

Fairytale that stories can manage change

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Sincerity - not storytelling - is the most important trait of leadership, writes Ryszard Bliszczyk.

IN THE spirit of the path of least resistance, Gabrielle Dolan (BusinessDay, 12/6) has provided readers with yet one more quick fix with which to solve the complex challenges of leadership in the modern corporation.

Her premise, that storytelling is an effective tool in aspects of leadership that contribute to successful organisational management, is in the vein of most writing in the business world that aims to offer advice and solutions to managers.

It simplifies the tasks of leadership to a set of isolated skills and claims that mastery of one of these skills will solve many, if not all, of the great problems of leadership.

This highly reductionist approach may make for easy journalism and for an easy entry in the popular business press, but adds nothing to the understanding of how to succeed in business.

Effective communication is a valuable skill in management and corporations must have effective organisational communications to manage employees appropriately.

Communication is obviously most important and effective in times of organisational stress such as a major transformation.

However, Ms Dolan's suggestion that "(w)ithout appropriate stories, it is difficult to see how leaders or organisations could embark on and succeed in leading change" is unsupported by the evidence of companies that have indeed succeeded at change without major efforts in storytelling, formal or otherwise.

She appears to be advising managers that they must tell their people stories in order to manage successful change and as long as they have combined these stories with hard data, then organisational change will succeed.

I assume that Ms Dolan is implying that the hard data (unspecified in her article) provides the factual evidence for the need for change and that the organisational stories provide the easily digestible versions of this need that will engage employees in the change process.

What she ignores, however, is the fact that leading change requires much more. It requires leadership. This is much more than just telling an appealing story; it requires decisions and actions that are consistent with the rationale for change and these will be the "critical component of successful organisational change", not the stories.

In my 20 years as a management consultant specialising in organisational change, I have probably experienced every type of change technique and approach known to business.

Over recent years, however, as the pace of business has continued to accelerate, my clients have commonly warned me of one key barrier to change in their organisations — that of "change fatigue".

The message being that I should tread carefully in developing and implementing any change management techniques because the employees have experienced so much change in recent times that they are too tired to accept much more. Therefore, they are suggesting that their staff require special assistance in navigating and accepting the next program of change.

Being curious as to how such a state of fatigue actually manifests among employees, I have tested this concept with the employees themselves. After many conversations with such "change-fatigued" employees, I have found that the facts were very different from the perception.

These employees were certainly tired of change activities within their organisations, but they were not fatigued because of the amount of change they had experienced in their jobs or roles in their companies. In fact, on the contrary, they were tired of the change rhetoric to which they had been subjected over recent years.

What they have typically experienced is an ever-growing litany of unfulfilled promises. In extreme cases, not only have working lives not improved but have actually gotten worse.

Business leadership is a much more complex challenge than the adoption of one or two specific techniques can readily simplify. Managers in organisations struggle to lead successfully precisely because it is more complex than many authors would lead managers to believe. It requires many different techniques to be employed in the many various circumstances that managers need to motivate their staff to perform.

Knowing which technique to use and when is one of the fundamental skills of leadership, a skill that many managers do not have.

Those espousing the virtues of one technique or another as the means to master leadership fail to take account of the most important trait of leadership, which, for simplicity, I shall refer to as sincerity.

As my anecdotal evidence about the cynicism of staff to change programs indicates, followers are particularly astute at identifying good leadership from bad. They know or soon realise when they have been misled or fed a story that turns out to bear little or no resemblance to their actual working experiences. They easily identify leaders who do not walk the talk.

Employees want to be treated with respect and dignity, which means they do not wish to be lied to or led astray by unfulfilled expectations. They will happily and easily engage in change if they are sure that they can rely on the promises of their leaders, can rely on having their perspective heard, especially when transformation is afoot and the consequences for their working experiences are likely to be profound.

In short, they want a leader to be sincere. If their manager is indeed sincere — open, honest and manages them with integrity — then they will believe the stories they are told and use them as metaphors for improving their performance.

They will satisfy the first condition for storytelling: they will be a receptive audience because no amount of eloquent storytelling will work if the audience is unreceptive.

Ms Dolan and authors like her should continue to make managers aware of tools that may be of use to them, but not suggest that implementation of such techniques can turn a manager into a leader.

Leadership is much more personal, individual and difficult to master. If it were easy, we would all be doing it and the Jack Welch of this world would not command such high salaries.

What managers need is a deep understanding of their own psychology to be able to harness their strengths and weaknesses in ways that are unique to them and encourage others to follow them. This is a much more complex activity than learning useful but ultimately limited communication, motivation or management techniques.

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