Storytelling as a Leadership Practice for Sensemaking to Drive Change in Times of Turbulence and High Velocity

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This paper explores how contemporary leaders can use storytelling as a sensemaking strategy that translates events into plausible scenarios and images to mobilize others to take action in complex, turbulent and high velocity environments that pose adaptive challenges. Literature on leadership, sensemaking, and storytelling is evaluated to address the increasing interest in leadership effectiveness during times of accelerated change and to examine how ethical leadership relates to storytelling. The article will be of interest to business leaders and managers, and to practitioners and students.

INTRODUCTION: THE NEW CONTEXT FOR LEADERSHIP

Leadership is a highly contextualized phenomenon that never occurs in a vacuum. As the context changes, to be effective, leadership needs to adjust to the new context (Kerns, 2015; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002; Osborn, Uhl-Bien, & Milosevic, 2014; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006; Shamir & Howell, 1999). The context of leadership relates to the milieu, conditions, circumstances or environment – physical, social and economic – in which leadership is observed (Liden & Antonakis, 2009). The leadership context, as we knew it, has been turned upside down. Over two decades ago, Arthur (1996) identified the following five trends that have been driving the new economy by redefining their corresponding domains: (1) globalization has redefined the concept of space; (2) networking and connectivity has reorganized structures; (3) dematerialization of products into knowledge has boosted the value of intangible assets; (4) speed has become a primary source of competitive advantage; and (5) increasing returns have redefined competition. These changes have had a profound impact on managers and leaders across industries: they now have to adapt to new rules for business (Jaworski & Scharmer, 2000).

The new context is one of high velocity, complexity, turbulence, and social and economic unrest. High velocity environments are those that become hypercompetitive due to continuously changing expectations caused by the disruption of new technologies and/or regulations, where information quickly becomes inaccurate, unavailable or obsolete, and where conventional approaches no longer work (Bogner & Barr, 2000). These environments are inherently turbulent (Lichtenthaler, 2009). Turbulence refers to "the amount of change and complexity in the environment of an industry" (Kipley, Lewis, & Jewe, 2012, p. 251) and is created by constantly changing economic conditions (Perrot, 2011). Related constructs to those mentioned that are found in the literature include: dynamic environments (Sirmon, Hitt, & Ireland, 2007); reliability-seeking organizations (Vogus & Welbourne, 2003); and clockspeed (Nadkarni & Narayanan, 2007). More recently, the acronym VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and

ambiguity), which originated in the early 1990s from the U.S. Army War College (Hicks & Townsend, 2002), has also become popular (Horney, Pasmore, & O'Shea, 2010). The term 'VUCA world' is used to describe the new environments characterized by: volatility – the speed and turbulence of change; uncertainty – the fact that outcomes and familiar actions are less predictable; complexity – the enormity of interdependencies in globally connected economies and societies; and ambiguity – the multitude of options and potential outcomes resulting from them (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

The new context has also created unfamiliar and incomprehensible situations (Vogus & Welbourne, 2003) by posing new types of challenges that have generated a crisis of leadership (Loon & Dijk, 2015; Salicru, 2017; Warrick, 2011). Today, communities and organizations are increasingly facing 'adaptive' challenges, as opposed to technical ones. Technical problems are well-defined and easy to identify, and can be solved by applying well-known solutions or the knowledge of experts. By contrast, adaptive challenges are difficult to define, have no known or clear-cut solutions, and call for new ideas to bring about change in numerous places that involve many stakeholders (Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow, 2009). Examples of adaptive challenges include climate change and other environmental issues, terrorism, poverty, violence against women, and corruption. In organizations, examples of adaptive challenges include designing a new system or procedure and/or successfully implementing it, securing agreement for a policy change, or dealing with multiple complex people management issues or stakeholder relationships. An equivalent distinction related to these new challenges is that between 'tame' and 'wicked' problems, which was first introduced by Rittel and Webber (1973) when they realized that social planning problems cannot be effectively treated using traditional linear and analytical approaches. Tame problems are those that we have experienced before and therefore have a known solution (e.g. building a submarine or performing a liver transplant). Wicked problems, on the other hand, like adaptive challenges, have complex interdependencies and innumerable causes, are difficult to recognize, morph constantly, involve many stakeholders with different values and priorities, and have no correct solutions, e.g. poverty, hunger, religious extremism, public policy, organizational strategy (Camillus, 2008; Grint, 2005). In essence, an adaptive challenge or wicked problem cannot be solved with existing skills or modus operandi. As a result, addressing such problems, usually involves uncovering a gap between an organization's current capacity and what it actually needs to do. Tackling adaptive/wicked challenges requires very uncomfortable work, for example, changing attitudes, values and behaviors, as well as increasing the tolerance for conflict, uncertainty and risk of those involved (Heifetz et al., 2009). According to Arthur (1996), identifying the 'rules of the game' that need to be played when facing such problems is what distinguishes great from average leaders.

Despite the multiplicity of definitions of leadership, a common theme is that effective leadership entails moving others to action by altering or reframing their meaning of reality, and tapping into the collective power of groups enabling them to tackle issues that matter to them (Grint, 2005; Heifetz et al., 2009; Loon & Dijk, 2015). In fact, "leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others" (Smircich & Morgan 1982, p. 258). Furthermore, "leadership is exercized when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them" (Robinson, 2001, p. 93).

The critical question that emerges from this discussion is, how can leaders be effective in the new context? This paper explores how contemporary leaders can use storytelling as a sense-making strategy that translates confusing events into plausible scenarios and images that provide meaning for, and mobilize, others to take action in a complex and turbulent world.

SENSEMAKING

> A small group of highly successful senior managers decided to challenge themselves by climbing Mount Everest to validate their legacy. They were excited at first, savoring the adventure of their lives. Suddenly, things turned ugly. On the second day, extreme weather descended, sparking an avalanche. To make things worse, their Sherpa fell off a cliff and disappeared carrying valuable supplies. Everyone was shocked. The group was paralyzed –

physically, mentally and emotionally. On the third day, still confused, the group resumed their journey. But after two days of wandering aimlessly, they considered themselves lost. It was snowing and their cold, hunger and isolation were amplified. They knew that 280 people had died climbing the mountain and that fatalities occurred every year. The possibility of another avalanche crept into their minds. Morale and energy were low, the silence grew, and what had been an unspoken fear turned into panic. Unexpectedly, one of the group members yelled, "I found the map in my backpack!" Everyone surrounded him to study the map, and they planned their way back to the base. The group settled down. Hope had emerged and energy returned. The group recalibrated their direction and kept moving. Their sense of progress and confidence was gradually restored. At various points in the journey, different group members contributed with their unique observations, suggestions and ideas. "It's important that we correlate what's on the map with what we see around us", said one. This helped the group to sharpen their senses and use their imagination to conceptualize a path to the base. Another one said, "A highly experienced Norwegian mountain climber told me that keeping a steady pace and never rushing are critical to navigation in these conditions". This encouraged the group to be fully present to their experience and to take the time to collect their thoughts while studying the map and their surroundings. After two days of navigation – much of which had seemed like trial and error – the group reached the base, exhausted but safe. Their big surprise was when they learned that the map they had been following was not of Mount Everest, but of the Yumthang Valley – located 109 miles from Mount Everest.

In this elaborate story, told by Salicru (2017) and inspired by Basbøll (2012), despite the fact that the map was not an accurate representation of the 'territory', it gave the managers the confidence to make good decisions. According to Weick (1995), when you are lost, cold, hungry, and panicked, any map will do. This is because, when dealing with ambiguity, individuals "search for meaning, settle for plausibility, and move on" (Weick, 2010, p. 549). From this position, sensemaking is not concerned with accuracy – finding the 'correct' answer – but rather about plausibility – creating a more meaningful picture that enables people to act (Ancona, 2012).

Sensemaking is one of the four core leadership capabilities (along with relating, visioning, and inventing) for contemporary complex, uncertain, and dynamic environments (Ancona, 2012). The term was popularized by Weick (1995) as the process of making sense by giving meaning to experience: "Sensemaking is about contextual rationality. It is built out of vague questions, muddy answers, and negotiated agreements that attempt to reduce confusion" (Weick, 1993, p. 636). Weick (2009) compares sensemaking to cartography to illustrate how people draw on their own maps based on experience (Sonenshein, 2007).

Sensemaking is mostly required in rapidly changing contexts where surprises and adaptive challenges emerge for which people are unprepared (Heifetz et al., 2009). In this way, organizations develop and maintain their sensemaking capability and are able to better analyze, interpret, and communicate complex information in an increasingly turbulent market (Neill, McKee, & Rose, 2007). In turn, this affords organizations adaptive sensemaking – the ability to frame, understand and respond to an evolving situation (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). Mediated sensemaking – a form of adaptive sensemaking – is the processes by which leaders bring forward cues and perspective to generate doubt, pause and inquiry among employees within a given context (Strike & Rerup, 2016). The genesis of sensemaking, then, is chaos and confusion, as people attempt to answer the question, 'what's the story?', by mapping the context and the ongoing unpredictable experiences thrown at them (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Ultimately, sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is understood explicitly in words, which serves as a springboard for action (Weick, et al. 2005). In the above story, despite the fact that the map did not accurately represent the surroundings, it gave the group the hope and confidence to make good decisions and not give up. This triggered their internal resources, as the climbers kept searching for answers by retrieving valuable knowledge from their reservoir of memories that related to the crisis at hand. Sensemaking is a critical organizational activity used by senior managers to scan and interpret the environment, make decisions, and drive strategic change (Maitlis, 2005). Leaders who are

able to effectively understand 'what's going on' in a given context are better positioned to make wiser decisions and are more likely to improve their effectiveness (Kerns, 2015).

Both sensemaking and sensegiving are processes of disseminating new understanding to audiences to influence their 'sensemaking-for-self' and are critical to leadership effectiveness in contemporary organizations operating in complex and high velocity environments (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt, 1988). Sensemaking assists individuals to crystallize meaning, which serves as motivation to act (Sonenshein, 2007; Weick, 2009; Weick et al., 2005). From this perspective, leaders are 'sensegivers' (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) who shape how employees understand themselves, their work, and those whom they work with, by enabling 'cognitive shifts' – a critical leadership meaning-making task (Foldy, Goldman, & Ospina, 2008).

Typically, sensemaking is a conversational and narrative process (Balogun & Johnson, 2005) which entails multiple communication categories (Watson & Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998) both written and spoken, and formal and informal (e.g. rumors, gossip, negotiations, and exchange of stories). This is line with Gergen's (2009) view that the construction of new meaning and reality occurs through dialogic action. Some authors (Gabriel, 2000; Snowden, 2003) distinguish between narrative and story arguing that narratives have a plot and more coherence and structure, while stories lack a plot and are more fragmented and non-linear. Often, however, narrative and story are treated interchangeably in the literature (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013; Brown; 2006; Czarniawska, 2004), as is the case in this paper. Above all, sensemaking requires a good story that "holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking." (Weick, 1995, p. 61).

STORYTELLING

Storytelling, or Narrative Parading Theory (NPT), was first developed by Fisher (1984) who used the term 'paradigm' as opposed to theory, claiming that paradigms are broader than theories. According to Fisher (1985), NPT does not deny the rational paradigm but rather it regenerates it and makes it responsive to all forms of human communication. In the same way that sensemaking is not concerned with accuracy or finding the correct answer but is, rather, about plausibility and creating more meaning, a story is not a quest for scientific truth but is rather "a quest for meaning" (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 1). According to NPT, humans are essentially storytellers. Storytelling is one of the oldest and most universal forms of communication: humans relate to their social world in a narrative mode and make decisions and act within a narrative framework (Fisher, 1984). This is line with Soin and Scheytt (2006) who claim that "stories are the fabric of our lives" (p. 3), and with Cragan and Shields (1998) who view humans as inborn storytellers and assert that all types of human communication are best delivered through stories. From a narrative perspective, stories are relevant to both the real and fictive worlds. Hence, there are living stories and stories of the imagination. Advocates of NPT contend that human communication is historical and situational (Fisher, 1984), and transcends cultural barriers (Barker & Gower, 2010). Hence, storytelling is an effective device to use in culturally diverse settings and cross-cultural leadership (Grisham, 2006).

Stories express how and why life unfolds (McKee & Fryer, 2003). They assist us to shape our own identities and make sense of others' actions (Bird, 2007). "In organizations, storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders" (Boje, 1991a, p. 106). Stories are sensemaking devices that create points of stability within the motion of organizational life. They assist people to make sense of change by locating the self in context, time and space. This, in turn, constructs and provides order to reality which temporarily stabilizes individuals who search for momentary resting-points that offer plausible accounts of ambiguous events (Alvesson, 2003; Czarniawska, 2004). According to Schank (1995), stories are essential to human intelligence and imagination, and offer a convenient way of remembering experiences.

Storytelling is a powerful way to explicitly or implicitly transfer both information and emotion (Snowden, 2000) that can move others to action. Impactful stories appeal to the intellect and evoke emotion (Denning, 2005), and contextualize and encapsulate messages (Pink, 2005). It not surprising that religious and political leaders throughout history have used storytelling as a powerful motivational strategy in response to crises or during times of change, upheaval and uncertainty (Forster, et al. 1999).

In organizations, storytelling serves multiple purposes such as: socializing new employees (Louis, 1980); problem solving and conducting action research (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975); generating organizational renewal (McWhinney & Batista, 1988); transferring knowledge in the workplace when mentoring others (Swap, Leonard, Shields & Abrams, 2001); facilitating internal and external communications, developing teams and leadership skills, and engaging clients and customers (Collison & Mackenzie, 1999); branding (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010); and communicating complex ideas and persuading others to change (Prusak, Groh, Denning, & Brown, 2012). Not surprisingly, many organizations are turning to storytelling to better leverage their human capital (McLellan, 2006). According to Boje (1991b), storytelling and the interpretation of stories are critical components of the consulting work conducted in complex organizations. From this perspective, organizations are collective storytelling systems "in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory" (Boje, 1995, p. 100). Disney Enterprises (formerly the Walt Disney Company) represents the quintessential storytelling organization (Boje, 1995). The company flourished during the Great Depression between 1929 and 1939 – the most severe and longest economic depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world. This created an opportunity for Disney to produce the first ever full-length animated musical film, which cost US$1,500,000. Disney's Mickey Mouse character kept people entertained through the Depression, and Disney's business was buoyant. Mickey Mouse served a crucial role in that context at that time. The character lifted peoples' spirits, and gave them a legitimate reason to smile. It reminded people of the good in life. Mickey symbolized the hope and unique power of the human spirit in overcoming great obstacles, which people badly needed. In 1937, the company released a blockbuster, 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves', financed by the Bank of America. If Mickey Mouse epitomized hope and the power of the human spirit, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs embodied the message that good could prevail against evil. This fantasy tale showcased qualities such as friendship, innocence and loyalty – just what was needed in the lead up to World War II. Both Mickey and Snow White are examples of how storytelling can create meaning and build optimism and confidence in times of crisis. There are similarities between Disney's stories, which brought faith and hope during the Great Depression, and the experience of reading the wrong map for the group of managers climbing Mount Everest. They both provided the sensemaking needed in each context, with comparable positive results (Salicru, 2017).

Narratives are used in different contexts and for various purposes, not just in times of acute crises but certainly critically in times of change. Individual leaders and entrepreneurs use personal and corporate brand stories to convey who they are, their convictions and values, and to champion their products and services. Some prominent examples of individuals who have done this well include Steve Jobs of Apple Inc., Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines, Anita Roddick of The Body Shop, and William Bratton of the New York City Police Department (Denning, 2005). Organizations such as Bell's Whisky, Guinness, John Deere, Nike, Lego and Weight Watchers have used storytelling successfully to promote their brands and engage their customers. Xerox, the New England Patriots and Amcor have used stories to challenge conventional wisdom and drive change (Sole & Wilson, 2002). Politicians use narratives to influence their constituencies. Former US President Barack Obama littered his acceptance speech with a heavy sprinkling of personal anecdotes, stories of gratitude, an over-flowing of humility and inspiration, and a great sense of intimacy, evoking solidarity and empathy for diversity. US President Donald Trump, in his controversial inaugural address in Washington DC, on January 20, 2017, declared a 'new vision' for America stating that every decision on trade, taxes, immigration and foreign affairs would be made to benefit American workers and their families. Americans' confidence reached new heights (from 11 to 13) in Gallup's US Economic Confidence Index by the end of that week. In fact, Americans viewed the

economy more positively after Trump's election than in the nine years prior (McCarthy, 2016). Clearly, his narrative provided sensegiving to many.

According to Sonenshein (2010), during times of strategic change, managers tell mixed and ambiguous narratives about how the organization is changing in an attempt to influence the meanings employees attribute to that change. In response, employees may overstate or elaborate these narratives to make sense of, champion, accept, or resist change. In fact, Snowden (2003) warns managers about generating anti-stories. An anti-story is a spontaneous and cynical reaction to a narrative that departs too far from reality, as far as the audience is concerned. Anti-stories tend to emerge when the storyteller(s) act hypocritically in relation to their underlying values or the story radically challenges the audience's expectations. It only takes one individual to say something like, "I'm afraid that's not what actually happened" or "This not the full story", and the whole process is undermined. If, for example, an organization is trying to inculcate new values that are in conflict with those reinforced within the prevailing value system, they are likely to generate 'anti-stories'. Similarly, and somewhat counterintuitively, stories with a happy end often generate an anti-story (Snowden, 2000). Therefore, to be effective, business leaders need to provide plausible narratives (Weick et al., 2005).

Snowden (2003) proposes three narrative approaches which constitute the foundation of organizational storytelling, and which can be used together or in combination to assist employees to share the organizational context: fable, myth management, and the story virus. Fables are tales that convey a moral message. They are rooted in ancient practices of storytelling and conveyed from one generation to the next to inculcate shared values (e.g. bedtime stories). Children are told fables to learn ethical lessons which they accurately remember into adulthood (Baldwin & Dudding, 2007). In contrast to most corporate communications, where the key message is delivered up front and then justified or explained, fables progressively build up until the story itself is the proven context that makes the message acceptable. The best fables are those that are ironic and don't require an explicit articulation of the message, rather, the audience realizes the message. This ensures that the audience doesn't feel preached to or patronized. A popular example is 'The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing' in which the wolf covers himself with a sheep skin, and a lamb follows him and is eaten. While the moral is that 'appearances often are deceiving', this is not explicitly stated in the story. Myth management, continues Snowden (2003), refers to the tribal, national and organizational stories that convey timeless themes found in all societies. Ancestral narratives are passed through generations, bestowing a sense of pride and association for individuals' history. Myths are collective fantasies that fulfil shared desires and offer an opportunity to discharge tension related to, or to partially inoculate against, misfortune. This includes symbolic means of, for example, offering consolation against suffering, turning passivity into action, powerlessness into control, or crisis into opportunity (Gabriel, 1991). Such stories, says Snowden (2003), are told and retold over time, thus reinforcing or creating such themes as well as characters. A good example are the many stories told at Virgin about the founder, Sir Richard Branson.

Finally, story virus is an umbrella term that refers to the various types of narratives (techniques) designed to counter the effects of anti-stories. They include six types: Socratic dialogue, reductio ad absurdum, metaphor, the killer fact, exaggeration, and direct contradiction. Given the limitations of length in this paper, each of these types of stories will be described only briefly. Using the Socratic dialogue type of story entails using dialectic reasoning to question the anti-story teller to the point where the story is self-destroyed. Reductio ad absurdum involves logical argument and reducing the anti-story to the absurd by finding fault in the weak aspects of it. A metaphor story creates an association with a well-known story in which it is possible to demonstrate that the errors in the metaphors are equivalent to those in the anti-story. The killer fact, while it can be effective, often makes the anti-story worse by arguing with the facts. The rationale for using exaggeration is to ultimately make the anti-story laughable by exaggerating it until it becomes ridiculous. Ideally, this is done by using good humor, as opposed to direct contradiction. Direct contradiction, like the killer fact story type, can have value but often makes things worse – especially in the absence of a good killer fact story that will resonate strongly with the audience. In summary, the need to use story viruses can be mitigated by gaining a good understanding of how the anti-

story came about within a specific context and history. The need to resort to story viruses can be minimized by using fables and myth management earlier in the process (Snowden, 2003).

Leaders can use the following four main themes for individual stories to establish credibility, engage employees, and brand themselves: triumphs, tragedy, tension, and transition (Dolan, 2017). Triumphs, or victory stories, entail sharing personal experiences or events of which the leader is proud. This includes times of helping a team, organization or community. When telling these types of stories, it is important to demonstrate some vulnerability and humility to avoid projecting an image of arrogance or self-importance. Tragedy stories convey moments or circumstances that are regretted that may have been either caused by or experienced by the leader. They should be considered carefully, as they can evoke strong emotions in the audience. Tension stories include recounting events that compromised the leader's values, loyalties or obligations. When telling such stories, it is important not to focus on the actual decisions made as leader, but rather on the inner struggles and the internal and/or external tensions they caused. Finally, Dolan (2017) refers to transition stories, which relate to times of significant change where the leader may have faced a choice instigated by or forced upon the leader.

ETHICS

Psychological manipulation relates to the social influence aimed at changing the perception or behavior of others by using abusive, deceptive, or underhanded means (Braiker, 2004). Manipulation is considered an unethical practice and approach to leadership (Bass 1998; Brown & Trevinõ, 2006). Ethical leadership entails exercising influence in ways that are ethical in both means and in ends. Unethical leadership is deemed as unethical in means and ends (Rhode, 2006). Driscol and McKee (2007) warn of the potential dark side of storytelling by leaders. They argue that caution is needed in relation to the use of the emotional and moral influence of stories on employees. Similarly, managers attempting to control employees through manipulative storytelling raise doubts about the ethics of such an approach. Auvinen, Lämsä, Sintonen and Takala (2013) claim that manipulation is not always self-evidently condemnable; they identify four types of manipulation in storytelling: humorous, pseudo-participative, seductive, and pseudo-empathetic.

CONCLUSION

Context and leadership are intrinsically linked. The new leadership context is one of high velocity, complexity and turbulence, which has created unfamiliar and incomprehensible situations, as well as adaptive challenges or wicked problems. Sensemaking is a core strategic capability that assists leaders to scan and interpret complex, uncertain, and turbulent environments, deal with adaptive challenges, and enable others to act under these conditions by creating more meaning, as opposed to finding the correct answer. Sensemaking is a narrative process that requires a good story. Storytelling is a paradigm which is also concerned with providing meaning and assumes that human communication is best delivered through stories. Storytelling is the preferred sensemaking currency of organizations and is particularly useful for leaders to use during times of strategic change. Fables, myth management and story virus are the three narrative approaches that constitute the foundation of organizational storytelling. Triumphs, tragedy, tension and transition are the main story themes that leaders can use to brand themselves, establish credibility, and engage employees. Manipulation is considered an unethical practice and approach to leadership. Managers should exercise caution in using manipulative storytelling, through either being humorous, pseudo-participative, seductive, or pseudo-empathetic.

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