

Storytelling as interactive intervention

Applying the narrative approach in organizational change

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This chapter discusses storytelling as an interactive methodology in organizational change, team development and coaching. First we briefly discuss the underlying model of thought: the narrative approach. The interaction between narrator and audience makes it possible to create a narrative space that invites the exchange of and search for meaning.

Besides of course a few negatively coloured possibilities, different positive functions can be attributed to storytelling, such as culture forming, the facilitation of transitions, processing of emotionally coloured events and creating new realities. When this methodology is applied in organizational management practice a broad arsenal of interactive interventions is supplied, in different settings, such as organizational change, team development and coached or reflective learning. And not as a last resort by telling a story with a hidden metaphor the change management expert can bypass resistance and gain acceptance for a difficult message.

1. Telling stories: bringing symbolics to life

Generally all kinds of stories do the rounds in organizations, stories that tell of events from the history of the organization and of persons who appeal to the imagination. If you collected those stories and tried to interpret them, you would find out that they celebrate the successes but also the setbacks of the organization in a symbolic way, the heroes and the antiheroes of the organization are honoured and the peculiarities and folklore of all sorts of typical behaviour are passed on.

Storytelling is an intervention that brings symbolism to life. In the life of a community, telling stories can have different functions. You learn from each other how things stand, what the values and norms are. Together you process what you find difficult, but you also comment on the things people are proud of. Ultimately everyone's power of imagination is stimulated in their own way so that they gain insight into what they desire, what they are hoping and what they think their prospects are. It is not for nothing that cultural anthropology uses the resource of stories from a particular community as an important source for gaining understanding of their culture. Storytelling has developed from folklore to a symbolized form of art: in storytelling circles but certainly also in all kinds of dramatic and narrative arts it's not only about the contents of the story but also about the form, not only about the message but also about the enjoyment, not only about the symbolic value but above all about the entertainment value.

Organizational science has discovered storytelling as an intervention that can be applied in a rich variety of situations. This lines it up along a lively storytelling tradition that is much less sophisticated and quite self-evident. Every organization has its corridor chat and its gossip. But it also has the formal moments when speeches are held and stories are exchanged. And every organization has different circuits along which the stories flit about events, true or not, from the past. And every time fantasies develop again about how this organization, this team and these employees will get on in the future. Stories are layered in their meaning; in this connection intervening is the application of the skill to involve that layeredness of meanings in the interaction between storytellers among each other and through that, among the listeners. In an organization the telling of stories can have a potential that surpasses the communal rituals and expression of cultural

elements, when applied in an appropriate setting and supervised by a narrative coach trained in change management. In organizations it has been possible to transform storytelling into a set of instruments for change management, partly by placing it in the framework of the narrative model that has flourished strongly in related change management disciplines and particularly as a branch of the psychoanalytic thinking framework (Spence, 1982), as part of the Erickson hypnotherapy (Zeig, 1994) and in the coaching profession (in: Milner and O'Byrne, 2004). Influences from linguistics and especially neo-constructionism also exert some influence of course.

2. The narrative approach

The narrative approach starts from the viewpoint that every person tries to give *meaning* to his life by reconstructing the stories he encounters in the course of his life; stories about himself but also stories about others.

The events you experience remain in your memory as shreds of stories. They mix with other stories that you have been given by other people in the shape of texts, sound, visual images or writing. What you remember of your own past at a particular moment is a reconstruction in more or less narrative form, in which your own images and images of others have mixed together. The story gives that sense or meaning. When someone tells about what he has experienced, or about what he has experienced and understood of the world around him, he can do that in a very concrete, expressive way, or in a very generalizing and abstract way, with all the possible variations that come in between. He is faced with an impossible task, or as the Lacan expert Slavoj Žižek formulates it: the formal problem, the impossibility of telling a story in a linear, consistent way, of representing the 'realistic' course of the events (Žižek, 1996, p. 72). In his attempt to present reality approximately, he already sees his own images there through telling and explaining them; the story comes to life through associations, like the way the story will also call up all kinds of associative images for the listener that are linked in turn to his own experience.

This power of imagination does *not only* work *afterwards*, but also aims *at a possible future*. I develop a vision of myself and my world in the future by fantasizing about how my story could continue. I project meaning into the future through the story about it that I see in front of me. This is also called the healing power of stories (for example: Taylor, 1996).

At this moment in time, in the *here and now*, all those stories combine in me. Whether they really happened like that can no longer be checked; whether they will play out that way, I cannot yet know. But my constructions and reconstructions give me the meaning I was looking for.

The story is *punctuated*, that means reconstructed from a particular point of view and moment in time. My story is not yours, my memory is private, my images do not correspond with yours. Or do they? There is a communal pool of stories we draw from; our collective experiences (and those of our ancestors) have been recorded in traditions, myths and sagas and our collective memory. Our sources of the written, oral and plastic tradition display an endless variation of a number of continually recurring themes that have settled in the stories of our co-inhabitants of this planet and of our ancestors (Campbell, 1986). All those stories can be seen as a complicated *interweaving of lines* along which our history writes and rewrites itself.

Stories are open to several *explanations*. What may be a casual anecdote to the naive listener is perhaps a profound lesson in worldly wisdom for the other. Where one person immediately sees a connection with his own situation, the meaning might not become clear till later for the other for a problem he has been walking around with for quite some time. And yet another person sees only the amusement value. A story does not have to be finished and it can demand a sequel. Yet another story will contain elements that only gain meaning through deconstruction, if they are removed from their context and placed in a new context.

3. The interaction between storyteller and listener

Stories come to life because they are passed on, told. Telling a story requires a storyteller and an audience.

The interaction between the storyteller and the listener makes it possible for a space to arise, a space I would like to call the *narrative space*, in which the world of the storyteller and of the listener meet each other and in which ideas, experiences, feelings and other contents of consciousness are exchanged with deep interest and respect for each other's different experiences.

Box 1.

In the psychodynamic framework of reference this is the space in which there is room for transfer and counter-transfer (Berkouwer, 2004), or in which as Ogden puts it, the reverie of the analyzed and of the analyst interact with each other (Ogden, 1989); in the coaching relationship this is the 'report' that makes exploration, development and learning possible; in the life of a group or of an organization it is the process of reflective culture transfer, it is also the space in which a dialogue can take place and the vision develops that comes before strategic action.

Characteristic of this space is a certain degree of openness, intimacy, receptivity and surprise, supported by a semi-trancelike *state of consciousness* that simultaneously allows an alertness towards the exterior and a self-investigation internally.

Box 2.

You know that state if as a parent you ever read a child to sleep from their favourite book. Have a look at what happens to you if someone in your environment starts with: 'Once upon a time, long ago, in a distant country a...'

If you step into this narrative space, two important mechanisms are mobilized: *projective identification* and *association/dissociation*. You identify with the storyteller or with one of the actors in the story. You project your feelings on to him, recognize in him your own thought constructions and presume your own presuppositions in him. At the same time the story calls up associations in you with other situations, persons or events that resemble in some way what is suggested in the story. While listening you dream your way in your own world that the story evokes. You are in the story of the other person and in your own story at the same time.

THE STORYTELLER

A storyteller has an important role in the creating of the narrative space. An experienced storyteller appeals to the power of imagination, associative thinking and feeling and the ability to identify and empathize. By painting with words. From a technical viewpoint, by increasing the tonality of the use of the voice and content-wise by using a structure that raises expectations, the use of painting language induces a state of consciousness in which the processes mentioned above can develop (Breuer and Wuestenberg, 1999). Unexpected twists, alternating tension and a variety in punctuation, particularly the position of the observer or the acting person in the story, stimulates these processes even more. Conversely this also means that a story is less appealing if told too flatly, if it is too abstract to evoke concrete images, or if it does not offer any possibilities for identification, because the action or the key figures call up too much resistance. A good story has an element of truth in it, which is not the same as a representation that is as faithful as possible to an event that actually happened. The listener must be able to imagine that the events represented in the story could really have happened (be it in totally other conditions), even if only symbolic.

THE LISTENER

The story has layers. The listener can link up at different levels (see Breuer, 2002):

1. The listener looks for *a line* to be able to follow the story; it is possible that the activities of the listener stop here. It amuses him or it doesn't: the story as a story.

2. The listener will also try to understand the story: the story as a *puzzle*. Why do the persons in the story act the way they do? Gradually: what could the end or the solution be? How do they get there (the procedure, method, approach)?
And possibly: how would I do that? What would my solution be?
3. The listener can also make more associative connections with his *own mental and social world*. Sometimes people understand their own situation better if you present them with an event from a totally different context but with similar characteristics and with a (possible) solution or solution direction.
4. In the story a solution for a problem can be presented that the listener can *use directly* in his own situation. 'That solution might just work for my problem too.'
5. The way the solution is chosen in the story can include an *analogous solution* for the listener. Besides openness to a different solution, this also requires a certain degree of creativity, because a larger translation effort has to be made.
6. The suggestion of *a different way of thinking, looking or acting* can undermine one's own presuppositions that lie at the basis of the 'normal' pattern of behaviour, bringing new possibilities for solutions into the picture as realistic options that were previously unthinkable or totally overlooked.
7. The story can also broach an even deeper layer if the persons and events in the story refer symbolically to deeply rooted, general human conflicts, contradictory impulses and endeavours that are connected to the human condition. Characters, objects and events can have an *archetypal meaning* that is belongs to all times and all people.

LOOKING FOR MEANING

The listener looks for a meaning to the story. Projective identification and the associating and dissociating power of imagination help to find that meaning. But *this also applies to the storyteller himself*. The storyteller too is affected by his own story. In telling he identifies with the figures he (re)creates, and in telling his own power of imagination is activated. Through storytelling you not only recreate your own reality, but you also put a certain meaning into it. That meaning does not have to be fixed in advance for that matter, but can also force itself on the storyteller during or after the storytelling. That is why a story must be told.

4. Functions

If the setting is suitable, people can get to work together by making and telling stories with the important function of creating an experience together that makes it possible to give meaning to old and new behaviour.

Depending on the setting, the telling of stories can have various functions.

Stories often have a strong *socializing and enculturation function*. The culture of a group is transferred and kept alive through the stories that are told to each other, stories about the significant events and (heroic) deeds of figures who served as a model for the central values of the group. For the organizational researcher these stories are an important source for gaining insight into the culture of an organization, similar to the way that applies to the anthropologist or the ethnographer with respect to the culture of a community. These kinds of stories can also be misused for indoctrination and absorbing outsiders into the group.

A positive intervention is to offer a group or collective the opportunity to have the story about the history of the group told to each other, by listening to each other respectfully for the different experiences and questioning each other about the experienced or transferred development. This can happen for example following the order of generations in a group.

A second function of stories is that by telling stories the *transition* to a new phase in the development of a group can be processed better. This concerns not only stories *about how it was*, but also stories *about how*

people think it is going to be.

By telling very personal stories in particular about what everyone has experienced over the past period, the histories of different people concerned come together. By telling each other stories about these varying histories, their experiences get a communal meaning that is new and that makes space for a more communal experience (see for example: Wortelboer and Van der Werff, 2002).

It is important to consider the different emotional colourings of that past.

By then also making and exchanging stories about future events that have not yet happened, but that can be imagined, a more deeply experienced image is developed of what the persons involved consider to be desirable developments. Because the power of imagination of the storytellers is mobilized, unconscious feelings filter through in the stories and underlying assumptions become discussible.

If the future stories are realistic and attractive, they also offer a lot to hold on to and help in reducing uncertainty. However, if they remain too vague or too woolly they can also function as an escape from the frightening reality.

A third function of storytelling is the possibility of creating a re-experience in the *here and now* of a situation from the past, that had been recorded at that moment in a structure of meaning significant to the person involved, with the goal of recovering that *meaning* or *redefining* it from a new context. On a trivial level the tension and other emotions that have come about due to a particular event can be processed by telling stories about it. You could call this the therapeutic function.

It is possible to take advantage of this by inviting someone to tell his story. The past is then relived in the telling of it, but not just like that. In the re-experience the structure of meaning that gave the event its importance becomes visible and if necessary, discussible. In telling the story the person concerned experiences the situation again that had made a certain impression. Even if that impression has been suppressed, the dynamics from the past can be called back into the here and now.

This re-experience can take very dramatic shape and is activated deliberately in certain therapeutic schools. Thus in the Gestalt therapy you work mainly with the client's own images; with psychodrama and sociodrama other people also have a role and with family and organization line-ups the implicit, archetypal images of those others are also drawn into the story.

A fourth function of stories is *creating a new reality*. By telling stories that affect us, we get on to the track of what makes life really meaningful. In as far as our stories are a representation of our reflection on what we experience as meaningful in our lives, the repeating patterns and themes are represented in it that help us form a broader picture of the world around us.

That is why telling stories, particularly personally coloured stories, is not just any old intervention that someone can feel more or less addresses them. However small an event may seem in the eye of the observer, the personal colouring of the story about it makes connections with what moves us in a broader perspective.

Another possibility of this function is the manipulative side. Stories can be brought into the world to suggest a particular reality that does not exist (yet). Just think of the so-called urban legends, of rumours that start to lead their own life, of misinformation about crises and the news reports that turned out not to be true afterwards. They can be recognized as the pseudo-objective stories, third-hand stories and biased news coverage.

As the story becomes more personal and is based on concrete experiences, the story gains in truth and expressiveness.

5. Working with stories in organizational science

Storytelling fits in different settings: for a collective event in the framework of organizational change, for the meeting of a group in the framework of learning, reflection and the development of a team and in the intimacy of the coaching or consulting relationship for the purpose of reconstruction, deconstruction and new sense-giving.

To make the transition to a new situation easier, an opportunity can be created in which the stories about the past of the organization are told. Telling the real-life - but perhaps here and there slightly embroidered - stories about how it used to be recalls the performances, the difficulties, the comic and the happy events and the exciting moments to memory, so that they can be let go of again. An important effect on storytellers and audience is that people feel proud of having been a part of this organization. But the need to continue the story in a new form arises at the same time. Just as a transition requires a ceremony, with space for speeches and recalling memories, an important organizational change can also be marked by celebrating the completion of the preparatory process with each other and adding lustre to it through stories.

Box 3.

An organization that operates nation-wide previously had a mainly supervisory role, but from now on must provide more consulting and more services to the field. To mark this transition it organized an internal study day to which all professionals were invited. They were divided into groups criss-cross through each other. The groups set up as storytelling circles in the communal room. Then the supervisor of the day gave brief instructions on how you put a story together, and everyone was asked to tell an anecdote in their circle that actually happened from the history of the organization. This took up the whole morning. Then from each circle a story was chosen that the group thought best characterized what the old organization stood for. These stories were told in a plenary session at the start of the afternoon to the whole hall. There were cheerful, exciting but also very melancholic stories. Most people were moved; the one person more by one story and the other more by a different story. There was a lot of recognition, applause but also moments of silence. Then everyone went back to his old group and (of course after more brief instructions) in each circle a new story was made that everyone contributed to. This was a story that had to take place in the future of this organization. It was fascinating to hear how everyone made an effort in the second part of that afternoon to imagine a new interesting future in which important values from the old organization often reappeared in a renewed form.

Stories that are told to each other upon the transition to a new organizational form can also be very personal. After all, such a change sees everyone going through their own process, depending on the circumstances and their own actions or reactions.

Box 4.

A new structure was introduced into a technical company. Old departments were pulled apart. New ones were put together. Certain functions were abolished and new ones created. The entire process was carried through from the top. First a group of 'quartermasters' was appointed whose task was to further elaborate the design and the setup for a particular section of the new organization and then select the people for it. In due course they would also form the new management team, at least, that applied to most of them.

While this was happening, the old organization continued to function. It was a renovation, while the shop still had to stay open. Some people knew quite quickly that their position was safe, because at an early stage they had been spoken to or because they had responsibilities for a speciality that would certainly come back in the new organization. For others this was not at all clear.

At that moment a consultant/trainer was appointed to give workshops to groups of staff about how you can tackle change processes in the organization.

As an important part of this program this supervisor got the participants to tell their stories in small groups on the basis of a general framework about transitions: first about their own personal experience with other change processes and later about their perceptions in this project.

The most important lesson from this workshop turned out not to be the contents, but the experience of having told your story for once to colleagues, that it was listened to with a lot of respect and without judgment, and that it helped to make clear for yourself where you actually were in this change process and what your ambitions in it were. The story about these workshops did the rounds in this organization and more and more requests came in. Right up to the team of quartermasters who applied, not because they thought they would learn something about how you have to manage change processes in organizations, but because they believed that it would be useful if they could also go through the experience their people were telling them about.

Stories can also strengthen a change already enforced. The stories about successful actions in the framework of a self-renewing organization can serve as example and inspiration. For example, they make the abstract material of a culture change concrete in terms of different desired behaviour, actions to be undertaken, successful operations and suchlike.

Box 5.

A steering committee that had directed an important culture change process at one of the ministries still got together every so often at a location outside the ministry to gain new inspiration and discuss with each other how the change process could be anchored more strongly in the organization. At one such meeting a storyteller was invited who taught them how to make stories and tell them to each other. As a result of that workshop it was decided to send stories into the organization regularly by means of a newsletter; these stories were about successful actions in departments that had apparently succeeded in handling the new formula in a creative way. These stories from practice were alternated with metaphors or fables that told the message about the new organizational philosophy again in different way.

The steering committee experienced that not only they themselves became newly inspired by this activity to persevere with the change process, but they also succeeded in bringing those in the organization who were already working hard on implementing the changes to the attention of the others as an inspiring example.

TEAMS AND GROUPS

Storytelling in teams and groups is a good means of bringing the group together and stimulating learning or development processes. Often the members of a group each have their own history, both inside and outside the group. To give a group more coherence it helps to let everyone tell his own story about the past period, for example on the basis of what each person experienced as the high points and low points. An important effect of this method is that a more shared picture of the past period starts to evolve and more

understanding from both sides about how each person experienced that period. Particularly if that past period involved a fair bit of tension, telling stories about it and listening to each other without comment is an exercise with a lot of return. This is also very suitable for a group that has lost different people and gained quite a few new members. The joining process is accelerated if group members realize what each person contributes to the history (also from outside the group). Another method is to let the participants of a group, in the order in which they joined the group, tell stories about how they joined it, how they found the group at that moment and how the group has developed further, until the next person came along. This is a way to reconstruct the history of a group (or organizational section) with each other. You can also distinguish different generations in a group and have them tell each other stories about what their world looks like.

Storytelling is not only about the past, but can also be about the near or far future.

Box 6.

A firm of consultants wanted to reformulate their enterprise strategy with the partners. They started by collecting material. A strength-weakness analysis was made. And there was an investigation into the portfolio: how did their customer base develop, what was the relative importance of certain activities as contribution to the turnover and to the profitability of the enterprise? What was the current and expected capacity utilization? What were promising activities for which type of client? How did they distinguish themselves from rival firms? On the basis of this and other research, a workshop was held in which a number of leitmotifs from this material were drawn.

Then there was an exchange of ideas about what they regarded as core values. The collective task or mission was subsequently distilled from this, how they understood it to be. But then the process threatened to get bogged down, because they didn't see clearly enough what this all should mean in terms of concrete actions to be implemented.

At a subsequent workshop, under supervision of an external consultant, a vision was developed about the firm as it should be in two years' time; as concrete as possible in terms of results, competencies and behaviour. And then everyone was invited to tell a story about what he saw as a development in concrete steps, actions to be taken and short-term results, and that could lead in the direction of the collective vision that had been formulated earlier.

The one story inspired the other and the collective yield resulted in a concrete action plan that could then be got going.

IN THE SETTING OF A COACHING PROCESS

The experiences and casuistry that a coachee brings up in the talk with his coach can also be understood as stories that must be told to find meaning in them, shake out lessons and discover themes that demand solutions.

Generally it is the coachee who tells and the coach who listens. Perhaps it is the most important intervention that a coach has at his disposal, that he listens to the stories of his client with attention, interest and curiosity, so that the client has the opportunity to re(consider) his own acting, discover new things in it and see himself mirrored. But the coach can also put his own stories alongside the other ones. Sometimes this can be to demonstrate an as yet unexposed side of the presentation of the matter by the client, sometimes as an analogy or metaphor.

DECONSTRUCTION

Another form of collective research that goes very well in the atmosphere of a coaching relationship and is

inspired by the narrative model from the therapeutic practice, consists of deconstructing the story of a client or coachee about his situation or history (Rober, 1997). The point of departure is that a story is often a one-sided coloured misrepresentation of reality that becomes fixated as a subjective reconstruction. By deconstructing the story, that is, bringing it down to the core elements or the underlying theme or by removing a story line from it and placing other punctuation next to it, space arises for new giving of meaning and through that, also for new constructions.

For this the coach or consultant needs skill in recognizing and unravelling story lines, such as archetypical constructions, scripts and self-strengthening processes, the capacity to get the feeling with respect to underlying themes (and be able to discuss from the counter-transfer), and being able to manipulate flexibly with formal mental constructions (such as variations on a time line, switching observation positions or punctuation, increasing or decreasing the complexity or the aggregation level of the system experienced and shifting on the axis of control and dependency, for example, *locus of control*). These kinds of lines of approach are derived from various reference frameworks such as the psychodynamic framework, Jung therapy and mythology, the transactional analysis and neurolinguistic programming (NLP), behavioural therapy and the system model. Depending on the affinity of the coach or consultant, the deconstructed material can be interpreted, denoted and processed using these reference frameworks. That is indeed the professional knowledge that a coach can contribute.

The objective in the end is to help the other to develop new constructions about how someone could set up his own life and work situation further. But the best thing is also – in my opinion – if the other succeeds in creating a bit of freedom from care for himself in the set images that he carries along with him and that have caused him problems continually in and out of his work.

6. Using the narrative space

In the framework of this chapter we examine the creation of a situation that we have called the narrative space in which it is possible to tell stories. Due to this it can also have a certain function in the development process of an individual, a team and the organization. It is important how that space is used. The story of one person can call up the story of the other. Sometimes it is functional for the storytellers to supplement each other or follow each other, sometimes it is only suitable to listen. Above we saw that telling a story has a function for the teller. To derive meaning from our lives and be able to give expression to it, experiences have to be made into stories (White: *be 'storied'*) and these constructions determine (White: *'storying'*) the meaning we attribute to our experience (White, 1990, p. 9-10). Expressing the story processes the inner material the story is based on. The storyteller becomes alienated from his story (as Thijs de Wolf explains about Lacan: 2002, chapter 7). Through telling, the story starts to lead its own life, separate to the storyteller. The storyteller can listen to his own story himself and hear yet more new meaning in it. It is the attentive attitude of the listener that makes this possible.

But telling stories makes the listener an accomplice in this process at the same time. The storyteller provokes a reaction; how the listener reacts to that is not without meaning. On which of the levels mentioned in section 3 does he link in: does he accept the story for what it is or does he search together with the storyteller for the underlying meaning for himself or for the other? We have seen how the story can also function in the framework of culture transfer. The game rules, the standards, the values and the calibrated patterns of behaviour can be passed on to each other. If the narrative space is filled with the stories about the past, in the first instance too this functions to confirm the culture. Here too however, it doesn't have to end there. The examples (see the boxes) show that the participants in a process of organizational change are quite capable of distilling those norms and values from an exchange of stories that they would like to retain, but also those that they would like to change. It is helpful if they are subsequently also encouraged to tell the stories about a future yet to be realized, seen from a point further in time. This often requires more time, however. Even if an intermediate step is made whereby people are invited to analyze what the stories about

the past provided, the transition to a clear vision of the future is still a whole step away (for example: Wortelboer and Van der Werff, 2002).

THE STORY AS ANAMNESIS

To what extent is it useful to intervene more in this process? Of course, a number of key stories can be distilled from the narrative material of (groups of) respondents, or if necessary they can be constructed, stories that are either typical of what is good in an organization or precisely of what is dysfunctional. An account of the construction of these kinds of *learning histories* is given elsewhere in this book.

Although such stories are fished up out of a narrative space, they are subsequently processed in a different context: as anamnesis for a dialogue between interested parties (Abma, 2002) or as material for deconstruction and revision to break through the circularity in processes. I will not examine this further here, because it is described elsewhere in this book.

7. The story or the metaphor as a technique of influence

A narrative space, once installed, offers the possibility of exchange and mutual influence. Stories evoke a reaction. And just creating a context in which people listen attentively to each other provokes the telling of stories.

In my experience as a coach, the stories that occur to me when I am preparing for a talk with my client, or when I am listening to the story of another person, are not without meaning for the situation that my client is in. I realize that I have to watch out that I don't run away with my own interpretations or projections. Questions I need to put to myself are:

- is the story of the other person just a reason for me to tell my own similar experience (*crossing over*);
- do I dovetail so well with the other person that I don't add anything new or surprising (*cross-fertilizing*);
- do I react to an implied question that is locked up in the other person's story with just as implicit a message that the other person can then claim as his own again (transfer – counter-transfer); or
- do I remove the tension from the other person, because I let myself be tempted into reacting with my own associations that are of no importance to the other person (deflection)?

Consultants and trainers are mainly interested in the possibility that telling a story will stimulate learning processes in their clients. It is also often very fitting to open a work conference with a good story that contains a hidden metaphor about the issues under discussion in the conference. It is an indirect way of giving a message that will get the participants thinking – if it works. An appropriate metaphor contains a hopeful pointer for the development or the learning process of the participants, not in a forceful, prescriptive way, but more as a suggestion that everyone can read in his own way, fitting his situation (see Simmons, 2002). Training sessions are also very suitable for stories in between.

A few tips:

- Use expressive language.
- Switch perspective regularly (for example, between the main character and other actors).
- Let the actors literally speak and think out loud.
- Use recurring patterns and archetypical elements.
- Digress every so often.
- Weave any comments from the sidelines into the story.
- Make sure there is a good ending or an open ending.
- Do not explain your story!

You don't have to resort to theatrical aids when telling this kind of story. They actually have more of an alienating effect, in the sense that they create distance, so that it is easier for the listener to hold off the impact of the story and not let it affect him. The motto is: just be normal; realize that you have an inexhaustible source of stories that can have an unsuspected meaning for your audience (but also often for yourself, for that matter); tell the story simply and trust that the listener will take advantage of it.

The following mechanisms (see Breuer, 2002) boost the *intervention character* of a story with a built-in metaphor: 1. The story creates confusion, *a shock*. You wrong-foot the other person.

They realize that the story has something to do with *them*, but *what* that could be is not immediately clear at first glance.

2. The storyteller keeps *control of the relationship*, but *still* encourages the *independence* of the other. The relationship is defined by: 'I tell and you listen'. That is the implied contract. That also means that I have something to tell that is worthwhile. The other has to look for meaning. All the same, this meaning is not dished out directly to the other or explained. This stimulates the independent thinking of the other.
3. The influencing *slips through the resistance*. Whether the other is prepared to listen depends on whether the story is seen to be more or less interesting, or whether the other can identify and make associations. The process of looking for meaning (*transderivational search*) largely follows an unconscious path. The creativity of the listener is stimulated at the same time, because his power of imagination is appealed to.
4. The story has *several layers of meaning*. Where the connection is made depends on the receptivity of the listener. The deeper his need to find meaning, the more connections will be made in different ways to fundamental values and beliefs.
5. The message is *fixed* in memory. The receptivity to a message (induced by the trance-like state of consciousness) allows a deeper impact on the listener.

METAPHOR AND ANALOGY

The original function of the metaphor is transferring meaning from the one domain to another (Van Peursen, 1992). If a story is intended to be a metaphor, it is important not to explain its meaning. The listener must be free to find the message themselves that is hidden in the story as a metaphor, through what David Gordon calls: *transderivational search* (Gordon, 1978). Milton Erickson was a master in casually telling an anecdote that could only afterwards be seen as an essential intervention (Erickson, 1987 and 1992). The basic principle is that the listener will *not* suspect a message that has been inserted by the storyteller and is addressed to him. The listener has the possibility of extracting an idea that he can do something with himself, but he won't recognize that this idea is something that came in from outside; he discovered it himself (Godin and Oughourlian, 1994). Other conditions for the effectiveness of a metaphor hidden in a story are that the story has a good ending or an open ending (and thus does not finish as a fiasco), offers the possibility of identification (with the storyteller or with one of the major actors from the story) and is concrete enough to mobilize associative images.

Reasoning by analogy works very much differently. With analogy, a comparison is made very explicitly between a particular problem situation and another situation that has a number of characteristics in common with it. The question is to what extent does the listener recognize that the solution found in that other situation supplies ideas for the situation the analogy applies to.

Argumentation by analogy can be developed in the talk with the consultant or in the coaching relationship, and investigation together into what lessons can be drawn from it is also possible.

8. Conclusion

Storytelling is an interactive methodology that can be used in widely divergent settings with a change-

management intention. Building up and monitoring a narrative space characterized by a respectful, constructive exchange of events experienced with differing emotions can lead to a creative learning process coming about and being guided, so that people can exchange and (re)construct meanings with each other:

- as an exchange between people or groups in the same organization to get a development going or to reinforce it;
- at the tense moments in change processes to make a transition possible or develop a vision about the future and learn consciously from your experiences;
- but also as a form in which a large diversity of experiences become available for sense-giving, inspiration, interpretation, learning and application in the context of organizations.

Finally, storytelling is also an intervention that enables consultants, coaches, workshop leaders or people in another influential role to urge and inspire people to learn, develop and give meaning. Stories and metaphors appeal to people's imagination. But that is not sufficient explanation for the strong rise of storytelling as intervention. I suspect that it is the growing need to create sanctuaries in the organization where there is space for reflection, not as an inward-looking process, but as an interactive event and a creative process and in which the more uncomfortable feelings evoked by experienced or future events such as doubts, disappointment, fears, shame and anger can be placed in the ancient ritual of the story circle that forever manages to renew itself (Houston, 1996).

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