

# Stages of Organizational Change & the Stories that Go with Them

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## Introduction

Change in today's turbulent business environment, is a constant and a regular experience. There is a plethora of excellent material dealing with organizational change that includes research, models and best practices (Anderson 2001, Gelinas 1998, Olson 2001, Smith 1997). Similarly, in the field of storytelling, there is a solid foundation for understanding the general types of stories that need to be told, or are told, in organizations: who I am stories, vision stories, teaching stories or hero stories, survivor stories or "kick-in-the-pants" stories, to name a few (Neuhauser 1992, Simmons 2001).

If we look at story work in organizations through the lens of systems thinking, we learn that change happens by connecting with people and relationships, not through top-down control (Olson 2001). Within a systems framework it is assumed that organizations are made up of communities and that change occurs through collaborative action. Here, storytelling becomes an ideal tool for affecting change because of its ability to create connections, break down barriers, and build communities. As Steve Denning (2000) states, "When human beings get into collaborative patterns of action, whether it be teams or communities of interest, or networks—they all have one thing in common: they contain individuals who share the same stories. It is the shared stories that enable the members of the collectivity to understand each other, their motivations, the habits, the expectations, the fears, the dreams, and this understanding enables the members of the group to anticipate each other's actions and intentions and so start to move in unison and harmony. Without this pattern of shared stories, the members of the group may appear as hostile, unfriendly, whimsical, capricious or difficult. Starting out by telling a story, and then the sharing of stories is an age-old method of building up these common libraries of shared stories and understanding in the minds of the members of the group."

Taylor (1996) adds to this by noting that, "Community is formed only by shared stories, not by monologues. Empathic listening is followed, in time by reciprocal storytelling. I know I

have a place in the community not only as I hear and accept its stories but as it hears and makes room for mine.” Both Denning and Taylor reinforce for us that when storytelling is applied to change initiatives, it becomes necessary to move story work from taxonomies (various classifications of stories) and repertoires (practicing storytellers and performance storytellers) to processes and models for shared storytelling.

To demonstrate the link between story work and organizational change, in this article I will review the change cycle (Gelinas 1998) and then share a model of change that uses storytelling to launch an initiative, build and sustain momentum, support ongoing learning, and celebrate the results before beginning the next change initiative. This model is based on the dynamics of storytelling, story listening, story solicitation and story sharing.

### **Organizational Change Cycle**

As one reads across the literature (Anderson 2001, Gelinas 1998, Olson 2001, Smith 1997) the field of organizational change reflects a process that moves from establishing committed leadership through the need for and vision of the change to taking action, monitoring progress, and closing out the change. The following is a basic organizational change cycle combined with a storytelling model. A more detailed approach follows at the end of this article.

1. **Establishing Committed Leadership:** Here it is important to share stories within the organization about the level of passion for the current change and when change, in the past, has worked and when it has not. Critical questions include: Who will stand for the future possibility? Why and how do we, the leaders, need to take a stand? Where is the passion?
2. **Feeling the Need for Change:** Key to this step is to listen for and tell stories about issues such as: How deep is the pain? What is the current state? Why do we need to change? Why should anyone care?
3. **Creating the Vision for Change:** In this step, share and promote stories about the desired future and have people talk about how they will personally benefit from it.
4. **Taking Action:** This step benefits from conveying and encouraging stories about plans, roles and responsibilities, and actions that are already underway.
5. **Sustaining Change:** Tell and solicit stories about overcoming barriers to change, courage in the face of challenge, and persistence.

6. **Monitoring Progress:** Use stories and find others who can tell those that demonstrate the answers to: “How are we doing? What’s different?”
7. **Adapting As We Go and Correcting Course:** Important to this step are stories from yourself and others that speak to “what are we learning?”
8. **Completion and Celebration:** Communicate and promote stories about what was accomplished, what results were achieved, and how they were accomplished.

Keep in mind that to sustain momentum throughout the change, the focus in each step of the change cycle needs to move from story to action (demonstration) and then back to story about the action.

### **Leadership, Organizational Change and Stories**

In addition to providing stories, a leader’s work during a change initiative is to listen for and elicit stories from other people involved in the change and to support those stories. As such, telling and listening are reciprocal skills. Storytelling and story sharing in change applications requires us to remember that change is not about launching one story (the need for change or the vision of the future), but to engage in a cycle of stories so that the organization can experience many diverse stories. Attending to story diversity satisfies the law of requisite variety. As Snowden (2002) states: “The Law of Requisite Variety is well understood in ecology—if the diversity of species falls below a certain level then the ecology stagnates and dies. Excessive focus on core competence, a single model of community of practice or a single story are all examples of ways in which organizations can destroy requisite variety” (page 17).

### **Additional Considerations**

Because organizations are systems, they do not follow linear models. When we are working in organizations around change and stories, there are three factors to remember:

1. Change is not predictable and occurs at different rates in an organization. The organization may jump around to various phases of the change cycle.
2. It is important to figure out where one is in the change cycle. Strong clues about this can be gleaned from the stories that are being told or not told.

3. Goals, plans, and structures for organization change emerge over time due to ongoing learning in the organization. Consequently, especially for transformational change, they cannot be clearly detailed from the beginning and need to be continually updated.

Here are some additional questions that come to mind around the topics of organizational change and storytelling. These could be future research opportunities or areas for further discussion within your organization.

1. What are the stories that we have forgotten to tell or tend to ignore that could be critical to successful change initiatives?
2. The notion of authenticity: First of all, what does this mean? Second, what is important for us to know about manipulation and authenticity in order to understand what to do or not do in change initiatives?
3. How does this model of storytelling woven together with organizational change help build community in organizations?
4. If this model works, what would it take to train and coach people in it?
5. How do you measure its effectiveness?
6. If this model is useful, how can it be applied to different venues such as project management?

## **Conclusion**

While the link I have outlined here between organizational change and story work needs further testing, I encourage story practitioners to work with this material in change initiatives or project management activities. I also encourage you to send your observations and findings to me so that we may all continue to learn.

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## Detailed Approach

A version of this model was successfully used at Monsanto when they were going through a large change effort throughout their global enterprise. Each item in the left column is a step in the organizational change cycle; an additional step has been added here (mobilizing commitment). The center column outlines key issues in each step. The right hand column shows the stories that need to be launched and/or listened for and/ told at this particular point in the change cycle.

Step in Change Cycle	Change Issues	Story Types
1. Establishing Committed Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who will stand for the future possibility?</li> <li>• Why and how do we, the leaders, need to take a stand?</li> <li>• What's the time frame?</li> <li>• Where's the passion?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Previous change experiences—failures and successes</i></p> <p>A. Telling stories about when changed worked, when it didn't, what's their passion for current change</p> <p>B. Getting others to tell their stories about when changed worked, when it didn't, what was learned.</p>
2. Focusing the Desire for Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the current state?</li> <li>• Why do we need this current change?</li> <li>• Why is this current change relevant and compelling?</li> <li>• Why should they care about changing in this current environment (WIIFM)?</li> </ul>	<p><i>What is (the current state)</i></p> <p>A. Telling stories about their experiences and conclusions regarding the need for the current proposed change.</p> <p>B. Getting others to tell their stories about their experiences and conclusions regarding the need for the current proposed change.</p>
3. Creating Shared Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the desired future state?</li> <li>• Why is this relevant and compelling?</li> <li>• What is in it for people as we go forward?</li> </ul>	<p><i>The possibilities</i></p> <p>A. Telling stories about your vision.</p> <p>B. Getting others to tell their stories about their vision.</p>

Step in Change Cycle	Change Issues	Story Types
4. Mobilizing Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is my role as an individual?</li> <li>• What is my role within the organization or community?</li> <li>• What if we did it this way?</li> <li>• What if we did it that way?</li> </ul>	<p><i>What are our roles, “what if” (thinking outside the box, and bridging barriers)</i></p> <p>A. Telling stories about individual and group roles, “what if” stories, and the initial barriers people and/or groups have overcome.</p> <p>B. Getting others to tell their stories about individual and group roles, “what if” stories, and the initial barriers they and/or groups have overcome.</p>
5. Taking and Leveraging Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing and communicating plans</li> <li>• Establishing and communicating actions</li> <li>• Communicating milestones and measures</li> </ul>	<p><i>Plans that are made, requests and offers (who, what, when), and actions that are taking place</i></p> <p>A. Telling stories about plans and actions taking place and requests and offers to assist.</p> <p>B. Getting others to tell their stories about plans and actions taking place and requests and offers to assist.</p>
6. Sustaining Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcoming barriers</li> <li>• Shifting resources</li> <li>• Fortitude</li> </ul>	<p><i>Bridging barriers, courage, persistence, etc.</i></p> <p>A. Telling stories about the barriers that are being overcome and where the light will come from in the darkest hours.</p> <p>B. Getting others to tell their stories about barriers that are being overcome and where the light will come from in the darkest hours.</p>
7. Monitoring Progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are we doing?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Successes and what is different and appreciation</i></p>

Step in Change Cycle	Change Issues	Story Types
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are our successes?</li> <li>• What are we learning?</li> </ul>	<p>A. Telling stories about suc-cesses, what is being learned, expressing appreciation about what was made possible.</p> <p>B. Getting others to tell stories about their successes, what they are learning, and expressing appreciation about what was made possible.</p>
8. Adapting as We Go	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are our next plans and actions?</li> <li>• What do we need to fix?</li> <li>• What’s the difference that will make a difference?</li> <li>• What do we need to strengthen?</li> <li>• What will the outcomes be?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Corrections (what happened when things didn’t work) and taking renewed action</i></p> <p>A. Telling stories about adapting and renewed actions.</p> <p>B. Getting others to tell stories about adapting and renewed actions.</p>
9. Celebrating		<p><i>Achievements and changes</i></p> <p>A. Telling stories about what has been achieved, what has been changed and the results experienced, and successes.</p> <p>B. Getting others to tell stories about what has been achieved, what has been changed and the results experienced, and successes.</p>

### About the Author

Karen Dietz, Ph.D., is the Executive Director of the National Storytelling Network (NSN) and former chair of the Storytelling in Organizations Special Interest Group. NSN is the premier association for storytelling and storytellers, in all of its venues, across the nation. In addition to her current duties, she is an expert in story work in organizations, and has used her rich cross



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