

STORIES AND META-STORIES IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Ludmila Mládková

Abstract

The paper is conceptual and offers a brief excursion to the world of stories and meta-stories in organizations. Stories are a natural means of human communication. They are sequences of interlinked events and complex systems of symbols via which we share knowledge and experience. Stories provide the background on which we interpret what is happening around us, provide a foundation for our values and culture, create specific memory structures and enable us to feel into others. People share and communicate stories everywhere, including organizations. The stories told in the organization are characteristic and reflect organizational values. Groups in organizations (teams, departments, etc.) create their own stories that reflect the management style, employee relations, experiences, knowledge learned. Such stories are shared either formally or in everyday informal communication.

Stories about stories and stories that are built from other stories are called meta-stories. Meta-stories about organizations combine stories about company business, customers and clients, internal and external environment, and organization future aspirations. When widely accepted, they become myths. The paper discusses the role of stories and meta-stories in organizations.

Keywords: story, meta-story, organization

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Introduction

This conceptual paper discusses the topic of stories and meta-stories in organizations.

Stories are a natural means of human communication. They are sequences of interlinked events and complex systems of symbols via which we share knowledge and experience with other people. Stories provide the background on which we interpret what is happening around us, provide a foundation for our values and culture, create specific memory structures and enable us to feel into others. People share and communicate stories everywhere, including organizations. The stories told in the organization are characteristic and reflect

organizational values. Groups in organizations (teams, departments, etc.) create their own stories that reflect their values, the management style, employee relations, experiences, knowledge learned. Stories are told in everyday formal and informal communication.

Stories about stories and stories that are built from other stories are called meta-stories. Meta-stories about organizations combine stories about company business, customers and clients, internal and external environment, and future aspirations. Such meta-stories are usually subconsciously shared in an organization, and employees defend them if they are questioned.

The paper is a short excursion to the world of stories and meta-stories in an organizational context. Examples of different ways how people in organizations use stories are provided.

The methodology of the paper is typical for theoretical work. Methods include methods of theoretical work that allow identification and interlinking of separate pieces of knowledge, e.g., analysis, synthesis, comparison, induction and generalization, and critical thinking. The search for resources was done as a keyword search. We started it in AIS journals; then, other scientific journals were searched (via Business Source Complete and Scholar Google), and the search was concluded by search in popular media (via Google). The example of a meta-story from the telecommunication company is based on the stories the author of the article was told by her co-workers who formally worked under the manager M.

1 Stories in Organizations

Due to the inconsistency in the terminology, words story and narrative are understood as synonyms in this paper. A story in its broadest sense is anything told or recounted in the form of a causally linked set of events, account, tale, the telling of a happening or connected series of happenings, whether true or fictitious (Denning, 2012). Stories “give events meanings and significance” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 18) and are “a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process and change” (Herman & Herman, 2007, p. 3). They work as tools for learning and memory (Hayes & Maslen, 2015). Stories about past actions give sense to what happened, and construct stories about the future provide background for decision-making. Stories create a virtual environment in which we share knowledge and experience, build our identities and create a common perspective.

Human communication happens in stories, and “humans are essentially storytellers” (Fisher, 1984, p.7). Humans are “homo narrans” (Fisher, 1984, p.6), mainly because stories

are the key cognitive coping mechanism (Hevern, 2008). Organizations are full of stories (Gibbons & Prusak, 2020), and stories play a significant role in organizational life, even though organizations still underestimate the role of stories. Stories shape employee behavior (Akerlof et al., 2020), influence knowledge and beliefs (Gibbons & Prusak, 2020), and directly influence preferences (Akerlof & Kranton, 2005).

In organizations, stories can be classified into two primary groups, formal and informal. Stories used and told in formal communication are formal stories; stories told in informal communication are informal stories. Typical formal stories are negative and positive stories, anti-stories, accounts, tales, chronicles, news, and reports.

- A negative story has the power to share even very complex tacit knowledge and change how people understand reality. Negative stories have high potential in management.
- Positive stories help to coordinate people with shared visions.
- An anti-story is a story that negates another story. It actually works against it as it provides an alternative explanation of reality. Interaction between stories and anti-stories often resembles a battlefield. Anti-stories demonstrate that stories are context-dependent. One reality may be explained by opposite stories.
- Accounts are simple and brief explanations of reality.
- Tales are stories that share through fictive events some important truth or experience.
- Chronicles discuss events and facts in chronological order.
- News informs about what happened recently.
- Reports provide analytical information about activities and events.

Informal stories emerge in the form of anecdotes, rumors, hearsays, gossips, and jokes.

- Anecdotes are short stories with simple messages about what happened to an individual.
- Rumors are unofficial pieces of information, true or untrue.
- Hearsay is information the storyteller heard but cannot guess its validity.
- Gossip provides unverified information about other people.
- Jokes are funny stories whose purpose is to amuse other people.

2 Meta-stories in Organizations

A story about stories or a story embedded within another story is called a meta-story (Metastory, 2021). Meta-stories constitute meaningful groups of similar stories that occur at arbitrary points in time (Gordevicius et al., 2010). Meta-stories influence the culture and behavior of all types of human groups and organizations (Somers, 1994).

The generation of meta-stories is a challenging problem because even though the central theme of each meta-story may be the same, the actual content of stories that create a meta-story can differ (Gordevicius et al., 2010, p.1909). Meta-stories are strongly context-dependent (Yehoshua, 2004). Meta-stories can be true and untrue, correct or incorrect, depending on the context and the beliefs of storytellers and listeners. When accepted by the group of people, meta-stories become myths, and as such, they influence group values and priorities and give sense to human lives and control human behavior. We must struggle to try to confront them critically, expose their moral quality, and uncover their problematic meaning regarding the shaping of our consciousness and life (Yehoshua, 2004, p. 206).

People in every organization create a distinct system of stories. These stories co-exist, communicate, influence one another, and together create meta-stories.

Montague (2013) explains how organizational meta-stories are created. Montague (2013) classifies stories that create meta-story into four so-called keys (groups of stories). The first key is the protagonist stories, e.g., stories about the company, its employees, and its business. It explains what it means to be employed by the company, to belong to the company, and work under different circumstances and situations. This part of the meta-story is often represented by typical "hero" stories, stories about difficult times, and how employees overcame them. The second key is the stories about participants, the people who are affected by organizations and use their products and services. The third group of stories is stories about the broader business and cultural platform on which the company operates, like economic, technological, cultural, and competitive factors. The last are the stories about the quest, e.g., aspirations and missions of the company, the source for consumer loyalty.

Such meta-story then influences basic assumptions about the organization about "who they are" and "why they are," e.g., the identity of an organization. Alternatively, as Gibbons and Prusak (2020) write, some stories play a role in organizations that sheds light on why organizations exist and how they might be improved. Such stories may induce a particular kind of organizational knowledge, of which organizational culture is a leading example (Gibbons & Prusak, 2020).

If strong enough, meta-story may lead to a mythical understanding of the organization as it happened, for example, with Baťa company. The meta-story about Baťa company, its development, distinct values, behavior in crises, how they treated employees and developed its external environment is shared generation by generation in Zlin region. E.g., even by people who are too young to have personal experience with the Baťa management system.

3 Organizational Storytelling

People in every organization create and tell many different stories, and organizations spend considerable resources constructing and disseminating stories to their workforces (Akerlof et al., 2020). Akerlof et al. (2020, p. 199) explain two primary directions of story creation as "stories are shaped by a combination of top-down and bottom-up forces. On the top-down side, organizations disseminate stories that are advantageous for recruiting and motivating workers. On the bottom-up side, employees are more favorably disposed of toward some stories than others. An employee's particular disposition is partly a matter of the prevailing cultural context. For instance, workers in more collectivist countries may be more willing to adopt a team-based story. Employees also have greater receptivity to stories that are identity enhancing".

Even though organizations can use stories for various purposes, from communication improvement, tacit knowledge sharing, community and team building, trust creation, presentation of intentions, and many others, Hayes and Maslen (2015) point out that organizations do not manage the work with stories well. Even in hazardous industries, it is experts who incorporate stories into learning and decision-making because organizations fail to support story-based learning by embedding it in more formal organizational practices (Hayes & Maslen, 2015). "Such stories have relevance only to those professionals who already have a deep technical understanding. Stories of this type, often shared at shift handover, build on experts' knowledge bank, providing more data on which they can draw when required to make decisions. Experts reported using these stories to drive their own scenario-based learning–thinking through how they would have responded in the same situation and how the new information changes their assessment" (Hayes & Maslen, 2015, p. 720). "While organizational learning is a stated goal of such systems, capturing them in a narrative sense appears to be left to the chance of informal processes" (Hayes & Maslen, 2015, p. 724).

Denning (2004) explained why organizations underestimate their stories and do not manage them properly as an outcome of the justified data-proof-oriented mindset of their executives. By him, "the antagonism toward storytelling may have reached the peak in the twentieth century with the determined effort to reduce all knowledge to analytic propositions" (Denning, 2012, p. 2).

To help managers to understand stories and their importance for the organization, he provided them with the storytelling catalog that classifies stories depending on specific needs and situations and gives guidelines on how to tell them (for example sparking action stories, communicating who you are stories, transmitting values stories, fostering collaboration stories, knowledge sharing stories, leading people to future stories, etc.).

4 Power of a Meta-story – Example from the Telco

The power of a meta-story can be illustrated by an example from a telecommunication company. The author of this paper worked at the end of 90th in the team of experts, formal employees of an operational unit of one European national telecommunication provider. The operational unit was managed by manager M. All experts told various protagonist “hero” stories (Montague, 2013) about M, and it was evident that they highly respected her. Their respect and adoration were so strong that they paid it even to her husband ("Wow, he is M's husband") when he joined the team for few weeks.

M's immense authority was based on two accidents and stories about them, which resulted in the meta-story (myth) about the highly competent, strict, firm, fair, and human manager. The first accident was the huge flood that damaged the capital of the country. Along with other damage, telecommunication technology was affected. In those days, the telecommunication wires were from water-sensitive copper; e.g., the flood destroyed them totally. The company checked the situation and declared that they needed six months to make the phones working again. However, the country's premier demanded to get the telecommunication operation back in two weeks (the European financial center was in the middle of the damaged area). M's operational unit introduced a 24 hours shift crisis regime (people slept at sites; the only reason for leaving the workplace was the death in the family). M asked all employees to concentrate fully on the work and promised to take care of their everyday personal duties. During that period of two weeks, she helped families of her employees with many things; for example, she arranged the hospital for the grandmother, brought the picture of the newborn to his father, and explained to the misbehaving teenager that it is better to wait with the revolt till daddy returns home. Above all this, she was the first whom the working groups saw in the morning, she brought them their lunch and evening pizza. The phones were back in operation in two weeks.

Even though the flood experience led to admiration and even love of M, it did not stop the practice that made her angry, which she failed to stop and which finally led to the

second accident. Field employees of the operational unit were equipped with excellent but expensive toolkits. Moreover, they did not care for them properly, and many toolkits were reported as lost. Of course, M knew that employees were stealing them but all measures taken to alter this behavior failed. M, once driving through the town, saw the yellow tent, the evidence that her subordinates were working there under the ground. M never missed the opportunity to talk to people, so she stopped to investigate what was happening. She opened the tent and got furious. There were no people there, just the abandoned toolkit. She took the toolkit, drove to the company, exhibited the toolkit on her desk, and promised to punish severely everyone who reports the toolkit lost. She was waiting, waiting and waiting till the police arrived the next day. The yellow tent belonged to the gas people, and M stole their tools. Quite a shameful situation, but not for M. She immediately told the story about what happened to everyone she could, and it quickly spread around the company. "We stopped 'losing' toolkits," my colleagues said. "We could not. She liked them so much that she stole them from other companies."

The mechanism of how stories worked together and created the final meta-story followed what Akerlof et al. (2020, P. 199) call "a combination of top-down and bottom-up forces." First, the bottom-up mechanism took place. Employees told many stories on their experience with M's behavior in the times of the flood, and these personal stories created the first meta-story. Stories of M going to see employees working the yellow tent, M getting angry over the abandoned toolkit, and M being investigated by the police resulted in the second meta-story. This meta-story was told and spread in the company by M herself, e.g., in the top-down direction. Together these two meta-stories created the final meta-story about M. The final meta-story was widely accepted by the company's employees and become the myth (Yehoshua, 2004).

Conclusion

Stories are a natural way of human communication. Every organization has a different system of stories that together create meta-stories. These stories and meta-stories influence how people understand organizations, roles they have in the working process, customers, managers, and the organization's future. Stories and meta-stories provide information about corporate identity and the health of organizations.

As it turns out that many organizations underestimate stories, do not know how they work, and do not understand their role in the organization, the primary purpose of this paper

was to highlight the topic and introduce some aspects of stories and meta-stories from an organizational perspective. This is also the major limitation of this conceptual paper – it does not provide concrete empiric data about the concrete research objective but provides more general background of the topic.

Even though the literature on stories and storytelling offers research results that cover organizational aspects of storytelling, this area still provides opportunities for extensive research. Emerging discoveries in neurology and theory on learning communities indicate that the role of stories in organizations may be more important than it was expected previously. When preparing this paper, we found out that the literature on meta-stories is extremely weak, and we see considerable research opportunities here.

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Contact

Ludmila Mládková

Prague University of Economy and Business

W. Churchilla 1938/4, Prague 3, 130 67

mladkova@vse.cz