Tell a Story

Introduction

Chapman and Fisher (1999) succinctly highlight the importance of *stories* for the communication of policy ideas: 'Most campaigns are based on an oral history which contains a range of multiple and conflicting perspectives. An effective campaign is based on stories and the extent to which these are accepted by different parties' (p.155).

Using narratives and story to help effect transition

A compelling story can provide the ideal vehicle for ideas, learning and good practice; simple, familiar and immediately understandable, it can also accommodate many points of view, strong emotion and difficult truths. Storytelling can be used to:

•   identify and exchange learning episodes;

•   explore values and inspire people towards the possibility of change;

•   enrich quantitative information with qualitative evidence, illustrations and real examples;

•   identify connections and create shared purpose; and

•   improve the effectiveness of strategic decisions by creating a better loop of understanding between strategy and implementation (source: www.sparknow.net).

Good stories are generally those that are interesting, unusual, provocative, serious, controversial, surprising, intriguing, or inspiring in some way. A few entry points into good stories include the following:

•   Include a 'human interest' element, i.e. clearly describe the people who will be affected by the issue or cause you are covering.

•   Tell the big story from the point of view ('through the eyes of') someone who is directly involved.

•   Sometimes the most powerful effect is achieved by simply telling the story of one individual.

•   Achieve a balance between words from human beings and statements from organisations.

•   Tell the story of a successful intervention.

•   Tell the story of an unsuccessful intervention.

A *springboard story* is one that enables a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an organisation or community or complex system may change. A springboard story has an impact not so much through transferring large amounts of information, but through catalysing understanding. It enables listeners to visualise from a story in one context what is involved in a large-scale transformation in an analogous context. The idea of a springboard story is explained in Steve Denning's book 'The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era

Organizations'. This book describes in detail how a springboard story works, as well as how to craft, frame and perform a springboard story. The book describes why springboard stories work well with particular audiences – and why they don't work with others – and the principles that can help us choose stories that will work with audiences to achieve a particular effect. It also explains the characteristics of springboard stories – they are told from the perspective of a single protagonist who was in a predicament that is prototypical of the organisation's business. The predicament of the explicit story is familiar to the particular audience, and indeed, it is the very predicament that the change proposal is meant to solve. The stories have a degree of strangeness or incongruity for the listeners, so that it captures their attention and stimulates their imaginations (source: www. stevedenning.com).

Box 2: Contending Stories: Narrative in Social Movements

by Francesca Polleta (*The Drum Beat*, Issue 307, 11 July 2005)

Polleta suggests that the narrative is just one of the many forms of social movement talk, and she begins by attempting to discover its nature and role. She suggests that storytelling is governed by social rules that may in fact make it likely to contribute to the reproduction of dominant understandings. Narratives affect movement development in several ways. The first is their role in fledgling movements, whose emergence is often described as a process whereby protest 'wells up', 'explodes' or 'bursts' forth from a previously unaware and unprepared grassroots populace. This suggests spontaneity, which is not always the case, but this appearance of spontaneity may have strategic value. Narratives are also important in attempting to describe the origins of a social movement. When does protest begin? When does one become an 'activist'? These questions are unanswerable in an objective manner. When organisations and movements encounter setbacks, it is often narrative that is used to explain defeat in ways that might put a more positive perspective on the tide of events.

Source: http://www.comminit.com/drum_beat_307.html

A good example

Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) (Heather Briggs, in email discussion leading up to the World Congress on Communication for Development, WCCD, in March 2006 in Rome, Italy.)

Documenting the stories of what works in particular contexts, and why, may be one of the most important contributions that communicators can make for development. My team tries to do that. One recent example from a project we've supported in the Philippines, which uses community- based participative processes to spread a particular approach to caring for the land through use of vegetative strips and tree plantings between crops: The team was undertaking standard M&E activities as part of their action research, but recognised they were not capturing all the richness to help guide future scaling up and out activities. We contracted a science communicator to work with the team's local facilitators to train them in interview techniques and develop an instrument to gather the stories of project participants at all levels – farmers, community leaders, nursery owners, researchers, regional policymakers, etc. The resulting stories have been woven into a book on experiences of land care in the Philippines (see: http://www.aciar.gov.au/web.nsf/doc/ACIA- 66CW4P). The process of gathering the stories, and

their availability to those continuing the work, have and will continue to influence project outcomes. The published output will contribute to the impact of the project.

Further resources

- Ramalingam, Ben (2005) 'The Knowledge and Learning Toolkit', London: ODI (forthcoming). Especially for further resources on types of narratives and a useful template.

- Chapman, J. and T. Fisher (1999) *Effective Campaigning*, London: NEF.

- Steve Denning, The website for business and organizational storytelling, see: http://www.stevedenning.com/

- Denning, Steve (2000) *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era*