

UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS THROUGH STORY

For twenty-five years I've worked within organizational systems, the majority of this time as an executive. Some of these experiences have been with very large, multinational manufacturing or service organizations, others have been with much smaller entities including a number of entrepreneurial start-up ventures. Common to each was the complexity of human interaction, the challenges of leading through change and the elusiveness of cultures that inspire, that honour individuality, and that create connection and positivity. Organizational dynamics such as these inspired my recent research, research that has highlighted the measurable benefits of developing relational leadership bench strength and building a culture of positivity.¹

Intent on assisting organizations to develop these competencies and facilitating cultural differentiation in the process, I have devised and deployed a unique process that engages members of the system to share their unique voices through story. For millennia, stories have served as a way to share our lived experiences. They transcend age, language and cultural tradition and as such are effective at revealing authentic voices within an organizational system.

Distinct from the more common application of story as an aesthetic practice used by leaders to create alignment around a corporate vision, my approach is a structured design that engages a representative cluster of constituents in the sharing of their experiences relative to a given topic. The process invites the initial storyteller to respond to a core group of open-ended questions. With each subsequent interview, supplemental questions are asked to embellish the storylines based upon the revelations of previous storytellers. The interview process continues until there is no further development of the storyline. Known formally as organizational storytelling, there are relatively few practitioners of the approach in North America, with fewer still focused on its application in corporate settings. I am one of those few who are able to decipher the emergent themes that are woven through the personal accounts shared by the storyteller group.

While revealing experiences of the organizational culture, its culture of leadership and specific leader exemplars is an exquisite application of this approach, it is by no means limited to these objectives. Indeed, assessing employee engagement, their perceptions on change initiatives, and their thoughts on obstacles or enablers to success are additional applications. Seeking the reaction of an external constituency, such as a regulator or customer, to philanthropic activities, social responsibility initiatives, or new products or services represent additional ways of using this storytelling approach.

To learn how you can find your way to the genuine answers to your toughest organizational questions, please contact me at david@soulzatwork.com or 647 383-7685.

¹ McLean, D., 2014, *Understanding Relational Agility: Exploring Constructs of Relational Leadership through Story* as published by OhioLink at the following address: <https://etdadmin.ohiolink.edu/>