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The Organizational Story as Leadership

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Abstract *Leaders are often noted for providing a compelling vision that inspires followers to act to fulfill the vision, often by telling stories. Here, we begin a separation of the notion of ‘leader as person’ from the notion of leadership as the discourse that represents such a vision. We transcend the notion that leaders tell stories, to the proposition that stories themselves operate like leaders. We suggest that people follow the story as much as they follow the storyteller or author, hence the story becomes the leader. In discussing the characteristics that stories share with leadership, we generate two propositions. First, within the context of organizational development, leadership development can move from ‘people’ development to the development of the narratives that resonate within organizations. Second, we decouple leader as person or position, from leadership as process in order to illustrate stories as leaders. We conclude with specific messages that individuals can take away.*

Keywords *discourse; leadership; organizational stories*

Introduction: The possibility of the organizational story as leader

The Fedex courier did not intend to go swimming during the work day, especially with harsh winds and rain covering much of Honolulu, Hawaii. However, when a gust of wind plucked a package from the back of his truck and flung it into the ocean, James did not think twice about diving in. James recovered the package and, soaking wet, delivered it to the customer.

This story was taken from the Fedex corporate website where employees shared stories that emulated the motto: ‘Absolutely, Positively Whatever It Takes’ to deliver a package. We have heard of others that range from employees chartering helicopters to deliver a package when weather had shut down roads, to a ‘drop box’ that could not be opened, uprooted and hauled into the back of a truck and driven straight to a sorting center to meet a delivery deadline. These stories all demonstrate enactment of the motto ‘Absolutely, Positively Whatever It Takes’. When employees invoke those stories while enacting new ones with their own plotlines, they are both responding to and practising leadership.

With the Fedex example as an appetizer, we begin by reviewing the literature on

organizational stories with the aim of illustrating the similarities between the nature of leadership and the properties of organizational stories. Without wishing to usurp many years of great research, our general conclusion is that people follow, and are influenced by, organizational stories and we suggest that organizational stories demonstrate leadership as much as any person demonstrates leadership. We then consider story making as a leadership activity and discuss insights for leadership when seen as stories. We propose that organizational development can benefit from our way of thinking and suggest that scholars might benefit from a further decoupling of 'leader as a person' from 'leadership as a process'. We conclude with a few practical implications for those in leadership roles.

In this article, we are not proposing that story telling is synonymous with leadership. There is a considerable literature to that effect, and we are not contradicting it. Nor are we proposing that the author of the story is the leader. There is also a literature to that effect and we are not denying it either. However, what we are proposing is that when a story displays leadership, we can view a story as a leader. Our discussion concentrates more specifically on organizational stories. As such we are implicitly drawing upon functionalist or unitarist understandings of organizational leadership. Much of our literature has an organizational underpinning. In effect, an organizational story may 'do' things that we often recommend leaders do, such as inspire followers. A story can do this without any active intervention by a person, whether author or storyteller.

The questions that we ask of leadership will help to develop our understanding of the links between organizational stories and leadership. In a criticism of the state of leadership studies, Alvesson and Deetz (2000: 52) wonder if Yukl's (1989) agenda to define 'What is Leadership' could have mislead leadership research. They suggest that more might be learned from questions regarding 'what can we see, think, or talk about if we think of leadership as this or that?' Our aim in this article is to ask just such a question, asking what we can see, think and talk about if we think of organizational stories as leadership. We also propose some insights we think are revealed by taking the perspective that stories are leaders. Specifically, we are assessing the organizational context for this examination. The potential value of engaging these questions is that in taking alternative views of leadership, we might reveal new aspects of leadership.

History has already provided us with insights. Pragmatic thought over the last century has established that the meanings of things and how we treat, react, and interact with them are determined by how those things function. Just as objects are defined by their use or purpose, when stories serve the same functions we associate with leadership, they begin to operate, do things, like leaders. So we contend that people follow the story more so than they follow the person who composes or tells the story. Therefore, the story can enact leadership as much as any person can act as a leader.

The following examination of the literatures surrounding the nature of leadership and the characteristics and effects of organizational stories highlights the conceptual similarities between the two constructs.

The nature of leadership and the nature of stories

We will commence with a discussion about the nature of organizational stories and the impact they have upon audiences. Next we will examine the characteristics and impact of leadership in order to determine the areas of overlap. We found four areas of overlap.

What is an organizational story?

Organizations have, tell, and are stories. Boje (1991: 111) defines a story as ‘an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience’. Stories are challenging for storytellers, and contain simple but resonant plots and characters, entailing risk, aimed at entertaining, persuading, and winning the audience over (Gabriel, 2000). Organizational stories provide members with models that guide their behavior and sense-making: ‘Organizational stories capture organizational life in a way that no compilation of facts ever can; this is because they are carriers of life itself, not just “reports” on it’, said Czarniawska (1997: 21). These characteristics of stories certainly reflect the Fedex stories in our introduction. Moreover, Gardner and Avolio (1998) contend that leadership is a dramaturgical performance. In effect, leadership becomes an operationalization of the organizational story.

Organizational stories emerge from the organization and reflect the norms, values and culture of that organizational context. They are detailed narratives of the past, and include particulars about management actions, changes in strategy and employee interactions. Given the organizational culture, context and past, stories provide a plot for employees, a proposal that if they take similar actions they should achieve the same ends as in the story. The typical plots of these stories include for example, and among many others,

- The rule-breaking story;
- When the little person rose to the top;
- How the boss reacts to mistakes;
- How the organization deals with obstacles;
- The change incident;
- The story of the restructure.

Organizational stories seem to have a general theme about overcoming adversity. However, because they are stories about and within an organization, it is not possible to claim that they have plots that follow the plot taxonomies of more recreational narratives.

How stories have an impact

Stories call for thought and action. One underlying assumption that links stories and behaviors is that discourse *does* things (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, cited in Phillips et al., 2004, emphasis added). A story is a discursive narrative plot with a beginning and end and conveys some meaningful past or future experience. Stories do things, they create things, bringing notions and ideas to a level where they can

be represented coherently and acted upon. A close link between story and action provides insight into the behavior because, and as Boje (1995) and Czarniawska (1997) assert, people use stories to make sense of and share experience as well as construct lines of action. We also express feeling and provide rationale for decisions or actions by building stories to represent why we do the things we do or want to do (Weick, 1995). In fact, Mumby and Clair (1997) contend that organizations only exist in so far as we create them through discourse, with organizations existing as a collection of all the stories, often competing, that are their make up (Boje, 1995). The idea that an organization is just 'a collection of stories' is not dissimilar from an organization making the popular claim that 'we are nothing more than our people'. Those people, and the organization, represent themselves by building stories that help them make sense of and communicate 'who we are'. They then also 'live' by those stories, using them to guide their actions and behaviors. All in all, we consider stories as metaphors representing organizational life, but recognize that metaphors have powerful and concrete effects, such that stories can operate and function just as leaders do.

Sequential and temporal impact

Boje (1991, 1995) reminds us that stories in organizations often come about in reaction to change, and reveal hidden aspects of the situation to the listeners. They also reveal hidden aspects of the people involved and in storying solutions to a problem or constructing a response, engender a new predicament which calls for thought, action or both. Thus, stories help to create a vision of the future, a coherent sense of the past and a journey for the listener. In effect, they take the listener from the past, to the present, and on to the future. In doing so, Czarniawska (1997) suggests that stories are able to hold sometimes disparate events together to form a coherent understandable whole, one on which people can base their future actions.

In addition, stories are effective because listeners are able to recall events and are likely to remember the information (Wilkins, 1984). Finally, listeners understand why they should do things, just as leaders would wish for followers to understand how and why they should behave differently. The more memorable the story, the greater is the impact upon the audience. We suggest that the impact that organizational stories have upon listeners is conceptually similar to the impact that leadership has upon followers. Just as leadership is theorized by Parry (1998) and others as a social influence process, organizational stories have an influence on audiences through their processual nature.

The processual nature of stories

We do contend that people follow stories, and therefore stories demonstrate leadership. By the same token, we could say for example that dishwashers do the washing up, and I do the washing up, therefore 'I am a dishwasher'. This is also true. However, we would add that although this latter statement defines an identity for people, it is not yet complete. I am a dish washer, among other things, or *inter alia*. The function does not fully define the object. By contrast to a dishwasher, leadership is not a concrete object. A story is more of a social construction than an object. A story can be modified and transform with each telling. Just as leadership is enacted with each

different manifestation, so too does a story alter and vary with each telling. Leaders are made of stories, but not *only* of stories. Similarly, a story is a leader, *inter alia*. Not surprisingly, the closest manifestation of leadership is that which takes the form of stories that are espoused by people in leadership positions.

Story as prophet

Similarly, we can suggest other similarities between leaders and stories. For instance, leaders are scapegoated within organizations when there is trouble, or followers develop dependency on the leader to deliver them in moments of crisis. Could we say the same things of stories? We contend that we can. Stories are scapegoated, just as there is a dependency on stories to deliver people in crisis. For example, a prayer could well be an appeal to the story about delivery from a crisis situation. We contend that stories are illocutionary in as much as they are acts of speech that presuppose some form of action or compliance. For example, a person fails when they are told that they are a failure, or a person succeeds when they are told that they are capable.

In some cases, leaders victimize, judge, punish and even kill people. To step outside the organizational domain for a moment, we could attempt to posit, perhaps as a mater of ontology, that stories do the same. For instance, a racist story may act as the prompt for lynching, but is it the story that does the killing? Well, Weick (1995) says that stories can be prophecies. For example, there is little difference between prompting racist lynching and actually doing the killings. Besides, we are not saying stories *do* these things; we are saying people are *led* to do them by stories as much as by other people. For example, stories might say that white people are better than black people, so white people might enact that story and ascribe to it by behaving that way. In fact, in the case of racial violence, the story that conveys the message that 'they deserve it' would be even more powerful than a person telling whites to be violent. People are in these stories, but the stories are not about specific, identifiable people. They are about anonymous people. In so doing, the story moves away from the identifiable leader toward an emphasis on leadership.

Exemplars of leadership

The ultimate exemplars of organizational stories might be sayings, parables and fables. People learn through following the morals inherent within the parable of the boy who cried 'wolf' or the fable about the goose that laid the golden egg. These messages are metaphors for behavior in organizations. After all, we all know of someone who metaphorically cried 'wolf' and we all know of examples of how an organization has killed the goose that laid the metaphorical golden egg. By learning those moral maxims, people follow a course of action that is expected and rewarded within the organization. Certainly, each storyteller is demonstrating leadership. Just as certainly, Aesop demonstrated leadership by first recording those stories. However, each telling of the story is slightly different from the last. With each unique telling of the story, people probably do not consciously or unconsciously model themselves upon the storyteller. Perhaps people model themselves upon the message inherent within the story itself. I never knew Aesop. I cannot recall the people who have recounted those stories to me, and even if I did, I am not following the storyteller because the storyteller is merely a vehicle of the story itself. It is the story,

characterized by moral rectitude and an implicit expectation that I will alter my behavior for the better, which is the true leader whenever it is told.

Leadership, stories and following

It is an *a priori* characteristic of leadership that it generates following. Similarly, Boje (2001) contends that one of the criteria for the effectiveness of a story is that it possesses what he calls 'followability'. A story could be what Kerr and Jermier (1978) call a substitute for leadership. However, even though an organizational story does not fit into Kerr and Jermier's typology of substitutes for leadership, it does have the effect of substituting for active leadership behaviors by a person in a leadership role.

Leaders affect the way their followers interpret the world around them. Trust and credibility imply that a leader can be taken at face value to provide meaningful appraisal of the situation or crisis the organization faces. But in communicating a vision, leaders probably cannot predict the future. Rather, they do two things. First, they provide an appreciation of the possibilities that the future might offer to followers. Put another way, they articulate scenarios that are possible for the future (Shamir et al., 1994). Second, Conger and Kanungo (1998) would assert that they make sense of and communicate a future that the organization can determine and pursue for itself. That future is bounded by many barriers, but within that bounded rationality, visionary leaders confirm confidently that the organization can hew out its own future. Weick (1995) contends that leaders make sense of those possibilities. Wilkins (1984) and Boyce (1995) discuss stories as an outcome of sense-making, but an outcome that influences future sense-making.

Following the charismatic leadership story

Charismatic leadership is most closely associated with visionary leadership. Charismatic leadership can only exist in the attributions of followers (Shamir, 1992). Hence, charismatic leadership lies not so much in the content of the message but on the impact that the message has on followers. We contend that the 'contagious' way in which stories spread could reflect the 'social contagion' attribute of leadership, as posited by Meindl (1990). Hence, it is the story of the charismatic leader, and the story told by the charismatic leader, that people are likely to follow. For example, Shamir et al. (2005) have articulated persuasively how leadership can be effected through the biography, or life story, of others. Gandhi is one example that they use. It is not the telling of the life story by Gandhi himself that has the effect, but the retelling of the story by many people over many years that has the leadership effect. In effect, the biography does the leading.

Charismatic leadership also enhances the self-concept of followers, who generate an emotional attachment to the leader (Shamir et al., 1993). Gabriel (2000) asserts that one of the characteristics of stories is that they can appeal more to emotion than reason. Charismatic and visionary leaders often inspire followers using emotion where rational appeals cannot be made because future states or projected outcomes are unclear. Stories are not bound by fact or rational evidence in portraying future states. Stories have their impact partly through their ability to inspire action for the listener. Every future-focused story is a proposal for action, detailing what behaviors lead to various ends, and how.

The role of discourse

The proposition that organizational stories can be ‘leaders’ relies upon our assumptions, taken from discourse theory, that we ‘make things’ with discourse. But discourse entails a duality in that it constructs as well as represents reality. We make sense of experience by constructing representations that we can share with others, but our constructions are all we know of ‘what happened’. So in constructing stories to make sense of something, we help to make the thing itself, which is both created and represented by the story. We do not know events in any objective sense, we know our version of events through building a discursive story that explains what happened and what actions we took or want to take. When we tell stories about ourselves to others, they know us not only by those stories, but ‘as’ those stories. We assumed that people, leaders, are an amalgamation of the discourses they speak – that leaders, as they are known to followers at least, are a collection of the discourses they engage in, and the stories they tell. So if we can separate the stories from the people who tell them, then we can separate leadership from a particular leader. Stories themselves then become leaders in that they exhibit the functions of leadership. This is why we contend that the construction of some organizational stories amounts to leadership development.

Table 1 summarizes the literatures which reflect the conceptual similarities between leadership and organizational stories. Within that table, we see four areas of overlap between the leadership literature and the literature on organizational stories. Within these areas of overlap we argue that narrative has a role to play in creating reality, in much the same way that leadership attempts to do so. Those four areas of overlap are now examined.

Sagas, epics and myths

In early research on organizational stories, Clark (1972) linked leadership and vision with ‘organizational sagas’, which were used as a claim of unique accomplishment (Boyce, 1996). Mitroff and Kilmann (1975) introduced ‘epic myths’, which capture the unique qualities of an organization and serve as repositories of meaning, especially useful in socialization. Organizational stories have been conceptualized as symbols, organizational culture (Mumby, 1987; Myrsiades, 1987; Rosen, 1991), visions (Conger, 1989; Gardner & Avolio, 1998), and maps (Perrow, 1979). Organizational stories map dangerous areas and safe social territory, and help employees focus on destinations and values in organizations (Perrow, 1979). All of these provide images of guidance. We contend that leadership is also about mythology (Pfeffer, 1981), symbolism (Gagliardi, 1990; Smircich, 1983), presenting a vision (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Nanus, 1992; Sashkin, 1988), and providing a direction (Sagie, 1997).

Sense-making

The second area of overlap between the literatures on leadership and organizational stories is in the area of sense-making. Stories are symbols that represent organizational understandings. Tacit understandings about organizational life are made explicit and represented in stories (Boje, 1991, 1995; Feldman, 1990), and stories

Table 1 *Similarities between leadership and organizational stories*

Leadership	Stories
Generates following (<i>a priori</i>) Sensemaking (Pye, 2005; Weick, 1995)	Have 'followability' (Boje, 2001) Sensemaking activity (Boyce, 1995; Boje, 1995; Wilkins, 1984)
Inspiring a shared vision (Kouzes & Posner, 1987)	"
Management of meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982)	Unfamiliar → familiar (Weick, 1995)
Develops sense of purpose and mission (Bass & Avolio, 1997)	Provide sense of purpose (Gardner & Avolio, 1998)
Activates higher-order needs (Bass, 1985)	Activate higher-order needs (Shamir, 1995)
Not prescriptive (Conger, 1991)	Have a loose script (flexible) (Shaw, 2000)
Role modeling (Bass, 1985; Kouzes & Posner, 1987)	Provide examples (Wilkins, 1984)
Dramaturgical performance (Gardner & Avolio, 1998)	Oral or written performance (Boje, 1991)
[Permeates] organizational behavior (Yukl, 2002)	Permeate every organization (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1985)
Empowers employees (Bass, 1985)	Empower employees (Ouchi, 1981)
Requires power (<i>a priori</i>)	Powerful voices silence others (Gordon, 2002; Ng & De Cock, 2002; Sims, 2003)
Builds organizational culture (Schein, 1992)	Forge a collective identity (Gardner & Avolio, 1998)
Enhances adaptability to change (Parry, 1999)	Provides plot for change (Boje, 1995)
Generates teamwork (Bass, 1990)	Unify groups (Martin, 1982)
Arouses positive emotions (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000)	Inspire action (Gabriel, 2000)
<i>Leadership is about . . .</i>	<i>Organizational stories are . . .</i>
Mythology (Pfeffer, 1981)	Epic myths (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975) and organizational sagas (Clark, 1972)
Symbolism (Gagliardi, 1990; Smircich, 1983)	Symbols (Mumby, 1997; Rosen, 1991)
Presenting a vision (Nanus, 1992; Sashkin, 1988)	Visions (Conger, 1989)
Providing direction (Sagie, 1997)	Maps – direction and guidance (Boje, 1991; Perrow, 1979)
<i>Leader . . .</i>	<i>Story teller . . .</i>
Has credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 1987)	Has credibility (Barry & Elmes, 1997)
Challenges the process (Kouzes & Posner, 1987)	Provides novelty (new way of doing things) (Barry & Elmes, 1997)
Stimulates intellectually (Bass, 1985)	
<i>Leaders . . .</i>	<i>Stories . . .</i>
Are often transient	Can be enduring
Need good stories	Good stories need a story teller
Engage in discourse	Are a form of discourse
Are hard to replace	Are easy to generate

serve as a means to pass on organizational understandings to others. Wilkins (1984) asserted that

Stories are powerful vehicles for transmitting values because they exemplify and give concrete context to abstract values. They also provide scripts about how to get things done and what to expect in organizations. They provide managers with useful ways to understand and even influence the maps in employees' heads. (p. 59)

As maps, stories provide direction in sense-making and guide behavior. Boje (1991) described stories as bits and pieces of organizational experience that are recounted socially to formulate recognizable, cogent, defensible, and rational collective accounts that serve as precedents for individual assumption, decision, and action. Stories help organizational members leverage the experience of others, which help them fill in gaps in their own understandings and sense-making, providing suggestions for action (Boje, 1995). Similarly, Parry (1999) found that leadership can enhance the adaptability of followers to the turbulence and uncertainty of change.

Ouchi (1981) suggested that when employees come to understand and believe a management philosophy it is like having a general theory from which specific solutions can be derived. Managers do not have to tell employees what to do in each case. Similarly, Bass (1985) contends that one of the axiomatic characteristics of leadership is that it empowers employees. Once they have a general solution, they can determine the specific actions they need to take to achieve an outcome. Stories are used as scripts that employees refer to when deciding which behavior and attitudes are acceptable or what they can expect the organization to do in the future (Boje, 1991, 1995). Stories provide a set of examples of past management actions which makes corporate philosophy come alive (Wilkins, 1984). Boyce (1995) explains that story telling is a sense-making activity, a symbolic form by which groups and organizational members construct shared meaning from which meaningful action arises. Stories are a form of organizational life that can be shaped, shared and passed on to new employees. By the same token, Pye (2005) and Weick (1995) contended that leadership is a sense-making activity, and Kouzes and Posner (1987) posited that leadership is the inspiring of a shared vision. Mitroff and Kilmann (1975: 19) contend that a central story permeates each organization, 'infused into all levels of policy and decision-making'. Likewise, Yukl (2002) contends that leadership permeates organizational behavior.

Collective identity

The third area of overlap between the literatures on leadership and organizational stories is in the area of collective identity. Organizational stories not only unify groups (Martin, 1982) and their understandings regarding organizational goals, but forge a collective identity among followers, suggested Gardner and Avolio (1998). By the same token, Bass (1990) asserted that leadership generates teamwork. Communication is more effective in organizations that rely on corporate stories as a source of inspiration because they promote consistency (Van Riel, 2000), and provide continuity (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975). Perhaps stories are more flexible than leaders. Leaders may come and go, but an enduring corporate story can last the life of the

company, and just as everyone enacts their interpretation of a leader's vision, they enact the vision a story provides. Just as a leader's vision changes, so do stories as they take on more voices, and hold diverse ideas in a coherent whole. Some of the other characteristics that stories share with leaders may include mobility and a potentially long organizational lifespan. They might also allow for multiple interpretations by followers balanced with the potential for sending a consistent message.

Leadership and stories as a source of power

The final area of overlap between the literatures on leadership and organizational stories is role of power. Some competing narratives are more hegemonic than others and thus marginalize other narratives and silence some constructive voices (Boje, 1995, 2001). Gordon (2002) found that stories are one of the deep power structures through which leadership is dispersed, often problematically, in organizations. We should be conscious of the power relations we construct with stories. Examples are the behaviors that are encouraged or discouraged in our organizational stories. For instance, we could ask whether risk taking and creativity are rewarded or punished. We could ask who is benefiting from the enactment of various stories, and who authored the stories and for what purposes. Similarly, we could ask what underlying assumptions are seen in our stories. For example, are leaders in our corporate stories all white men who value work over family?

Stories can be instruments of oppression and mystification as well as instruments of contestation and rebellion. Sims (2003) provides examples of how middle managers 'story' or narrate their lives in an environment where those stories are contested and resisted. We posit that if you are not allowed to narrate yourself in some way, it is the same as not being allowed to live that way. For example, if women cannot be storied as leaders, they cannot be leaders. Whereas Sims is discussing story telling as much as the nature of the story, the point is well made that a story can be contested by another story, just as one leader can be over-ruled by a more powerful or persuasive leader. Power and influence are central in leadership. Dahl (1957) said power was getting someone to do something they otherwise would not have, and Yukl (2002) has concluded that the utilization of power is axiomatic of leadership. The similarities between the literatures on leadership and organizational stories provide an important background. However, to add some utility to this argument, it is probably necessary to apply a practical focus. Hence, it is necessary to examine the potential application of these insights about the similarities between leadership and organizational stories.

Making good stories and making leadership

Perhaps people in leadership roles need good stories, but good stories do not need 'leaders' in order to be told. Of course, we contend that the stories are the leaders. Stories may well emerge within organizations as a by-product of attending to experience, sense-making, and communication. We are suggesting that in addition to the emergent stories, there is the opportunity for stories to be created, much as the Fedex 'story' was created. So how do we go about making good stories? For the most part, the extant literature has not focused on the construction of stories. Rather, the extant

literature has defined the components and characteristics of stories and their role in organizations. Denning (2004) offers a comprehensive categorization of story patterns that are paired with various objectives, offering a story type for every circumstance and a projection of what feelings various stories might inspire. But with the growth of the interpretive paradigm, stories emerged as great 'factories' of meaning – creating it, transforming it, testing it, sustaining it, fashioning it, and refashioning it (Gabriel, 2000), and perhaps the field needs to move from story telling to story making. Certainly, we are suggesting that to maximize the manifestation and utility of leadership in our organizations, we should move from story telling to story making. Because leadership is central to our argument, a good starting point might be the construction of a vision.

Constructing a vision

We begin with a very functionalist perspective on how leadership might be enhanced through story making. Alvesson and Deetz (1996) suggest that corporate visions and cultures are strategic local narrative constructions which provide integration and motivation. For example, at 3M, stories are constructed to explain events and their significance (Shaw et al., 1998). Strategic stories specify critical relationships and demonstrate how goals can be achieved. Employees understand their role in the organization's story, enhancing their sense of commitment and involvement (Shaw et al., 1998). Stories help organizational members leverage the experience of others, which help them fill gaps in their own understandings and sense-making, providing conclusions or suggesting actions (Boje, 1995). Stories help them make sense of unfamiliar situations by linking them to familiar ones (Weick, 1995), just as Smircich and Morgan (1982) contend that leadership is the management of meaning. Stories also provide precedents for times of crisis or change (Boje, 1991). Stories symbolize overarching purpose in a way that inspires and teaches, and provide suggestions about how participants should act once inspired. All these characteristics of stories are very much like the constructions of visions that leaders provide for their organizations.

Gardner and Avolio (1998) explored how leaders use stories to influence future behavior and use stories to articulate an organizational vision, one that challenges the status quo and aligns followers' values and aspirations. In providing an idealized vision, stories can make followers' work more meaningful and provide them with a deeper sense of purpose, even activating followers' higher-order needs by appealing to their desire to contribute to the collective good (Bass, 1985; Shamir, 1995). This forging of a collective identity parallels the leadership function of building organizational culture, as claimed by Schein (1992). This development of a sense of purpose or mission, this generation of an organizational vision, is also a characteristic of leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1997).

Novelty and plausibility

To be effective, stories should build a world that is experienced by the reader as plausible and believable despite the potentially fictional nature of the story (Phillips, 1995). Barry and Elmes (1997) assume that effective story tellers manage to achieve

two fundamental outcomes: credibility (or believability), which Kouzes and Posner (1987) argue is one key to effective leadership, and defamiliarization (or novelty). This novelty is conceptually akin to Kouzes and Posner's leadership factor 'challenging the process', Bass's (1985) leadership factor called 'intellectual stimulation', or Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe's (2001) transformational leadership factor of 'critical and strategic thinking'.

Stories should be loose scripts, suggesting specific behaviors without imposing inflexible rules. Similarly Conger (1991), in an assessment of the 'language of leadership', concluded that leadership need not be prescriptive. Good stories should plot events that make sense and be concrete enough to provide a vision for collective decision and action (Wilkins, 1984) where people can see their roles, and know what actions are called for, yet flexible enough to allow followers to construct their own lines of actions that fit within the story as they enact the story in fulfilling the vision it provides. Likewise, role modeling is an axiomatic component of leadership (Bass, 1985; Kouzes & Posner, 1987). Therefore, one can see further evidence that organizational stories are conceptually very similar to leadership.

How stories have a leadership impact

If successful, stories will have an impact on an audience that is in line with the leadership aims of those who are creating the story. We suggest that there is no right or correct story. Rather, there is the meaning that the audience takes away. That message, or the 'moral' to the story, represents sense-making and is the key to the leadership impact of the story. Moreover, plausible and effective stories have a moral dimension to them. This moral dimension represents the 'authenticity' of the story (*vis-à-vis* the inauthentic or 'shaggy dog' story, for instance). Such authenticity represents the sensibility of the story and of the message. In common with this sensibility is Bass and Steidlmeier's (1999) notion of 'authentic' leadership, *vis-à-vis* inauthentic and self-serving leadership. This notion has parallels with Czarniawska's (2004) and Gabriel's (2004) notion of a 'narrative contract' wherein the 'contract' between leader and followers emphasizes that stories can and often do lose their credibility and come to be viewed as spin or empty verbiage over time.

Social contagion

By telling the story (and of course by specifying the moral to the story), the teller releases the leadership within the organizational community so it can do its work. The moral to the story is in effect the essence of the meaning that the listener might take away. Just as Meindl (1990) conceptualized leadership as a social contagion, the story multiplies and proliferates throughout the organization with each retelling. In effect, the leader(ship) is unleashed and set free to spread among the organizational community. The story achieves that effect, not the author of the story and not each teller of the story.

The downside is that a story cannot champion itself. Furthermore, stories are just as susceptible to 'spin' as any event. Organizations have rumor-mills, grapevines and informal stories. There are comprehensive literatures that detail the nature of these constructs. Stories cannot defend themselves against restorying, while people in

leadership roles can make efforts to maintain a consistent message in story telling. We contend that one management role can be to clarify the moral (or meaning or purpose) of those unanticipated stories. This clarification represents leadership. Moreover, anyone who clarifies the moral (or meaning or purpose) of those stories is demonstrating leadership. Such people need not be formal leaders or senior managers. They could be clerical or process workers at the lowest levels of the organizational hierarchy.

Insights and conclusion

To summarize thus far, our overarching conclusion is that organizational stories can operate like leaders and exhibit the functions of leadership. Moreover, we are surrounded by organizational stories, and people follow the stories at least as much as they follow other people. Stories have an impact on audiences in the same way that leadership has an impact. Stories are enduring. They can be revitalized because they are not subject to the relatively static constraints of personality and reputation. Stories can spread and proliferate much like a social contagion. Because of this, their leadership effect can be widespread. Concomitant with this realization is our assertion that management should focus efforts on building better stories just as much as on building better 'leaders'. There are three main implications that we see emerging from the discussion so far.

Organizational developmental implications

The first implication rests with the potential to enhance the role of organization development. Leadership development has been an important component of organization development for many years now. If our scholarship remains wedded to the leadership notion that leaders are always people, then we remain wedded to the notion of 'people development' as leadership development. We are attempting to offer an alternative approach to leadership development. We offer the approach that leadership development can include development of the discourse and of the narrative of the organization, not just the development of the story telling capability of the people in the organization. Story telling has dominated this aspect of leadership development (cf. Denning, 2004). We contend that it might perhaps have done its dash, if for no other reason than story telling accentuates and reinforces the rather simplistic and populist notion of 'leader as person' and 'leadership development as people development'.

Similarly, as we move further into the 'post-heroic' notions of leadership, we move to a more 'crafted' approach. Variations of heroic leadership confine leadership development within the tactic of emulation. Prospective leaders emulate the behaviors of heroic archetypes. Certainly, stories are often about people and include people, but usually the aim of the story is to show or model the behaviors and attitudes that are desired. The story need not be about the heroic role model. Stories give much more flexibility to that modeling process than do individual people. We would suggest that the 'modeling' is not about being like a person, but broadening out the options available to others in terms of the desired behaviors and attitudes (and other competencies).

A contemporary UK example of organizational story as leadership comes from Rippin (2005). Rippin examined the narrative about organizational change that spread through and about Marks and Spencer. What emerged from analysis of the organizational story was that it was based on the metaphor of the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty. The metaphor of the legend enabled greater sense to be made of the impact of this narrative on the actions and motivations of followers. Of course, people did not follow Sleeping Beauty, with its inherently gendered characteristics of male domination and misogyny. Rather, they followed the Marks and Spencer story. Rippin proposes that this story reinforced perceptions of misogyny, aggression and patriarchy within the change process. As Rippin said, 'Marks and Spencer's employees and other stakeholders have colluded with a culture of symbolic violence in their toleration of bullying and their impatience with and expulsion of less aggressive leaders' (p. 591). In effect, Rippin contends that this was the organizational change leadership that this organizational story displayed.

We also think that a focus on stories as leaders does redirect our attention and reveals several aspects of leadership that may have been marginalized in the extant literature. New conceptualizations might lead us to ask questions that further reveal multiple perspectives in leadership studies. These questions might ask for instance, how is good story making different from leadership practices such as empowerment and visioning? In doing so, we are moving the locus of attention further away from the leader to leadership. We are moving away from a concentration on people to a greater realization of leadership as a process. Such a move is not new within the history of leadership research, but we are proposing that the notion of 'organizational story as leadership' is another way in which that move can be made.

Decouple leader as person from leadership as process

The second implication of this discussion is to further the debates about the distinctions between 'leader' and 'leadership' and between 'person' and 'process'. Thinking about 'story as leadership' more clearly decouples the definition of 'leader' from 'position', as Yukl (1989) has suggested. Although this call has been made previously, the contemporary imagery of the hero manager too closely couples personal-ity to leadership, in spite of the ground-breaking work of Grint (2005) and others. Recent leadership studies, such as those of Dvir et al. (2002) and Meindl (1995) have demonstrated an interest in followership as being integral to leadership. This position is already implicit in story telling, because stories are invariably constructed with an audience in mind (real or implied). In seeing stories as leadership, our attention is drawn toward leadership effect and its reception by followers.

Thinking about stories as leadership focuses our attention on context. Some contemporary leadership research is attempting to incorporate the temporal and contextual nature of leadership. Until recently, much of the mainstream research has accounted for leadership success as a set of behaviors only, removed from temporal-ity or context, and has provided models that leave users with little to judge about transferability. However, with a story, content comes wrapped within a context that provides much of the meaning to the story (Hansen, 2006). Stories emerge fused with context (after all, they are hard to tell without setting the stage for the story). Thus, followers can determine how well a particular story represents the situation they face,

and allows them to make judgments about using the content. Followers can project themselves into a story and still make autonomous decisions to enact an organizational story. This allows followers to judge for themselves, attuned to their own context, how they might best contribute their individual knowledge, skills, and abilities in moving a story forward to fruition, and in fulfillment of an organizational goal or vision. In so doing, leadership becomes more of a process, and less of a person or a position. This notion is supported by French and Simpson (2006). They noted that many successful leaders of business organizations downplay their personal leadership while telling the story of their organization. In effect, people are influenced more by the story that is told and retold, and less by the leadership example that the person in the leadership position has provided. This influence process frees up the individual from bearing the leadership burden.

Context may need to be closely coupled with story content when conveying a specific message. Such a goal relies heavily on contextual knowledge. Stories told out of context might lose much of their meaning, so a follower's sensitivity is heightened to attempt to 'place' where certain leadership behaviors might be effective. While stories can be evoked in any context to support a specific teller's agenda, if the story is widely shared among members, there might be less chance that the specific messages and values the story represents can be 'spun' to meet competing agendas.

Finally, stories can hold conflict. Leaders who hold two positions simultaneously face serious legitimacy questions in their followers' minds. For example, a person might be a colleague or peer, *and* the manager. A story has no such problems with legitimacy. Not only can stories hold conflict, they even rely on conflict to move forward. For example, imagine a story where the protagonist never meets any resistance? We contend that conflict moves a plot forward. Peter Senge (1999) has described a metaphor for change where a vine must meet resistance (a wall) in order to grow. This means that not only do stories allow multiple voices and ideas, these multiple voices and ideas can be represented in story without the compulsion to resolve differences in order to avoid impeding forward movement towards goals.

Specific messages for individuals

The final implication of this work is to generate some practical usefulness for individual people who might be in leadership roles. We have five specific messages that individuals could take away. The first message is to be aware of stories that circulate within organizations. Some stories are positive and supportive of individuals and of the organization. Other stories, usually categorized under the headings of the 'rumor-mill' or 'grapevine', are negative and damaging.

Second, individuals could modify those negative stories in order to turn them into positive stories. One way to do this is to build in a desirable 'moral' to the story. The moral to the story includes what Boje (2001) would call the narrative, *vis-à-vis* the ante-narrative, which is merely the restatement of events, or the story line. In a sense, the story is then refueled and relaunched. This alteration of the moral to the story should facilitate desirable sense-making in the minds of followers.

The third message for individuals is to recognize that every action by them can become a story, told and retold by others. Here we differentiate between intentional

story making and the unintentional formation of stories within social contexts. By asking oneself, 'what story will be told by followers as a result of my action?', all people have an impact on the stories that might be created within organizations. This aspect of your leadership role is to ensure that the story to be told is a positive one, or at least the story that you would wish to be told and retold. Thereafter, you hand over to the story to continue the leadership role.

Fourth, individuals could build stories into their discourse – to generate what Burke (1975) recognized as dramatic effect. We do not wish to revisit the burgeoning literature on story scripting, but the better stories for leadership are those that represent the collective organization, where everyone gets to participate in the discourse that creates stories. Rather than building prescriptive stories into one's discourse, individuals could allow followers to be empowered when determining how to write or enact the story. A mindset such as this allows people to decide how to move the plot along, and in this way, stories can distribute and share the leadership around.

The fifth message is a rather relieving and releasing message. That message is that we should release ourselves from the excessive burden of expectation that goes with leadership. Of course, if one is in a leadership role, one cannot be relieved of leadership entirely. However, we are suggesting that one could follow the suggestion of French and Simpson and 'downplay' one's personal leadership role. By downplaying one's personal leadership role and by having faith in the story that has been released into the organization, the same leadership effect can be achieved. Indeed, the leadership effect might even be greater.

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