Since the early 2000s, storytelling as a means of managerial communication has been increasingly advocated with a focus on the management practices of leadership, change and organizational culture (e.g. Brown et al. 2005; Denning 2005).


Despite the volume and availability of (practitioner-focused) literature on storytelling in management practice, there remains a significant shortfall in empirical knowledge about its specific use and effectiveness. This is problematic because management practitioners and consultants cannot make informed choices as to whether storytelling is an appropriate means of communication to support a specific management issue, thereby increasing the risk of being misled by enthusiastic and potentially ill-informed sources. More critical examination of storytelling in management practice is required.

Our empirical research is investigating the dynamics of storytelling as a means of managerial communication. It seeks to identify:

- the factors that influence the effectiveness of storytelling in managerial communication;
- the different levels in an organization where storytelling takes place as well as the characteristics of these types of storytelling;
- the role of storytelling to build organizational culture and identity;
- the role of storytelling to share knowledge, give sense and develop people within organizations; and
- the role of storytelling to create and maintain professional relationships among organizational actors.

Questions include the following:

- What types of stories are used by managers? Are there specific points when managers tell stories? What factors may influence the credibility of stories? Do managers listen to their employees' stories and address them in a dialogic fashion? Do employees listen to their managers' stories and make them part of their own? Are there any differences in the communication of managers who use storytelling explicitly in comparison to those who do not? Is storytelling more effective than other modes of communication? In what way?

Emergent findings:

Relationships between managers, storytelling and audience are complex, interchangeable and interdependent. Managers in the middle represent a powerful axis through which all types of storytelling flow; their position of translator and interpreter can potentially distort the message, affect what is put into action, and what the resulting outcomes/outputs for the organization are. Storytelling is employed by middle and line managers to build relationships, share knowledge and develop staff in their roles.

The verbal or written telling of an organization’s story itself is not enough, it has to be lived by managers and experienced by employees. Management has to establish credibility and win employees’ trust by actions that underlie the organization’s story in order to engage staff effectively. There is significant potential for damage to an organization if actions do not match words.

Storytelling is a way of sharing knowledge and developing a sense of community between organizational actors. It offers ways to make sense, to construct reality; however, this may be in conflict with the broader organizational direction and business requirements. Storytelling can be used to exert power and control. However, we question whether organizational actors are indeed as passive an audience as they are often portrayed, for example misrepresenting the stories they hear. Intentions of storytellers are filtered through motivation/feelings of audience, which then affect their behaviour/response.

Two organizations are participating in the research, as are approximately 10 reflective storytellers. The first case organization employs storytelling purposively to manage change (25 individual and three group interviews). The second case organization does not use storytelling explicitly and acts as a control to establish whether and how grass-root communication differs (25 interviews). Expert interviews with reflective storytellers are helping to refine the case study findings. The experts are a sounding board for emerging analyses of the case study data and provide rich insights into the use of storytelling and management and associated practice.

References:

References:

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