

BUILDING EFFECTIVE SHARED SERVICES USING STORY TELLING



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Have you ever wondered why it's easier to work with some people more than others, or why you can achieve more with one team than another? The bottom line is that it probably boils down to how you communicate together.



This article isn't debating one style of communications over another or the need to listen twice as much as you talk – it's more about creating the story together – so it's truly shared.

The relationship between storytelling and the pace of change...

Compass Point was created in 2010 as a Joint Venture Shared Service company and has been providing business support services since April 2011. Services include Finance, Human Resources, ICT, Benefits Assessments, Revenue Collection and Customer Services.

It has fast-tracked the consolidation of services, transferred from the two founding authorities, in order to secure the delivery of £6.6m of savings by March 2014, creating shared services operating across the two main council headquarters, 58 miles apart.

This article looks at how creating a story together, the shared narrative, with our teams helped to make collaborative working more productive and more compelling and why shared storytelling by employees affects the pace and effectiveness of change management.

Hearing stories, and telling one's own story, can motivate people when shared services are created, by helping them to make sense of the new reality.

Today in the digital age everyone's got a story to share, be it on a blog, via twitter or as a Facebook post; sharing our stories is nothing new – looking back through the ages it's something we've been pretty well-versed at.

Telling a story, weaving a plot line and creating memorable characters – we all enjoy a good story either down the pub or in the movies, so why should change management be any different? Quite simply, it's not, we all engage emotionally with stories¹. So how did we harness this in our collaborative working?

We wanted our bosses, team leaders and managers to pitch to us, their view of a positive future in the new service being created. But, we also reserved the right to recount the tale at the water cooler, office kettle or across the dining table and in doing so put our own spin or point of view on the tale.

That's why the power of shared storytelling is so effective. By building the story together and sharing a 'team understanding' it helps to build a compelling platform for change where people realise the potential of working in a different way and the benefit of different perspectives².

¹ 2013, Kotter J and Cohen D, *The Heart of Change: Real Life Stories of How People Change Organisations*. Harvard Business Press).

² (2006, Adamson, G., Pine, J., Van Steenhoven, T. and Kroupa, J. *How Storytelling Can Drive Strategic Change*. Strategy and Leadership).

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Teams who are engaged in creating a shared script, their own shared narrative, are able to achieve more together, because there is a common picture being created. It's a coherent vision and one that reflects peoples' ideas and concerns.

The relevance to collaborative working is clear and therefore the practical application of shared storytelling can be useful when bringing different teams and organisations together¹.

What if..?

A guide though, is that when collaborative working takes place you do need to create the space for a two-way dialogue. One which helps employees share their stories and generate a new psychological contract which can embrace the transformational change.

This can be achieved through group dialogue, facilitated and supported to encourage, 'what-if' scenarios.

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Communications and engagement is crucial to any change management plan. Change agents need to support the organisation's employees to create their springboard stories for change².

This can be achieved not through a 'just-tell-em' approach but by:

- facilitating workshops and discussion groups in forming the new service processes;
- enabling staff to give a name to the new initiative and select its identity and subsequent elements of branding;
- engaging honestly with all employees to create their new reality, the new shared service company or collaborative initiative – enabling leadership collaboratively;
- providing support to team leaders on how to encourage adult-to-adult conversations;
- creating values and symbols that encourage shared storytelling; eg a shared email domain name of the new organisation or logo; and
- developing an on-going transformation programme which encourages emergent change.

Communications should at the very least be memorable and compelling and what better way to do that than to put people at the heart of the issue and create a compelling tale filled with characters, plots, and myths to build a shared storyline?³

Change management after all is about people, and people love to talk!

¹ (2005, Hardy C., Lawrence T., and Grant D. *Discourse and Collaboration: The Role of Conversations and Collective Identity*. Academy of Management Review).

² (2000, Denning S. *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge Era Organisations*. Butterworth-Heinemann).

³ (2007, Vogler C. *The Writer's Journey – Mythical Structure for Writers*. Michael Wiese Productions).