Storytelling

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Managing Innovation

Storytelling

Once upon a time .....

Chances are that as you read that your body went into a well-rehearsed routine. You relaxed, your head perhaps cocked to one side, you settled into a position ready to receive information. It's the classic start to a story – and we're programmed to listen, knowing it will entertain and inform. We've been doing it for thousands of years and we're hard-wired to respond to stories.

It's not just a passive process – story *listening* is as important as storytelling. The process of seeing and living out the pictures in our minds, becoming the characters and sharing with them the experience of what is going on, is a key element. Which brings in a third dimension – story *re-telling*. We share stories we have heard with others, adding to them, embellishing them, replaying them to ourselves and to others. It's a process of co-creation.

Stories matter – they are powerful devices not only for spreading information but for many other purposes. Not surprisingly storytelling been recognised as a powerful tool in organizational life – to help communicate, to allow for explanation and elaboration, to help people make sense of their organization and the complexities of life within it, and to reinforce the values and beliefs which bind the organization together.

And it's a powerful resource in managing innovation, one which we can deploy in a variety of ways. For example, stories can act:

- *as a carrier of messages* – stories reinforce our models and understanding of how innovation works in a vivid way. Not for nothing do they form the staple diet of most conference presentations, and in a more restrained fashion form the core of our teaching. (After all the case method is all about stories, reading, interpreting and retelling). Think about some famous innovation stories – 3M's Post it notes, Dyson's heroic battles with his arch enemy Hoover, Edison's 1000 filaments, Steve Jobs the troubled genius – and add your favourites to the long list……

- *as educator* – there is a long tradition of using stories to carry important messages about directions and desirability for change. The world's oldest soap opera is the UK series, 'The Archers' which is broadcast daily and draws over 5 million listeners. It originated in 1951 as a way of communicating important information about farming innovations with the other storylines wrapped around the core message. (The programme still has an 'Agricultural story editor'). Or consider 'The Goal' – Elihu Goldratt's story about a struggling factory owner and his gradual adoption of radical process innovations. Published in 1984 it became the top-selling business book and still has wide readership, now available in many different formats including a movie!

- *as diffuser* – in viral fashion ideas spread out from their source via the stories around them. Everett Rogers highlighted the key role which perceptions play in the adoption of innovation – and stories offer powerful ways of shaping those perceptions. (Ask anyone who works in advertising!) Stories can help overcome anxieties and concerns about various attributes of innovations, and in doing so accelerate the take up of new ideas. Or they spread like wildfire, becoming amplified as they get retold and acting as a strong brake on diffusion. They can affect our perceptions of the person trying to persuade us to adopt something new - if they are good storytellers then we are more likely to believe in them and accept the new idea which they are promoting.

- *as knowledge management tool* - there's a famous quote, attributed to Winston Churchill amongst many others, suggesting that people who forget their history are condemned to repeat it. Organizations need some kind of memory, some way of remembering what they did and how they dealt with past problems. Being able to retrieve these memories can be a powerful resource for dealing with today's innovation challenges. Stories act as powerful repositories of this learning – they are accessible and remind us of core lessons. Every large company today must have been a start-up once upon a time – and sometimes reflecting on the stories of how the organization handled the crises from that time helps. A growing number of organizations - Corning, 3M, Philips - are trying to capture their organizational history not as a vanity project but as a way of codifying key lessons from the past to make them available for the future. Stories from the past provide both a roadmap for what to do and the courage to know it can be done.

- *as a change lubricant* – managing change is not a matter of imposing decisions – people are pretty creative about the many ways they can resist an innovation which they don't want! That's especially true in process innovation where we're trying to change working methods or technologies. Storytelling can help by creating a picture, a vision of how things are going to be – but it's not a good idea to sell a story without allowing a response. The trick is to engage in an element of co-creation, giving people and opportunity to participate and create the future which they will be a part of. It's a well-known tool in organizational change management, giving people voice and autonomy around innovations which will affect their working lives. But it's also not a bad tool to use in product/service development – engaging people in prototyping makes them co-authors of the story….

- *as a 'rough guide' resource* – one way of looking at entrepreneurship is to focus on the 'hero' embarking on a journey to a far-off land, encountering strange people, slaying dragons, getting into tight situations and picking up surprising friends and resources which help him or her along the way. And much of the new thinking about how to manage this journey describes the importance of effectuation and bricolage, making the best use of whatever is to hand and muddling through towards a goal rather than planning each step in careful fashion. Stories capture this kind of approach and give others a 'hitch-hiker's guide' to help them in their own journeys….

- *as a way of exploring the future* – science fiction is a branch of storytelling which creates pictures of the future which we can climb inside and explore safely and early. Its value in

thinking about innovation comes particularly because unlike trend extrapolation or forecasting it presents a rich connected picture of possible futures. The narrative carries not just the score storyline but also a wealth of information about context. (Think about a movie like 'Blade runner' – there's so much interesting stuff going on at the edge of the screen, around the corners, in the background…)

Organizations can use such stories to create new future worlds which they can then crawl inside and explore – where are the threats, how could we move to take these opportunities, etc.?   And they can use this exploration to identify what they need to start doing now in order to build the capabilities for working effectively in these futures. At the heart of powerful futures methodologies like Shell's 'Game changer' approach or Procter and Gamble's storytelling lofts is the ability to construct and share compelling stories….

- *as vision statement* – organizations aren't just collections of people, they have a sense of purpose. Creating a vision is a key element in their success and long-term survival, whether we are looking at a start-up or a centuries old corporation trying to reinvent itself. The trouble with so many vision statements is that they are just words and aspirations. What separates out the effective vision is the ability to embed it in a story, to allow people to identify the core elements, and then bring their own storytelling capabilities to it.

Human beings have evolved to deal well with vague data and half formed patterns in our environment – we fill in the gaps with a storyline which makes sense of it. So a compelling storyline around a vision is something which people can pick up on and elaborate in their own minds, shaping their own creative activities towards realising it.

So if stories are such an important element in innovation it makes sense to try and develop skills around using them. In particular we need to explore three areas:

- Story writing – the craft of writing compelling stories,
- Story telling – delivering them in compelling fashion
- Story listening /retelling – engaging users in the stories, using them as boundary objects for co-creation

You can find more about storytelling here:

https://www.tacitproject.org/materials