The Extension Storyteller: Using Stories to Enhance Meaning and Catalyze Change

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Abstract

Many cultures share and pass on norms through storytelling. Extension as a culture also creates and shares stories to pass on history, provide information about Extension work and experiences, and develop the organization. However, Extension as a culture less frequently uses storytelling to enhance meaning and catalyze related change. This article provides a brief review of relevant literature on types of stories, purposes of storytelling, and effective storytelling techniques and describes qualities of successful stories. This information provides a basis for best practices that Extension professionals can apply when using storytelling to enhance meaning and catalyze change.

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Many cultures share and pass on norms through storytelling (DePree, 1997; Hyvarinen, 2009; Mathison, 2005). Extension as a culture also creates and shares stories to pass on history, provide information about Extension work and experiences, and develop the organization (Peters & Franz, 2012). However, Extension as a culture less frequently uses stories or narratives to enhance meaning and catalyze related change. This article provides a brief review of relevant literature on types of stories, purposes of storytelling with respect to facilitating change, and effective storytelling techniques and then describes qualities of successful stories. This information provides the basis for best practices that Extension professionals can apply when using storytelling to enhance meaning and catalyze change.

Types of Stories, Purposes of Storytelling, and Storytelling Techniques

The use of stories or narratives to examine human change has a long history in social science research (Hyvarinen, 2009). (In this article, the terms *story* and *narrative* are used interchangeably because no common definitions exist to differentiate the two.) Stories used to examine or facilitate change can be categorized. Mathison (2005) suggested three types of narratives: stakeholder stories, evaluator stories, and performance stories. Powers (2004), in contrast, suggested 13 theme-based types of stories: bravery and courage, challenge and triumph, love and forgiveness, integrity, wisdom, leadership, humor, origin of the organization, the sacred, beginnings and

endings, journeys to the underworld, the warrior's initiation, and modern and ancient. To understand how stories can enhance meaning and catalyze change, it is important to explore why stories are used to facilitate change and which storytelling techniques most effectively capitalize on the various ways people respond to stories.

The literature articulates a variety of reasons that stories are used with regard to enhancing meaning and catalyzing change. They are used to teach; to preserve traditions, practices, and values; to preserve and remember the past; to give hope (DePree, 1997); to encourage critical reflection (Deshler, 1990); to influence actions; to socially construct meaning; to describe conditions before and after a change; and to determine what has happened and what it means for an individual's place in a group and his or her personal identity (Mathison, 2005). Other researchers have found that stories help people understand old and new situations; become familiar with social, cultural, and political realities; understand a phenomenon in context (Hyvarinen, 2009); understand how power works (Anderson & Shafer, 2005); and acquire concrete advice and guidelines on how things work, and on what to expect in an organization (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). Research also has shown that information is more accurately and quickly remembered when stories are used to give examples (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). Finally, Powers (2004) found that storytelling (a) inspires, motivates, and re-enchants people; (b) makes learning easy and memorable; (c) ensures that wisdom and experience are passed down from generation to generation; (d) strengthens the culture's values and traditions; (e) increases enthusiasm, creativity, and productivity; (f) cultivates wisdom for wiser decisions; (g) builds and strengthens relationships and community; (h) builds leadership and positions future leaders at the growing edge of a group or organization; (i) builds a foundation for future change and growth; and (j) is an inherent talent that is easy to develop.

Stories can be especially effective for enhancing meaning and facilitating change when specific storytelling techniques are used. Leaders, who likely understand such techniques, are often good storytellers (Kouses & Posner, 1987). Adjusting stories and telling them over and over can help people understand what is happening and why. Ibarra (2005) emphasized this point, stating, "Good stories develop in the telling and retelling, by our putting them into the public sphere even before they are fully formed" (p. 209). Clearly describing the plot of a story is important for ensuring that the story is a trigger for change. As Ibarra (2005) noted, "Without a story that explains why we must change, the people to whom we are pitching our reinvention remain dubious, and we too feel unsettled and uncertain about our own identity" (p. 209). Another storytelling technique that is important for enhancing meaning and catalyzing change involves helping people, hear, sense, and recognize the feel of a vision by using metaphors and analogies to make abstract ideas more vivid and tangible (Kouzes & Posner, 1987).

There are various examples of specific Extension stories on our origins, or who we are; our practice, or what we do and why; and change within our organization, or who we are becoming (Peters & Franz, 2012). Another example of the use of stories to enhance meaning and change for Extension is associated with the public value movement (Franz, 2011, 2014; Franz, Arnold, & Baughman, 2014; & Kalambokidis, 2004). Extension professionals and volunteers involved in this movement craft specific stories about the impact of Extension work on social, environmental, and economic changes to help the public and decision makers better understand and value Extension work (Franz, 2013).

Qualities of Effective Stories

Every storyteller and listener knows that some stories are more compelling and effective than others. Best practices for successfully using storytelling to facilitate change, from the author's experience, spring from the following qualities of effective stories:

- Stories need to connect with people, emotionally motivating them to see themselves fully in the change process and ultimate destination.

- Stories should be clear so that everyone can relate to them but also should include nuances that allow for deep discussion of what the story means for each individual, his or her identity, and the work he or she does, and for the group as a whole.

- Oral storytelling needs to be accompanied by visuals (e.g., costumes, photos) to help the story "stick" more fully in the listener's mind.

- Good stories are simple so that the message is passed on accurately, spreads quickly, and stays alive over time.

- Stories work best when few facts are presented so that people can more fully remember them.

- Stories need to appeal to a variety of audiences and cultures.

- Stories laced with good humor appeal more fully to listeners.

- Metaphors and analogies enhance the listener's ability to understand, embrace, and act on the story's message.

Summary

Stories can change the way people see themselves, their work, and their futures. Extension professionals need to more fully use effective storytelling in enhancing meaning and change. The research, examples, and information about best practices provided here may help Extension professionals more fully integrate storytelling into their work to enhance personal, programmatic, and group change.

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