

For those too busy:

The latest research, thinking
& news on growth pace and delivery
from around the world

The second mouse gets the cheese: why CEOs tell stories to spark change

A lot of insight, and hype, has been produced about storytelling as a useful leadership tool. 'Stories' sound nice, but how does a good narrative help a CEO with the tough job of leading significant, difficult change?

Why stories work

We looked at a range of research showing that telling a clear compelling story is a characteristic of major successful change initiatives. Stories work where conventional corporate communication does not, because they trigger the receiver into active and emotional involvement. The trouble with traditional logical argument, facts and figures is that you only convince with a shallow rational basis, not fundamental emotional buy-in.

At its most basic a story can be a simple analogy to capture the nature of a major change. When one technology company CEO set a new strategy he started by saying: "Most of us remember that the early bird gets the worm. They forget that the second mouse gets the cheese. Let's be the second mouse – the technology 'follower' that makes all the money".

The three parts to a story

Robert McKee, the Hollywood script doctor, says that all stories are about how and why life changes. They persuade people by uniting an idea with an emotion, and follow a sequence to engage you in that change:

1. *Set the scene*

Most stories start with the current situation, where life seems relatively in balance. These are all the things that employees (or other stakeholders) are familiar with and understand.

2. *Introduce the dramatic conflict*

The key to a story is the "inciting incident", the circumstances that threaten to throw the current situation out of balance. This conflict between old reality and new challenge is what engages the emotions.

3. *Lay out the journey*

Finally, what needs to be done to win this conflict? What is the tough decision, the difficult journey required to win out in the end? CEOs need to base stories in an understanding of the past - but even more they have to bring to life an imagined, compelling, future where the hard battle has been won.

Some CEOs are suspicious of stories. They can imply spin and are not as 'credible' as facts and logic. But, as McKee puts it, in a world that has seen Enron and Lehman Brothers, facts are just "BS in a ball gown".

This approach to powerful stories is very close to the three cornerstones of a classic change plan: a clear description of the desired end state, an assessment of where you are now, and the journey.

It is also true that stories only work if they are authentic, which means:

- *Truth to the teller*: leaders believe in what they are saying and back up words with their actions. They share their emotion - including both vulnerability and excitement.
- *Truth to the audience*: a story which connects to the genuine needs of the receiver.
- *Truth to the moment*: a story must be right for the moment in history, and the context.
- *Truth to the mission*: a story must bring to life, and trigger support for, the mission.

What makes an idea sticky?

Finally here is also good research about the common traits that make some ideas and narratives stick. Stickiness is driven by: simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, and emotion.