

What Does It Mean to Restory an Organization?

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The term “restory” refers to a growing field of research and practice into the ways narrative influences our organizational lives. Narrative is a broad field and touches the disciplines of sociology, literature, and psychology. In my use of the term I’m referring to its social and psychological perspectives. What this means for the person interested in restorying or changing the direction of their organization is that s/he must gain an appreciation for the complexity that lies below the surface of the most simple story.

Stories tell a version of history that is more meaning than fact. That is, what is told isn’t to repeat chronology but to communicate the meaning within it. Likewise stories bind those events to our memory and are the tool of choice to help us recall “why” over “what.” Stories also reveal what we value. As individuals and families have stories that link their past to present and define for them what is real, so too do organizations. You may even know some of the stories of your group. These are no less real or important than those of our own for in fact they do become our own.

A study conducted in the UK took as its basis that organizations are constituted through stories and to test their hypothesis they studied a tour operator, Laskarina Holidays. Noting that multiple narratives were in circulation in this company, one stood out as baseline identity for both company and employees. It was a narrative of the founders as moral people and was exemplified in

multiple instances of “exceptional efforts... to rectify problems” (p. 318). The presence of this underlying yet defining narrative expressed itself in employee’s willingness to accept responsibility to and for the public with whom they dealt as well as a commitment to ethical behavior. Brown, A., Humphries, M., & Gurney, P. (2005). Narrative, identity and change: A case study of Laskarina Holidays. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 18, (4), 313-326.

In a similar vein, a company in New Zealand was brought up short when deregulation forced a radical departure from the long established policy of lifetime employment.

To change the story of their organization, Telco relied upon the crisis in which they were embroiled and the insertion of new story that addressed it. In this case they used the story of General George Patton as played by George C. Scott in the movie “Patton.” In one scene the column comes to a stop while troops attempt to negotiate with a farmer whose cart and mules are blocking the only route of passage, a bridge. While stopped, German warplanes begin strafing the stalled column. Patton charges to the front, demands to know the cause of the delay and then sees the reason. He promptly pulls his revolver, shoots the mules, and orders they and the farmers cart be thrown over the side. He then orders the column to move on. This new story of lore communicated that the new Telco would do anything to keep moving. In time cries of, “I shot the donkey”

could be heard in the halls.

Although organizational change can be occasioned by many factors it may not be felt intently enough to force the organization or its members to recast how they view themselves. While identity is constituted at one level of our sociality by the organization that comprises the expression of our worklife, i.e., our church or workplace, at another it is deeper and broader and connected to the society in which our organizations function and exist to serve.

Therefore when the approval of that which our organization provides is withheld by society, be it widgets or forms of spirituality, we may be moved to fashion for ourselves another identity to remain in favor of our society. Change of this sort could be beyond a change in practices but a restatement of who we are, that is, a restating of the structuring tales of lore from which our stories and culture derive. It is this that restorying is concerned. Dunford, R. and Jones, D. (2000). Narrative in strategic change. *Human Relations*, 53(9): p. 1207-1226.