *Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2003. <http://www.startupjournal.com/ideas/services/20030730-bennett.html> (March 8, 2004). (5) Julie Bennett: "Storytelling & Diversity." *Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 2003. <http://www.careerjournal.com/myc/diversity/20030708-bennett.html>