‘I’ve got a story for every occasion’: Sense-making and Sense-giving in Organizational Life

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19th Organizational Storytelling Seminar
BACKGROUND
Narrative/storytelling

• ‘Something that is intended to persuade others towards certain understandings and actions’ (Dunford and Jones 2000:1209).

• Stories as vehicles through which organizational actors make and give sense, thereby constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing the organization.
Sense-making

• Defined as: creation of meaning.

• Sense-making is a narrative, interpretive process.

• Individual and social (Weick 1995).
  – Individuals can make sense based on their own resources.
  – Individuals can also draw from others and use any plausible explanations to support their sense-making.

• Meaning is multiple and open-ended.
Sense-giving

• Dissemination of ‘some abstract vision of the changed organization’ (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991:434)

• ‘Intentionally trying to influence how other people attribute meaning’ (Smerek 2011:81, emphasis original)

• Sense-giving as narrative, interpretive process tightly linked to sense-making, but role of story less researched.
Sense-giving research

- Traditional focus on how senior managers try to deliberately influence organizational actors’ perceptions of change through formal events (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991).
Current thinking

• Understanding how more experienced professionals share their stories with less experienced colleagues (e.g. Humphreys et al. 2012).

• Increasing questioning if the term ‘sense-giving’ always suitable (Corvellec & Risberg 2007)
  – Assumes meaning can be owned.
  – Assumes meaning pre-exists communication.
Conceptualizing of stories and sense

- What part do stories with regard to sensemaking and sensegiving play in an organizational context?
  - What types of stories are told in what contexts to give and make sense?
  - Who is telling such stories and who is receiving them?
- Discursive rather than directive (story-sharing)?
- Transcends vertical relationships?
Our propositions

• Characterized by everyday interactions (relationships?) between organizational actors (micro-analysis).

• Individuals seek social input from other organizational actors to help them make sense (sense-seeking).

• Organizational actors may offer social input even when it is not directly sought to provide reassurance and/or support (sense-offering).
Offering sense through stories

Organizational actor – Story-sharing – Organizational actor

Storyteller and recipient

Storyteller and recipient
Methodology

• Qualitative, interpretive, inductive.
• Largely unstructured interviews analysed using thematic analysis, aided by NVivo.
• Two case studies – NorthService Ltd. and NorthEdu.
• Expert interviews with reflective storytellers.
OFFERING MEANING:
STORIES OF THE COLLECTIVE
Line manager Timothy

When we’re looking at savings, when they say there’re challenges here, I’ll say “well, just remember two years ago we had a situation where the team was delivering substantial savings and we did that without the sort of issues that we’ve got now”. So I’ve recalled historically what’s been done and point them back to previous successes or previous areas where there’s been issues and how we’ve dealt with them there and try and draw the parallels to the current situation. So looking back is always a useful tool that I have used, just drawing back on previous successes.
Well, just remember...

- Story of team’s past achievement.
- ‘Echoes’ of the past.
- Encouraging team members to make a connection to previous success.
- Therefore, reminding team members to use their resources to make sense of and overcome (perceived) challenges.
Imagine is a word that I’ve used probably quite a lot, because I’ll say, “look what we’re trying to get to, just imagine if we were the Centre of Excellence that we are trying to be, if we were structured correctly, if we worked as a team together, this is what we could provide”. So it’s trying to give them a picture of what I see as being a really good service, and that sometimes creates a debate about, “well, do you think we’ll ever get there and how?”, “Well, I don’t think that’s good, I think we should be doing that.” “Oh well, fair enough”. So it creates a debate, it paints a picture for them of broad watercolour and they come in and fill some of the detail in.
Just imagine if...

• Story of inspiration to help team members make sense of the unknown.
• Sparking team members’ imagination to jointly create the team’s future.
• Initiating discussion of the future to create shared meaning of their work, role and significance.
If you can tell a story that people can identify with, so it might be the story of [local area], which is what we tell people when they come to work for us. This is the story of where you work, so they’ll engage with that, “oh yes, I work in [local area]” and they probably live in [local area]. The story is the mechanism for delivering the message. So if I can use the example of the induction, the story is the history of [local area]: thought we were doing well, started getting inspected, actually we weren’t doing very well, all this deprivation, poverty, dah di dah di dah. Put our own house in order, got a new chief executive, started doing some good stuff. But the economic crisis has just hit us, [another] new chief executive has hit us, we are now doing something different, and this is where we’re heading. So it’s just using the story, using the vehicle of the story to actually say, “this is where we’ve come from, this is what happened, and this is where we’re going, and this is your role within it”.
Stories to identify with

- Story of local area to help new recruits make sense of the environment in which the organization operates and their role within it.
- Establishing connection between individual (new recruits) and collective (local area, organization).
- Generating relevance of individual and collective experiences.
OFFERING MEANING: STORIES OF THE INDIVIDUAL
Employee Rebecca

When I first started work in this department, I did a piece of work wrong and I was treated terribly, [people were] sitting and talking behind my back and I thought that should never happen. I’d just started doing this job and I had made a mistake, but instead of just putting it right, it was like, “oh, she’s made a terrible mistake” but I said anyone can make a mistake. So when I did become a team leader, I used to get younger people coming through and I always remembered that. I always thought because people will make mistakes, you don’t worry about it, and I say “when I first started here...”, but I never used to tell them the negative side of it. ... And that’s just one instance where I wouldn’t have told the whole story, because I just think it would make people a bit more wary of us, you want them to know what you’ve been through.
When I first started here...

• Story of negative experience; making sense of and learning from negative experiences in a positive way.
• Explaining own behaviour / management style.
• Justifying team ethos.
• Reassuring new team members that mistakes happen and that they can be put right.
• But: polished account.
Senior manager Alexander

There’s one story I tell which is a bad story about me and of how first impressions don’t count. I was doing graduate recruitment and I had done it over a few years and I stuck my head round the door to look at the applicants, and there was this one character who stood out and she was spotty and fat, and I thought, “oh love, you ain’t going to get a job”. And that was wrong of me, absolutely wrong of me, and I thought, “oh I hope I don’t get her”. Now I sat through 20 interviews that day of graduates and one brought me to tears of joy and of triumph giving a real and credible example of the helping and supporting of others and as a genuinely inspiring character, and it was her. And the reason why was the compelling evidence that she gave when it came to the things that we were looking for – leadership capabilities – she absolutely had them. And I thought “you little s***” because I had been disapproving and dismissive of her because I thought “you’re a large fat, spotty girl, you ain’t gonna get a job”, and I was wrong. OK, I will admit to being wrong because I got to find out on that occasion her stories were so good, her evidence was compelling and I wonder in the past, and I wouldn’t describe myself as somebody who discriminates, but I would describe myself as being honest enough to admit when I think I have. And it makes you wonder how many times in other situations, we do discount others without giving them necessarily a fair chance.
Don’t do as I did...

• Story of personal weakness.
• Offering a cautionary tale to others.
• Encouraging others to recognize and reflect on their own blind spots in their sense-making.
Senior manager Shaun

So I’d talk about, prior to when I was at [organization] I worked for [different organization] and it was the first time to move into a team management role. I’d come from a technical background, I hadn’t managed anybody, so it was quite a big step for me at that time. So I use those sort of examples and other ones from throughout my career to illustrate that it always looks worse at the time and when you look back in hindsight, well actually it wasn’t as bad as I was fearing. And because you made that conscious decision to step out of your comfort zone, you are learning something new and you are taking your career in a different direction. So that’s probably the area I would use a lot of story-telling.
It wasn’t as bad as I was fearing...

- Life story (excerpt).
- Offering lessons learned in own career to junior team members.
- Helping junior team members make sense of reactions to challenge.
MAKING SENSE FROM STORIES HEARD
Employee Catherine

My manager’ll say “well, I’m not going to tell you what to do, but I’ll give you an example of something that happened to me.” And you think “oh right”, and you just take it from there. ... I think you are kind of getting the information without really thinking about it, where you would have to think about it, but you’re not going to go, “oh I have this to do and that”. And you are thinking about it, but I think you are subconsciously thinking and I just find that easier.
You just take it from there...

- A story from the manager’s experience of getting a job done that may be relevant to current situation.
- Receiving insight into possible actions.
- Story as stimulus for listener’s thinking to support them make sense of what to do.
Employee Jim

So if I go to someone with a query and there is a lot of people around us with a wealth of experience, it will be a personal story on their part that helps me reach a decision on how to do something.
Reaching a decision...

- Account of how employee seeks sense and how s/he receives stories of experience.
- Consciously drawing on others’ experience to inform own sense-making.
- The sense-making process informs the decision that is made.
Senior manager Alexander

So I’m eager sitting in these conferences and I thought “what is this guy going to tell me?” And he basically told me a story. He said “when my wife was ill, I had to do the food shopping. I had never been in a supermarket before, I just used my wits and followed what everybody else was doing. I was probably in the shop for two or three hours trying to find the things that I was looking for. [At the checkout] I put my stuff on this conveyor belt and get through to the end and this woman looked at me and said, ‘That’s £17.48’. [And I say] I’ve been in this store for three hours, no one’s spoken to me, no one’s greeted me and no one’s even thanked me for my custom’. With that she handed him the receipt and said ‘I don’t have to, it’s printed on the receipt’.”

So the essence is that the thank you printed on the receipt is evidence of customer service. But it’s absolutely not, it starts as you approach the store and as you go through that whole experience, it’s not sufficient just to say it you’ve got to do it and mean it. I found that to be a very powerful story, it certainly works for me.
Stories to provoke

- Second-hand story about customer service that is meaningful to storyteller (and used with others).
- Story does not contain judgement, but opens up discussion about customer service, what it is like and what it could/should be like.
- This story has been received and retold on the basis of its wide relevance to customer service.
Employee Sebastian

As far as information coming down, if there’s a story behind it, for me it normally means that there’s a bad result, a bad ending to it, or an ending that people don’t want and you get the story to butter you up before revealing whatever it is. Well, that’s how I perceive it.
Buttering you up...

- Critical account of how stories can be perceived and received by organizational actors.
- Story as packaging, pretty paper that dresses up the ‘true’ (negative?) message; the sense offered is perceived as being polished by the story.
- Story mechanism creates feeling of disbelief/cynicism about message.
I must admit, me personally and the team, where we take an interest in the grapevine is an issue of where [organization] are going, which direction they are going, are we going to pay staff off, are we going to lose contracts, are we going to be put in a pool, things like that, something which might have an impact on them, they will take an interest. But if the grapevine was about say some member of staff that might be getting paid off in the council and it didn’t affect us, they’ll be, “oh I heard that rumour like, did you hear it? Oh yes fine, phew what a rip off that is.” It’s only when it will have an impact on us that they are a bit more interested. In my team it’s a case of they want to understand the other side of the coin, they want to understand the picture, to actually form an opinion or find out whether or not the grapevine is the truth.
We take an interest in the grapevine...

- Grapevine as collective offering of possible meaning.
- Filtering snippets of information (ante-stories, Boje) as circulated on the grapevine.
- Using filtered information in their sense-making.
Employee Keira

**Stefanie:** And if you think of these meetings and the anecdotes this person tells, do they want to get a point across that’s somehow related to the meeting?

**Keira:** No, not at all. I think they’re just the type of person who can’t really help but let their personality come through. Yes, I think it’s just a kind of lid that’s screwed onto a bottle that’s been shaken and every now and then it just bursts off and a little bit more of their personality bursts out, but it’s very rarely related to meetings. The other day she used an example from the television programme ‘Lost’ to describe a situation on campus, which was sort of related, but again was just her telling me that she liked ‘Lost’, I think.
She was telling me about her...

- Stories as a distraction.
- ‘Nice to have’ but limited usefulness with regard to business issue.
- Enable the listener to make sense of the teller, but not necessarily of their own situation.
Reflections (1)

• Sense-offering through story-sharing differs from traditional conceptualizations of sense-giving.
• Implies choice of action by the listener (non-directive, suggestive).
• Transcends hierarchical position and organizational boundaries.
Reflections (2)

• Stories:
  – Motivate, inspire, encourage.
  – Help understand and make sense.
  – Participate and engage.
  – Challenge, provoke and caution.
  – Open to interpretation.
• Notes of caution:
  1. Story authenticity: the audience makes a judgement (relationship between teller and audience?).
  2. Story editing: teller may choose not to tell the whole story (reasons why?).
  3. Story filtering: listener may choose which stories / elements of stories to hear.
  4. Story as a distraction: individual gets in the way of the issue, potentially frustrating for the listener.


We gratefully acknowledge financial support by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under grant No. RES-061-25-0144-A for the research from which this paper derives.