



Making Change Happen: Steve Denning Tells the Story of Storytelling

INTERVIEW



by Jeff De Cagna

Jeff De Cagna is managing director for Strategic Learning and Development for the Special Libraries Association. He may be reached at jeff@sla.org.

••• What is Storytelling?

WHEN WE THINK OF STORYTELLING, OUR MINDS MAY RETURN TO FOND MEMORIES

of childhood when, tucked snugly in our beds, our parents would read us a favorite fable or fairy tale. We may remember scary stories shared around summer campfires, or even family anecdotes that help us better understand our heritage.

But, as Stephen Denning of the World Bank discovered, storytelling can also be a powerful tool for catalyzing organizational change. In his recently published book, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (published by Butterworth-Heinemann), Steve tells his own story of storytelling and offers guidance to other change agents on how to master the craft. *Information Outlook* sat down with Steve to find out more about *The Springboard*, and to learn how you can use storytelling effectively in your organization.

IO: What do you think is the most common misconception that we have about organizational change?

SD: Well, I would say the conventional wisdom is that you get an organization to change by explaining the reasons for the change as clearly as you can, and that people—being rational beings—listen to what you have to say and weigh the reasons. If your reasons are good and your idea is good, they accept them and they get on with implementing the change. In reality, the opposite is the case. The people usually do not welcome an idea that is going to turn their working lives and personal lives upside down and inside out as something that is positive and the addition of reasons rarely places the idea in a positive light.

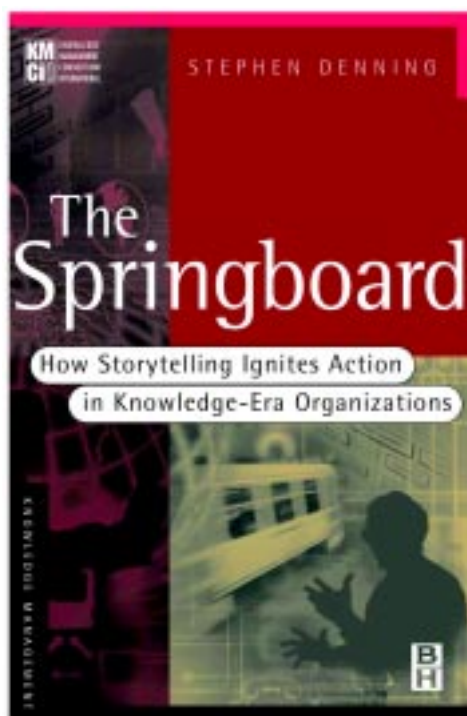
In fact, even before one has explained the change idea, the listeners are already offering their own arguments about why they do not want the change. One of the reasons why this happens is that the idea is coming from the

speaker to the listener. It is the speaker's idea that is invading the territory of the listener, and the listener is wondering what to do with this new idea that is going to have a possibly radical impact on his or her life. This is a remarkably ineffective way to communicate change, although it is the approach recommended by most of the leading books on change in organizations. But then you do it and realize that it doesn't happen that way. It doesn't work.

IO: So how does storytelling help overcome that disconnect?

SD: What I have stumbled across in my own journey of trying to make change happen at The World Bank is that telling a certain kind of story enables a listener to understand an idea in a way that is much less threatening. So, for example, if I were telling a story about how someone in Zambia got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria from the website of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, I am simply telling them about something that happened in the world a few months before. It is not a frightening idea that is invading their territory. It is simply a story about something that has happened.

What I discovered is that if you have chosen the right story and you tell that story in a certain way, then not only do listeners understand the story about a health worker in Zambia but they also begin to imagine stories in their own lives. They begin to draw on their own experiences, their own knowledge, their own understanding, and they start to imag-



ine possibilities for themselves. They might think, “Well, I am not in health care, and I am not in Zambia, but I am in highways in Latin America and we could do that, too. We could get organized in the same way. Of course, we would have to have a body of knowledge. We would have to have a community of experts to assemble it. We would have to have a website. We would have to have some technology to make it happen. We could, in fact, do that in our environment, and maybe we should think about how we should do that.”

And so a process of imagining in their own lives what this change idea can do starts to take root. If it is effec-

one that is typical in that organization.

At The World Bank, the quintessential predicament is the person who is in a distant place, who needs an immediate answer to a critical question, and who doesn’t happen to have that answer at hand. This is a difficult challenge with which everyone who has worked in World Bank operations has grappled with and agonized about in their work. Therefore, a story that presents such a situation is likely to resonate in our organization. If I worked in an oil company, the story most likely would feature an oil driller as the hero. In a sales-oriented organization, our heroine would probably be a salesperson. In short, the

A springboard story needs to have a certain amount of strangeness, a certain unexpected aspect to it that actually draws in the emotions of the listener. It is this unexpectedness that grabs us and gets the whole body of the human being involved in imagining the story.

tive, the idea sparked by the story quickly can become a very part of the identity of the listener because it is an idea that they have conceived in their own language and in their own context. It is the listener’s idea, not the speaker’s idea, and we are always much more comfortable with our own ideas than with the ideas of others. Under these circumstances, the basis for rapid action can form almost immediately, even while the listener is still listening to the story, as the listener begins to think through implementation. There is greater commitment to change, because it comes from within the person, even though it was sparked initially by someone else’s story.

IO: The kind of story you are talking about—a “springboard” story—is the title of your book. You have spoken about the impact that such a story has on a listener, but what else makes a springboard story special in comparison with other kinds of stories that are shared in organizations?

SD: Well, as I’ve already mentioned, the “springboard” story can, literally, spring the listener to a new level of understanding. I have found that there is a certain kind of story that works best as a springboard story. These stories are always about a single individual—a hero or heroine if you like—who is the protagonist of the story, such as the story of the health worker in Zambia I spoke about earlier. In the story, the hero is in a predicament, and to have the story and the change idea it presents resonate in an organization, the predicament should be

story needs a central character and a dilemma with which the organization and the people in it can identify.

Moreover, the story should embody the change idea you are intending to propose as fully as possible. The story is told from the point of view of the protagonist, even though as the teller of the story, I normally did not hear the story firsthand. Others almost always told the stories to me, and they typically were incomplete versions of what actually happened. So, over time, I would try to fill in the missing pieces and re-create the story and tell it from the perspective of the protagonist.

A springboard story needs to have a certain amount of strangeness, a certain unexpected aspect to it that actually draws in the emotions of the listener. It is this unexpectedness that grabs us and gets the whole body of the human being involved in imagining the story. At the same time, the story needs to be plausible, something that people can believe. In the case of my Zambia story, the World Wide Web does exist, and it is possible that the worker had access to a connection. Of course, the CDC does have a website in Atlanta with information on how to treat malaria. It is a strange story, but one that is plausible, and so it starts to be believable.

The story needs to be told as simply as possible. Unlike someone telling a story for entertainment, I do not immerse the listener in the details of the explicit story. I don’t tell you anything about the health care worker in Zambia,

not even whether that person is a man or a woman, a doctor or a nurse. I don't talk about the sounds or the smells in the office when this happened. I set aside all of the tools of the traditional storyteller because I want to leave enough space for the listener to imagine the larger, implicit story, the story that the listener will imagine for his or her own environment. So I tell the story in a deliberately minimalist fashion.

Finally, I think that Hollywood is right. A springboard story must have a happy ending. I have had absolutely no success with stories with negative endings. If I tell a

much larger quantities of finance than we were, and much more easily than we were. So the question in the air at that time was discussed in many forums around the world: What is the purpose of The World Bank?

It wasn't obvious that The World Bank had very much of a future as a lending organization. So we started to think about something different. What if we shared our "know how," all of the things that we had learned over 50 years about what works and what doesn't work in international development? What if we were to share that knowledge not just with our own staff, but also with all of the cli-

There is a huge difference between understanding something as an external observer—as a phenomenon to be observed but not something in which one participates—and taking an idea and actually living it, feeling it, and experiencing it.

story about an organization that went out of business because it didn't introduce knowledge management, that kind of a story fails to produce this resonating springboard effect. It requires too much of a leap to reach from that horrible ending to a more positive scenario for the listener. By telling a story with a happy ending, however, it requires only tiny leap to their own environment where they begin to imagine what's possible.

IO: Earlier, you said that that you "stumbled" upon springboard stories as part of your change effort around knowledge management. How did you travel this road?

SD: Going on five years ago, I was asked by The World Bank's senior management to look into information, and I could see that after 50 years of life as a lending organization, we were drowning in information. We had information everywhere, and it was very difficult to find what you needed because none of it was very well organized. Clearly, we could save a tremendous amount of money if we organized ourselves better and made things easier to find.

It also became clear to me that if we carried on in the same business—the lending business—simply with more efficient information systems, The World Bank would still be the same kind of organization—more efficient, but pretty much the same. And, in fact, at that point we were facing tremendous challenges as a lending organization from the private sector which was providing very

ents, partners, and stakeholders who make decisions that affect poverty around the world? If we did that, The World Bank could become a very exciting organization, an organization in which knowledge was at least on a par with money. It would be a very different kind of organization.

So this idea began to emerge, but it was difficult to get anyone to listen. It was as though I was speaking a language they couldn't understand. When I tried rational explanations, they didn't seem to work. When I tried charts, people just had slightly dazed looks on their faces. Dialogue made some progress, but was far too time consuming for a large organization. I had a real problem.

When I learned of the Zambia story and the effect it had on people when I told it, I made it a part of my presentation on knowledge management. It quickly became the center of the presentation, and helped us form a coalition of senior managers who adopted the idea. But even with support from senior management, the whole organization did not simply salute and march in lock step to implement it. Most managers and staff still needed a great deal of persuasion that, in fact, knowledge management was the right way to go. I found that stories were tremendously effective in getting people to understand and remind themselves why this was crucial for their future and the future of The World Bank.

I have to say that if someone had asked me five years ago about the value of storytelling in an organization, I would

have said that there was very little. I would not have thought that it was very important because I believed that knowledge is abstract, and that the way to communicate it is through argumentation. That was what I was taught at school, that was the basis of my career, and that was what I would have thought, if you had asked me five years ago. Even as I was telling stories to communicate change, I don't think I was consciously aware of the power of storytelling. It was just something I was trying out and that appeared to be working. Finally, I started to look into the storytelling itself, and I discovered the true power of the idea. I made the connection to everything we had

more memorable and meaningful because we have allowed it to become part of us.

IO: What do you say to skeptics who question whether the future of an organization should be determined on the basis of a story like the kind we're discussing?

SD: Well, I would say that it should not be determined solely on the basis of the story. I am not saying that you should abandon analysis. I think when you are trying to change an organization, you should analyze the hell out of the change idea and determine its costs and benefits.

By using stories to convey important ideas, I think that information professionals can operate at the vanguard of leading constructive change, so that libraries and information centers can continue to play the wonderful role that they have played in organizations throughout history.

been doing within The World Bank and that's what led me to write *The Springboard*.

IO: In the book, you write, "[t]he meaning is not in the story itself, but rather in the meaning that the listeners create out of the story linked to their new context." I gather this is what you mean by "getting inside" the story?

SD: Yes. There is a huge difference between understanding something as an external observer—as a phenomenon to be observed but not something in which one participates—and taking an idea and actually living it, feeling it, and experiencing it. When you actually experience an idea, it is not just your mind that is looking at the idea but your whole body that becomes part of the experience. When I tell you a story about a health worker in Zambia who logs onto a website in Atlanta, Georgia, if you are following the story at all, you are doing so not only with your mind, but you are thinking and feeling what it might feel like to be a health worker in Zambia who, at one moment, does not have the answer to something and then what it must feel like, at the next moment, to have the answer to that problem.

We have great difficulty, in fact, in imagining or remembering abstract ideas because they are unaffected by emotion. They do not register in our emotions, and our brains record and save those things that actually make an emotional impact on us. When we "get inside" the story, it is

So you certainly shouldn't abandon analysis. You should think clearly about whether the idea will benefit for the organization.

What I'm talking about, rather, is communicating the idea. If you could communicate the change idea in a simple, rational and logical way, then there would be no problem. You would simply say, "Well, here is the change we want to make. There are many reasons why we think it is a good idea, and so let's go ahead and do it." But using this approach, we find that even before the explanation of the idea is finished, there are people finding fault and criticizing it. They immediately see it as a problem, because they can see how the change will turn their lives upside-down and inside out. And so, ideas do not get accepted.

What I am saying is that if you want the idea to get a fair hearing, then narrative can scoop up listeners and bring them inside the story so that they understand it in a different way, and once they have understood it, then they can look at how to analyze the costs and benefits with a more sympathetic bent. Often when people are analyzing change idea, they are looking only for costs and problems because they are think the idea is going to create a great deal of difficulty.

But when I say to you, "Let me tell you what has happened in Zambia just a few months ago," we can start to imagine the story together. The speaker and the listener

start to imagine what it was like, and it is an inherently collaborative activity, not adversarial. At the end of the story, we can go back and say, “Well, now let’s analyze this idea,” but you are looking at it through the lens of the possible support instead of the hostile critic who is trying to defend against upsetting his whole world.

IO: So, if someone reading this says, “Okay, I love this idea of springboard stories and using stories to catalyze change. How do I find these stories in my organization,” what advice would you offer?

SD: When you talk to people in the organization and when you think about experiences you’ve had, you need to look out for the stories that you think might work. My advice is to try out a story, but only on a very small scale. Try it out on a spouse, a friend, or a trusted colleague to see what they think. If they don’t get it, then you probably need to either re-craft the story or find another one. So, I definitely think that you should try stories out in a very low profile situation. It is unwise to think that this is a panacea, that you should try it out for the first time at a senior management meeting. Even if it is the perfect story, you will need to practice telling it one-on-one so that you can deliver it with maximum impact when it really counts. So find your story, find out whether the story can work, and then work on perfecting the performance so that you get it to a higher level of effectiveness.

IO: To help our readers get to know you a little better, can you tell us about your favorite story, beyond of course the ones you tell about knowledge management. Which stories resonate and really mean something to you?

SD: Well, I certainly love most of Shakespeare’s work, both the plays and the comedies. *Hamlet* really resonates with me, as does Leo Tolstoy. The Greek myths are tremendously powerful and very simple stories that still have great meaning for us today. I love Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. I love the *Arabian Thousand and One Nights*. Those are wonderful, wonderful collections of stories. I mean there is this huge cornucopia of wonderful stories that we have inherited from many cultures, and it is just such a joy to have them at our disposal. We are so privileged today because we can all have access to any of these stories at any time. And I have tried to add my stories to the heritage, both in *The Springboard*, and in my novel, *The Painter: A Novel of Pursuit*.

IO: Given what you know about our members, what would you say to them specifically about the role they can play in sharing organizational stories and identifying possible springboard stories?

SD: Well, I would say that libraries and information professionals will be facing the challenge of sustained and profound change in the coming decade and beyond. So, your members either can be leaders and helpful in communicating and facilitating needed change, or they can be part of the problem and try to keep things the way they are. By using stories to convey important ideas, I think that information professionals can operate at the vanguard of leading constructive change, so that libraries and information centers can continue to play the wonderful role that they have played in organizations throughout history.

To find out more about Steve Denning and *The Springboard*, please visit www.stevedenning.com on the World Wide Web.

