

## ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING: A LEADERSHIP TOOL



### TELE-WORKSHOP SPOTLIGHT SPEAKER

**Stephen Denning**  
Organizational Storyteller



#### Speaker Profile:

*Steve Denning successfully merged his technical and analytical thinking with the creativity and drama of storytelling to develop techniques for motivating change and transferring knowledge within large organizations—starting with the World Bank.*

*He served as the World Bank's Knowledge Management Program Director from 1996-2000, earning worldwide acclaim for its organizational knowledge sharing program. In 2000, Teleos and Work Frontiers International selected Steve as one of the world's ten Most Admired Knowledge Leaders.*

*Steve studied law and psychology at Sydney University in Australia. He worked as a lawyer in Sydney and later earned a postgraduate law degree at Oxford University in the U.K. Steve now works with organizations in the U.S., Europe, Asia and Australia on knowledge management and organizational storytelling. His clients include scores of Fortune 500 companies.*

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### STORIES THAT BUILD ACTION

Compelling stories distinguish America's Byways™ from other roads. The designation process for All-American Roads and National Scenic Byways requires that each byway organization convey the special meaning of its route's intrinsic qualities. These stories pique the interest of travelers, share significant information and encourage visitors to become stewards of the byway's resources. Storytelling used this way is gently persuasive.

Storytelling can also become an effective tool for organizations to enable change. Steve Denning, an expert in organizational change, explained how narrative—a story—can

communicate complex new ideas and motivate response. Springboard stories, as he named them, can be very persuasive as they create a vision of the future. Like interpretive stories, they can also transfer knowledge and create a sense of community. Springboard stories move people to take action and make the vision come true.

Organizational storytelling can help byway organizations as they communicate to the members within the group or as they communicate beyond the group to stakeholders, community members, legislators or the traveling public. And, it requires no special talent—just thoughtful preparation and practice.

"We all can tell stories," said Steve. "Human beings start telling stories around age two and they're masters by age five. However, school teaches us arithmetic and theories. And they retire stories."

But, according to Steve, we don't lose the desire for them. "What do you do after those abstract meetings at work? You tell stories. You chat, you exchange information. You even dream in stories. We are a storytelling species."

*"Endless mind-numbing cascades of numbers can result in dazed audiences and PowerPoint burnout."*

He suggested that storytelling allows leaders to communicate in the natural language of humans. And, while objective analysis and number-crunching

can validate the request for change, stories move people to act.

"Endless mind-numbing cascades of numbers can result in dazed audiences and PowerPoint burnout. At a time when corporate survival often entails disruptive change, leadership is about moving and inspiring people—often to do things that they are not by habit or by predisposition inclined to do: just giving people a reason simply does not work," Steve commented on his Web site ([www.stevedenning.com](http://www.stevedenning.com)). "A story can translate dry, abstract numbers into compelling pictures of how the deep yearnings of decision influencers can come true."

Interpretive stories, though similarly geared toward enlivening facts and making them meaningful, don't necessarily persuade or motivate action for a particular end result as organizational stories do. Organizational stories drive toward transformational change.

### STEVE'S STORYTELLING EXPERIENCE

Steve Denning, a self-proclaimed rational manager, got involved in storytelling because "nothing else worked." He shared his experience with the Tele-Workshop participants (reprinted from his Web site with permission here):

"As a manager in the World Bank in 1996, I had been trying to communicate the idea of knowledge management and to get people to understand and to implement it. At that time in that organization, knowledge management was a strange and generally incomprehensible idea. I used the traditional methods of communicating with no success. I gave people reasons why the idea was important but they didn't listen. I showed them charts and they just looked dazed. In my desperation, I was willing to try anything and eventually I stumbled on the power of a story, such as the following:

'In June 1995, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia logged on to the Web site for the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria. This was June 1995, not June 2001. This was not the capital of Zambia but a tiny place six hundred kilometers away. This was not a rich country: this was Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world. But the most important part of this picture for us in the World Bank is this: the World Bank isn't in the picture. The World Bank doesn't have its know-how accessible to all the millions of people who make decisions about poverty. But just imagine if it had. Think what an organization it could become.'

In 1996 in the World Bank, this story had helped galvanize staff and managers to imagine a different kind of future for the organization and to set about implementing it. Once knowledge management became an official

corporate strategy later that year, I continued to use similar stories to reinforce and continue the change. The efforts were successful: by 2000, the World Bank was benchmarked as a world leader in knowledge management."

### CRAFTING BARE-BONES STORIES

Typically, a traditional well-told story has a plot, a hero and lots of details about sights and sounds. But to spark action, the organizational story doesn't fit that standard. A springboard story has three characteristics, according to Steve:

1. It's a true story.
2. It has a positive tone—a happy ending.
3. It's told in a minimalist fashion with little detail.

Steve explained that fiction asks the

**Organizational stories can be specifically crafted and delivered to:**

- Persuade people to change
- Get people to work together
- Share knowledge
- Tame the grapevine
- Communicate who you are
- Transmit values
- Lead people to the future

Source: [www.stevedenning.com](http://www.stevedenning.com)

storyteller's audience to imagine something, and the audience then reacts with "O.K., but that won't happen here." Truth forces confrontation of the issue.

"Do not tell a lie," he said. "Tell an authentic story that can be checked out. And not just a factually accurate story, but authentically provided."

To emphasize his point, Steve said you could say that 700 happy passengers reached New York after the Titanic's maiden voyage. This is factually true. However, a few of the facts that were omitted—the Titanic sank and 1,500 people died—invalidate the story.

The audience backlash would minimize the story's impact and generate suspicion toward any future stories.

Steve noted that the truth should be conveyed in a positive manner and the story should have a happy ending. "Hollywood's right," he said. "The happy ending releases an indigenous opiate that produces a mild sense of euphoria. It's the perfect frame of mind to think about change."

While truth and happy endings are familiar story elements, the goal of minimal detail breaks from traditional storytelling. "My Zambia story has 29 words. The blandest story can still have a huge impact. I chose the words 'health worker.' Was it a doctor? A nurse? Male? Female? I didn't want you to think about Zambia and the setting, but how you could have been part of the solution."

### DOUBLE THE AUDIENCE

Steve suggested that as you craft your story, imagine that you are speaking to two listeners per person.

"Speak to the person you see and the little voice in the person's head," said Steve. "This is hugely important to communication. Work in harmony, work in consonance, with that little voice. Give it something to do. Give the voice something to respond to and think about. That's the springboard. The little voice can be creating an action plan while you're telling the story."

According to Steve, organizational stories can be specifically crafted and delivered to:

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He defines these as the seven types of organizational narratives and the central challenges of leadership. "Traditional tools may not work," said Steve. "Narratives are effective." ★

# Q & A

**Q. You mentioned several different ways to tell stories. How can byways use them to engage people in byway activities or for fund-raising?**

**A.** You asked two questions. First, to motivate people to become active when they were not active before, you need to find a springboard story. Create a story on the framework of a true story. Be clear on the “change” idea. What do you want people to do? Find when that’s actually happened before and gained a benefit. Tell a story based on that experience. The person in the story should be like the target audience. Provide a date and place to show it’s true. Say what it was like without that person’s participation. Then say what did happen and make the ending happy. The story should be short, crisp. Conclude with one of the three magic phrases: “what if...”, “just imagine...” or “just think...”. Second, for raising money, tell the story to potential donors so they see the value for the people they would like to help or show how the donation will benefit the donor. Get the little voice to say, “Well, if I give some money, then we could do that...”

**Q. Should our volunteers at the visitor center have three or four stories about certain issues ready to tell people?**

**A.** Yes, develop a set of compelling stories that perhaps explains who the volunteers are, the meaning of the byway, where it’s at now and what it might become. This is a very effective method.

**Q. What about other models for organizational change, such as John P. Kotter’s work on leadership at the Harvard Business School?**

**A.** Well, the other models don’t work. Giving people a reason to change isn’t generally enough to compel someone to make transformational change. Identity is bound up in how a person does things. Simply giving a reason, threatening and other conventional tools for change rarely work for long: the person’s heart isn’t in it. The person has to take the new identity. You have to win minds and their hearts. Stories reach the heart.

**Q. Are there different approaches to stories delivered to leaders vs. stories for the rank and file in the trenches?**

**A.** The narrative pattern is the same. The basic story won’t differ. The context and dynamics—the setting—will likely change. Some storytellers will have advantages. For example, the CEO can convene people and get people to listen without much question. If you’re not the CEO, then talk about what you know the audience is concerned about, so they’ll listen.

**Q. For a story to generate significant change, does it matter if it’s spoken or written?**

**A.** To get people to do things, I think you need face-to-face storytelling. You have to be there—be there to look people in the eyes. I’ve never seen transformational change with memos or emails. For other purposes, once people are interested, then books can be great tools. But the people need to already be interested and curious. Transformational change won’t happen 100 percent of the time even when you are there, so when you’re not there, it’s almost sure it won’t happen.

**Q. How do you develop a bare-bones story? Should you practice the story?**

**A.** I consulted the storytellers at the Jonesboro Storytelling Festival in Tennessee. Those storytellers wanted the details. I knew for entertainment storytelling, the details were important. In organizations, people have the attention span of a housefly. The audience might get interested in the details, but then they’re not focused on the action—the change. To strip it to the bare bones, get clear on the change, the purpose, the action. Then ask how much of your story is relevant? Make it audience-specific. What makes it credible (one or two details are probably all that’s needed)? Benefits are often presented as over-done (such as in advertising). Strip down to the bare bones. Try it out on segments of the audience and revise as needed.

**Q. Byways hear a lot about vision statements and visioning.**

**Organizational storytelling points to the future, but it’s not visioning, correct?**

**A.** Vision statements are very rarely compelling and they’re set in the future. It’s difficult to tell a believable story about the future. A springboard story connects to the future, but the listener makes that connection based on the true story from the past. Each person tailors an action plan—the vision—to what he or she can do. The listener can continually update the plan. Storytelling is a short-cut to the future. This isn’t to say that you should not do a mission statement or vision statement. They’re a promise of what the future will be. A springboard story shows what happened in the past that can make the promise come true. ★

## RESOURCES

### ELECTRONIC

**About Steve Denning and Organizational Storytelling**

Web site: [www.stevedenning.com](http://www.stevedenning.com)  
Email: [steve@stevedenning.com](mailto:steve@stevedenning.com)

To join a listserve of several hundred storytelling practitioners from around the world, email Seth Kahan at [seth@sethkahan.com](mailto:seth@sethkahan.com).

**The National Association for Interpretation (NAI)**  
[interpret.com/interpret/about.htm](http://interpret.com/interpret/about.htm)

### PRINT

**Squirrel Inc.: A Fable of Leadership and Storytelling**

by Stephen Denning (Jossey-Bass, 2004). Discusses the seven highest value forms of organizational storytelling.

**The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations**

by Stephen Denning (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001). Describes the springboard story and strategies for communication in organizations.

**Storytelling in Organizations: How Narrative and Storytelling Are Transforming 21st Century Management**

by John Seely Brown, Steve Denning, Katalina Groh and Larry Prusak (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2004). Examines how four busy executives use storytelling to understand and manage organizations; the authors describe their experiences working on knowledge management, change management, and innovation strategies in such organizations as Xerox, the World Bank and IBM.



## **America's Byways Resource Center**

provides information, connections and expertise that help build better byways. State coordinators, local groups, volunteers and organizations with ties to nationally designated scenic byways look to us for hands-on assistance in planning, preserving, promoting and managing scenic byways.

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November 2

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