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Narrative Leadership – A Proposed Theory

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Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical approach to leadership called narrative leadership. It is understood that persuasion requires both intuitive and rational information for it to be successful. Psychologists have recognized numerous theories regarding persuasion and leadership is primarily identified with being able to execute these ideas in such a way to motivate people to change. Narrative is a means for addressing all these psychological needs and motivating people for change. This paper proposes narrative can be a mode of leading which impacts the numerous psychological mechanisms necessary for facilitating change and maintaining organizational loyalty. The paper provides general principles to develop narrative as a mode of leading after reviewing both leadership and psychological literature.

Key Words: leadership, meaning, purpose, self, narrative, story, influence, change

Introduction

A number of leadership theorists argue the core defining characteristic of leading is the ability to influence others. Northouse (2010) writes, “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). Exercising influence is what initiates change and transforms organizations. Psychological research has identified numerous factors that lead to persuasion, a form of social influence. For example, there are features about the speaker that influence how well a message is received. The credibility and assumed expertise of the speaker impact whether or not individuals are convinced by what someone proposes (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004). The physical features of the speaker are also factors impacting the influential power of the message. The more attractive the speaker the more likely people will be persuaded by the message being delivered (Petty, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1997). In addition to characteristics related to the speaker, characteristics of the message impact whether or not people will be influenced by it. The subtler a message is, the more it demonstrates both sides of an argument, and the timing of the message impact its power to persuade individuals and influence them to make changes (Igou & Bless, 2003; Haugtvedt & Wegener, 1994).

Petty & Cacioppo (1986) created a model that combined a number of facets noted above called the elaboration likelihood model. This model proposes that a persuasive message is processed on two routes, the central route and the peripheral route of communication. The central route is processed by individuals who are motivated to process the information, are interested in the facts and data surrounding the proposed change, and those listening are analytical in nature. The peripheral route of persuasion is one in which peripheral cues such as the appearance of the messenger, the manner the message is delivered, and fewer tangible factors are employed to increase the chance of persuasion. The central route seems to require a more rational analytical approach while the peripheral approach seems to appeal to the quick heuristic styles of thinking.

It is this author's contention that while these previous psychological studies capture some sense of how one is influenced by the message and its deliverer, there is more to this phenomenon than identified in these studies. In fact, for leadership, the ability to influence others in order to facilitate organizational change requires something deeper than what is discussed in the previous paragraphs. One does not need to deny that the two routes of persuasion exist to agree with another important and more recent theory proposed by Jonathan Haidt. Haidt has done extensive research in the area of moral psychology. Haidt believes that moral decisions are not primarily derived through rational cognition but rather are intuitive in nature (Haidt, 2001). Haidt identified that while most people think they are reasoning why something is morally good or morally wrong the truth is they sense intuitively something as morally right and morally wrong and then based on that intuition create reasons for it. This model of moral decision making is called the social intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001). The key reasons people have these intuitions according to this model is to either maintain a positive position socially allowing social interactions to occur smoothly or to maintain a coherent social identity and worldview. Basically, according to Haidt's research people are persuaded to believe something is acceptable or not based on intuition first and then rationalize the intuitive sense after the fact. People have within them a set of values and ideals regarding what is right or wrong, appropriate or not, and based on these unspoken ideals and values experience intuitive inclinations and then create reasons for why they believe something is right or wrong. For Haidt, if one is to persuade someone to believe something is morally right or wrong addressing logical reasons will not facilitate the change, it requires addressing the intuitive moral sense people have. These are different among groups such as conservatives and liberals and if one can understand and work within another person's moral framework, they can influence them. These same psychological processes have been noted by Denning (2007) who describes the best means for leaders to communicate change in an organization is through narrative processes. He writes the following in his book *The Secret Language of Leadership: How leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative*:

The successful leaders communicate very differently from the traditional, abstract approach to communication. In all kinds of settings, they communicate by following a hidden pattern: first, they get attention. Then, they stimulate desire and only then do they reinforce with reasons. (p. 27)

Denning's approach to communication is to initiate a connection with the individual's intuitive sense and then address issues and concerns with reasons. Denning believes one must connect with the people being communicated with at an emotional level first and only then will reason have an inroad to help facilitate change. What does this mean for leaders seeking to make changes in an organization? How can leaders most effectively harness this intuitive/emotional force in the human mind to effectively cause change in an organization?

Many modern leadership theories persist in believing a rationalist approach to leading change is the most effective means for transforming an organization. Much of the reason for this is they continue to draw on seminal work by social psychologists like Kurt Lewin. Lewin's change management model initiates change by breaking down the status quo first in order to reshape the organization later. In order to break down the organization, Lewin believes you must "convince" your constituents that the way things are done now is not functional. This is done by presenting organizational data and facts in such a way the organization needs to re-examine itself, a mostly cognitive process (Lewin, 1947). Kotter's theory, another popular theory of organizational change also proposes change is facilitated by showing people the facts and convincing them of the truth of their situation which then impacts how they feel about the situation. While one can appreciate the fact that feelings (aka intuitions) are at least recognized in this theory, the priority for facilitating change is to impact cognitive elements of human experience first and then hope they will inspire urgency and emotional reactions (Kotter, 2012).

While some change theories continue to focus on rational discourse as a primary means for change others are building on the same processes Haidt and other recent social psychologists have

identified as intuitive models. Nudge theory (Thaler, 2008), which identifies the need to modify environments in order to facilitate unconscious cognitive change mechanisms recognizes that human beings are not merely rational decision makers is one such theory. Thaler proposes advocates who desire to create change (He calls these advocates choice architects) can harness the intuitive nature of people so that default options work to the individual's benefit. For example, a default form for employee contributions to savings would be the max amount an employer matches thus making sure that employees are benefitting from the default choice, one that most people select intuitively without thinking through their options. Additionally, McKinsey 7 S model developed by Waterman and Peters (2006) rightly recognizes the central role of values which to some degree gives credence to intuition models. The implication for leaders who want to facilitate change is to shift further from a primarily cognitive model and move closer to a model addressing the intuitive nature of people first. This paper will present a theoretical perspective in which the use of narrative can be used to facilitate this intuitive change in organizations in order to transform them into something powerfully new yet deeply rooted in core organizational principles. Narrative is a powerful way to influence intuitive aspects of the human experience and can be a powerful tool for leaders who want to make lasting and functional change in their organizations. While narrative is something already addressed by those in leadership studies this paper hopes to uniquely unite psychological research regarding meaning and purpose to narrative in a way that demonstrates how leaders can be more strategic in its application as well as give basic principles that allow a leader to use narrative on a broader scale. The paper is theoretical in nature and will continue to develop as part of this researchers work in future studies.

Meaning and Purpose

In his book *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* Simon Sinek (2009) says the following:

Great leaders, in contrast are able to inspire people to act. Those who are able to inspire give people a sense of purpose or belonging that has little to do with any external incentive or benefit to be gained. Those who truly lead are able to create a following of people who act not because they were swayed, but because they were inspired. (p. 6)

He then goes on to provide examples of such people like Martin Luther King Jr., The Wright brothers, and Apple's founder Steve Jobs. His premise is that if one wants to get people to make the decision to buy a product, join an organization, or simply follow one's lead it is important to inspire them with a message of "why" first and only then will they care how an end result is accomplished and what that end result looks like. Sinek demonstrates that people bought (and still buy) apple products not just because they do what one needs, but rather because the customer has connected their identity to the identity of the company. Apple products tell a story. They say to the world, "I am someone with an artistic flair not contained by boundaries who is creative and engages technology to make that creative energy I have into something unique." The people who use Apple products are people who connect their identity to that type of a message. Contrast that message with the Microsoft/IBM message, a key competitor to Apple. At the time of the great personal computer battles in the 1980s, Apple was creating a narrative about creativity and thinking out of the box. Microsoft products combined with IBM or IBM compatible hardware was creating a narrative that said, "I am someone with solid business sense who needs to be productive and efficient to improve my bottom line. I am a serious business minded individual who can get the job done and demonstrate a high level of productivity." One can see these two very different narratives drew two very different kinds of people to these products. In fact, the trend still exists and most corporate data centers are not implementing apple products on a large scale, particularly not in enterprise IT situations.

Connecting one's identity with an organization is a powerful means for eliciting loyalty. It explains why some people are willing to tolerate products with less features than a competitor's

product. It also explains why people will pay more for a product when a less expensive model can do the same. Marketing researchers call this the consumer-company identification model and it demonstrates people will remain loyal to a product or organization when it connects and relates to their sense of self (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005). In short, when a company creates a compelling “Why” the customer connects their personal “why” to it. The individual’s personal narrative is entwined with the organization’s narrative.

What is occurring in these instances is certain products and organizations are creating narratives that connect with the human need for meaning and purpose. It seems people are in constant need to create meaning of situations and to ultimately find purpose and meaning in life (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Higgins, 2000). Much of the psychological work on meaning and purposes was initiated by Victor Frankl. Victor Frankl believed finding meaning and purpose in our lives was essential and without it people will struggle in all areas of life. Frankl (1984) writes:

Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a “secondary rationalization” of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning. (p. 121)

Frankl further proposes that meaning is discovered in three different ways; first, by creating a work or doing a deed, secondly by experiencing something or encountering someone, and lastly by the attitude we assume as we engage in unavoidable suffering (Frankl, 1984). Accordingly, then, it is when individuals engage in work, encounter or experience an interaction with another human being (or group of human beings) and through the experience of difficulty and suffering that the search for meaning is initiated. These are key moments when leadership has a unique opportunity to transform these experiences to be meaningful. The work being asked of the group, their encounters with one another, and common organizational struggles can be opportunities for eliciting meaning and purpose to which

the organizational body will respond. In fact, if leadership does not address these moments, people will develop their own meaning and that could be counterproductive to what leadership is trying to accomplish. When the opportunity is seized to make meaning by leadership in a coherent and structured way it creates a common narrative. Narrative can be the mechanism a leader uses to create meaning and purpose in the organization. As change is required it is a matter of changing the common narrative which changes meaning. The key is to get everyone on board with the common narrative. A shared common narrative that speaks to the individual's sense of self as it is connected to the organizational narrative creates loyalty.

One can see in this brief description of how meaning and purpose are key human drives that a leader can draw on to persuade people within an organization to make changes. This ability does not rely on the cognitive mechanisms of persuasion alone, but rather is reflective of the social intuitionist model of moral decision making and the other less overt theories previously discussed. One is persuaded by intuitive responses driven by meaning and purpose rather than overt cognitive functions, at least initially. To understand the psychological mechanisms at play useful for facilitating organizational change it is important to review how narrative works to create an identity in people which can drive organizational loyalty and be a source leaders can tap into for making significant change.

The Psychology of Narrative

People use stories to organize their experiences. The stories they tell themselves are organizing principles for their understanding of reality. When people experience situations that conflict with the developing plot-line of their narrative it causes them concern and discomfort. Marriage and family practitioners who use narrative as a means for understanding the impact of group narratives on individuals have recognized this for some time (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006). The same factors involved in narrative work with families can be applied to leaders and organizations. Organizational narratives

matter. This is why it is imperative leaders are aware of the shifts they make in these narratives. People connect their narratives to these organizational narratives much like members of a family connect their sense of self with family narratives. This is the root of customer loyalty discussed previously in this article. Extreme narrative shifts can be disconcerting for those who work within changing organizations.

Narrative is the way human beings integrate and explain experiences, changes, difficulties, and numerous life events that occur every day and therefore many psychologists find narrative an important part of working with clients (Crocket, 2013). These same principles apply to leaders working with people. The more aware they are of a narrative's impact on individual experiences, particularly self-experiences, the more they can draw on it as a powerful tool for change. Narrative helps people maintain a continuity with their past and project the manner in which they believe their future will progress (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Leaders who can craft the organizational narrative effectively can do so in such a way those in the group envision a future within its structure. Narrative is the primary way people form and construct their sense of self (Goodson, 2013; Dunn & Burcaw, 2013). The emotional and evaluative ingredients of one's narrative link past experiences to the continued growing sense of self in the present. This developing self provides a framework to appreciate the present and to anticipate the future (Hardcastle, 2003). As people connect their narrative with an organization, they see their future intimately connected to the organization's future. The narrative provides coherence of self and allows the individual to make sense of his or her experiences as they relate to that individual self. In a sense, an individual becomes the protagonist of an unfolding novel that is their life story (Neimeyer & Tschudi, 2003). By continually reflecting on the present happenings in relation to past occurrences individuals create a life story filled with hope for the future. Telling and hearing stories has a primary place in human experience. Kedar Nath Dwivedi (1997) discusses how deep story finds itself in the collective human psych and it why it is important in the life of people:

Life is a continuous process of organizing or structuring of experience. We have a strong longing for order and sense but we live in a world that may not have any. As we do not have a direct knowledge of the world, our knowing requires that we interpret or ascribe meaning to our experiences, which become intelligible or comprehensible when seen in a historical sequence of beginning, middle and end. Thus, the lived experiences and events get turned into stories. (p. 19)

Because narrative is such an intimate part of the human experience leaders who want to inspire and navigate change need to harness this powerful part of human motivation. Narrative not only gives access to meaning and purpose for those in the organization it also is a powerful tool leaders use to demonstrate authenticity in their own leadership style (Sparrowe, 2005). Overall however, effective use of narrative finds a way to merge the individuals associated with the organization into the organization so that the organization becomes a part of their self-understanding. Denning (2007) captures this as well as much of what has been described up to this point when he writes:

And it's not just a story. What's generated becomes a new narrative to live by, a story that is both credible because it makes sense of their lives as they understand them, and capable of being put into practice. The newly emerging narrative is constructed both from the ongoing stories of the people and their organization and from the new story put forth by the leader. It's born in the listener's minds as a more compelling version of their ongoing life stories. The listeners themselves create the story. Since it's their story they tend to embrace it. (p.35)

Developing a Narrative Leadership Style for Change

To conclude this paper, it is important to take these key ideas and apply them to situations where leadership needs to facilitate change. One might argue these principles are key regardless of how leadership is implementing any facet of organizational growth and adjustment. The basic principles

articulated already are key to how people understand the world. Narrative is a tool many leaders neglect yet as we have discussed does a great many things for the psychological aspects of how people engage the world. As noted above, narrative is a means for people to organize reality, helps them understand and explain change, maintain continuity with the past and project how the future will unfold, and ultimately is a key aspect for self-development. People use narratives to make meaning and derive purpose from the work they do, the relationships they establish, and in how they process suffering. Solid narratives lead to an adjusted and empowered experience of the world surrounding them. When personal narratives are entwined with organizational narratives individuals become exceptionally loyal to that group as identified in the customer-company identification model. The power in narrative is the fact it does exactly what psychological models of persuasion identified as important to the persuasive process. Narrative speaks to the intuitive nature of people first and then allows for a message to use rational arguments to augment decisions for change, growth, and adjustment. So how might a leader use this powerful tool?

First, leaders must become familiar with what one might call a “narrative sense.” A narrative sense is the ability to know how to use narrative and when it is appropriate to do so. It is built from what Denning calls narrative intelligence. Narrative intelligence is built upon three main dimensions: the understanding of a basic theory of how narrative works, the ability for that knowledge to become automatic and second nature, and lastly, how to deliver or as he describes it “perform” the narrative (Denning, 2007). These three dimensions can be developed in anyone interested in narrative approach to leading in the following ways.

It is easiest to start with the second dimension, developing a habit of narrative leading. For anything to become second nature it must become a habit. Habit has been known to be an effective tool for shaping human behavior. Aristotle discussed the utility of habit for developing virtues and most athletes develop training habits that propel their performance from average to excellent. Charles

Duhigg (2012) demonstrates in his book *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* that habit can be a success shaping force for most any endeavor. In the book Duhigg demonstrates the basic need to establish a desired behavior through a habit loop. A habit loop consists of a cue that initiates a behavior that is then rewarded. If one is to develop a narrative sense one needs to identify the particular cues that are important for initiating the story telling behavior in order to get the desired results. Everyone knows of some uncle or elderly relative who tells stories endlessly. This is not what a narrative approach to leadership should do. A proper narrative sense is to identify when it is appropriate to initiate narrative and that is done by recognizing the appropriate narrative cues. These have been mentioned already and can be quite useful in developing the narrative habit. In this article we have noted that Frankl identified three key moments when people seek meaning in life and these moments are good starting points for leaders to use as narrative cues. Narratives will be most easily received when discussing the work of an organization (and the tasks of those involved), when discussing new encounters or gatherings of people (i.e. when organizations need to think about competitors, partners, mergers, etc.), and lastly when dealing with struggle and suffering (cutting jobs, eliminating product lines, etc.). These events are cues leaders can pick up on to initiate the narrative habit. Through practice, this can become second nature.

In addition to recognizing the cues it is also important to practice using narrative until it is indeed an established working habit. However, this should not just be rote initiating of narratives without feedback. I am not implying by just picking up on the cues and providing stories one becomes proficient in leading in a narrative way. One must practice intentionally. Ericsson and Pool (2016) note that reaching excellence in any activity requires something they call “deliberate practice.” Deliberate practice is a type of practice that pushes people beyond average. Ericsson and Pool (2016) describe it in this way:

With deliberate practice, however, the goal is not just to reach your potential but to build it, to make things possible that were not possible before. This requires challenging homeostasis – getting out of your comfort zone – and forcing your brain or your body to adapt. But once you do this, learning is no longer just a way of fulfilling some genetic destiny; it becomes a way of taking control of your destiny and shaping your potential in ways that you choose. (p. 48)

The point is for one to have a natural automatic sense of narrative it needs practiced and developed as a habit. Through the use of developing a proper habit loop and using deliberate practice one can improve their story telling. Yet as noted above, there are two other dimensions required for this to be an efficient means of leading.

The next dimension to discuss has to do with becoming familiar with narrative theory. One might think this has to do with studying volumes of literature regarding the creative writing process but that is not the case. The most efficient and effective way to know narrative well is to read stories. Reading can enhance one's understanding of narrative because it provides the leader with material to draw from when addressing issues within his or her organization. When we read about great people's stories and read great works of fiction we learn more and more about the human condition. Joseph Badaracco (2006) a professor of business ethics at Harvard Business School describes his use of literature in his leadership classes as being exceptionally effective in the following way:

In the best stories, literature and life converge. The characters come across as real people, not puppets or specimens in lab dishes. This can broaden our view of leadership by showing us leaders in a wide range of circumstances. It also deepens our understanding by revealing what they are thinking and feeling. And, as we look closely at these men and women, we confront a series of challenging questions – about the individuals in the stories and about ourselves. (p. 4)

To use narratives well individuals must be familiar with narratives and stories. Since this is such a deeply engrained part of being human one's sense of narrative is already there it simply needs to be nurtured. That is done through reading good stories, listening to good story tellers, and watching good movies. If one spends time with good narratives, they learn to develop good narratives. It is less important one becomes an expert in narrative theory than a connoisseur of excellent stories.

The last dimension described by Denning has to do with how one presents the story. This too is developed by not just learning simple techniques but by exploring what great presenters do. There are numerous resources available which this paper cannot address, but the key is adopt and reflect what is successful. If one wants to start that process it is suggested that they identify how such organizations as TED advise their presenters. This simple yet interactive approach is a foundational way to engage those listening to your narrative and reflects the psychological model of persuasion that emphasizes the peripheral route.

Having gained a narrative sense through the exercise of the above techniques there are two final elements to developing a narrative leadership style that must be briefly addressed. The first of these is that whatever your narrative is it must connect back to the vision and mission statements of the organization. If it is true as noted earlier in the paper individuals connect their personal narrative to the organization's narrative that means they are committed to the foundational ideas of the organization. These ideas should be found in the vision and mission statements of the organization. Peter Drucker (1992) captures this elegantly when he writes:

Only a focused and shared vision will hold an organization together and enable it to produce.

Without agreement on purpose and values, the organization will soon lose credibility and, with it, its ability to attract the very people it needs to perform.

The narratives you tell within your organization, particularly those facilitated toward a persuasion to change must still be grounded in the vision and mission of the organization. One can see how an

organization that drifts from its vision can fail. The history of Apple computers demonstrates that well. Steve Jobs was replaced as CEO and with that replacement changes were made in the organization that moved it further from the artistic barrier breaking creative organization that is part of Apple's key values, vision, and mission. The narrative no longer reflected the vision and values of the company. It was only when Steve Jobs came back as CEO that Apple exploded with new products like the iPod and iTunes forever transforming the music industry. Narrative need to reflect organizational visions because people have connected their narratives to the organizations. This is what drives loyalty both internally and externally to the organization

The last element of narrative leadership is that the leader himself or herself must embody the narrative. Their narrative; their life story must in some way be an embodiment of the organizational narrative and narratives they tell. This embodiment of the narrative is a way leadership communicates authenticity, a key factor people desire in leadership. If the leader does not embody the narrative and appear authentic to the organization people will not get on board with any proposed changes. Trust will be diminished and the beginnings of organizational failure will emerge.

Conclusions

This paper attempts to demonstrate narrative is more than a tool that a leader uses when he or she likes but rather is a mode of leading; it is in itself a type of leading. Narrative leadership is well suited to facilitate organizational change because narrative is a key means for addressing the intuitive nature of people and providing the logical reasons for change. Most importantly narrative leadership recognizes that people have their own stories and want to connect them to an organization that has a similar story consisting of similar values. When people do that, they develop a profound loyalty to the organization and will more comfortably change with the organization if they see in that overall narrative a future self of their own. While this paper is purely theoretical there has been some significant work already done demonstrating the role of narrative in leadership communication as referenced in the

research above. What this author would like to see is if narrative can become a primary mode in all facets of leadership. This will be the subject of future research.

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