

Giving change a boost with the power of narrative



By [Aiden Choles](#)

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The discipline of change management is in a crisis that threatens to reduce the appeal of change management projects in the minds of managers. Even though business leaders understand that change management is needed and that it's a fundamental aspect of running a successful business, disappointment levels continue to rise. The reason being that change management efforts often fall short of expectations.

Major obstacles to success in change processes include: ineffective change sponsorship from senior leaders; resistance to the change from employees; poor support and alignment with middle management; and a lack of change management resources and planning.

Achieving the desired outcome

Change management is generally accepted as the process, tools and techniques used to manage the people-side of a change initiative to achieve the required business outcome. It involves understanding how an individual goes through and experiences the change, and how organisational tools are made available to support that transition. Such tools include communication, sponsorship, coaching and training. What is often not evident is the complexity of effectively changing behaviour in human systems. Overcoming fear of loss and the unknown, complacency with the status quo, and moving diverse groups of individuals toward a common goal can be enormously challenging tasks.

In the experience of gathering thousands of narratives from employees across multiple industries, it is suggested that employees feel as if the human side of change management is not regarded highly enough by the people managing change projects. These stories imply that employees feel disenfranchised and alienated by many change initiatives. It is therefore evident that new underpinning methods for enhancing the effectiveness of change management are required. What then can be done to reinvigorate change?

When communication fails...

In most change projects, communication is a key focus area. Despite this focus, a lack of effective communication is often raised as a key reason for the failure of change processes. Often times the change messages and the impact the change will have on individuals aren't communicated in a way that addresses the inherent uncertainty that often accompanies change. The vision for the change, the answer to the 'why' question, is also often not communicated in a compelling way that captures the hearts and minds of the people.

It is in addressing these issues, that the use of narrative in the change management context, provides the leverage point

from which to change organisational culture, values, behaviours and mindsets.

Human language is dependent on the ability to use stories as a way to communicate, educate, share and connect with others. In fact, academics are beginning to refer to *Homo narrans* (the story-telling human), instead of *Homo sapiens* (the knowing human). Humans make sense of the world through narrative and stories, and use stories to convey complex messages. Therefore, when someone tells a story of an experience they had, that story has in its DNA a high level of complex information regarding the experience.

Stories are useful

Stories are especially useful in exposing the values and attitudes that inform behaviour. However, stories and narrative have not been as commonplace in the business environment as they have been in our social settings - or at least that's the perception. The reality is that as the business environment shifts, organisations are realising the benefits and rewards of rediscovering the 'old skill' of narrative in a 'new context'.

The power of narrative is harnessed when an organisation develops ways of gathering stories that matter. This includes listening attentively to employees and sharing pertinent stories with employees. Such stories would ultimately help staff dealing with the change. The overall power of storytelling therefore lies in its ability to enhance communication skills - for both the individual and the organisation.

We all tell stories

Despite common misperceptions, everyone is a storyteller! You might not consider yourself to be a professional storyteller, but you certainly are a social storyteller. Whether gathering around the braai, sitting around a dinner table, or standing around the water cooler in the office, everyone has a story to share. Multitudes of stories are told all the time - inside and outside of the organisation - and especially by employees and customers about the organisation. Imagine how useful it would be if businesses were able to gather and harness those stories.

In combination with traditional change management practices, one useful way of incorporating narrative is through the concept of a change story. Based on emergent properties of the existing culture of the organisation, a change story's intent is to educate staff about the pending change through the use of metaphor and/or story, and to encourage constructive participation in the change. The development and implementation of a change story will vary depending on the context. Some of the approaches involve developing a fictional story with characters based on those in the real stories told throughout the organisation; while other approaches involve the use of a metaphor that represents how people already see the change to wrap around change communications. Another angle involves feeding back real stories or experiences that people have shared as examples of what is required in the change. As a result, a figurative mirror is held in front of participants, bringing them to a state of descriptive self-awareness and thereby enabling sustainable behaviour change.

By harnessing the power of narrative, organisations would be in the position to solve amazingly complex problems in surprisingly simple ways. By knowing what stories people are telling about the change, and what metaphors they use to make sense of it, narrative becomes a powerful communication tool that speaks to the hearts and minds of staff. Conveying change messages and the vision of the company through stories, makes them more memorable, and creates more buy-in than other more traditionally employed methods such as PowerPoint presentations or posters.

For more information on the topic of Narrative Change Management email Aiden Choles on aiden@narrativelab.co.za or visit www.narrativelab.co.za.

About The Narrative Lab

[The Narrative Lab \(TNL\)](http://www.narrativelab.co.za) is a South African company which through the use of narrative, probes and influences the mindsets, perceptions and belief systems that govern the patterns of behaviour within a team or organisation. In operation since 2006, the TNL team is well versed in models and methods used to analyse and strategise solutions to complex or

adaptive challenges. Through the gathering of stories and metaphors relating to various themes or challenges facing a company, TNL equips leaders with the tools to understand the problems experienced by their people, while also equipping them with techniques to educate, motivate and shift mindsets so as to create sustainable change.

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