

Narrative Leadership: A Story about Blue Chairs

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Except for nine years as a Director, then VP of Sales and Marketing, the rest of my leadership work has been in volunteer staffed organizations. This has caused me to conclude that while employee and volunteer staffed organizations share many similarities, they differ in their ordering of profit to purpose and this from the value each assigns time. Usually, the employee-staffed organization must be concerned with generating profit and that where the timing of market forces dictate the response. The volunteer staffed organization, not too concerned with market forces, concentrates on accomplishing the purpose of its founding. Although neither organization takes profit or purpose to the exclusion of the other, it seems that in the former profit tends to precede purpose (although certain non-profits, such as health care, have struggled to change their ordering) while in the latter, purpose is first. In both, the ordering of profit and purpose provides the organization a base for the grounding of values, its sense of priority, the impetus for mission, and a value of time.

What I think matters in this discussion are two things: First, how do leaders reverse the state of affairs when the organization's sense of itself is misplaced: when profits aren't pursued or the sense of purpose is misstated? Second, while attempting to lead a correction, are leaders given adequate time? For solutions to these questions, either part or whole, the form of leading referred to as narrative leadership seems the most complete. Narrative leadership concerns itself with an appreciation of the stories of organization members, how these become a locus of power, form identity that members adopt, and coalesce into practices for which the organization is known. It holds that effective organizational change occurs when people are led to rewrite

the story about themselves thereby changing what they identify with and in the process gaining a new sense of mission. Narrative leadership is about people change first and organizational change as its result. With its emphasis solidly on people, leading narratively is less a quick fix than wholesale firings or forced downsizing but people losses do happen. Finally, changing a story can occur among as few as one or as many as hundreds. The difference is time.

What you will read here is the application of narrative leadership within a volunteer staffed organization to the problems as I've defined them. The dynamics, pressures, constraints, and opportunities of change may all differ in the employee-staffed organization. I make no attempt at prescription only the hope of sharing some observations.

Narrative and Myth

Since 1984 I have been an ordained minister and in that time served in a number of congregations. Common to each has been the presence of an unwritten code that, apart from matters of doctrine or faith, defines the taboos of the congregation in their organizational life. Its proscriptions determine what is permissible and codifies what is acceptable. My perception of this phenomenon is that its influence upon members is equal to or greater than that accorded their Faith.

Without exception this code is bound up in a story or stories, a narrative about or of the group that serves to plot (Whitebrook, 2001) their shared life within the greater structure of stories created about themselves (Denzin, 2000). These come from relationships and are the memory of particular events that in their causation are thought responsible for the organization being what it is. As such, memory and all that term entails,

becomes their keeper and the primer from which neophytes are inculcated in the norms of the organization.

I have observed that the narrative of organizations, which in every sense of the word is what congregations are, become mythical: the stories behind the story of the organization. As do the myths within social fabric everywhere, these also explain, provide cohesion, legitimize, communicate unconscious wishes and conflicts, mediate contradictions, and anchor the present in the past (Bolman & Deal, 2003). It seems that our pleasure at and need to live within imagination makes myth necessary and in it we construct devices that help (Tanasoiu, 2005) to center us.

Tanasoiu (2005) held that truth cloaked as myth is cosmic in its generation, that is, neither real nor unreal but imaginary but that becomes social in its breadth. When handed down in this manner, the story of the organization forms a paradigm that achieves clarity due to being thought of as bearer of some essential truth. This makes myth privileged at least and possibly even sacral in its esteem as the revealer of the organization's fundamental values and guarantor of its cohesion. For these reasons our myths resist change: their explanations being well protected against debate and argument (Abma, 2000) and their actions legitimated by the sacredness of their content.

Myth, like the narrative it supports, is integral to our organizing and presents beliefs about what is important and why it is so. What I've discovered in leading congregations is that to effect lasting organizational change I must first learn the myths and the narrative supported by them. An example of this is what I call the "The Story of the Blue Chairs." Although fictional, the dynamics of the

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story are real and I think experienced by leaders who attempt organizational change.

A congregation in its formative days had been meeting in various school buildings until, unexpectedly, the perfect building was available for lease. After raising money for deposits and other necessary equipment and furnishings, they realized that the chairs that had been provided by the school would no longer be available to them. But how could they raise more funds to pay for dozens of expensive chairs? It didn't seem like anyone could give another dollar. Then between the extended giving of five families the bulk of the seating was procured. The color of choice? Blue.

That first service was celebrated with joy and excitement ran high. Much was made of the new facility and especially the beautiful new blue chairs that God had provided. No one questioned that God had provided them although everyone knew it was the Smiths, Jones, Higgins, Clarks, and Roberts who gave the money. It was just accepted that in their time of need God came through. The fact that real people had given real money was secondary to what was thought of as the miracle of the provision.

In time the leadership of the church changed and a new pastor came who wasn't familiar with the story of their founding or of the provision of the blue chairs. Popular colors had changed and to keep the sanctuary up to date he suggested buying new seating and giving the blue chairs away. The firestorm that resulted clued him into the fact that 1) the chairs were staying and 2) he had missed something.

What he missed was the power of a narrative supported by myth. To paraphrase Denzin (2000) again, our new leader had touched upon their

shared life within the greater structure of stories that they had created about themselves. Namely, the chairs had come to represent something more than seating, they were the reminder of good favor. Removing them then became equivalent to touching the sacred. In our story, it wasn't about the leader but the people, their shared experience and why the meaning of that experience had risen to a narrative. If you have ever encountered resistant-to-change rules or practices in your organization, perhaps you too have seen the results of a narrative supported by myth.

Memories and Narrative Construction

Narratives are powerful because they are stories. They are the stories we tell about ourselves that fix our place in time and link our memories with events. They bring coherency to our experiences (Bojea, & Rhodesb, 2005) and help us create meaning (Polkinghorne, 1988). When our stories are woven into a comprehensive narrative, they become the way we know ourselves and our larger society (Denzin, 2000) as well as the main source of knowledge in our organizing (Brown & Humphreys, 2002). The narrative of everyday life is a timing of activity in an attempt at making sense of our experiences. It provides rhythm to the social order (Patriotta, 2003) and through it we relate what is past to what is present, organizing the experience of time into a personal history (Richardson, 1990). Richardson stated:

People organize their personal biographies and understand them through the stories they create to explain and justify their life experiences. When people are asked why they do what they do, they provide narrative explanations. It is the way individuals

understand their own lives and best understand the lives of others. (p. 126)

Our "Blue Chair" leader encountered a narrative explanation. By retelling the story, the organization's members could extend their presence over the past and into the future (Barclay, 1994) making it perpetually rewritten (Bruner, 1994). What they retained was the shape of an event composed in constructed and reconstructed memories (Barclay, 1994).

In forming these narratives, our memories refer to events that are known and verifiable, the same memories that provide us a sense of personal coherence and integrity. In effect, they help form the basis of our personal identity (Fivush & Neisser, 1994) and make change of our identity perceived differently than change to our identity; where the one is self-orchestrated, the other is imposed by the changing narratives of our work-life (Lundberg, 1999). In the Blue Chair story, the attempt at updating furnishings was, in itself, innocuous but touched a work-life narrative of the members. What began as every good intention was perceived as a change to the identity they had constructed about themselves. The result was that, by not understanding the role and the power of narrative to construct identity, our leader lost valuable ground and the change initiative failed.

Organizational Identity

I had been asked to pastor a congregation that, if I accepted, would make me the third person to lead them in the two years since their formation (in congregational, as I suspect in corporate life, revolving leadership is not a good indication of longevity). After asking and listening I discovered that the group formed in response to what was perceived as

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abuses of power by the leadership in a previous congregation. Their story held them to be skeptical of leadership and was rooted in the loss, for many, of over twenty years of congregational life and investment, including a facility built with their own hands. As a result the approach to me was that certain attitudes toward leadership and its exercise had become non-negotiable. I took the job.

The congregation is now approaching its eighth year in existence. In response to their reason for forming, its early days were marked by strength of conviction that taking care of themselves was a priority, a fact made clear by a roundtable of the organization's leadership core. These men and women were asked to form groups and define what the statement, "We will care for what's in our hand and reach as far as we can," meant to them. This slogan was used to represent the idea that a church is to take care of its own people while devoting resources to gaining new adherents to the Faith.

The group aggregately defined the first part of the statement, "We will care for what's in our hand," as "taking care of each other." When asked to score how well the congregation practiced their definition on a scale of 1-5, they ranked the effort at a 5. To the second part of the statement, "and reach as far as we can," the groups' aggregate definition was "reaching people with the Gospel" and gave the congregational effort a score of 2 out of 5. Alongside their founding sentiment of mistrust in leadership, it seemed the congregation had a high felt-need to take care of each other. My working conclusion was that these narratives were dominant and tended to define the identity of the organization.

The Stuff It's Made Of

As I understand organizational identity, it is an amalgam of member's individual

narratives with the narratives and myths of the organization. It represents what an organization does, enables its members to locate themselves and their place in the world, and reflects the underlying values, assumptions, philosophies, and expectations of organizational life (Hopkins, Hopkins, & Mallette, 2005). Facts the roundtable seemed to bear out are that through their shared narratives, members contribute to the development of the organization's identity and may even see in it their self-image as well. Indeed, the organizational identity of those in the roundtable was likely formed through the narratives they shared. The result is that the organization becomes a unique expression the individuals identify with, even to the extent that self-esteem can be intimately connected to the organization's identity (Brown & Humphreys, 2002).

Taking the church as an extension of the concept of "work organization" made it possible to see that what was held corporately could also be held personally. In other words, these were organizational narratives because they were personal. To help this congregation move beyond their narratives of lack of trust and self-care meant knowing personal as well as corporate stories. Some of these became clear through a series of interviews and conversations where a number of common themes were discovered.

During these visits I heard stories that were as reflective about them as they were about the church. These stories posited the congregation as "loving" and without "exclusive groups;" a "friendly" place where there is a "feeling of family." Another held that the church was not "activist" or one where the "ugly head of politics" reared. Instead, it was a "comfortable and safe" place for people "who enjoy being together" and "have

like interests." In a nod to the linkage of personal and corporate identity, one view was that "when the church hurts, I hurt and when the church rejoices, I rejoice." The stories about their founding were couched as a "conflict in inter-church politics" and "not because of Faith" and creating a place where people have "a similar outlook about how a church should be that fills their need." Statements that further refined this were the congregation being seen as people with "a common goal or ideal of how our church should be" and that a place where "we felt safe, where people would listen to what we had to say and care about those things and ideals." The common practice privileged by their narratives were "the love and care we have for each other" expressed as a "sense of love and care by members" and received as "the feelings of loving others and being loved in return." When asked if the majority of the congregation shared their views the answer was an unequivocal "yes."

The reason for the roundtable response was becoming clearer as was that of their position that certain of their attitudes were not up for discussion. Memory had shaped a response that, related as a story, had defined the identity of the organization and revealed much more.

Collective Identity

Just as individuals know themselves and gain identity through stories, so too do organizations. Acting as the sub-texts of organizational culture, that is, the underlying story that the members have helped construct, organizational narratives place members in a network (Brown & McMillan, 1991) and produce an identity to which they can relate collectively. When in the new congregation, members individual actions were held up as significant by the group, a sense of identity developed that was personal to the recipient yet shared

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among all. It is the me/us emotion of attachment and referred to as collective identity (Armenakis, Field, & Harris, 1999). The organizations in which it occurs are noted for their member's emotional connection with a broader community (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Here, members realize their shared worldviews, that is, the meanings they take for granted (Patriotta, 2003) and become invested in the organization they have created (Mumby, 1987).

If at some level self-identity can be connected to an organization (Humphreys & Brown, 2002), altering the story within it can alter how we perceive ourselves (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). The response can be defensiveness, especially if what is proposed is thought to diverge from accepted practices (Churchman, 2006). Recalling the story of the blue chairs, our leader's attempt at changing the chairs was, in effect, to alter a lived story and his efforts perceived as a change to identity. The question I faced was how to avoid a similar pitfall.

Bluntly said, organizational change is people change. It is not without problem or disappointment; neither is it undertaken with the leader hoping to remain in the good favor of all. It is a messy business that can only be attempted if you are certain that where you're going is where those in the organization have asked you to take them. Anything else is fraud or egomania. It is likewise certain that not everyone in the organization will want to go with you although you're direction is ostensibly the same as theirs. This is so because direction is always qualified, that is, who determines how we get there? Those in power who value their position and/or perceived investment in the organization have already resolved the change issue. What remains for them is the power issue. Depending on the depth of crisis in the organization,

when a new leader arrives everyone may already know "we need change around here." What isn't known until the journey begins is the form that change will take: Who initiates it and who orchestrates it? To find out, sometimes you have to move a chair.

At issue in leading organizational change narratively is the leader's appreciation for the lived experiences of members and the practices they have privileged. It is not a slavish confinement to honor everyone's story but those that result in the practices the organization is known for. It's important to hold this distinction because people will be upset at you and will leave your leadership, sometimes after they've first tried to wreck it. Another important distinction worth holding is that the goal of narrative leadership isn't to preserve the organization but to preserve the people. The organization will change and in some cases not resemble anything it has been. It seems a little oxymoronic to say the goal is to preserve people yet be prepared for them to leave, doesn't it?

As has been said, my opinion is that some stakeholders are interested in who initiates and who orchestrates or put another way, the power issue. Their departure will likely be a power issue but don't dismiss them as insignificant or petty, they are stakeholders for good reason. For the most part they will be substantial people, talented and industrious; people you want on your team. But for those for whom power is a motive, their support can fade once it becomes clear your way to the destination is down a different path. Again, where you're going isn't the problem but how you propose to get there. You may see that changing the chairs is necessary to appeal to a diverse population. Power oriented stakeholders want the same thing only they want the population to conform

to their offering in a take it or leave it fashion. Something like, "This is the way we do it here and if you want to be with us then you should like doing it that way too." Not in every case will the resistance of a power-oriented stakeholder be tied to the story of the organization, his or her identity with it, or their identity with the group. Unlike the rank and file they will more often than not see themselves as leaders for whom matters of identity are some distance removed.

Of the issues involved in leading narrative change effectively: what constitutes power in the organization, who has it, and who uses it, is vital to the leader and a key reason for listening to stories and discerning narratives. This is not to say that those who have oriented themselves to power are opposed to you, clearly they aren't. It is rather a call to understand where power lies and not confuse the pursuit of one with being aware of the other. Your power will come as trust is built between you and members. So, yes, people will leave and some that do will be important to the organization in its current form. What those who lead narratively will recognize is that the organization in its current form is not sufficient, otherwise there would not be the need for change.

People Change

Like all literature, our stories include the development of a plot, the storyline we communicate, hoping to express how we see ourselves. We form our plot aware that our self is a continual ordering of personal events into a historical unity that includes what we have been with anticipation of what we will be (Polkinghorne, 1988). As is the ebb and flow of life elsewhere, we look for finality in our plot where change to it is gradual and the interpretation of our daily life somewhat stable (Barclay, 1994). It is normal in our context of time

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and story for what begins to end. After all, the stories we hear and tell as well as the books we read and the theatre we see all have beginnings and endings. So too is the desire for stability within our identity narrative a desire for closure, a certain hoping for order and completion in our lives (Whitebrook, 2001). In the narration, then, of our lived stories we depict events and in their plotting we demonstrate the interconnectedness of those events (Cobly, 2001). In this way we enhance the knowledge of our selves even though we live in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end (Polkinghorne, 1988).

This makes the breadth of our narratives and plot equal to the depth of our memories and that held the closest, our identity, the least negotiable. If this is true, then, one cannot change the story of another. Instead, change in another's narrative must come at the hand of its author. People change then is not something that leader's do but something they provide the means for by telling another story, giving, as it were, people opportunity to see themselves differently. As such narrative leadership seeks to change human organizations by leading their members to write a new story of their organization. This entails an appreciation of the essential nature of narrative within human sociality, its power over social actors, and a commitment to determine the individual and corporate narratives within the scope of its influence. Further, narrative leadership takes as primary the human as social actor and refuses to delegate that place to any other entity. This focuses the leader's effort in a people centric fashion and places human concerns, if not above, at least on par with those of the organization.

If for people to change all that is required is the introduction of alternate story, why

did the leader in the blue chair example have such difficulty? Narrative leaders recognize that communicating a story isn't the same as it being internalized among members. While the one is words the other is trust. Changing narratives is not an overnight proposition but neither does it have to be a lifetime achievement. It does however, depend on trust being built between you and those who have asked you to lead them. Jim Dethmere (Dethmere, 1992) defined human motivation within organizations as being toward the corporation, the community, or the cause. Each is vital to the organization's work but only one sustains the volunteer: the cause or, stated another way, the purpose for which the organization exists. In the volunteer staffed organization, friendships form, work is undertaken, and money is given all in the context of purpose. Our re-narration efforts are in part acceptable because, aware of purposes' primacy, we share the understanding of its importance in member's lives. In so doing, we confirm our own sense of the mission and that our leadership is trustworthy.

Re-narrating the Organization

We need to construct the world we act into or, put another way, we like having a hand in building the stage that our story is played upon (Hopkinson, 2003). Hence the power of narratives to become the conversations that maintain and objectify reality for those in them (Humphries and Brown, 2002) and to express a reality accepted as the natural order of things. Organizationally, this world is one in which we have created an ideology to make right the dominant group and its impositions (Mumby, 1987). Through its ability to punctuate and sequence events, a certain reading of the world becomes privileged and a means to produce member's consent (Brown et al., 2005).

To this point the discussion is sounding like our organizations have unstated agenda's demanding our conformance to an unwritten set of standards. The organization doesn't but the people in them do. The narratives of our organizations become excessive when the control they exercise prevent the organization from relating to the world in ways that are constructive to reaching its goals. Remember the "resistant-to-change rules or practices" of earlier? Their resistance will continue to grow until confronted. It is not a question if the organization's narratives can control members, neither is narrative's ability to create selves in doubt (Brown et al., 2005). What does remain unanswered is if the realities we've created present us the best chance of reaching our destination.

To facilitate the organization's re-narration, the connections the existing narrative provides to peoples self-identity have to be recognized (Hermanowicz & Morgan, 1999). Todd (2005) talked about this and said:

Where identity has been entwined with power... changes are experienced not simply as a change of regime, but – for the dominant group – as an overturning of the moral order, an insult to their own integrity and identity, a placing of the undeserving above the deserving. It is a particularly sharp form of dissonance, where the world is not ordered as they had come to expect, and where these expectations were constitutive of their sense of themselves. (p. 440)

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Both leader and member who attempt change in an organization will experience resistance. This isn't a sign that the effort should be abandoned but an indication that the system has been disturbed. It is this disturbance and the chaos that follows that provides the narrative leader his or her best opportunity for change (Wheatley, 1999): to produce new meanings, new cultures, and to formulate new ideology (Atkinson, 2006).

The job of a leader is to look ahead, to see what others don't. As leader you may see clearly that your organization must change but sometimes as clear as it is to you, it's that unclear to others. People in organizations can be slow to see the need for change in their narrative as well as resistant to changing it (Quinn, 2004). In addition to making for some interesting conversations with yourself, this fact will cause your efforts to be perceived among those of the dominant narrative as a loss of their identity or a sense of bewilderment and frustration. The result will be a rise in feeling that their view is the correct view and that compromise is being demanded of them. These feelings aside, the fact is that people can and do change. Likely in one of three ways: First, to receive rewards or avoid punishment: here the rightness or wrongness of the change itself is not in view. Second, to remain in relationship with another person or group: in this the content of the change may be irrelevant. Third, and the goal of the narrative leader: because it is congruent with the individual's values (Armenakis et al., 1999). As members evaluate our change efforts to determine whether their values are supported or threatened (Bruhn, 2004) we're given the opportunity to touch those values and provide the concepts and language needed to discuss the meaning of the change (Quinn, 2004).

Stepping Around the Pit

Narrative change is an unending dance: a step here, a pirouette there, a two-step there, all to be present for those whose identity is undergoing catharsis. This isn't the place for disingenuity – only the sincere need apply - and the patient. My work is in volunteer organizations that, unlike those in the paid workforce, are limited in the demands we can make on people. We've all seen head lopping and wholesale dismissal of employees as one way of changing the narrative. Attempting this in the volunteer organization may get you a new narrative but you'd be the only one talking about it (more on this later). The challenge is ever how to introduce change while keeping as many of the people as possible. To this end were my efforts directed.

After signing on as the third leader in two years I made it my business to learn as much about them as possible. I listened to their stories, to conversations to pick up nuance, and I listened to their silences. I observed what they did and didn't, who did it and didn't, and whose opinion was sought and whose wasn't. I learned who were the stakeholders and the early initiators without becoming indebted to either but treating all the same. I made a point of not making changes. In fact, we wouldn't even talk about change but referred to those times when things would shift as adjustments. In committee meetings and private conversations my position toward change was consistently that we must go slow and be careful to honor the traditions of the group. I made it my concern to assure them that their values of not trusting leadership and wanting to take care of themselves were okay by me.

I saw to it that the practices in place when I got there continued although I was often asked to introduce change. What I did change were the philosophical underpinnings that would make transition

easier. Things like asking the Board of Directors to consider their work purely administrative and not pastoral, and asking that the committee structure so common to congregations be replaced with teams and team leaders. The change in the Board officially delineated pastoral and administrative work giving me one area where I had a clear leadership role and responsibility. The change in structure gave me a group of leaders with which to inculcate my vision and values and served to place me strategically within the initiating and maintenance sectors of the organization. What was left was to begin the task of re-narrating the organization.

I've discovered three things that help in narrative change: First, people don't reject change as much as they resist being surprised. Second, in making a change don't remove the practice you want changed merely add the new one. This gives those who need more time to adjust that time and those ready to move forward the path to do so. Third, periods of high change demand high touch. That is, you and your leadership core must not only be accessible but pro-active in giving assurances with your words and presence. Having heard their stories and learned how those stories informed their practices, I was ready to provide the means for change by telling another story, hoping to provide them an opportunity to see themselves differently.

Once they knew their values were safe, slowly, then gradually, then completely by following these three rules and taking time as my ally, they trusted me. Trust between leader and led is sacred and one reason why I say you must know that you're going the same place or your leadership is fraud or the act of an egomaniac. Before I would be considered a candidate to lead them, I made diligent inquiry about their goals,

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the vision, where they saw themselves today and in the future, about why they existed. There was no question in my mind that our destinations were the same but I did know they couldn't get there with the values they held. I wish my story were that I kept all the people, but I didn't. Some left because change was too slow. Others because their control was lost, and others still because they would not allow any change to their story. Does a leader have the right to displace people? One view of leadership is that it is imposing your view upon others. I would agree that's stark but it also admits a fundamental point of leading narratively: the leader must give an alternate view. The key is in how that view is presented. Will it be a top-down "you must do this" or a bottom-up "would you consider this?" I opted for the latter. This seems natural for me in that I think of myself as a collegial leader. I don't need consensus to make a decision but when time allows I prefer it, finding that the means to make a decision are insignificant to those needed to deal with its aftermath, especially, if people are surprised or feel their values weren't honored.

Another View

The moment of crisis in this organization wasn't over chairs but growth. It would seem the desire of an organization whose charter begins with "Go" to be just that, but again, everything is viewed through the story that has been created. If "going" isn't in the storyline then it won't occur: the saw that we do what is most important is true. To present the ideas about growth I first needed growth and we had it. My next step was to enlist our primary leader core, the team leaders, and then move outward meeting and talking with those leaders who formed the groups on the individual teams. When this was accomplished we didn't have a buy-in, I wasn't looking for one,

but permission to present another view of their organization. Their acceptance of my ideas, of my story about growth and what it said about them was the permission I needed. The next step would be before the entire congregation.

Preparations for the day were intense: presentation materials, scripts, multiple mailings informing people that this day was no ordinary day, and follow-up plans with the team and group leaders all had to be readied. After the presentation people were elated and smiles were everywhere; a genuine sense of good will pervaded the place. Had they changed their story? Were the values of self-care and mistrust of leadership no longer in place? In reality, nothing had changed except that now people really felt good about themselves. If anything, their values were strengthened and this achievement the proof of their correctness. My efforts up to and including the day and the follow-up that would come were just the beginning of putting a new story in place.

Over the next two years I consistently told a new story. A story where their attributes and strengths caused the growth and the rightness of growing larger was emphasized. My actions honored their values while my speech highlighted the qualities they had as a people and an organization. Special notepaper was printed so that I could send short messages to those whose efforts furthered the attributes and strengths I talked about (people started telling each other about the "love notes" they had got from Will that week). Praise was my fare and encouragement the course until at first one, and then another started saying the same things that I was. Were there detractors? Yes and here their voice was raised the loudest.

If a new story is to gain prominence

sufficient enough for people to invest in it the stake of their identity, it must be thought of as credible. Credible doesn't mean without criticism but of adequate substance. In other words, that what is being said in the new story is deemed true thereby giving members the ability to effectively counter a detractor's calls. Critics and criticism aren't the stuff of people rejecting a new story, that's reserved for disingenuousness and a lack of careful, caring planning. Detractors are those who disguise their motives as criticism when in reality it has more to do with preventing the story from changing. I've found that usually, a personal investment is at risk. Critics, on the other hand, are a leader's best friends because they speak out with yours and the organization's best interests in mind. Anything else is detraction. Because I believe this, I will not internalize a person's criticism if he or she doesn't have some concern for my welfare. The difference is that in the one the person has accepted you as leader and in the other you're merely thought of as a placeholder.

Protests to a new story come in response to buy-in by others. Again, the effort has more to do with preventing the story from changing than it does with you as a person. In fact, you may find your relations with the most ardent detractor to be convivial and if you would cease your efforts, they would likely be a strong supporter. This organization was no exception: detractors arose and protests came. The challenge became to stay focused while assuring members that this really was worth it. Helping with that assurance is the fact that what I had spoken was true: the attributes and strengths I pointed out, then praised, were in place and real. This has the effect of making the detractors protests less about their issue and more about the group as a whole and makes their

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words, as perceived by the group, less encouraging, less complimentary, and less morale building toward them than yours. The result is the louder the protests the more difficult it is for the group to defer making a choice about whom to believe. If you've been genuine the choice, while not simple, becomes clear.

Choices were made but not in support of those who railed the most. The alienation they felt was not in the group or myself but in their response to the new direction the organization was taking. They had lost position and power and now their prestige dribbled away as well. At this point it is likely that you will encounter one of two responses: the person will give up (remember, these are volunteers. You can't fire them) or their resentment becomes latent. So while their voice is no longer a constant barrage of criticism, their efforts can be. By now the early adopters are on board and momentum continuing to increase as members "get" the new identity. For the first time they are seeing the purpose in an entirely new light and the differences between their story and yours are just shadows filling the background. There is a sense of accomplishment, a, "We did it" as renewed desire for mission is discovered. Unlike the presentation where elation was really about them feeling good rather than buying my story or even seeing it as necessary, the joy here is because people want the new story to work and now it appears it is. But, it may not be over yet.

What followed the cessation of protests were attempts to reinterpret the mission. Since our values (the why of our doing) determine our priorities (the what we do) changing why we do a thing can also change the practices we allow ourselves. The charge was simple: the new story didn't adequately reflect why we're here;

we've abandoned some practices and as a result the purpose is no longer fully addressed; this new story, this new identity, cannot be for us. Unlike the cacophonous tenor of the vocal protestor in not wanting the story to change, this form of protest raises the charge that, "We've made a mistake." The damage can be enormous as people reacting from fear take up the hue and cry. In this instance, protestors formed on the sidewalk and distributed information that they considered missional but believed we in the new story didn't. The issues were multiple but their cause the same: you are perceived as not fulfilling the purpose.

There is a difference in not wanting the story to change and believing the organization's purpose is misplaced. Both can be power issues but the latter can take on an added dimension: zealotry. Zealots, though polite, cannot be reasoned with. Their analog is the person who only sees black and white. These are the people whose numerical table stops at two and ignore the infinite possibility surrounding them. They are a monochromatic spectician avoiding the intoxicating world of color and combination they live in. Are they evil? No. Are they perverse? No. They simply hold one issue at a time and your new story didn't adequately address that issue, at least as they perceived it. Therefore, you must be stopped. When this person arises he or she provides cover for those who don't care about the issue animating the believer but do care that you've changed the story. Like our first protestor theirs is about the story changing, the difference is that they wouldn't speak up and be identified as such. However, in the discontent of the believer they have found the perfect cover for their grievance so they too join the cause.

It is difficult to see duplicity and not be able to deal in a direct fashion with it however, haste is not in your favor. Those who follow you must know that you have nothing to fear from an examination of what you've been saying. By taking time to deal fairly and address concerns without allowing yourself to be dogged, you will reassure members of the validity of what they're coming to believe. Truth never runs. Earlier, in dealing with the protestor, your integrity and truthfulness caused him or her to be ignored. Here, your patience and unflappable approach will likewise isolate this new problem. Working through these matters, as opposed to dismissing them, reveals the extent that you believe the new story. It tests your own conviction that for this organization to reach its destination the story must change and answers the question of your willingness to disagree with significant people, even to the extent of watching them leave. What this at first unseemly trouble accomplishes is that uncommitted members now will buy-in, interrupted momentum resumes but more broadly than before, people take leadership roles, and initiative increases. The beginnings of identity with the new story are underway. Though you will not dismiss issues, even in the volunteer staffed organization you may reach such an impasse that you will have to dismiss people.

Much has been made about the priority of people over the organization, about preserving people, and that, unable to fire volunteers you just have to deal with them. All of that is true but only up to a point. There are decision points where you must know that by refusing to confront an individual's behavior you're allowing them control over all change efforts. These are people who sometimes are in your direct line of authority (which makes their opposition really interesting) but have found a task that it's thought

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no one else does as well or even wants. It's their corner and they've backed into it. Their willingness and supposed skill is thought to make them vital to the organization's ongoing movement and from this position of power they fashion a podium to pontificate about all that you and others are doing wrong. They, however, are safe because no one can fill their shoes. If you and the group are to advance one of two things must happen: the embedded person has to quit their dissension or quit the position. Neither will happen; the role of savior and counselor is too intoxicating besides, who will ever take their place. However, those who bluff shouldn't be surprised when it's called and call it at the appropriate time you must.

Since you're dealing with people who are in process of fashioning a new identity retaining trust is paramount. Yet that trust is not retained when, paralyzed by fear, we allow people beyond what is reasonable dissent and discussion to force their views. As in all other events, knowing when to act is key. In this instance I exercised my management prerogative to relieve the person of their role but not their membership-the only time I acted in this way. The significance that attached to my actions by the as-thought untouchableness of the person and the rarity of what I did communicated as clearly as the action itself. People learned that I was committed to this path. The benefits of time and timing to these endeavors cannot be over estimated. By waiting (four years) I had gained the confidence of the group, they increasingly identified with the new story and wanted to see it work, and they too had experienced the unfairness of being bullied. Instead of being incensed, people were relieved. The position was filled the next week.

The other shoe always drops and

it did here too when those who thought of themselves as having been disenfranchised demanded a meeting with the Board. This was not unanticipated. Some time earlier the believer, the protestors within their issue, and the embedded asked to meet with me. Several hours latter it was clear that, from my perspective, I could not address their concerns and probably from theirs, that I would not. I invited them to take their grievances to the Board. What followed was their mailing to every member of the organization a multiple page letter that enumerated where they disagreed with me and what they hoped to achieve at the Board. The gauntlet was down.

My efforts to this point had been to build trust at all levels of the organization and to introduce a new story about them. My story was that they weren't people who lived in distrust and selfishness but that, unlike the values that raised these images, they were trusting, love giving, and open to others. This story of the organization presented as true and resonated with members. By speaking what was true, respecting their values regardless what I thought of them, and moving slow enough that people could stay with me, I had gained their trust. Now was the time to draw on that capital. I explained my actions to the Board and asked them upon hearing the grievances to not make a decision. In fact, I hoped they would allow the matter to be addressed by me subject to the provision that my actions could be reviewed and even rescinded. They agreed. Some may see this as the neglect of their responsibility: I see it as the proper placement of it feeling that this issue could not be adequately addressed either by the time inefficiencies or the collegial nature of a group discussion. Images of the American old west and a showdown, like those pitting our conflicts as good versus bad or right versus

wrong, do have an appeal. However, there would be no winners here.

I am a leader. My guiding principle is to work with people in the hopes of helping them achieve their objective, the very objective that I determined before I accepted the task was compatible with my own. To undergo then the disruption of members genuinely angry at what they perceived as the loss of their organization and its effects upon members who have long standing relationships with them is very difficult. I didn't win, those who opposed the changes and me didn't win, and the organization didn't win. We all lost something. Was anyone better for it? The argument is that yes, having realized what you can't do frees you to know what you can do. This is an important and crucial decision that every movement of people and individuals must come to. Unfortunately, the way there is that the organization, it's members, and leaders must come to an understanding, to the forge, where our desires are recast in the collective and the singular "me" gives way to the plural "we."

The meeting did occur and the outcome, while never predictable, wasn't surprising either. What began as a movement toward the "we" between Board and leader moved swiftly to embrace the other members until in just days it was clear that the desires of the organization weren't compatible with some of its own members. Upon seeing that there would be no traction in their arguments, those who brought the protest left. Again, there aren't winners in these situations. Even though you've arrived at the knowledge of what you can and can't do and "me" has become "we," the rupture of people heading for the exits creates its own negative momentum (being first chair in the band aboard a sinking ship isn't a career enhancement) and the aftermath can be troubling for members. To this

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point trust was conferred in large part because I didn't make changes but, what happens when under your leadership the largest change in the affairs of the organization occurs? You will own this, let there be no question about it, and own it you must but as a leader not a sole-proprietor.

The "me" becoming "we" must be emphasized. My conversation changed from what "I" thought to what "we" thought, from what "I" could or could not do to what "we" could or could not do. A unity had formed in place of an entity and we had made a decision based in it. The results would be taken in the same fashion but with this exception: if people don't like the way or what they feel in the organization then leaving is a real option. Members in a volunteer staffed organization stay because of the identity and relationships they've formed, yet even as tangible as these are if the pain exceeds the pleasure people will take steps to re-pleasure their lives. It may be to leave the organization or to do something outside of it and that detracts from their roles and responsibilities to the organization. After the euphoria of reaching agreement and unity it is likely that if this process leads to a rupture with people you will, in the near term, experience the low of disquiet and unsettledness among members. Kingdoms have been lost at this point and neither you nor the members can escape the doubt that has been the undoing of other organizations.

Doubt comes in many forms but these three seem the most prevalent: Support, as in "do I continue to support this organization with my time and effort?" Trust, as in "Can this leader and those who work with him or her be trusted to really know what their doing?" And provision, as in "Can this organization provide the services and resources

for which it was founded?" These are serious questions from people who have, at some level, participated in your new story but are now faced with the extent of their involvement with the organization, that is, how much will they become invested? It is a defining issue made all the more stark by the change in awareness that informed their previous relations-dozens of people no longer showing up is pretty hard to miss. The landscape is now quite clear and what were undefined issues stand in sharp relief. Unfortunately, this is largely in the negative or what it is that you won't do, now you must lead them to that you have believed all along was theirs and yours destination: the permissible, the possible, the achievable of why this organization exists. Doing so will provide people the means of settling doubts and resolving their investment.

Observations

As mentioned earlier, during the change process I talked with the members asking them, among other things, how they felt about change, if they felt the organization's story had changed, and how they personally adapted to change in the story. I was surprised by the effect of what I've come to call transcendent values on narrative change. I've parsed an individual's values as being held as transcendent or transactional (the language is mine). Values held transcendently are absolutely right or correct, non-negotiable, and resistant to change. Values held transactionally are those needed to transact a person's living in a given situation or course of life. An example of this is one member's comment that if the practices of the church changed she would "keep an open mind, evaluate it, and see if it's something that the other members want to do." When asked if other members were to change their position regarding the Bible being inerrant would she go

along with that? Her response was a firm, "No." "That's one thing I won't change." The willingness to change and even adapt to a practice not completely of her liking so long as it was "something that the other members want to do" would not extend to every practice. Clearly, there was more than a single value or a single narrative at work.

By generating a fictitious organization holding the same values as themselves, members have an expectation of the real based on it and on what the real organization purports to be. This is very often the real organization's statements with which they initially identified and to which they have formed an allegiance. Basically, members want to identify with the people and the organization that thinks and looks like them. Perhaps the members of our organization said it best when describing these expectations as the practices that any "Bible based congregation that is serious about its faith, friendly to each other, and those who visit" and that considers itself "a place where people genuinely love others" should, by definition of the word "church," be engaged. My opinion is that due to the identity people derive from their transcendent values, leaders seeking to re-narrate that story, except in instances when the values are no longer adequate for their identity, may not be successful.

I took from this two points: First, that it underscores why you and those who ask you to lead their enterprise must share, at a primary level, a common identity expressed as going the same direction. Second, is the suggestion that changes in identity are more likely to be in the way members relate to the organization than in the way they view themselves. I think it possible that all members may not have transcendentally held the narratives I deemed dominant: mistrust

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of leadership and the priority of self-care. Instead it is likely some held them as working or transactional narratives and others, particularly those oriented to power, held them transcendentally. This would explain the willingness by so many to recast themselves in the new story and the departure of those who could not. It also begs the question of what changes in narrative change: the story of people about themselves, the story of people about their organization, the transcendent values, the transactional values or some of all these? Earlier I noted that I understand organizational identity as an amalgam of member's individual narratives with the narratives and myths of the organization. If anything, this view is reinforced by my experiences. Just as change is not a neatly bound package of ideas with a checklist, neither then can our work in the nuts and bolts of a person's identity be so simple. Rather it is both complex and is a complex of competing then conflicting ideas and emotions from which we form positions held as permanent and temporary simultaneously. The hope is that we, the leader and the led, arrive at an understanding of our joint purpose and content to accept that sublimate our differences to it.

What I think changed in this instance of re-narration were the lower, transactional-based practices not considered essential to the organization's purpose and the individual's identity with the organization as opposed to their personal identity. For instance, through our use of a screen and projector we changed how the hymns were presented. Whether we sing hymns from a movie screen or the Hymnal is a transactional value but whether we sing at all is transcendent and rooted in the member's sense of and value for the meaning of worship. The first is negotiable, as we proved by changing how the song and its music are

presented; the second is not. This tends to clarify what is meant by organizational change through a change of underlying narratives. It does so, I think, by demonstrating that some narratives cannot be changed without a concomitant change in the identity of the participants. And, the greater the practice/identity is held to be transcendent the less likely the narrative that represents it will change. The practices that can be changed are those that have a lower held-value to the participants. Though these lower practices can be sources of identity, without the significance of transcendent value that identity seems limited to identifying with the organization. An example of this is in one member's statement that no change had occurred within the organization while another listed no fewer than nine changes. Yet neither felt their personal identity threatened. I attribute this to the fact that neither perceived the new practices as changes to their personally held, but transcendent values. The church, for them, was still fundamentally what a church is supposed to be; changing nonessential practices only changed their identity as it relates to their church but not their identity with the church.

The possibility also exists that those who attempt to prevent change do so because the new story is against their transcendent values. We sought to test this hypothesis by means of an unofficial follow-up of the person to determine where their protest would take them. In every instance the individual migrated to an organization that valued the issue over which they had protested. Although I accept the hypothesis, in this case it seems unlikely the protest was connected with values or identity.

Living the Story

I see narrative change in this organization in the following ways: change of the

dominant narratives of "mistrust in leadership" and "we must take care of each other," and change of the working narratives. Since we shared similar beliefs about what a church should be, the change was in the working narratives. What this means in real terms is that the dominant narratives were not held transcendentally but only as transactional, that is, members felt their response was the only one possible under the circumstances. Their working narratives had to do with the stories of their history and affected practices not related to what we agreed a church should be. However, introducing new practices without considering the source of the old would have, by diminishing their sense of trust, been ultimately hurtful to the task.

Re-narrating even working practices involves an appeal to transcendent values and asks if the practices that represent those values are the best way of relating to the world. Changing them requires another story, another way of looking at the same truth but through eyes freshened with possibility and that takes into account the myriad ways custom and technology creates new opportunities. Members now have a firm grasp of what their organization should and does represent and appear pleased with that identity. I suspect the contentment is associated with the belief that the organization now more closely represents what they have held all along as of ultimate importance.

I have been intrigued to discover what I call the difference between leading and leadership. In the first are the practices that build up a people and in the second the environment of mutual trust and respect that makes it possible. I point this out because I suspect that in human sociality the majority of people aren't as interested in having a leader

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as in having leadership. Of course one cannot occur without the other but I think it serves to locate the primary task of leaders as “environmentalists” while reminding us that our role cannot be fulfilled in a vacuum: we need people. It’s oxymoronic yet so fitting in the grander scheme of life that what we need to accomplish our mission is also that which defeats it. Leaders and perhaps particularly narrative leaders then dance the perpetual steps of the unconvinced but always moving toward a destination, taking people with us.

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