The Story In Leadership

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Heavily influenced by the traditional scientific paradigm, modern organisations are often obsessed with approaches and methodologies which strive to be rational, objective and logical. Yet, all organisations are human systems in which their people struggle on a daily basis to find connection and meaning in their worklives – and these central dimensions are scantly serviced by a scientific approach, comprising as they do elements which are best seen as subjective, non-rational, and personal. Effective leadership is concerned with working productively with human dynamics, as distinct from management, which focuses on resource control. As such, it is qualitative, and personal, creating enabling conditions, as opposed to problem-solving - for open, trusting and robust relationships, and the continual and ever-changing creation of meaning. It is here argued that the tools of traditional science are largely ineffective in working with human forces, that we must look outside the relatively recent preoccupation with rationality for the human vehicles we need to do a human job. It is here that the ability to create, fashion and render story and metaphor emerge as a central capability for the exercise of leadership. It is story which throughout history has been a primary vehicle for the creation and dissemination of meaning – in the creation of relationships and trust, in building a sense of shared purpose and value, in modelling behaviour, in giving inspiration, in communicating and guiding, and in providing a thread of meaning through times of change. Organisations which seek to provide a creative, ethical, stimulating and humanly satisfying work environment will increasingly be those in which leadership in these terms is encouraged, where the real human dynamics are productively engaged, rather than repressed – and where their employees constantly challenge and regenerate their story.

The story in leadership

We shape our self
to fit this world
and by the world
are shaped again.
The visible
and the invisible
working together
in common cause,
to produce
the miraculous.
I am thinking of the way
the intangible air

passed at speed
round a shaped wing
easily
holds our weight.
So may we, in this life
trust
to those elements
we have yet to see
or imagine,
and look for the true
shape of our own self,
by forming it well
to the great
intangibles about us.

"Working Together" by David Whyte

We are our stories. As individuals, the narrative representations which we construct and rehearse and relate are both the mythology we enact and the process by which we make sense of ourselves in our worlds. In organisations, and their sub-cultures and groups, there are analogous, though often disparate, narratives in formation and representation, which serve to create and render meaning in our worklives. In this setting, storytelling is very much alive, but generally disowned and discounted, associated with rumours, gossip, or 'spin'. We often fail to see how integrally connected story is to meaning-making, and just how much we employ it to do just that for us. Ask experienced managers to tell a story to a purpose, and all too quickly they play-act teachers talking to children…or worse, tell a story, or analogy, then explain the point, just in case it wasn't clear.

As Morgan (1986) pointed out twenty years ago, the dominant metaphor for our companies and governmental agencies is that of the machine. Even when managers refrain from phrases such as 'running like clockwork' or 'well-oiled machine', the implicit model for conceptualising their organisational systems is mechanical – or mechanistic. The only 'knowing' which can be trusted, or at least justified, is that based on measurement. Business books, with titles such as "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People", "The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership", or "How Full is Your Bucket?", are the surrogate technical manuals required by managers who see their job as identifying and solving problems, and fixing things - linear, sequential, operational and exhortational. They offer the promise of simplification in an uncertain, uncontrollable and complex world. And they are the companions to the 'tools' required to diagnose and re-engineer the organisation – from pareto diagrams to decision analysis to accountability mapping.

It is hard, after all, as a senior manager, to be held accountable for leading a system which you can't actually control, though the mantra of 'shareholder value' does offer the possibility of immediate, superficial change, tied to short-term performance measures, linked in turn to often excessive remuneration benefits – a kind of 'chain letter' passed from one CEO to the next. In a messy world, leading by

analysis and decree offers the promise of control, or at least of some sense of order and momentary stability.

This inflation with rationality and analysis is, of course, rooted in traditional science thinking, the paradigm of technical, academic, and business fields; in organisational life, it has habitually become the paradigm for business management and leadership, and linked to a widely-endorsed managerial fantasy of control. It 'makes sense' to use the traditional science paradigm to underpin the business of technical, financial, strategic, administrative, and operational work. Customers, after all, expect consistent high quality and reliability in products and services, and rationality, logic and measurement are essential to that end.

It is no surprise to us, then, that whenever managers seek to better their organisations, they will approach the task within a mindset which has dominated their formal education, their technical and management development, their worklives, and the public discourse of the workplace. As a consequence, their work is defined through analysis, planning, strategizing, process-driven design, frameworks, modelling, systems, measurement, technology, and processes. Performance management and rigid meeting agendas at the team level; Six Sigma and Du Pont safety training at the corporate. A change of senior manager has become equated with an organisational restructure, process redesign, or new frameworks for regulating employee behaviour.

But in the process, modern organisations have lost their connection to the non-rational, essentially human nature of their own being. Thirty years of globalisation and agglomeration, of the corporatisation of language, of the justification of far-reaching decisions in notions such as 'wealth creation' and 'shareholder value', and galloping uncertainty and disorder – a fragmentation possibly greater than at any time for 500 years (Kelly, 2006) – has if anything intensified organisational desperation for order and the reassurance of numbers. And yet, whether we harness its potential or not, story remains probably the most potent means of shaping and representing meaning in our direction, purpose, relationships, and engagement with our lives – including here, particularly, our worklives. As individuals or collectives, our lives reflect the continuous iteration of our being and our narratives. Our identities are always in construction through this interaction between experience and sense-making. And, as we 'make sense' of our experiences, our stories become the myths which our lives express. In our organisations, our shared identity is constantly moderated and maintained in our shared stories.

The central fact to contend with in the leadership of organisations is that they are human, or social, systems (Cohen and Prusak, 2001). They are best understood through a non-rational lens, as complexes of subjective realities, formed and expressed through patterns of personal and collective meaning creation and dissemination. Despite our best efforts to control our behaviour and thought, to make defensible decisions, and to make ourselves (or at least our staff) predictable and orderly, we are in fact emotional, subjective, and distinctly non-rational in how we engage with ourselves and each other. When Wheatley (1992) began to explore the concepts and metaphors of 'new science' for their application to human systems, she initiated a process of legitimizing a more fitting perspective for the understanding and engagement of human forces in organisations.

This approach to leadership is characterised by an acceptance that meaning-making is central to being human, and is a process which is internal, emotionally integrated, personally and socially constructed, and essentially uncontrollable (that is, no-one can legislate for others what they will believe, what they will know, or who they will trust). When we add a systemic frame, and the effects of inter-relationship, the business of 'leadership', as opposed to 'management', may be seen as the capacity to work effectively with non-rational dynamics, at various system levels – intrapersonal through to organisational. Looked at from another perspective, leadership is the expression of Gardner's (2000) interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. And, as Wheatley (1996) highlighted, the foci for leadership energy will be on those aspects which make the greatest difference to system effectiveness – 'relationship' (or connectivity), 'identity' (or the socially-constructed ideations that create coherence and cohesion), and 'information' (or freely-available data and interpretation necessary for action). Arguably, none of these aspects can be relationally transacted without story.

Many related notions emerge from the carriage of leadership in these terms. Problem- solving is replaced by identifying and modifying patterns (no cause and effect relationship is assumed); the modelling (in both senses – behaving and mentally mapping) of desired patterns replaces the modelling of problems and dysfunctionality; we look for the patterns of the patterns (fractals); we accept that unconscious (ie out-of-awareness) process is at least as powerful a force as conscious behaviour; we accept and work with multiple realities, rather than seek to impose one reality; and the focus moves from feedback (or control) loops to amplification (or self-fulfilling) loops, as key dynamics.

The incessant efforts of managers to use the tools and methods of rationality, conscious design and control to work with essentially non-rational, unconsciously patterned and uncontrollable dynamics, are doomed to mediocre results. The high failure rate of acquisitions and mergers to realise the financial and market gains which are predicted at the planning stage, is testimony to the relatively rare attention given to working with human dynamics.

What comprises the exercise of leadership? If it's not about rationality, analysis, measurement or control, then what does it entail? For those of us involved in leadership development, what capacities and dynamics might we aim to help build in client organisations, or with individuals?

When leadership is seen as embedded in a context of non-rational dynamics, and as an essentially human activity, we can see that effective – and ethical – leaders demonstrate several distinct capacities. They welcome the act of engagement with others and are skillful and open in doing so. They turn their face towards others, and use the opportunity to explore rather than debate, learn rather than judge, elicit rather than pronounce. In so doing, they create an imperative for openness. They show a capability for self-understanding, combined with a willingness for the discomfort of personal learning and exploration; they are prepared to make mistakes, and are personally secure – when these aspects are manifest, they are experienced by others as congruent (which in turn increases trust).

Effective leaders demonstrate that they understand what it means to be a participant in the human system to which they belong; they know that they cannot

not participate – that the leadership question is about the nature of that participation, not the fact of it; and in so doing, they draw others into the act of belonging, rather than fragmentation. They also show that they understand that the fact that no person can legislate, or control, another's beliefs, relationships, or knowledge, far from making them impotent, helps them to understand the power of modelling the qualities and actions they espouse – otherwise, why would others follow them down any particular path? Rather than dictate behaviour, leaders 'do it'; then, rather than command, they invite others to suspend their disbelief and test whether they, too, might take the risk of new directions, new behaviours, and new identities. They know that the higher the level of interpersonal safety and trust, the more likely it is that others will accept the invitation.

Rather than seeking to 'change the culture' through electronic media, powerpoint slideshows, corporate roadshows, and 'events' at five-star hotels – all of which reinforce disconnection, formality, fabricated order, and hierarchy – effective leaders engage with others by using human means to do a human job. They are skillful in using, and co-constructing, symbols, symbolic actions, rituals, and metaphor and story.

'Leadership' may be seen as a term to describe a certain quality of relationship, in which, at that point in time, a particular person, or people, make both an offer and an invitation, with which others choose to engage. As such, the giving and receiving of leadership involves an exchange which is value-laden and rich in personal meaning. And while we might expect rational judgement to be better exercised as managers progress through the hierarchy, it is clear that leadership may be found – and increasingly needs to be found – at all levels in an organisation.

Wherever leadership is brought to bear, story is an integral element in its effectiveness. This includes the 'why' of work – in the form of shared purpose and aspiration, which can only ever be captured and shared through metaphor. It also includes the 'where' – an organisation's vision, direction, desired future or outcomes, best expressed in a way which connects to emotion and creates clear mental images. There is the 'how' – in the form of shared values and of the ethics of engagement, both internally and externally; it is through examples and illustrations that we build a shared knowledge of what these abstractions might mean to each other, which are then brought to life by constantly challenging each others', and our own, actions, against those espoused values. And there is the 'what' – the subjectively-laden content of our discourse, which, as Gargiullo (2005) has argued, sees knowledge and information constructed and shared primarily through story.

Leadership also works to create a shared sense of the 'who' – as a focus on identity, it can be to draw out the story and re-present it in such a way as to amplify the organisation's sense of self. But it is also socially conceived – we are defined by who we relate to, and the quality of those relationships. Thus, a 'shared story' is not an artefact of data collection but of relatedness unfolding, adjusting, over time. The important thing about narrative is the process of its construction and maintenance between the story-holders. The shared story we tell and enact is embedded in our relationships, and is a living thing. Every time we have that story (or metaphor) printed or published, we risk the loss of its living character, by ossifying it in print. Stories with life must be told, re-told, personalised, and evolutionary. And,

behind the shared stories, there is the dynamic, modelled by leaders, of the willing-ness to share our individual stories. It can be argued that relationships and trust are the product of perhaps just two things: the assurance of consistent and compassion-ate behaviour over time; and the disclosure of and listening to each others' stories – both from the narrative itself and the way in which it is told, which take us past stereotypes to a deeper knowing of the other.

The relational skills of leadership evidence a continual infusion of metaphor and story, not just in the opening of the self to others, but in transactions which are clearer, richer and more compelling than by using technical or corporate language. Metaphor, in the form of story, anecdote, illustration and instance, evidences rap-port, and is the vehicle for communicating ideas and information. It enables us as teachers, learners and coaches. And it brings the future to life in the present.

The quality of leadership is also about the depth and insightfulness of our self-understanding. Our tales about ourselves – whether shared with others or held within, others' tales of themselves, and others' tales of us, all stimulate us to reflec-tion and the possibility of re-writing our personal mythologies with greater aware-ness.

A continuous challenge for leadership lies in effecting successful change and transition, and this is an area in which ritual, symbolic behaviour, and story are vital. The preoccupation of managers with rational approaches leads them too of-ten to the re-design of structure, processes, systems, and required behaviour, as if the human aspects can be folded in later – or perhaps during the 'implementation' phase. But also engaging with the transitional dynamics – the human dimension – is critical to success, or else the corporate culture, the non-rational dynamics, the power structure, the emotions, and the changing identity and relationship issues are all essentially ignored. If only the corporate culture could be simply dictated by sen-ior managers! But, as in all significant relationships, the telling and re-telling of our personal accounts and responses are an essential part of real engagement as complete human beings; and the joint pursuit of the emerging shared story for the 'new order' can only be achieved through the face-to-face co-creation of the new narrative. This contrasts strongly with the corporate pronouncements, slogans, jargon, 'spin', and 'corporatespeak' which is dry and lifeless, and usually handed down from the 'top team', or worse, by communications consultants – outsiders.

The conventional patterns of organisational life lie in disconnection, so-called 'objectivity', and detachment, and it is in this manner that much of what passes for leadership is framed. In addition, there is often a pervasive collusion to 'keep things nice'. But Whyte (2002) has argued over many years for engagement with the *whole* experience of organisational life – not just the light and the tangible, but that which is "the dark and invisible" side of that life, since it is the "very chasm from which our personal destiny emerges" (p 5). At no time previously in the his-tory of the modern organisation has this been more important than now, at a time of immense uncertainty and global upheaval.

The common response to uncertainty by managers is to do more of what already fails, that is, to seek more control. To put a name, a human face, a feeling, or a genuine 'warts and all' engagement into organisational life is to reveal to ourselves the frightening edge of chaos and conflict, and to have to confront that place where

our practice is weighed against universal human values (or our espoused ones). This is the place in daily organisational life where we are truly accountable to each other – seen every day in those areas we dare not name and face together, such as excessive and manipulated CEO remuneration levels, or the human realities of constant retrenchments ('rationalisations'), or the falsifications of corporate language and 'spin doctors'. And organisational development practitioners too often play their part in perpetuating rational and disconnected methodologies as the means to working with the uniquely human forces within our organisations, and in so doing, help to ensure that violence, aggression, power, and unjustness – as well as compassion, fairness, happiness, and grace – cannot be openly engaged, known and honoured. It is in relationships sustained by the stories which are true to us that we are led towards what Orton calls our "workable truth".

The post-globalisation context for business, described by Saul (2005) and by Kelly (2006), is truly a world of turmoil with multiple emerging forces competing to drive our global futures. Effective leadership in both society and in organisations will seek to chart a course which seeks the best for their people, while honouring their right to share in the responsibility. To voice our true stories and work together to build a genuine shared narrative to represent and shape our destinies takes courage, but the leader within us has no better alternative for creating a coherent, relational and congruent course.

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