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# *“Once Upon a Time...”* – the Use of Storytelling in Consultancy Leadership to Influence Behaviour Changes Post 2020

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** The authors of this chapter were inspired by the parallels they saw between education and management consultancy in terms of the behavioural

change, and the methods used to achieve this. They seek to explore these parallels in particular the use of storytelling.

**Methodology:** The chapter first unpicks the notion of storytelling and goes on to examine the idea of behavioural change and the connection between the two. It goes deeper by rooting this in adult transformational learning. This is then linked to some real-life examples (recruitment and consultancy) of storytelling and adult learning.

**Findings:** The chapter considers some implications for the use of narrative for leaders moving forward into a post-pandemic world.

**Value Added:** Combining narrative with adult learning theory and comparing the world of business with education.

**Recommendations:** It is our hope that examination of this intersection will provide lessons relevant to both the education and business professions.

**Key words:** narrative, storytelling, consultancy, leadership, transformational learning

**JEL codes:** I20, M12, M53

## 1. Introduction

While we might like to believe that behavioural change is something that we adopt rationally and consciously, all too often external factors play uncomfortably pivotal roles, not just the stories we are told, but also the ones we tell ourselves.

Storytellers surround us, whether it is politicians telling us that better times are coming, or advertisers letting us know that all we need to do to make our children happy is to buy their product (Chang, 2012; Wilson, 2005). It seems sensible, therefore, to question why and to what end this is the case: just how powerful can stories be?

This is a question that occasionally rises to national importance, such as in the United Kingdom in 2016 when a narrow majority of the country voted to leave the European Union. Regardless of the



arguments made, it has been suggested the ‘Leave’ side won because they were more effective at telling their story (Forss & Magro, 2016), with one author specifically attributing its success to its similarity to classics of the romance genre (Spencer & Oppermann, 2020).

During the COVID-19 virus pandemic of 2020–2021 urgency entered the discussion, and the importance of effective methods for influencing behavioural change came to the fore. As most European countries went into ‘lockdown’ over the COVID pandemic, each had an individual national narrative, some chosen deliberately and some not, influencing the behaviour of the population. The contrast between a virus which “is very much under control” (BBC News, 2020) and the nightly applause for health-care workers in Italy and Spain mirrored the subsequent experience of these countries and demonstrated the influence of these narratives. In the case of these stories, there was a clear and wide-reaching effect not only in the way they made us feel about ourselves, but also in the way we behaved. Indeed, speeches given by Angela Merkel at the height of the coronavirus pandemic had a measurable effect on the levels of both self-reported depression and anxiety nationally in Germany (Teufel et al., 2020).

This chapter was written during the early part of 2021, as COVID-19 rates reached new highs worldwide. We had been forced to rapidly adapt and discover new ways of influencing others, both externally and within organisations. It remained to be seen whether the adoption of new communication channels would turn out to be more or less effective, but it was apparent that they would constitute a fundamentally different way of changing behaviour (Chan et al., 2020).

In this chapter, we discuss the essential components of storytelling, and how these relate to transformational leadership, before going on to look at how behavioural change can be accomplished through the medium of storytelling by examining a professional context. We then introduce a framework for transformational learning in adults and examine whether this

behavioural change can be considered transformational learning in this way.

While we are mindful of the long-term impact that the pandemic will have, we hope to synthesise lessons to enhance behavioural change through the medium of storytelling and ensure this can be used to drive transformational learning and leadership within organisations long into the future.

## 2. Storytelling Definition, Structure and Elements

### 2.1. Definition

The defining feature of stories that distinguish them from other forms of communication is that they hold the attention of strangers, sometimes transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. The boundaries for other forms of communication that hold our attention are often more limited. For example, an individual may want to hear about events if they are recounted by a close friend, but this may not hold the attention of a stranger if it includes details they cannot follow: incoherence quickly becomes tedious. Furthermore, sometimes attention is maintained because of the consequence of not listening, such as with students and teachers, or in work meetings. This lack of incentive to make something compelling has resulted in the adoption of a less engaging didactic communication; a concept that is recognised as being undesirable in education and work settings alike (Green, 2004).

### 2.2. Structure

Across the centuries, scholars have identified and attempted to quantify the key elements that all stories contain, normally in the



range of five to ten (Krulik, 2015; Yorke, 2013; Butcher, 1902). The inability to land on a definitive number demonstrates the subjective nature of the art of storytelling. Therefore, we have chosen to focus on the 3 that appear most consistently because they are comprehensive enough to provide a useful springboard for discussion without being overwhelmingly convoluted. These three are **character, plot, and exposition**. Normally, the main **character** or characters are the ones whose perspective the recipient is provided with, although not necessarily through that character’s voice. A relatable protagonist that demonstrates character development throughout the story is usually considered more engaging (Norrick, 2000). The **plot** considers the coherence of sequential events and draws on one of the most fundamental physical laws of *cause and effect*. There could be many more events that occur in the story, often dubbed *subplots*, but if they do not somehow shift the narrative, then they usually do not feature in the *main plot*. The **exposition** includes setting and backstory, which is often used to set the tone and provide context for what is happening.

In addition to this, there is a striking regularity to the story structure writers adopt, a set of components which have appeared recurrently throughout history: the **status quo**, the **inciting incident**, the **main action**, the **all is lost moment**, and the **resolution** (Yorke, 2013). The status quo is often when the writer provides the exposition, including setting and backstory, so there is some crossover with the aforementioned 3 story elements. The inciting incident is an event the protagonist encounters that interrupts their normality and acts as a catalyst for them to make a change and leave their comfort zone. The main action involves the pursuit of a goal, and it often contains a series of challenges and a point of no return. The all is lost moment is when the protagonist thinks they have failed in their mission and have lost everything, and the resolution is when things restore themselves, either in the same way as before or, more often, with a fundamental shift in perspective and circumstance. It is important that the tone is consistent: if the story has been realistic and serious in tone throughout, and resolves

with a *deus ex machina*, it is jarring and can be ruinous to the entire narrative. The story must have an internal logic to be believable.

An integral aspect to all stories is **conflict**: it drives all of the action from the inciting incident to the end of the story. I am discussing it separately because, in a similar way to emotion, conflict is an inherent part of being human and its existence in stories is due to the prominent role it plays in everyday life. For example, the competing tension between the instinct to protect oneself and one's immediate family and the instinct to collaborate with large groups to aid progression underscores many of the complex social dilemmas our species grapples with. Furthermore, humans constantly have to balance internal struggles, such as the incompatibility between thoughts and feelings. The word *emotion* stems from the Latin verb meaning 'to move': this demonstrates the intrinsic understanding that emotions motivate one to act, which contemporary endocrinology research reaffirms (Goleman, 1996, p. 6). Conflict and emotion, thus, trigger action.

**Conversational storytelling** is distinct from normal dyadic communication, for which I will adopt Norrick's term, '...turn-by-turn talk' (2000, p. 3). Among other uses, turn-by-turn talk is employed to command, question and plan, whereas the function of stories in conversations are to entertain, enhance rapport, align group members, convey interpersonal information or illustrate a point (Norrick, 2000, p. 200). This type of storytelling can occur spontaneously in reaction to contextual cues: two individuals are chatting in a restaurant when a waitress drops a plate of food, reminding one of them of a time they did something similarly embarrassing, so they proceed to share the story. The recipient will then often respond with a story of their own. A personal anecdote could further illustrate a point, for example, that the local supermarket is always busy on a Saturday. Additionally, 'conversation starters' such as, "Have you ever met a celebrity?," often demand a story, evidencing how stories fuel conversation. Oral narrative tends to be less structured than traditional written stories, with false starts



and repetition a naturally occurring feature, particularly if a rudimentary recount. Despite this, they contain the same elements: an oft cited piece of research into conversational narrative identified 3 distinct narrative clauses, labelled, ‘...action, orientation, and evaluation...’ (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, as cited by Swanson, Rahimtoroghi, Corcoran & Walker, 2014, p. 171). Action clauses incorporate the sequential causal events in the story, akin to the plot; orientation clauses provide the background information, akin to exposition; evaluation clauses offer emotional reactions to key moments in the story, akin to a character’s voice.

### 2.3. Stories Lead to Awakenings

The success of the human species is often attributed to the ability to collaborate in large groups and the capacity to understand how other people are feeling (Harari, 2011). Our ability to work effectively with strangers stems from the human capacity to empathise with anyone in the population, whether immediate family or not. Being able to imagine what another person is feeling is why we can connect with characters in a story, fictional or otherwise. Some theories postulate that we can experience the same emotions as a character; a concept called *blurring* (Wilson, 2012, p. 246). By providing a new entity to empathise with, it broadens our ideas of who warrants our emotional investment, thus, we believe stories encourage empathy with larger groups of people.

Imagination is a tool that humans can employ to deal with conflict and to make decisions, imagining outcomes to various scenarios in their mind before taking action. **Witnessing a character in a story deal with their conflicts, be they internal or external, provides the recipient with possible outcomes to scenarios, without any real-world consequences for them. It helps one learn how to prepare for future scenarios and make decisions by providing a new perspective.** Harmon argues that the structure of popular narrative frameworks, such as *The Hero’s Journey*, reflect

phases of human growth: experiencing something new, facing a series of challenges, feeling like one has failed, and then resolving the episode by learning and growing (Myers, 2018). We agree with Harmon and we think stories reflect Mezirow's definition of transformational learning (discussed in section 4.2. below), particularly in reference to the '...disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 1995, p. 50). The fact that stories make useful teaching tools is a concept that we do not believe is well enough explored in education research, particularly for older students.

Humans are naturally curious: when presented with an initial hook, our brains enjoy piecing together the clues more than being given all the information at once, and we actually anticipate a positive outcome; a phenomenon termed *seeking* (Badt, 2015). It is for this reason that being the recipient of a story is enjoyable, and we are rewarded with endorphins when we solve a puzzle, which could explain why thrillers are such a popular genre. Thrillers in the UK were particularly popular during the lockdowns that occurred in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Flood, 2020).

Stories help us learn by teaching us empathy; broadening our social schemas; increasing our capacity to imagine solutions to hypothetical scenarios; helping us navigate conflict; and demonstrating the process of growth by overcoming obstacles. This transformational learning subsequently leads to awakenings that influence our behaviour and is a useful tool to employ with adults in a work setting. Storytelling may seem dissonant with a professional setting, but we think it can easily be introduced in a presentation, pitch, training, or even just in everyday conversation. As demonstrated above, storytelling and conversation are closely interrelated concepts, demonstrating their cultural and social importance.



## 3. Transformational Learning leads to Behaviour Change and better Leadership

### 3.1. What is transformational behaviour change?

The term ‘behavioural change’ is open to varying interpretations depending on the context. Having established our understanding of storytelling, we need a broad definition to apply to contexts in which the authors have experience. Michie, Van Stralen and West (2011) suggested that behaviour is best thought of as the ‘prevalence or incidence of particular behaviours in specific populations’. We can then adjust this for our purposes to say that a behavioural change is a material change in this prevalence or incidence. When we examine storytelling then, we will be looking for cases in our professional experience that meet this criterion.

While this is broad, this would, for example, capture a client who changed their way of working or an employee who participated in a training course, while not capturing cases which are primarily about changing views rather than a shift in behaviour, such as political or commercial advertising. We must acknowledge though that these shifts in attitude can often be the precursor to behavioural change, as we see from Mezirow’s writing on transformational learning discussed in section 4.2. below.

### 3.2. The notion of power

When thinking about examples of behavioural change, the first to come to mind may be of a negative change imposed by powerful groups on less powerful ones. However, this pertains to

a transactional leadership style, which we are less interested in than a more equitable persuasion to change behaviour that benefits all; this is the contrasting concept of transformational leadership we establish in section 4.1. below. It is vital to ensure the broader applicability of any lessons we are able to synthesise, that we understand that traditional notions of power do not necessarily indicate success in driving behavioural change, as demonstrated by the historical success of climate change protests in driving structural change (Adedoyin et al., 2020).

### 3.3. Context for change in different environments

In our examination of this subject, we will use two contrasting contexts to examine behavioural change. Because of the experience of the authors, we have chosen contrasting examples in the context of management consulting.

The neoliberal concept of the ‘outside expert’ has been in vogue now for more than 100 years, giving rise eventually to the management consultant. For the purposes of this chapter, we will take a broad view on the definition of management consultancy to encompass the advisory services provided by large management consulting firms and accounting firms and innumerable outside experts who provide their advisory services for a fee. The management consulting industry provides a suitable focus for our examination because they have a demonstrable association with storytelling. For example, Accenture’s recent blog post extolling the skill of storytelling as foundational to all of their work (Aguilar, 2021), and PricewaterhouseCoopers’ explicit efforts to use narrative as a way to draw meaning from recent political and economic events within the United Kingdom (PwC, 2021).

As well as the clear promotion of storytelling, the industry is predicated on organisational change, of which behavioural change is an integral part. It is possible to transform organisations without



changing behaviour but it prevents the benefits from that transformation from being fully realised (Lawson & Price, 2003). This means that effectively changing behaviour is a vital necessity for these organisations.

Finally, as the industry matures and services offered risk becoming commoditised, competition increases (Nissen, 2018). In these cases, there is pressure to use effective narrative in order to differentiate services where this might not be possible using more traditional methods (Padgett & Allen, 1997). For example, we see this in the case of Deloitte’s 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary where an advertising campaign is explicitly a historical creation myth of the organisation rather than its current capability or position in the market (Deloitte, 2021).

### 3.4. Theoretical underpinnings

In order to analyse behavioural change within a recognised framework, we need a simple framework which is applicable across the contexts we will discuss. For this purpose, we choose the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) because of its simple three inputs of **Attitude**, an individual’s desire to undertake a specific behaviour, **Subjective Norm**, an individual’s beliefs about the response of others to their undertaking of that behaviour, and **Perceived Behavioural Control**, an individual’s perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour. This is an expanded version of the Theory of Reasoned Actions (Madden, Ellen, & Ajzen, 1992) which we require because of the situations arising, where people believe they will be unable to take the action that they believe is right.

There is a weakness, however. As we are considering relatively small groups of individuals rather than whole populations, we cannot expect behavioural change to arise spontaneously when there are sufficient conditions, but instead must look for animating triggers. There are a number of models which aim to incorporate specific triggers, such as Fogg’s behaviour model (2009), however,

these focus on individual actions, rather than shifts in behaviour, or the process of behavioural change, and so are less useful for our purposes. We will therefore use Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour in order to analyse the narratives that are likely to lead to a behaviour change, with the addition that we must acknowledge specific triggers for the given behaviour, rather than assume it has arisen spontaneously.

First, considering **attitude**, the changes in attitude that storytelling can drive are a common thread in our discussion above, including as part of *The Hero's Journey*, where necessarily the protagonist of the story emerges a different character at the end of the journey compared to when they started. Second, regarding **subjective norms**, the 'blurring' that we have previously discussed regarding empathy for the viewpoint of a character may well change our perception of the views of those around us. This provides the necessary personal connection for a shift in subjective norms that is not possible with other methods of influence, such as advertising. We see this through the need we have established for a protagonist that is relatable to us, having more personal impact on norms. Third, regarding **perceived behavioural control**, which is affected by a number of the story elements we have established, including the pursuit of a goal ending in success or failure, particularly the 'all is lost moment'. The 'blurring' concept is likely to render us particularly affected by the subsequent success or failure of the character and oftentimes, when protagonists model overcoming difficulty in their pursuit, it can encourage us to try something previously deemed impossible.

Finally, as we have established, in our context there is a need for a **trigger**. We can see this with the 'inciting incident' component of stories, combined with the ever-present call to action that a story relies on. Triggers can also be found beyond the story as it stands and may instead be caused by our reaction to the story, particularly when internal conflict is motivating a change in behaviour.

This demonstrates that the elements of storytelling can establish foundations necessary for behavioural change. In order to de-



termine whether these are sufficient, we will examine examples of these principles in action within the professional context.

## 4. Transformational Leadership based on transformational learning and significant Behaviour Change

In this section we draw links between transformational leadership and transformational learning for significant behaviour changes in leaders and their followers, and highlight the clear and valuable place for storytelling for the teller and the listener.

### 4.1. Transformational leadership

We discuss definitions further below, but we understand **transformational leadership** to mean the alignment of structures and roles and the development of sustainable cultures that enable organisations to make their values and vision a reality. The shift in the education and other leadership agendas requires leaders who are comfortable working in this highly complex and dynamically changing environment that will continue post-COVID-19. If change is to be transformational, it is axiomatic that leadership itself needs to be less managerial or transactional and more transformational. There is some consensus in the literature that such leadership involves:

- building a compelling vision of a better future underpinned by high moral confidence;
- establishing shared organisational goals;
- displaying high levels of interpersonal engagement with a deep understanding of personal, team, and organisational learning;
- offering individualised support;

- modelling best practices and important organisational values;
- demonstrating expectations of high performance;
- providing intellectual stimulation for others and seeking best practices;
- creating a productive culture with a commitment to community;
- developing structures to foster participation in decision-making and distributing leadership throughout the organisation; and
- personal resilience.

If these are some of the ingredients for transformational leadership, then critical perspectives are essential if we are to provide high-quality learning in an increasingly frenetic world. The wisdom to make the best possible decisions in the busyness and potential confusion of differing leadership contexts rests on leaders' abilities to employ intelligent, informed discrimination between choices. We believe such leadership requires a passion for social justice and equity, reflective practice, and critical thinking. Transformational leaders should want to question; they should have the courage and the capacity to challenge conventional wisdom and to critique accepted but untested assumptions, beliefs or values systems. Above all leaders need to understand and cultivate their own ability to learn and that of others whom they serve.

## 4.2. What is transformational learning?

Mezirow defines **transformational learning** as: '...the process of effecting change in a frame of reference... [which] are primarily the result of cultural assimilation and the idiosyncratic influences of primary caregivers' (Mezirow, 1997, pp. 5–6). All learning is transformational in that it transforms neural connections in one's brain, but not all learning results in an ideological shift that transforms actions and behaviour. We think Mezirow's definition is referring to the latter. From his definition, it follows that every adult has



a unique frame of reference, given that every adult will have been brought up in a particular culture with a unique set of interactions with their primary caregiver. Moreover, these frames of reference are changeable. Often, this theory is applied solely to adults and, although we believe transformational learning can occur in children, we think it mostly occurs in fully formed brains. Modern cognitive research indicates that brains stop developing at the average age of 25, resulting in adults thinking differently to teenagers (Johnson, Blum, & Giedd, 2009).

Learning is unavoidable because human beings are predisposed to do it: it occurs automatically when we think and feel, and when our senses perceive, therefore, it continues throughout our lives (Spitzer, 2006, p. 50). Transformational learning is distinct from other types of learning because, rather than being focused on new, immediate knowledge, it broadens long-held beliefs and schemas, normally regarding social dynamics. The rate of learning decreases with age: younger learners have faster processing speeds and larger working memories than older learners, which means they can be better at learning new technologies and skills that change frequently. It is this phenomenon that explains why the workplace has been known to favour younger employees and why age discrimination protections are required. However, older people have more life experience, therefore more knowledge stored in their long-term memories that new concepts can connect to. This allows for a deeper understanding of concepts that remain more constant, such as emotions and human behaviour, meaning they are better positioned to be leaders and produce more profound observations on the social sciences (Spitzer, 2006). That is why top leadership positions, such as president of a country or headteacher of a school, tend to be taken by older people.

Mezirow argued that the greatest opportunity for transformational learning occurs after a ‘...disorienting dilemma...’ (Mezirow, 1995, p. 50). This is the result of a crisis or transitional event, such as a bereavement, which implies the trigger must be dramatic. Moreover, his use of the verb ‘effecting’ in the definition we

provided, suggests that the process is consciously and deliberately induced. We believe it happens more frequently and at a less conscious level: everyone encounters challenges, and each challenge that is overcome provides a slightly new perspective that we think the subconscious mind helps to formulate. That is why we believe conversational storytelling can be powerful: each conversation contributes to the tapestry of stories collecting in your mind. Gradually, one's ideology shifts, albeit at a slower rate than were one to regularly practise effortful reflection to challenge one's perception. We think self-reflection is a useful habit to build into one's weekly routine, and many educators recognise its merits in formal learning scenarios as well, with blogs becoming a more widely used educative tool. Storytelling has a clear place here.

Thus, we argue that in order for organisations, whether they be public, private or Third Sector, to thrive in the current and future world, they require transformational leaders. How can these people be prepared and developed appropriately and what would such transformational learning look like? Where does storytelling fit in?

Unlike transmissional and transactional learning, for which there is still a place, transformational learning is more profound and involves the learner finding and knowing their own meanings in relation to their role (such as a leader). Transformational learning is thus a deeply challenging, truly educational, intensely liberating process. It is a journey – a well-used metaphor but still of value – with no prospect of reaching a final destination. It is essential that our leaders are travelling in this way to shape their views of the world, the organisations that they run and the people whom they lead.

Such transformational leadership can be learned. Burbules and Berk (1999) stress four components to such learning:

- the ability to think outside the conventional and accepted ways of doing things;
- the maintenance of the essential tension of controversy (being prepared to accept that leadership can be messy);



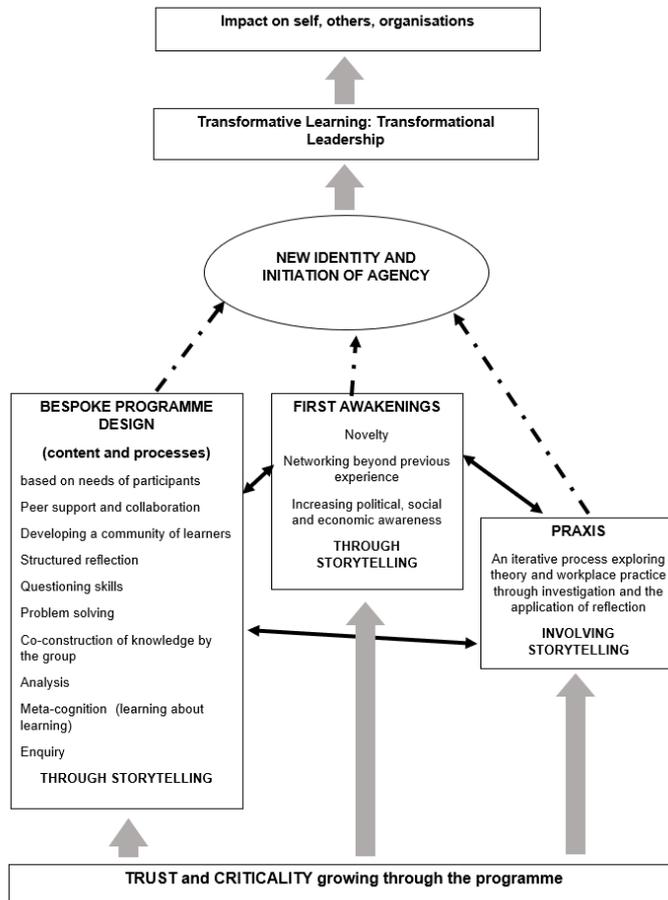
- an interactive, collaborative construction of meaning (developing the involvement of others); and
- fallibilism (accepting that leaders cannot know everything).

Underpinning opportunities for leaders to develop in these ways is the need to develop a critical, enquiring stance. All of these features are those of effective storytelling.

### **4.3. The place of storytelling in a framework of transformational learning**

One of the most useful analyses of opportunities for transformational learning is that by Greenan and Dieckmann (2004). They developed this in evaluating a teacher education course in the USA, but their thinking has wider applications to leadership. Their analysis of transformational learning helps us to see what learning for transformational leadership looks like and how it might be developed. This has been deconstructed and reconstructed by Precey and Jackson (2008). Transformational leadership development seems to rest on three core interrelated elements. These elements are the foundation stones that can make it possible for leaders to learn to behave in transformational ways within their organisations and to help others likewise. As well as the imperative of developing criticality, Bryk and Schneider (2002), Bottery (2004) and Covey (2006) rightly maintain that trust is the magic glue that enables organisations to transform, and this precious commodity needs to be grown by leaders. Therefore, trust along with criticality must underpin and infuse the learning process and this applies to storytelling as well.

Figure 1. Conditions and Processes for Transformational Learning



Source: based on Precey & Jackson (2008).

The clear place of storytelling can be planned, delivered and evaluated through these 3 interrelated elements in the framework:

- A **unique learning programme** that is designed for each particular group of individuals for transformational learning to take place, programmes must be bespoke rather



than standardised “one size fits all”. Storytelling fits comfortably within such programmes as they need to be tailored to fit the whole audience as well as individuals whose behaviour the storyteller seeks to confirm or alter. They need to be designed to influence and so should pay attention to Burbules and Berk’s (1999) four components of transformational learning in order to be most effective;

- **Praxis**, here meaning “the intentional capacity to identify and implement alternatives” (Miron & Lauria, in Greenan & Dieckmann, 1998 p. 189) must be developed. This involves interrogating practice against relevant theory and research and vice versa. Storytelling as discussed has a clear rationale in relation to andragogy;
- **Awakenings** through which the transformation of learners through the concepts explored must be precipitated, and personal and institutional knowledge constructed leading to the reconstruction (or even confirmation) of identity. Just as in the *Hero’s Journey*, storytelling in a transformational learning context is all about such awakenings in individuals listening (Campbell, 2008).

Profound behaviour change rests on **awakenings** leading to those involved seeing themselves differently with a **new sense of identity**. This in turn can lead to a **greater sense of agency** and unlocking the potential of human beings – one of the major roles, we would argue, of leaders.

## 5. Theories in Action

In the following case studies, we discuss experiences at work in relation to the storytelling elements we explored previously. In each case study, we find that our examples of situations that changed behaviour map very easily onto story structures, demonstrating the aforementioned theoretical link.

## 5.1. Graduate recruitment

There is perhaps no greater behaviour change that is forced on us externally than when we begin a new job. In this case study, we consider the case of the graduate intake of a large Professional Services organisation.

The story begins before candidates have decided to apply, with the firm organising well-resourced recruitment events featuring dedicated professionals. Sessions start with the organisation, its accomplishments, history, and the part you can play in that, with reward and work only minor features. This continues through the application and offer process, where candidates wait in modern rooms attended by well-dressed professionals with glossy printouts of the firm's latest research at hand. The story of what can be expected is reinforced. The final stage is the induction process which begins not with training, but with a presentation from the CEO, and the story is complete. Graduates are now a part of this organisation, and this is the motivation for their behavioural change which will make them more effective over the coming weeks and years to the organisation.

We can see that this largely follows the framework of a story we have established, with the graduate themselves playing the part of the protagonist. There is clearly a status-quo before application, followed by the inciting incident as we are shown something we want, but can't easily obtain. This is followed by the main action of the application process before the resolution of the story as that application is successful. We can even locate a series of 'all is lost' moments, as candidates at multiple stages of the application are left unsure whether they will be able to progress to the next stage, waiting for an external influence. Of course, this assumes that the application is successful. If the application is unsuccessful, it no longer follows our narrative structure, but this does not affect the organisation, as there is no longer a need for behavioural change.



We can see that this narrative then goes some way to meeting our theory of planned behaviour. While it may initially appear that there is not the personal relevance to impact the subjective norms, in fact it may be that as candidates internalise this narrative and the positivity with which it is delivered, they come to shift their views of the opinions of their peers and family. As well, while it may appear that this narrative would reduce the perceived behavioural control of candidates, the deliberate inclusion of diverse examples of successful candidates throughout the process is a clear effort to mitigate this, as candidates are exposed to successful ‘people like them’. Third, trivially, this narrative also shifts attitude positively, making candidates significantly more likely to apply. This is evident from the significant resources which these organisations are willing to spend. Of course, it is important to note that this is not a story that works in isolation, but one that compliments the culturally pervasive narrative of hard work leading to good grades leading to good jobs, allowing it to have a greater impact than it would have by itself.

We can examine then the extent to which this provides the foundational elements for transformational learning as described by Precey (2008). First, the structure of the delivery is necessarily not unique because the same materials are present en masse to a wide audience with whom the firm will only have a fleeting connection. However, this narrative is not over once the input has been delivered, but instead relies on each individual’s response being highly personal. This is further reinforced by the personalisation of information available from secondary sources, such as relevant websites and personal interactions with graduate recruiters. In terms of praxis, we find that this experience goes at least some way to fulfil the necessary criteria. The recruitment process is designed not to develop the capacity to make rational comparisons between organisations, but instead focuses on making decisions between the options available as part of the organisation. Finally, more clearly, we see that this narrative contains an awakening event, as the primary purpose of the narrative is to elicit

a behavioural change (a completed and successful application) within a specific timeframe.

Surprisingly, this narrative has remained mostly similar during the Coronavirus pandemic. While the medium has changed entirely to delivery over webinars and video calls, the structure has remained similar, with the identified elements intact. The longer-term impacts of this change remain to be seen, but this indicates that, however wide ranging the impact of the virus on logistics, the narrative remains the crucial component in the process.

## 5.2. Storytelling in Consulting Projects

Narratives are used constantly between a management consultant and a client, regardless of whether the story is being sold to the client, or the client is proposing a change story to the consultant and requesting their help to implement it. An example of one such story is a project where the client was a police force, so the consultant set them up as the protagonist. The process of holding remand hearings was that a police officer would travel to a local court with a defendant, whereby a judge determined their punishment for minor crimes. This formed a less than ideal status quo. The inciting incident was realising how inefficient and costly this process was to the police, when technology offers a quicker and cheaper alternative. The main action involved many technological obstacles, as all involved had to learn an entirely new and uncomfortable way of virtual working, including police, lawyers, translators and the media. However, after the height of frustration and discomfort, perhaps occurring in the first experience of a virtual remand hearing, the narrative resolved with a much more convenient process, whereby all actors other than the judges in the remand hearing could join the event virtually from their laptops, wherever was convenient. Moreover, the inherent understanding of story structure meant the client understood that, although the journey was difficult, it was worthwhile and would result in an

awakening. It also, crucially, changed the client’s behaviour. Drawing from Azjen’s theory: the client’s attitude was favourable to the change, they believed in the positive response of the public, and a dedicated team of change professionals helped them to perceive the behaviour as easy enough for them to control.

Moreover, the foundational elements of Precey and Jackson’s (2008) framework for transformational leadership learning can also be seen in this example. The structure for all transformation project plans must be bespoke for them to be successful: this was not a one size fits all approach. The context of the police force with its idiosyncrasies was taken into account and there were variations across regions accordingly. Praxis was applied in the technological solution proposed, whereby all alternatives were considered. Finally, awakenings were apparent throughout, particularly in the narrative the client told themselves. Some actors who had resigned themselves to being ‘bad at technology’, had to challenge that notion and overcome it, leading to a reconstruction of their identity.

## 6. Conclusions

This chapter has argued and illustrated that storytelling can beneficially be at the heart of significant individual and organisational behaviour change if harnessed by transformational leaders who understand and are skilful in deploying the important principles underpinning transformational learning. A framework has been offered in which to locate this narrative approach. Storytelling provides tools and a methodology for changing behaviour, but also, when done with knowledge and understanding that this chapter seeks to develop in the reader, facilitates transformational learning in both the storyteller and those listening. The process of a narrative, starting with practice and drawing out general learning points is in itself transformative. As seen in the case studies, Storytelling by external consultants can clearly provide the found-

ations for behavioural change. Such behavioural change best rests on the pillars of adult transformational learning:

- a unique story and structure provided by the individual telling and responding to the narrative, leading to;
- awakenings in individuals (both teller and listener) which are necessarily provided by these narratives, underpinned by;
- praxis that brings together adult learning theory and day to day practice so that there is a solid foundation for the use of stories to change behaviours.

We can learn lessons from the application of theory to these case studies. We should not underestimate the extent to which recipients will internalise the narrative, and leaders should facilitate this wherever possible. Coronavirus has not fundamentally changed the nature of storytelling for behavioural change and may indeed have made it more foundational. This enforced lockdown forced storytelling to become virtual and less impromptu: working from home limited the chances of bumping into a colleague whilst getting coffee and socialising generally was significantly reduced. We think a fascinating area of future study would be to evaluate if this had an effect on internal behavioural change initiatives in organisations.

Storytelling has been a feature of human interaction for as long as we have existed, although the means of communication have changed a little throughout history. Effectively used, it is still a strong feature of deep learning and significant, even profound, change, and effective transformational leadership. Transformational leaders unlock the potential and harness the talents of themselves and those whom they serve. They understand the power of transformational learning and facilitate it in order to change behaviours in themselves and others. Storytelling is something we all grow up with and we all love a good tale. Let us learn from them to become more developed human beings.

*“Once upon a time...”*



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