

Using stories as the spark for meaningful change in organisations

At [Comma Partners](#) latest networking event, thirty senior internal communication professionals gathered to explore how stories can be used to connect personal experiences with big strategic messages. The session was led by Sabine Jaccaud and Philip Gibson of [Sparknow](#) who, in sharing a case study, demonstrated how using everyday stories from around a business can enable organisations to break through barriers of indifference, open minds and move forward with cultural change. The particular case study focused on a global manufacturer who needed to tackle issues of product quality – a tricky subject at the best of times.

“In our work we use storytelling and narrative research to address critical business challenges. It makes perfect sense to use the experience of day to day actions and decisions of employees to create wider and deeper understanding of the corporate message,” explains Jaccaud.

Abigail Rowland, who attended the event, told us: “I was excited by the success they had in opening up conversations between and across teams, around what was a challenging, if not taboo, subject in their client’s organisation. I can really see how storytelling can be used to address a specific business issue, successfully changing the underlying mindset of individuals and the culture of the organisation as a result.”

Shifting mindset

Being able to get workers to talk openly about shortcomings in quality is rarely an easy feat. Quality - and performance generally - are often about everyday actions, compromises, challenges and trade-offs where tiny shifts in individual behaviour add up to something much more important. The real skill lies in finding ways to get everyone noticing, discussing and then doing something about the routine things they take for granted. It’s about accountability. It’s about responsibility and it’s about feeling safe to raise concerns. Ultimately, it’s about shifting mindsets and inviting people to see themselves and their day- to- day reality in what might be more abstract corporate concepts.

“What grabs me about the Sparknow approach is their understanding of the vital importance of surfacing real, frontline stories - and the authentic collaboration and involvement with employees at all levels that this requires,” says Joanna Hyde who is particularly interested in conversational communication, brand engagement, storytelling and change.

Virginia Hicks of Comma Partners, who hosted the event, told us: “Communicators are well used to storytelling that is more about creating a strategic narrative, crafting engaging content and adopting a rather manicured and sanitised version of events in a top down strategy. This is important, of course, but involving frontline employees at the outset to create the stories really does help build the engagement that is required for long-lasting behaviour and cultural change.”

And it is this long lasting behavioural change that will prove the success of a project like this. Cami Joerin picks up this point: “I've heard a lot about the concept of 'storytelling' in



organisations, but have never heard how it can be used practically beyond reinforcing the organisation's purpose, vision, values and strategy, so the event really helped to bring that to life for me. It looks like a terrific tool when used in this way, to shift the culture in organisations to be more transparent by giving people permission to 'speak up' freely. I would hope that once people had experienced the portfolio of initial stories produced, they would feel more comfortable and confident voicing issues, and managers would feel more confident responding to them, and understand what they needed to do to facilitate these kinds of open conversations."

Why use stories?

Stories are incredibly powerful: they help us make sense of the world around us. According to psychologist Jerome Bruner, stories are over 20 times more memorable than facts. Ellen Hake, who applies neuroscience to her communications work, added: "Research shows that the brain responds to stories, and that stories generate trust. I liked how Sparknow worked with their client to build on this understanding. Firstly, they involved people throughout the organisation in capturing the stories and then they turned the stories into visual tools which enabled people to process them more deeply and find themselves in the narratives during discussions with supervisors."

Stories are an ideal tool for building relationships and improving collaboration. One story tends to lead to another, and they travel well too. "Everyone relates stories that capture their imagination in some way, so they are a great way to enable you to make use of your organisation's grapevine as well as its more formal communication channels" explained Gibson.

In Sparknow's case study, around 60 stories were gathered from across the business and distilled into a handful of recurring themes that linked directly to the company's desired quality behaviours. Essentially this was a rigorous bottom-up research process, collecting scenarios from around the business. "What we have discovered in our work," says Jaccaud, "is that a deceptively simple story can produce a large amount of valuable insight when used as a trigger for generating conversations within teams and across teams."

Pictures vs words

From this portfolio of 60 stories, a toolkit was created using picture boards and posters so that each story had wider international appeal and value. With the picture prompts, employees in manufacturing sites were encouraged to discuss 'what is going on in the picture' relating the story they were looking at to day-to-day situations that resonated with them. Supervisors and team managers had a simple briefing pack that explained how to encourage discussion that would focus minds on the core issues and behaviours around quality. There was no prescribed outcome. But what did happen was that groups of employees started talking about difficult situations and daily dilemmas and it got them thinking about what they would do in those situations.

Rowland again: "Most teams are time-hungry with customers to serve, targets to meet, a production line to maintain. The first thing to fall away is time to talk, share information, discuss learnings, test and apply improvements. I can see that storytelling used like this is a valuable way of kick-starting those conversations."



Jonathan Berry of Camrose Management added: “What was interesting to me was how they genuinely involved people in the process of creating the stories, so their experience of change went to a very deep level of involvement.”

Challenges

A process like this is time-consuming and for several of those who attended the event, the issue of getting enough senior management time to plan and implement a programme like this was seen as a potential problem. Certainly a programme like this does require sponsorship from the top team.” We all know that change programmes do not succeed if the leadership is not fully bought into the approach. Successful programmes are visibly championed from the top and also project managed well. Securing a good lift-off is important but for ongoing success we need to have management and frontline champions for the continued roll-out so it doesn’t fizzle out,” added Hyde.

A second concern raised at the event was that of reputation management – particularly pertinent where programmes are around quality and safety. Jaccaud again: “Of course it is important to consider the legal and media issues. In this particular case study the stories were anonymised so not identifiable to any particular part of the business. This also encouraged the discussion to be about the issues they raised rather than the individuals involved. Another technique is to set the stories in an external context or other organisation to encourage people to talk more openly.”

Working with external affairs teams, social media and communications teams is also essential. Organisations’ approach to social media varies and being sensitive to this is vital. Make sure you have established ground rules with tips and advice on how you expect employees to continue their discussion around some possibly tricky issues. No one wants content shared inappropriately with external audiences and most organisations will already have guidelines around this. The best storytelling programmes focus on action and behaviour so it is important that employees know what they can do and how they can go about it.

The key thing about using stories in this context is that the ultimate aim is not for people to remember the stories: it’s all about using narrative techniques to open up difficult issues that have to be addressed for people to change the ways they think and act. The stories and scenarios become a tool for initiating the right quality conversations to create lasting cultural and behavioural change in organisations.

Hicks concludes: “Done well, a narrative exercise like this will gather its own momentum, preventing the rather too- familiar “sheep-dip” approach to communication programmes.”

Comma Partners provides internal and change communications managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit www.commapartners.com.

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Sparknow accompanies organisations to help find the space to think, involve and act innovatively to drive change. Their work is multi-disciplinary and method-driven, focusing on narrative research, communications, brand and organisational development. For more information visit www.sparknow.net or contact Sabine Jaccaud on 07894715447.