

SPARKNOW: narrative research into merger culture in the public sector. Case study from 2005.

CONTEXT

A merger of 2 large public sector entities, apparently similar, in practice very different within and between business areas, into a 100,000 person national service.

The Board experiments with story

1. Board 'big picture'
2. 'Big picture' shared with 500 managers
3. "Deep Dive" front line exploration of the merger and its implications

Sparknow is jointly sponsored by the business design team and the business and given 2 months to do a 'Deep Dive' in 3 business areas differently affected by the merger who want to explore communications, barriers to change, feelings, morale, values, customer stories.

"In our efforts to change and engage the organization there is a risk of being held hostage to informal stories reinforcing the negative because the organization is not able to replace them with competing and forward looking ones"
(Deputy Chair)

STRUCTURE OF DAY:

Icebreaker
Jumpstart Story (personal, past)
Half Stories with swapped endings (group, 'faction', present, near future)
Discussion with pinboard cards and exhibit
What's not working? (opinion, present)
Obstacle stories (faction/fiction, parallel world)
Future stories (relocated in to a future present)

Prepared for a presentation at The Narrative Practitioner: Developing Excellence in Research Education and Practice 11-13th June 2007
<http://narratives1.wordpress.com/>

For further information on this and other sparkwork contact victoria.ward@sparknow.net or paul.corney@sparknow.net

WHAT WE DID: SIX WORKSHOPS

6 workshops in 3 business areas with over 160 frontline staff in 3 geographic regions.

Narrative journey - a move from personal actual experience through 'factional' then fictional constructions

Sparknow's role - not to change people and their views, but to pay attention, make space for uncomfortable truths to be aired safely, reflect accurately back to the centre, look at where narrative technique could help in future, let the experience touch people or not as they responded, rather than directing them to respond

Curation - everything recorded in audio and images

"Storienteers" volunteers with an ambiguous role – both participants & observers, eyes & ears but not influencers. Hear and see meaning in debriefs afterwards. Identity story which might get lost

EXAMPLE STRUCTURE: OBSTACLE STORIES

In your group, share your concerns about the change process. Remember the concerns that you heard from your colleague as part of the preparation for today? Share them too. Take ten minutes on this.

Spend the next thirty minutes creating a fictitious story of people not responding to the change process. You might want to tell it from the point of view of one person – a Callcentre woman or a Policy Guidance man, or maybe from a group perspective e.g. compliance, or as a customer. This is your chance to get your voices heard, so let go and be as creative as you like. Use the storytelling guide to help you.

Nominate someone to tell the story. Rehearse it and give the story a name.

Each group will then tell their story to the whole room.

EXTRACT FROM LAMINATED GUIDELINES PLACES ON TABLES:

Listen to each other attentively. Please do not take notes. Instead listen in a way which allows you to experience the story. Remember you are here as listeners as well as tellers; each role is important. In telling the story, stick to an actual episode however small rather than, say, a description of a whole project. To make your story come to life for listeners, try including some 'insignificant' details about the emotional or sensual experience of the episode (sight, sound, smell, taste and feel). This often provides a hook and makes the story memorable. Bring it to life through your descriptions using small details (vivid images); try to create a picture in the listener's head.

STORIENTEERS: Post Workshop Debriefing Template

Thank you for coming today and we hope you enjoyed it.

Please spend some time before tomorrow thinking about the following:

Which stories can you recall the most?
Why?
What did they tell you?
What surprised you most about the day?
Why?
What did it tell you?
What was completely unsurprising that needs to be told anyway?
Which stories should go forward to the manager's event?
Why?
What did they tell you?
What general patterns/themes did you hear?
What did they tell you?
What key things did you learn from listening to the stories and exercises?
What business challenges and opportunities did you hear?
What stories are still hidden that should be surfaced; what did you think people were not talking about?

NOTES & QUERIES

1. The usefulness of documenting everything; the burden of documenting everything.
2. How to manage the contradictory messages: this is a safe space and we are recording everything.
3. Storienteers: difficulty staying as witnesses, not getting drawn in, (and the value of storienteers in deepening insight and meaning). Storienteers are volunteers, which challenges Sparknow.
4. Having 2 sponsors and 3 people to report back to – a danger of losing sharpness and clarity.
5. Holding the space: ambiguity of Sparknow facilitation and reporting role.
6. Over-valuing soundbites, laughter and drama when truths are held in undramatic fragments?
7. How to create listening ears in the executive for fiction which holds uncomfortable truths?
8. Old chestnuts, rose-coloured spectacles, downward spiral of the negative – does it self-correct?

SELECTED STORY TITLES:

Snow White and the Seven Vertically Challenged Civil Servants
Recycled Geezers
Secret Squirrel gets a Swallower
Conquering the Wild West
Pig's Ear
Two Spaceships
On the Buses
Bee Colony
A Baby Changes Everything

CD COVER CAVEAT:

"These stories were given in confidence. Please treat the contents of this CD with respect – don't copy or share them."

REPORTING BACK

6 CDS, each with around 45 minutes of materials (125 stories, some visuals) given back to managers with confidentiality strictures

3 reports to Business Areas and related debrief meetings

1 "placemat" - a summary of principles and range of narrative ways of responding to challenges (with glossary which annotates interventions)

1 20 minute verbal report (10 minutes taken up with playing 3 collected stories) to the Board at the end of a 3 hour

EXTRACTED FROM INTRODUCTION TO ONE OF THE WRITTEN REPORTS BACK TO BUSINESS AREAS

If we were to make only one recommendation it would be that senior managers take seriously the explicit and more subtle implications of what this collective voice is saying, make sure that those who attended the workshop feel fully listened to, and that responses while realistic and demanding are open, empathic and undefensive.

What may be surprising is the openness with which people were willing to engage in the process at a time of great frustration and charged emotion. They came, they did, they showed huge imagination and creativity and the materials which resulted are often beautifully honed, sharp stories, raw materials which deserve a wide audience and to be drawn on in ways which go beyond this report.

The report has been designed intentionally to have some of the experience show through unvarnished and not tidied up. Senior management should take the time to read the whole report, rather than just a summary. Only by engaging directly with the actual stories themselves can the complex insights they generate be fully absorbed and used as a guide.

EXTRACT FROM "RECYCLED GEEZERS" TRANSCRIPT

NatCycling was a scrap merchant. LocalGeezers ran a care home. Having decided that they would merge, and call the company Recycled Geezers they decided that they would co-locate because the care home had a lovely mansion in some very large grounds, and they realised that all the scrap sorting and recycling could be done in the grounds of the care home. As you can imagine, the amount of noise and pollution and dust was something to behold. There was no way for the staff of the new care home/scrap merchants to escalate any concerns they might have about the new operations. And they could actually see elderly patients straying into the metal crushing plant. There was no way of drawing the managers' attention to the problem, so unfortunately residents gradually became increasingly crushed as they wandered off into the grounds of the plant. As a consequence of this the income started to drop, because the relatives of elderly people became concerned at the number of funerals that were taking place with the new company, and of course the costs were escalating to pay for all these funerals.

"To deliver its findings back to the three business areas Sparknow created a report for each one that was interspersed with verbatim transcripts of the stories told as it summarised the findings and gave recommendations for addressing the concerns of the front line. "They look like official, recognisable reports but we sneaked in stories told word for word. The stories interrupt the readers and make them think. As the extracts are framed by an analytical document, the reader feels so safely anchored in the recommendations that he or she gets really drawn into the story."

FROM SPARKNOW DRAFT CASESTUDY, 2006

"2 years back we were struggling with how to convey wicked tales which had resulted from some frontline workshops about how people felt about a big merger. We had documented (audio, then transcribed) stories which came out of groupwork, such as "The Car in Front" (a car manufacturer where the parts were from Volvo the process from Toyota and the instruction manual from Ford) and "Recycled Geezers" (the inappropriate merger of a scrapyard and an old people's home). These wild, naughty tales held great insight into some complex and uncomfortable truths. But how were we to report back to senior management, the Board of the great and the good, some of the uncomfortable truths told through these fantastical tales? How could we create the listening space which might encourage the Board to take on board the insights?

At the time I was reading Herman Hesse's Fairy Tales. They are an odd mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary - mixing fairytale symbolism with contemporary issues of war and alienation. Some of them also touch on the theme of storytelling. It was one of these, in "The Dwarf" which caught my attention. It is an old story of a beautiful lady, a love potion, fidelity, infidelity "all that is at the heart of every adventure and tale, old and new" as Hesse says. Filippo the Dwarf is a master storyteller, whose job is to entertain his mistress (whose bad treatment of him leads to a dark ending, but you'll have to read the story yourself to find out what happens). (My underlining in the quote that follows.)

"He had learned the art of storytelling in the Orient, where storytellers are highly regarded. Indeed, they are magicians, and will play with the souls of their listeners as a child plays with a ball. His stories rarely began in foreign countries, for the minds of listeners cannot easily fly there on their own powers. Rather, he always began with things that people can see with their own eyes, whether it be a golden clasp or a silk garment. Then he led the imagination of his mistress imperceptibly wherever he wanted, talking first about the people who had previously owned the jewels or about the makers and sellers of the jewels. The story floated naturally and slowly from the balcony of the palace into the boat of the trader and drifted from the boat into the harbour and onto the ship and to the farthest spot of the world. It did not matter who his listeners were. They would all actually imagine themselves on this voyage, and while they sat quietly in Venice, their minds would wander about serenely or anxiously on distant seas and in fabulous regions Such was the way Filippo told his stories."

And that is what we did. We play 3 stories, leading from the factual to the fantastical, each a two or three minute listening experience.

FROM 'TASTE THE KNOWLEDGE' Victoria Ward's Blog, June 2007

IMPACT

"It sounds simple but we got the Executive Committee to listen and think about what the stories were telling them, which was very powerful. We were able to convey how employees were feeling. One of the messages we heard from the front line was that these people had a lot of things they could tell us to help us create a very successful department, but they couldn't see the opportunities. They wanted us to listen to them. Since then we've been working to develop these opportunities at the front line."

"People are used to focus groups and will almost give you what you want to hear by rote. This approach taps into people's creativity and their emotional feelings. We're not computers, the way things work or don't is often down to how people feel; if you ignore that you do so at your peril."

"We will be able to measure behavioural change by collecting more stories. The stories that came out of the Deep Dive at the beginning of the merger were very much rooted in the past. We would expect any stories collected towards the end of 2006 to have moved on and be more focused on what people are doing now. If they're still talking about how things used to be that would give us cause to worry."

CLIENT INTERVIEWS FOR CASE STUDY, 2006
"The methodology generates extremely deep insight and the stories have proved extremely powerful both in and out of the Board room. It has been interesting watching people react to the stories - they can make people very uncomfortable or react quite strongly. The interesting thing is that they don't allow people to 'hide' from the truth and therefore the impact of just the stories collected is long lasting, as well as the insights generated. The audio material is still being used to this day so there is quite a legacy!"

EMAIL FROM CLIENT, 2 years on, May 2007