Stories Managers Tell: How Lessons are Transferred into Practice

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Abstract

Storytelling in public administration is an underdeveloped area of study. Most public administrators have little if any formal training or deep thoughts about storytelling in organizations. This article is designed not only to improve the telling of stories but also the listening and learning of stories. A theoretical framework and a telling, listening, learning dialectic are developed from empirical research. A methodology is designed to collect stories from three city managers. These stories are interpreted using assessment criteria. The emphasis in this study is on story validating.

Why Stories are Important in Public Administration

Public administration is learned by experiences. These experiences can come from reading textbooks, browsing Internet sites, observations, talking with others, and through stories. Stories play a unique role in leadership development, organizational change, institutional stature, and cultural understanding. Storytelling is viewed as an inevitable, essential, inexpensive heuristic in organizations.

Storytelling can create costs and benefits. If storytelling does not create one of many benefits, there are costs of time, workplace disruption, and angst toward the storyteller. Storytelling takes time that can range from seconds to minutes. A story may disrupt the flow of work in an organization by creating mental, emotional, and even physical distractions. If a habitual storyteller does not contribute to productivity or provide an entertaining account, past and potential story listeners will avoid this person.

Public administrators should know when and when not to tell a story. Deciding when to tell a story may necessitate a “snap judgment.” Often administrators must pass on the “gift of gab” and avoid storytelling because it is irrelevant, violates someone’s privacy, or is in “poor taste.”

“Managers are advised to enlarge their storytelling repertoire in order to increase the likelihood that they will be able to tell a story that connects with the uniqueness of the situation to guide and shape employee behavior” (Barge, 2004). This behavior should parallel the values in public administration. These values include efficiency, ethical decision making, transparency, and upholding the public trust. Employee reporting may need to be supported with a story. Stories move up and down organizational structures. Often superiors and subordinates seek deeper-meaning from storytelling. Researchers may have the advantage of hearing stories in a learning
context, whereas the development of this context may be neglected by employees that work in an organization.

**What is a Story?**

Every symbol, situation, artifact or behavior in an organization may be part of a lived story, but stories in this study are told. A story is different from a narrative. A narrative is a written or prepared text (Adorisio, p.10) or a conversation (Adorisio pp. 21-22). Policies and procedures would be considered narratives. A city manager’s explanation of a bad hiring decision would be a story. A story can be an oral or written account of events when it is documented. To become an oral story, accounts have to have a listener or listeners. To become a written story accounts have a reader or readers. With the advent of social media and online educational instruction, storytelling will not be solely face-to-face. It is debatable as to whether e-mails can contain stories. The length of narratives even required for terse stories may limit the number and depth of listeners with electronic mediums.

**Storytelling and Praxis**

Storytelling is often strongly related to praxis and attempts to put theory into action. The story listener takes the story as a lesson and puts it into practice. Perhaps storytelling can be used to assess or build theories and principles of public administration.

The listener of a story may use that information to make decisions. The entire study by Adorisio was to study the relationship “between narrative practices and decision-making processes” (2009, p. 2). However, with action or evolving research she had to change her methodology. The Short Story Department in *Public Management* often offers stories which give sage advice for city managers when making difficult decisions. The April 2011 issue illustrated how city managers need to keep their “integrity in the face of difficult political pressure” (Hutmacher, 2011, p. 32). Stories in the January/February and March issues of *Public Management* are not deemed as valuable by the reader.

**Types of stories**

Stories in public administration are often based on themes or lessons learned (if I had to do it over again), principles (this rule generally works), morals (the point is that), advice (if you confront this situation take these actions or make these decisions), inspiration (this is why I choose this profession) values dissemination (e.g., this is how to uphold the public trust) in this profession (e.g., a city manager will constantly have their leadership challenged), or heroic (this is when I saved the day). Recognition of the type of story being told will help with the objectives of the storyteller and the story listener. The recipient of the story, if they are a learner, should immediately decide what is in the story for them. For example, the listener may think this story
will be entertaining, help me contextualize a situation, allow a better decision to be made, provide parallel knowledge on the same situation, help to resolve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity, or learn about a similar person to get a character profile.

**What are the Purposes of Stories?**

Why do professionals tell stories in organizations? By speaking from experiences, professionals bring credibility to the discourse. For example, when working with the Texas Department of Transportation an author undertook a comprehensive study to determine the effectiveness of district communications with constituents, consumers, businesses, and citizens. The next sentence or a story would gain credibility based on the previous sentence. Stories often offer sensemaking. As organizations go through transactional and transformational change a story or a “blast from the past” will help provide the context so participants can gain understanding or make sense of a situation. A particular policy, procedure, or practice may not be understandable until it is backed with a story. Stories often back a directive. Leaders and supervisors often want things completed a certain way. Telling the subordinates this way may better be accepted and implemented if it is backed with a story. Denning (2005, pp. 167-172) provides 23 reasons why narrative pervades organizations. In addition, stories provide entertainment, information, empowerment, socializing, and imaging (Spradley, 2011).

Story research will progress if stories are heard. “Story researchers can benefit by entering organizations to observe first-hand how people perform storytelling” (Boje, 1991, p.125). “In-depth conversations with managers show how they are capable of defining reality, judging what kind of knowledge is useful to them, and developing validity standards relevant to their world” (Hummel, 1991, p. 32). The dearth of documented storytelling in public administration is alarming given the penchant for case studies in the field.

**Theory Development**

There is a need for theory development to work with storytelling. With a theoretical foundation storytelling can and often should be improved. Privacy management theory would determine the basis for information in a story that is concealed or revealed. “Given the power of storytelling in organizations, we believe it is important to establish a basis in theory of our understanding of it” (Taylor, Fisher, & Dufresne, 2002, p. 314). Whether theory development should follow the art (Taylor, Fisher, & Dufresne, 2002) or scientific methods (Hummel, 1991) provides an interesting inquiry. The use of postmodern modes of inquiry like interpretation and hermeneutics appear to often be the greatest opportunities. It may be argued that storytelling is really a craft and theory development should be pursued on that basis. By developing and testing a model of storytelling we hope to contribute to theory. In addition we use dialectics to better understand storytelling from city managers.
The engaging anecdote has great potential for theory development. In training and in education a story is told or a case is presented. Listeners will have different perspectives or solutions to the story or case they have heard. Each story or case may have a preferable action that is withheld until all the perspectives have been articulated. After the story context is provided the listener is asked, “What do you think?” The epistemology of the engaging anecdote is that it is better know and articulate what we know and then be challenged by others. This challenge may lead to preferable actions which may or may not match reality of the story being told.

**Assessment**

For a variety of reasons, stories have to be assessed. This assessment can be based on story performance or story validating. Six assessment criteria are developed in the following discussion.

First, stories have to be **relevant**. “Relevance standards are epistemological standards of the first order, because they ask the question: ‘Does this ring true?’” (Hummel, p. 38). If the story lacks relevance it is not valid. Longer stories can oscillate between being relevant and non-relevant to the situation at hand. The epistemology that governs relevance is theory.

Second, storytelling implies that the facts may be embellished. **Factual** standards are second to relevance standards (Hummel, 1991, p. 38). The listener is not to challenge the facts (e.g., Did the Sergeant really say that?), but to determine the meaning of the facts. In our study we prefer to look at stories as being **believable**. “People engage in a dynamic process of incremental refinement of their stories, of new events as well as on-going reinterpretations of culturally sacred story lines” (Boje, 1991, p. 106). These refinements may be innocent changes or drastic or distorted changes to make the story more interesting. If the story as told did not take place it becomes a lie. The **reliability** of the story comes into question as the story is retold. Is the story the same? A story should not be like a river that you cannot step into twice.

Third, words have a limited ability to reconstruct objective reality. At best the **social construction** of reality should take place. A good story teller will seek acknowledgment from the listener. For example, how might these motivational techniques be applied with your subordinates? Acknowledgements force sensemaking on the part of the listener. With social construction there is greater learning that can occur for story listeners and even the storytellers.

Fourth, the determination of **good and bad** stories “has implications for every aspect of management practice” (Taylor, Fisher, & Dufresne, 2002, p. 317). “Not all stories are good stories, nor are all individuals effective storytellers” (Gabriel, 2000, p.5). The assessment of stories should be able to make good and bad distinctions.
Fifth, the main criterion to assess a story may be **effectiveness** (Taylor, Fisher, and Dufresne p.314). Effectiveness must look at the intent of the story teller. Stories told by city managers to a graduate assistant were in part designed to indoctrinate the assistant into the city management profession. Sensemaking requires the listener to stay engaged in the story and to provide some acknowledgement or input. All stories are not equally effective. As listeners and tellers of stories we need to develop criteria to assess stories. These criteria will help advance theories of storytelling in public administration. These criteria will help us to become better storytellers and story listeners.

Sixth, every story should have a **point**. There is a scene in Planes, Trains, and Automobiles were Steve Martin is chastising John Candy for this poor storytelling. The blow to Candy is when Martin states “You know your stories would be better if they had a point—it makes it so much more interesting for the listener.” The criteria developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), fitness, understandability, generalizeability, and control may be applied to storytelling.

The validity of the story deserves examination. The source of the story will help determine validation. In this study the city managers had been in office for several years.

**The Search for the Universal Storytelling Sequence**

The sequential build-up for most stories is very important. In evaluating stories this build-up and its component parts may determine the success of the story. Davis (1993, p. 36) provides a story format consisting of five sequential components: main character, trouble coming, crisis, insight, and affirmation. Davis maintains that “Crisis is the plot center of all stories” (1993, p.20). There has to be a setting, characters, actions or decisions, results, learning, and awareness (which could be a projection of future events) or new behavior. The last stage in any setting has to close the communication loop to ensure an end, a lesson, or reiteration of meaning. Stories that are told and not listened to or easily forgotten do not follow the sequential build-up.

**Figure 1. A Theoretical Framework for Storytelling**
In Figure 1 the experiences with public service can be positive, neutral, or negative. The storytelling becomes a narrative interview when best practices are described. Responses to the stories are critical. The learning that is derived from hearing stories is designed to improve management styles, suggest behaviors, and assist in decision making. The relevance and application of this knowledge from learning becomes important.

Latent knowledge is accumulated with learning. “Every interesting piece of knowledge has two dimensions” (Brown, 2005 p. 56). These dimensions are explicit and tacit. The explicit dimension of knowledge can be documented in this study. The tacit dimension of knowledge is accumulated with story listeners. Determining when and how this tacit dimension of knowledge can be put into practice is of interest beyond the scope of this study.

**Methods**

We could do worse than study and give full credence to the knowledge of those who manage and work to maintain not so much public administration but public service (Hummel, 1991, p. 40).

The original methodology was extravagant as it was designed to assess the performance of stories and improve storytelling. The researchers were going to sit down with city managers and listen to stories related to public administration. By using a deductive, grounded theory approach the researchers would use open-ended directives (e.g., tell us a story) follow-up questions (e.g., What is the purpose of this story?) to explain understanding of application and meaning. The city managers were to be asked if we can talk with, or e-mail, subordinates that have heard this story. It was believed that managers could benefit from the feedback if they are going to retell the story or prepare for the next story.

We even modified the phrase to suggest that the city managers tell us “war stories.” In this study, storytelling is in a conversation context. City managers responded to statements. The experiences of city managers are at the center of this inquiry.

We decided this approach would not yield the desired stories, and a set of statements would need to be asked. These questions had city managers tell us about times they were involved with or aware of a bad hiring decision, when they introduced an innovation that saved the city money, when their leadership was challenged, when they confronted an ethical dilemma, and when they changed the culture of the city. These questions were e-mailed to the city managers in advance with a consent form.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The five languages of storytelling need to be acknowledged. It is impossible for a transcript of a story to capture all these languages: gesture, sound, attitude, feedback, and words (see Davis, 1993, pp. 77-83).
Findings

In theory, good story telling by managers invites interaction and follow-up. The telling (context), response, learning dialectic provides a method or frame to study stories in an organization. In this study, storytelling was delivered to the Graduate Assistant (GA) the listener. In each of the interviews there was a natural flow to the dialectic. The city managers would tell stories in response to the statements, the listener would provide responses (i.e., gestures, expressions, statements often for clarity, and posture), and the city manager would enter into a teacher mode and learning would occur. In the teacher mode, the city manager would assume that the listener wanted to become a city manager. The listener instinctively followed Hummel’s advice as she heard the stories. The events were not meaningful until she read herself into the story (Hummel, 1991, p. 36). “As listeners, we are co-producers with the teller of the story performance” (Boje, 1991, p. 107). The effectiveness of the story is dependent on the listener. The listener can assess story performance.

The findings are organized by the questions that were asked of the city mangers. The city managers subsequent answers are interpreted or categorized using two assessment criteria: relevant v. irrelevant and applicable v. non-applicable. These criteria were discussed in the assessment section above and are designed to determine relevance and application validity of the stories.

Leadership

In response to the question, “tell me about a time when your leadership was challenged” gave way to a very relevant answer from City Manager C and applicable answers from two city managers (City Managers A & B); however, City Manager B lacked an answer that gave much relevance or application at all (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant</th>
<th>Irrelevant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City Manager C: My analysis of the program [to increase efficiency] created a conflict. Which ultimately lead to challenging a lot of my authority and integrity on a lot of other issues. I was running up against an unmovable wall.</td>
<td>City Manager B: I’m real big on first impressions. We have city uniforms. I’m big on being able for people to walk in the door and know that I’m the city manager. I’ll go shake their hand, because without them we wouldn’t be here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicable</td>
<td>Non-Applicable</td>
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<td>City Manager A: I tell employees that we’re co-workers instead of boss subordinate relationship</td>
<td>City Manager B: I spent 20 years as a judge before I took this position. So for 20 years I didn’t have my</td>
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and that’s been effective for me.

City Manager B: And I’m very fortunate that I have a mayor and city council that believe strongly in the chain of command. And they informed those employees that don’t come talk to me, we have a chain of command, you have a city manager and if you have a problem you need to discuss it with him.

leadership challenged too much because as a judge what I said was pretty much final.

In Table 1, City Manager C’s relevant response was “going-by-the-book” and using cost-benefit analysis. What he neglected was the political factors that would be opposed to change. Part of City Manager B’s irrelevant response suggest a symbolic way to prevent leadership from being challenged. City Manager A provided an applicable response to being challenged by the city council on issues. City Manager A’s response provides a lesson to promote unity on the part of administration (superiors and subordinates) when challenges arrive from elected officials. City Manager B’s response dovetails City Manager A’s response in that staff cannot go the city council without going to the city manager first. The chain-of-command can help foster the “we” over the “I” mentality in city administration. The non-applicable comment by City Manager B in Table 1 only provides a contextual background of the answer. The listener cannot apply the answer unless they become a judge. The stories and their interpretation suggest that leadership is most often challenged when the organizational structure or organizational communications are not established.

Ethics

Another question that was interpreted for relevant v, irrelevant, and applicable v. non-applicable answers is the question that asks the city manager to tell about a time when you were confronted with an ethical dilemma.

Table 2. Ethical Dilemma

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<th>Relevant</th>
<th>Irrelevant</th>
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<td>City Manager B: We had a long term employee that was in the police department. And he was asked to resign. Because we were given information that he was having an affair with an employee here. Well that’s two grown adults...the problem being one of them was married and one</td>
<td>City Manager A: The International City Management Association Code of Ethics I find to be a little bit humorous, they should be called the international city management association’s survival code.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
City Manager A: You know the way that I was raised I mean right was right, wrong was wrong. Um, your word is your bond, a hand shake is a contract, but then you find out real quick that there are a lot of people that don’t adhere to that.

City Manager C: Just because I go out and have a friendly conversation with a police officer, doesn’t mean that I’m getting information and the chief is being put out of the equation. Or if I go have coffee with a firefighter in the morning, doesn’t mean I’m overstepping the chief. I constantly have to walk that line of sending the wrong message to others. . . . . Are there favored departments, leaders or supervisors? Yes. But it’s a really hard one, and I’m not sure if that’s ethical as much as it is a leadership dilemma.

City Manager B provided a relevant story, in which he was approached with an ethical dilemma that included characters, crisis, and insight. This story provided useful and relevant information to the listener because it was a situation in which the listener could actually confront or visualize in future endeavors (see Table 2). City Manager A missed the relevance of the ethical dilemma storytelling, but used the International City Management Association’s Code of Ethics as a veil to prevent ethical encounters (see Table 2). City Manager A’s application from the context of how he was raised shows how organizational cultures may have changed over time. City Manager C provides the application of the context for an ethical dilemma (see Table 2). The talking with police officers and fire fighters seems like a good city management practice. However, openly admitting that you have favorite departments sets the stage for ethical dilemmas and stories being lived. The non-applicable cell in Table 2 is open suggesting good storytelling.

**Hiring Decision**
The question about making a bad hiring decision was consistent in all three interviews at producing relevant and applicable answers. The city managers provided stories that proved to be personal lessons and the listener found relevance and application for future hiring decisions (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Bad Hiring Decision**

<table>
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<th>Relevant</th>
<th>Irrelevant</th>
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<tr>
<td>City Manager A: I was going to tell one about my ego and my thinking that I can change somebody and we needed to hire a planning director. . . . There was just one problem, every position she held she would get fired because of a lack of interpersonal skills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>City Manager B: What I learned in the CPM Program, from the professors and the instructors, is take a long time to select someone but be real quick to fire if they can’t do the job . . . Right now I am short administration staff because we didn’t do a good job of selecting those people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>City Manager C: I didn’t really understand the interpersonal dynamics within the organization at the time and the leadership capabilities or lack thereof, of the individual being promoted . . . The worst hiring decision I made was based on not understanding the department and not understanding how that person can lead that department.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicable</td>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Manager C: You can make some good decisions for the wrong reasons and bad decision for the right reasons . . . if you don’t look at the administrative side of hiring and don’t look at the personal side of relationships in an organization, you run the risk of being a machine.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Manager B: Every department in the city now has a hiring committee, interview committee,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
City Manager A presented his applied theory that past behavior dictates future behavior, and listener will not have to learn this lesson by trial and error because of hearing the story (see Table 3). The relevance of the story provided by City Manager B suggests a principle of “hire slow fire fast.” City Manager C noted that internal hiring to maintain the organizational culture may be a bad decision. The listener understood the relevance.

City Manager C maintained applicable advice for the listener (see Table 3). He stated many times, “you can make some good decisions for the wrong reasons and bad decision for the right reasons”, in referring to a hire he made internally when he did not interview and hire outside of the organization because he was looking for an easier transition and he failed to understand the qualifications of the person he hired (See Table 3). This finding is interpreted in the relevance category, suggesting that some categories may intertwine. City Manager B’s application provided the listener with knowledge on how and why committees are preferable in hiring decisions.

An additional finding in pertaining to this question is that answers from all three city managers were basically applicable and relevant: the irrelevant and not applicable cells are open in Table 3. Perhaps this is due to the question being more tangible than the leadership and ethical dilemma questions and also because it specifically asks for a negative experience about hiring.

Discussion

This study has established and fleshed out a theoretical framework for storytelling. Capturing the experiences with public service through the stories of city managers has lead to the use of a dialectic. This dialectic of telling, response, and learning needs further investigation to completely assess its value to storytelling. This value is determined by the assessment criteria established and tested in this study. The ultimate value of storytelling is effectiveness. A story is effective and typically good if it is relevant and applicable. The other criteria including the factual standards, social construction, and good and bad stories have yet to be applied to the stories. By meeting the relevant and applicable criteria the listener will often hear and visualize the point of the story.

Conclusions

The end result of this framework is the development of theory and the principles of public administration. For example, the “hire slow, fire fast” principle was inherent with all the city
managers and the stories they told. This principle should generate a visual image to a listener that has been hired or witnessed a firing. The knowledge and the establishment of the organizational structure and organizational communication dictate leadership in city management. To a certain extent structure dictates communications. Since the vast majority of management problems typically involve communications, it appears that structural context as expressed in the stories provide opportunities to learn how to improve communications. This research focuses of the explicit dimension revealed through transcription of words. The tacit dimension developed by listening to stories and reading research will prove invaluable for public administration.

References


Barge


