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WHY EXPLORE  
STORYTELLING  
IN BUSINESS?

“Meet the Press” and tell them your story.

—NANA BETTY

**S**TORYTELLING CAN BE a personal inheritance, a lifelong and life-sustaining habit of mind, as well as an organizational inheritance, a management tool that helps businesses develop and even thrive. When my maternal grandmother, Nana Betty, encouraged my sister and me as children to tell stories about ourselves to her neighbors—“the press”—whom we encountered on our walks to the beach, she was building our self-confidence in talking to strangers and in finding our place in her small Manhattan Beach (New York) community. Similarly, organizations, like those featured in this book, can encourage storytelling for good purposes, such as making sense of their strategy, communicating it, and developing or strengthening culture and brand. These uses of storytelling generate positive consequences that can have a sustained and significant impact on an organization.

This book is written for business professionals who want to know more about the power of storytelling, how it has functioned successfully in companies, and how, in practical terms, it can help achieve an organization’s and a professional’s goals.

### THE VITALITY OF STORIES

As the “Nana Betty” story illustrates, storytelling may have powerful roots in childhood. Novelist and screenplay writer Larry McMurtry reflects:

If, for example, you dare to interrupt a five-year-old’s thirty-ninth viewing of “The Lion King” in order to find out a basketball score, they will, once they regain control of the remote, immediately rewind the film to the point of interruption, so as not to miss the smallest element of the story. Watching the avidity with which the very young absorb stories . . . leaves one no grounds for pessimism about the survival of narrative itself. The human appetite for it is too strong.<sup>1</sup>

This child’s play of “story watching” is closely akin to the serious play of story creation by novelists and nonfiction writers like McMurtry, and filmmakers like the Disney studio, producer of *The Lion King*.

Professional storytellers like McMurtry express our intuitive understanding that people are hardwired for stories. The familiar beginning and ending of fairy tales—“Once upon a time . . . and they lived happily ever after”—act as verbal bookends, marking a child’s grasp of how things work (or ought to work), a predictability that can produce emotional reassurance and pleasure with repeated telling of the same story or with repetition of the familiar elements of story applied to a new topic. As the performance of a gifted storyteller, these tales not only compel a child’s rapt attention and adamant demand to “play it again” but also create an intimate link between the listener and the teller of the tale, often a trusted parent or teacher. From early childhood on, the best stories, replete with memorable details, make sense of apparently disconnected facts and experiences, arranging them in a sequence that feels inevitable, and take us on a journey led by the teller of the tale, who, having earned our confidence, orchestrates it all.

The livelihood of writers and the fortunes of filmmakers depend on their ability to craft stories, rich in plot and detail, that touch audiences emotionally, from young children to the elders of a society. McMurtry grew up in rural west Texas among storytellers. In *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*, he reflects on the art of storytelling, weaving into his autobiography an essay on this art by the early-twentieth-century European intellectual Walter Benjamin. McMurtry reminisces about the roots

of his writing life in a small town where old men would sit around at the corner store and while away the time by whittling. As they carved wood into rough shapes, an activity that kept their hands busy and their ears alert, they would take turns telling and listening to each other's stories. "Whittling cowboys," McMurtry reflects, are "perfect receptacles for stories."<sup>2</sup> McMurtry's west Texas town was a close-knit community of shared stories, values, and "tribal" memory.<sup>3</sup>

Even though this context for stories has vanished, McMurtry argues, stories have vitality and a sustaining presence: "Watching the avidity with which the young absorb stories . . . leaves one no grounds for pessimism about the survival of narrative itself."<sup>4</sup> And even though we are far removed from the leisurely pace and idyllic setting for the stories he portrays, most of us are nonetheless drawn to them despite—or perhaps because of—the pressured busyness of our organizational and private lives and by our hunger for emotional engagement in our work. As I will argue, it is now time for business to turn to narrative with greater confidence and respect for its capabilities.

#### WHY TURN TO STORYTELLING IN BUSINESS NOW?

Organizational life is highly pressured. We multitask, we text-message, we surf the Web, we tweet, and we check Facebook in settings, virtual or real, that are galaxies removed from the pastoral idyll of McMurtry's whittling old men: "The decline of whittling," McMurtry explains in an elegiac passage of his autobiography, "has clearly deprived storytellers of many willing listeners—most of the old men who filled the spittle and whittle benches outside the rural courthouses of my youth regaled themselves as they whittled with story after story."<sup>5</sup>

Unlike McMurtry's rural storytellers, the businesspeople we want to influence are busy, harried, quick to calculate the dollar value of their time, bombarded by multiple messages from a dizzying number of communication channels, and likely to respond in haste and in kind to what comes their way. Moreover, as the Millennials who were raised with social network technology increasingly populate the ranks of management, much of business communication takes the form of instantaneous sound bites. Jim Reilly, former general manager of marketing plans and

communications at IBM, acknowledges and laments this shift: “People want to knock things down to a bumper sticker. Everything is shorthand thinking. People need stimulation every twenty minutes. Today, instead of the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln would have to say ‘Read my lips. No slaves.’”<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite, or because of, all this, a well-chosen, well-crafted story can get through to people.

How do stories reach beyond the pressure and noise to influence people in a sustained and powerful way? According to business communication expert Mary Lang of Comadrona Communications, stories succeed in getting through to people because “humans crave narrative and the use of story builds a narrative for topics that goes deeper and lives longer in a person’s psyche than most any other form of communication.”<sup>7</sup> (The work of novelists and child psychologists supports her point as well.)

Reflecting on his daily routine as a busy executive, Bob Feldman, former senior corporate communication director at DreamWorks Animation and now principal of the strategic communications firm PulsePoint Group, explains the impact of stories in this way:

When I think about my day . . . I get up, watch the *Today Show*, read the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, go to work, listen to the radio, turn on CNN.com. During the day I am hit with thousands of messages. Am I going to take away three or four messages from a CEO about a company? It’s a fallacy to think companies have an opportunity to deliver several messages. If they’re lucky, I’ll have one impression. *So what’s that single story a company has to tell that is relevant and memorable?* Take the message and put it into a story for singularity, relevance, and memorability.<sup>8</sup>

Amid the rush and intensity of data from multiple quarters, Feldman suggests (and some economists and historians also agree) that stories have sense-making capability. In the hands of a skilled storyteller who selects from bits of information to create a coherent, succinct message, a story can make a company’s case compelling and memorable, especially when those on the receiving end are likely to suffer from what educator and essayist Sven Birkerts calls “attention deficit disorder.” This is, according to Birkerts, a contemporary malaise ushered in by the decline in reading

and reflection and characterized by a loss of focus or a “grazing mentality” that is the antithesis of thoughtful assessment.<sup>9</sup>

Having the ability to make sense of things and to influence, stories are an inevitable expression and tool of leadership. “Stories are unavoidable if you’re going to be a leader,” advises Irv Miller, group VP of corporate communications at Toyota Motor Sales. “Every leader needs a vision, whether you’re a leader of a trash brigade or a big company. You need to communicate where you’re going. A person who’s a good communicator has a grasp of storytelling. If you can’t translate your passion, you’re hard-pressed to be a good leader. No one followed a committee into battle.”<sup>10</sup> Some leaders have an easy grasp of storytelling. Betsy McLaughlin, CEO of Hot Topic, remarks on the capacity of stories in business to reach a diverse audience: “If I have a problem to solve, a big idea to get across, and I have to reach three people in the room with different backgrounds, I tell a story. Two weeks later I hear people retell the story.”<sup>11</sup>

In the highly contested arena known as organizational life, stories can help leaders—and aspiring leaders—to emerge from the conflict with a team of supporters. “Communication is a contact sport,” asserts communication consultant Tom Pyden. “You have to do it, look forward to doing it, and do it as often as you can. Employees then run through walls for you.”<sup>12</sup> At a minimum, stories can be a survival tool for leaders. As Rob Lively, vice president of corporate government affairs at Schering-Plough, concludes, “Stories are the pivot point of falling on your face or making the game-winning shot. Take it seriously. The question is, Are you food or are you the head of the team?”<sup>13</sup>

More and more, stories are important because people want interaction and engagement rather than being “broadcast” or lectured to. Especially with the growing presence of social network technology, employees and external stakeholders (for example, investors, customers, clients) want to be heard—and at times have their stories told in their own voices: how I experienced driving my new BMW; what it’s like to work on a Chevron oil drill platform in the Pacific; the meaning of the Johnson & Johnson Credo and its emphasis on serving mothers and children as it comes into play in my work as a salesperson, a researcher, or a senior manager.

In this new environment, businesses themselves need compelling and memorable stories at the enterprise level because people's trust in business is quite low. Bill Margaritis, corporate vice president of global communications and investor relations at FedEx, explains:

In today's world, people are more willing to trust other people than they are large institutions. Authentic stories, well told, remind stakeholders that good companies are the ones that value, celebrate, and empower their people. You've got to deconstruct the cold corporate edifice and focus on the individual building blocks—the people whose stories exemplify a company's culture and values. That's how you gain trust in this increasingly cynical world.<sup>14</sup>

In a business environment where distractions and lack of trust dominate, stories can cut through the busyness to capture attention, engage and influence people, create meaning, exemplify values, and gain trust.

#### SUPPORT FOR STORYTELLING: A RALLY CRY FROM MULTIPLE QUARTERS

Professionals from a variety of disciplines have long recognized and voiced the importance of storytelling to their field. These include cognitive psychologists, neurologists, physicians, lawyers, city planners, economists, historians, literary critics, filmmakers, and, yes, professional storytellers; each group employs its unique perspectives in working with stories. Locating stories for business on this broader canvas sometimes yields unexpected insights into how stories for nonbusiness purposes are thought of, crafted, and used—and what may be the potential of storytelling for business.

Research by cognitive psychologists and neurologists confirms our intuition about the power of stories; scientific data substantiate the fundamental connection between being human and telling stories.<sup>15</sup> Tracking the cognitive maturity of children from age two to seventeen, child development specialist Arthur Applebee shows how their growth is characterized by the increasingly more sophisticated stories they can understand and tell. The toddler responds to a simple tale, while the older child delights in creating and appreciating more complex stories characterized by multiple voices, characters, dialogue, and plot complications. Exploring a

similar set of research questions, psychologist Jerome Bruner reflects on the language development of a precocious child, Emmy, who would express her half-thoughts in emerging stories she'd concoct to make sense of her world to herself as she prepared for bed: "The soliloquies were not just about the routines of the day; she seemed drawn to the unexpected, to things that had surprised her or caught her unprepared. . . . So intent was she on getting her stories right that we came to believe her progress in acquiring language was driven by some sort of narrative energy."<sup>16</sup> In the related field of neurology, researchers using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to do brain scans have located our storytelling comprehension in the prefrontal cortex of the brain where our working memory and, in turn, our ability to identify sequence and represent stories are lodged.<sup>17</sup> James McGaugh, research professor in the Center for Neurobiology of Learning and Memory at the University of California at Irvine, who is an expert in brain functioning and memory, has been using MRIs and interview protocols to investigate individuals who have extraordinary powers of memory: "You can ask them what happened in their own lives or what was of significant public interest on a particular date—even years ago—and they'll remember the details, often telling them in a narrative. (We are finding that the organization of their brains is a little different, some regions smaller or larger, than the brains of others.) All of us make sense of our experiences through stories."<sup>18</sup>

Some physician-educators also recognize the benefits of storytelling to the humanistic practice of medicine. Psychiatrist and educator Robert Coles has used "doctor stories," fiction written by famous authors who trained as physicians, for instance, Anton Chekhov and William Carlos Williams, to teach students at Harvard Medical School to go beyond clinical diagnoses by listening fully to patients' stories as a way to connect emotionally with them and to interpret their life circumstances as they struggle with illness. Reflecting on the value ascribed to storytelling by his mentor in psychiatry, Coles notes: "He urged me to be a good listener in the special way a story requires: note the manner of presentation; the development of plot, character; the addition of new dramatic sequences; the emphasis accorded to one figure or another in the recital; and the degree of enthusiasm, of coherence, the narrator gives to his or her account."<sup>19</sup>

Closely akin to the work of Bruner and Coles, graduate programs in the relatively new field known as “narrative medicine” help healthcare practitioners develop their storytelling capabilities. As the program at Columbia University describes, the premise for the study of narrative medicine is that “the care of the sick unfolds in stories. The effective practice of healthcare requires the ability to recognize, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others. Medicine practiced with narrative competence is a model for humane and effective medical practice.”<sup>20</sup> Rita Charon, a pioneer in the field and both a physician and educator, offers this poignant representative anecdote from her work that captures, in this first interview with a patient, the promise of narrative medicine<sup>21</sup>:

As his new internist, I tell him, I have to learn as much as I can about his health. “Could you tell me whatever you think I should know about your situation?” I ask him. And then I do my best to not say a word, to not write in his medical chart, but to absorb all that the patient emits about himself—about his life, his body, his fears, and his hopes. I listen not only for the content of his narrative but for its form—its temporal course, its images, its associated subplots, its silences, where he chooses to begin in telling of himself, how he sequences symptoms with other life events. After a few minutes, the patient stops talking and begins to weep. I ask him why he cries. He says, “No one has ever let me do this before.”<sup>22</sup>

Storytelling can be a catharsis for the patient, and story listening on the part of a physician can open up productive communication with the patient.

In medicine, stories can build a doctor’s diagnostic capabilities and responsiveness to patients; in law, stories can help all the players—prosecutors, defense attorneys, litigants, and judges—make arguments. Here the persuasive power of storytelling comes to the fore. Law professor Paul Gewirtz explains: “Both scholars and the public have increasingly been drawn to law as an arena where vivid human stories are played out.”<sup>23</sup> These stories, fundamentally persuasive in intent, either reinforce or work against each other in the competitive space of the law court. A defense attorney may craft a story about a pharmaceutical company’s honest and thorough efforts to test and retest a drug before release; the prosecutor counters with a story that argues for the company’s negligence and abuse.



The “trial process” becomes, then, “a struggle over narrative” in which different versions of the story compete.<sup>24</sup>

Like scholars of narrative and law, those in city planning focus on the persuasive powers of storytelling; for instance, James A. Throgmorton in *Planning as Persuasive Storytelling: The Rhetorical Construction of Chicago's Electric Future*. From his perspective, planners engaged in forecasts and analyses of a city's growth proffer competing stories about the urban future. Readers of these stories, who include the full array of stakeholders (including civic planning commissions, community groups, NGOs, potential partners, and competitors), revise, reject, advance, or embellish these stories to fit their own goals and may pitch their own “counterstories” for the future.

Even the profession of economics, known for its focus on numbers and theory, has found room for stories. Economist D. N. McCloskey argues for seeing economic interpretation in terms of the stories that economists choose to tell and those they leave on the cutting-room floor: “the economist, like a novelist, uses and abuses stories. Once upon a time we were poor, then capitalism flourished, and now as a result we are rich. Some would tell another, anticapitalist story; but any economist tells stories.”<sup>25</sup> Economists, she claims, take pleasure in both the “unforeseen consequences” and “trick endings”<sup>26</sup> of stories and need, as a consequence of the ethical dimension of their profession, to discriminate carefully between dishonest “snake-oil” stories and those grounded in data, analysis, and sound theory.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to an interpretive function, stories in economics can shape decisions, as researcher Graham Smart explains in his study of monetary policy at the Bank of Canada (the equivalent to the US Federal Reserve Board). There economists craft sometimes competing macroeconomic stories or “mini” stories about different sectors of the economy, while interpreting patterns in massive amounts of data, and move toward a single overarching narrative, a monetary policy story that is used to make decisions (for instance, about interest or exchange rates) and to explain and defend them to the Canadian public.

Of course, the professionals who place storytelling at the heart of their work are historians, literary critics, filmmakers, and professional

storytellers. Historians Richard Marius and Melvin Page underscore the fundamental link between story and history:

Historians try to solve puzzles in the evidence and to tell a story that will give order to the confusion of data we inherit from the past. Historians make connections, assign causes, trace effects, make comparisons, uncover patterns, locate dead ends, and find influences . . . they apply their minds to the sources and their considered judgments to the evidence, writing those stories about the past they intend to be both credible and true.<sup>28, 29</sup>

Those who study how and why history is written consider the purposes for which historians write (for example, to celebrate or critique a nation's past, to provide lessons for the present, to create a reliable and accurate account of events), the scope of histories (for example, everyday life, politics, culture, global history), and the tone of the work (for example, didactic, analytical, impassioned, or some combination of these), all of which are fundamental elements of history as narrative.

Since the 1960s, literary critics have given increasing attention to the theoretical study of narrative, spawning an entire field of research called "narratology." Some of this work provides interesting insights about storytelling in business, in particular about the active engagement of audiences in recreating, and even constructing, stories in their own imaginations as they read or listen to them; on the storyteller and the points of view from which the story is told; and on the choice and sequencing of events in a story drawn from a wealth of possible material. When relevant, narrative theory will find its way into this book, but rest assured that the rather substantial jargon of narrative theory will be kept to a minimum.<sup>30</sup>

Understanding narrative is central to the work of historians and literary critics, but it is the work of filmmakers and their reflections on storytelling that is most familiar and influential today. Interviews with these professionals and published accounts of their work offer valuable insights about many aspects of storytelling: building interest and suspense; working with characters, dialogue, details, and plot; finding the sources and inspiration for stories; and assessing audiences for their films. Indeed, some experts in the field, like screenwriting coach Robert McKee and entertainment executive Peter Guber (who produced such movies as *Batman*, *The Color*

*Purple*, and *Rain Man*), have drawn explicit links between their work in film and storytelling in business.<sup>31</sup>

And finally, since the late 1970s, a storytelling movement focused on the oral performance of narrative has been active in the United States, sponsored by the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling. This organization holds conventions featuring storyteller performers and provides training in the art to children and adults. As the movement has matured, it has increased its efforts to build public awareness of and support for storytelling.

This quick journey across a range of professions and disciplines outside of business reveals a wealth of benefits that stories offer, from making sense of experience to reaching audiences emotionally to wielding explanatory and persuasive powers. Before reading further, you may want to consider whether these benefits are true for business stories as well.

#### STORYTELLING IN BUSINESS EDUCATION: A RESTRICTED PRESENCE

Though typically finding lukewarm reception in business schools, storytelling has gained a foothold in many of their communication programs. At the Sloan School (MIT), MBA students explore their ethical positions by means of an exercise called “A Tale of Two Stories,” which is part of a new curriculum, “Giving Voice to Values.” Students share and examine stories about moments when their values conflicted with what they felt pressured to do in the workplace; for instance, circumstances in which they may have been told to inflate billable hours, exaggerate the capabilities of a product, or misrepresent budget information.<sup>32</sup>

At the University of Virginia’s Darden School, the required communication course includes a module on narrative that asks students to tell and analyze stories from several angles: about a business, their own or one from a foreign country; about a communication challenge in the workplace; about an example of leadership, their own or someone else’s. As James Rubin, the director of the communication program, explains: “The interesting thing tends to be how much of themselves they [the students] reveal and how willing they are to take some emotional risks to connect with the audience, in either a company or a personal narrative.”<sup>33</sup> This

module sets the stage for discussion of the “narrative logic” in management presentations—beginnings, middles, and ends—and of organizations as storytelling enterprises.<sup>34</sup>

Additional uses for storytelling abound in these courses. At NYU’s Stern School of Business, students in a communication elective tell stories about what has most shaped them as businesspeople.<sup>35</sup> At the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame, students share stories about an organization in which they’ve worked, its values and culture.<sup>36</sup> In a public-speaking course at the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University, they tell, revise, and retell stories to hone their abilities as presenters.<sup>37</sup> Stanford’s Graduate School of Business brings in leaders from both the business and entertainment worlds to talk to students about their uses of storytelling and their approaches to it.<sup>38</sup> At the Tuck School (Dartmouth), students in a communication course that uses business cases extensively follow up discussion of the written cases—stories about organizations facing significant challenges—by checking online for updated sequels to the case stories.<sup>39</sup>

Communication courses at several business schools include analysis of speeches by public figures known to be gifted storytellers, people like Steve Jobs of Apple, Jerry Adamic at MCI, Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines, General George Patton in his speech to soldiers on the eve of the Normandy invasion, Prime Minister Winston Churchill in his many addresses to the British people during World War II, President Ronald Reagan in his First Inaugural Address, and Jesse Jackson in his campaign address to supporters for his presidential bid in the mid-1980s.

Storytelling also has a place in a few management courses on creativity and on strategy. Wharton offers a course to MBAs on how to develop one’s creativity and how to recruit, manage, and develop a creative workforce. For this course, students are invited to use narrative to make sense of “rules” for imaginative thinking or to write an op-ed article on creativity; professionals known for innovation in a variety of fields (for example, medicine, microbiology, computer science, art, and industrial design) are invited to the class to tell their stories about their breakthrough discoveries.<sup>40</sup>

At UCLA Anderson School of Management where I teach, storytelling features prominently in a communication elective and in the capstone

strategy projects in which students think about the business plans and presentations they are crafting for organizations as data-based stories about an organization's future strategic reality. In the elective course, students tell a "signature" story, one that defines them as a person, a professional, and an aspiring leader, and consider the situations in which they'd use the story (for instance, in a job interview; on Facebook; in presenting to a client, a customer, or, later in their career, to the media).

In the UCLA Anderson Executive Education Programs, participants who include leaders from around the globe—anyone from a government official posted in the Guangzhou province of China to a high-tech entrepreneur from New Zealand to the dean of a medical school in California—are asked to discuss a host of questions about organizational storytelling to build awareness of this powerful communication tool:

- What story (or stories) will move your organizational initiative forward?
- Who are the best storytellers in your organization? What about in public life? What makes them effective?
- What stories influence people in your organization? Why do you think so? Which ones resonate with outside stakeholders as well?
- Are there stories from the broader culture—your country or your region—that capture the attention of members of your organization? Do these stories travel well across cultures?
- What are the elements of a powerful story?

Before reading further, you may want to take a moment to respond to these questions as they apply to your work life.

#### THE BIAS AGAINST STORYTELLING IN BUSINESS AND IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

Though storytelling has made inroads in the workplace—and much of this book covers this territory—it appears to be less valued in business than in other professions, an unfortunate circumstance attributable to a number of factors that characterize business education and business life. First of all, stories seem upon initial inspection to be at odds with data

and theory, both of which dominate business education and are essential to sound decision making.

Second, of those who pursue university degrees in business, very few have devoted time and attention to the humanities, the home base for storytelling, as education has become increasingly specialized. (Humanities majors who pursue advanced degrees in business today are few to be found.) Once business students enter the workforce, they apply, often unknowingly, this antistory bias, with its overreliance on charts, graphs, tables, and PowerPoint presentations crammed with bullet points, which list ideas or information but neglect to find and express the connections among them in story form.

The often unarticulated assumption in the workplace then is that serious business is all about numbers and models, that stories are child's play and as such a stigmatized type of discourse best left behind in adult life or relegated to one's time off from work. As Jim Finn, chief marketing officer at Groovy Corporation, observes: "Businesspeople tend not to appreciate the value of relating a story. They think business is operational only."<sup>41</sup> Yet many senior advisors and CEOs would argue the contrary (as we'll see).

As further evidence of the diminished role of storytelling, note too that even in higher education, storytelling and more generally the humanities have a minor role in the curriculum. This was not always the case. Flash back to the nineteenth century and we find that university students were required to take several years of coursework in the humanities: to engage frequently in analysis of famous speeches and literature, write themes on these subjects, and participate in public oratorical performance like debate, oral reading of prose and poetry, translations, and speeches. These studies were often at the heart of the curriculum. And despite a lack of consensus among educators of the early twentieth century about the function of a humanities curriculum, university students at that time took courses where they focused on writing stories and descriptions, analyzing literary texts, or writing in preparation for being engaged citizens capable of participating in and assessing issues of serious consequence to a democracy.<sup>42</sup>

As earlier examples of storytelling in fields outside of business have shown and as I will argue, neglecting stories and, more generally, the

humanities may come at serious cost to business professionals and the organizations they lead. David A. Samson, general manager of public affairs at Chevron, warns that “MBAs can read income statements and balance sheets, and they can use marketing disciplinary concepts, but they get caught up in jargon. They need to know how to explain complex issues in laymen’s language. To advance their careers, they need to know how to communicate to people in language people can understand and in stories.”<sup>43</sup>

The research and analysis for this book show that the case for stories in business is strong, though it has been relatively muted; by contrast, the case for story in other fields—its emotional, explanatory, and persuasive powers—is strong and more and more assured. Along with the growing uses of storytelling in business, the relative strength of the case for stories *outside* of business should encourage a stronger presence for stories within business.

#### RESEARCH FOR THE BOOK

My research on storytelling in business required a multipronged approach. As I’ve described, one approach was to work comparatively, looking at how stories operate in other fields. I also turned to disciplines (for example, literature, rhetoric, management) for theory and examples applicable to the subject.

Perhaps most important, over the course of four years I sought the insights of expert practitioners in organizational storytelling—an established research approach for studies of different types of business discourse—by using a number of questions about storytelling to stimulate open-ended discussion.<sup>44</sup> These expert practitioners are primarily corporate communication executives in the United States and abroad, the professionals responsible for helping to craft and disseminate an organization’s stories to multiple stakeholders. In addition to responding to questions about the topic, they provided many examples of effective stories for business. As the interviews progressed, I tailored each to a particular subject for which the interviewee had expertise and experience; for example, on storytelling and social media.

After an initial set of interviews, I conducted on-site research at several corporations selected for excellence in storytelling at the enterprise level. As mentioned before, I focused on the work of corporate communication professionals with an eye to writing cases—or narratives—illustrating best practices in organizational storytelling.<sup>45</sup> Here the interviews focused on the particular roles, responsibilities, and accomplishments of the professionals for that enterprise as well as assessment of company stories, written or online.

To supplement these efforts, I conducted interviews with several other relevant groups: CEOs of small companies, who are in effect their organization's chief communication officer; business communication faculty, the primary instructors of storytelling in business schools; and filmmakers, experts in crafting stories, who are often insightful critics of the place of stories in culture, and, increasingly, resources that organizations turn to to discover and capture their stories. For example, General Electric hired the director of *Seabiscuit*—a 2003 movie about a horse that becomes an unlikely racing champion and inspires his team as well as the nation during the Great Depression—to teach senior executives about storytelling.<sup>46</sup> In total, I interviewed over 140 professionals, who represent approximately fifty organizations.

#### PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE BOOK

The purpose of this book is to help business professionals understand how organizational goals are accomplished through storytelling. I provide a framework for organizational storytelling and four extensive cases of corporate storytelling based on original research, each with important implications and lessons for business practitioners. The four organizations chosen for the cases were singled out for the quality of their stories: they meet criteria for ethical representation and business success. Each case is followed by “lessons learned,” that is, commentary on the case that suggests practical application to other workplace settings and circumstances and that addresses how individuals can apply the lessons learned from the case to their own work. The final chapter summarizes the key points of the book and invites readers to develop a significant story of their own.



#### A WORKING DEFINITION OF STORY AND THE AUTHENTIC AND FLUENT STORY

The working definition of *story* in business derives from what interviewees had to say about story, *from their uses of the term*, along with the examples of stories they told or showed me. It has the following elements:

- The depiction of event(s) that unfold in a sequence with a beginning, middle, and end, requiring choice of what to include and exclude and resulting in a pattern that makes sense of apparently disconnected facts
- A storyteller, either an individual or an organizational voice and point of view, that may not be specifically identified
- A “real-time” audience in the case of an oral presentation or Webcast, or a remote one that’s imagined and assessed in the case of a written or online communication

This definition is less restrictive than the many definitions of narrative offered by scholars who study the subject.<sup>47</sup> Though it does not reflect the qualities that make for a compelling story, its three elements are what expert business practitioners of storytelling understand the term to mean and how they use it.<sup>48</sup>

As discussed by my interviewees, stories for business are quite flexible in presentation: they’re written, oral, face-to-face, visual, online, or some combination of these formats. Communication expert Andy Gilman notes, “Stories are sometimes a lead grabber, sometimes frame issues, and sometimes are put in later in the Q&A.”<sup>49</sup> As social networking capabilities continue to expand, the platforms and presentations of stories are evolving from video clips authored by employees, to blogs and interactive stories on company Web sites, and on and on.

Organizational stories are also quite flexible in scope. They can assume grand proportions or a modest, even an intimate, space. The story writ large may have as its subject strategy, culture, branding, or some combination of these. Some stories are far more circumscribed: for instance, an anecdote woven into a larger story or made to stand on its own; a short online story by a customer or employee about an experience with a firm;

a scenario developed by an engineer or salesperson about how a user can operate a new machine. Cumulatively, these smaller stories can tell a bigger story about a firm.

Things get more interesting when we move beyond the basics of organizational storytelling and consider what makes for *successful* business stories. A successful story can be characterized as both authentic and fluent.

*Authenticity* is a term that's commonly used in business circles by those who talk about the need for appearances to match reality. Stories must be credible, realistic, and tangible. "Authentic" organizational stories are intended to be truthful—to meet criteria for ethical representation as well as for business success. Think, for example, of the many stories told by employees at Johnson & Johnson about the impact of the "Credo," the company's mission and code of ethics, on their work and their lives. These stories are fact-checked, scrutinized for accuracy in detail (which in no way detracts from their emotional impact). Here's an excerpt from a story told by an employee who works in medical devices and manufacturing about an experience she had at a design and manufacturing show. She had taken aside a speaker whose life had been saved by a stent that was produced by the firm:

I walked up to the man and explained to him that the engineer he was speaking to happened to be one of the leaders of the team that developed the actual stent that was currently in his body. The man went limp, turned pale, grabbed the engineer in a bear hug and said: "If it wasn't for you, I probably would not be here right now." He started sobbing in his arms, then the engineer started crying, and most of us viewing this display of emotion in this large convention hall also got teary eyed.<sup>50</sup>

This and other Johnson & Johnson stories are in sharp contrast to inauthentic stories, which at best "fudge the facts" and at worst land their chief executives in jail. Inauthentic storytelling is perhaps exemplified by the many scenarios from Enron executives about ever-increasing, astronomical profits and global expansion, really flights of fantasy spun at the height of their efforts to fool investors, financial analysts, and others.

The consistent admonition by corporate communication executives is “Don’t tell stories that aren’t true.” Asked what makes stories for business vulnerable, Valerie Di Maria, principal, the 10 company, warns, “Don’t embellish for the sake of drama.”<sup>51</sup> Gary Grates, principal, WCG Worldwide, emphasizes that “people don’t want to hear what your organization wants to do, but what you are. Beware of romanticizing, telling stories about the good old days, which weren’t really that great.”<sup>52</sup> For Harvey W. Greisman, senior vice president and group executive—worldwide communications, MasterCard Worldwide, “the greatest vulnerability of stories is inconsistency and breaking a promise if the story is about what your company is and how it acts in the world: ‘Once a liar, always a liar.’”<sup>53</sup>

To be successful, stories for business need to be fluent as well as authentic. *Fluency* is a term typically used to describe someone’s language skills: “She’s fluent in French” means she speaks with substantial command of the language, exhibiting an ability to speak conversationally, to craft sentences easily and with accurate grammar and style. As used here to describe storytelling, “fluent” stories represent a catchall description of several of the storyteller’s capabilities and the story’s qualities: engaging the emotions and intellect of the audience and commanding the elements of a powerfully crafted and presented story—elements such as a place for the novel and unexpected, significant details, compelling language, and a logical sequence in which the story unfolds. These are things business professionals need to know to be fluent storytellers, to master the “language” of stories. In the case of digital storytelling, fluency means working comfortably and flexibly with technology as well.

At first glance, fluency may appear to be at odds with authenticity since fluency requires selection to shape a story and authenticity requires, in simple terms, telling the truth. Looked at more closely, the two actually work in concert: different data, checked for accuracy, can be chosen for a story depending on its purpose, audiences, and the experience and perceptions of the storyteller. When the data are “encased” in stories, only one of various authentic stories results. All stories are necessarily shaped, and they require fluency. Without fluency, we don’t have stories but rather a pile of data that’s boring and disorganized, or a poorly conceived, poorly

crafted, and poorly presented story that falls on deaf ears. At the same time, authentic stories don't distort the facts or otherwise slant the truth. Their goal is ethical representation.

#### PREVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The following chapter presents a framework for thinking systematically about organizational storytelling, giving prominence to the importance of authentic and fluent storytelling. This discussion sets the stage for the central chapters of the book, which offer a number of cases, or stories about organizations that represent "best practices" in organizational storytelling. Each case is based on original research, on-site observations and interviews, and assessment of corporate documents and is followed by a chapter of extended commentary and analysis of the case and implications for other organizational settings and circumstances that call for stories.

Chapter 3 and the commentary of Chapter 4 look at Schering-Plough's strategy as a persuasive story about the future that unfolds in "chapters" crafted and communicated by the CEO and leadership team. Successful stories about strategy, both authentic and fluent, are intended to help stakeholders understand the strategy to envision (and enact) the future. These chapters emphasize the importance of a corporate culture that supports the company's strategic direction; the role of the CEO as the chief corporate storyteller; and the power that stories about strategy can exert in challenging times.

Chapter 5 and the Chapter 6 commentary focus on the complex, mutually enriching relationship between stories and corporate brand at Chevron, how authentic and fluent stories bring a brand to life and give people confidence in it, and how a brand that lives up to its promise can serve as a frame or filter for powerful organizational stories. Such stories also reflect and strengthen corporate culture while showing the strategic differentiation of the firm from its competitors.

Chapters 7 and 8 show how one company, FedEx, brings together technology and craft to tell visual and verbal stories in video clips and blogs that are disseminated across multiple communication channels, including social network media. The company's strong corporate culture and expertise in the craft of storytelling, accompanied by sophistication

in communications technology, result in powerful organizational stories. These, in turn, strengthen the culture and build trust in the organization.

Chapters 9 and 10 illustrate how storytelling workshops can educate employees about a company's (Philips's) shift in strategic direction and related changes in branding and culture, and assist professionals in a high-tech or engineering culture in communicating with nonspecialists. The workshops introduce storytelling systematically throughout an organization, helping people develop fluency in the practice through instruction, rehearsal, and review.

Finally, Chapter 11 highlights the key points about storytelling addressed in the book and invites readers to develop a significant story of their own, a model for which is the "Nana Betty" story that opened this chapter.

There are several ways to read this book besides reading the chapters in sequence. After reviewing Chapter 2 on the storytelling framework, if you are most interested in the cases, go on to Chapters 3, 5, 7, and 9, the stories of best practices at Schering-Plough, Chevron, FedEx, and Philips. If you are primarily interested in the lessons learned, based upon the cases, as well as practical application more generally, review the cases quickly and then focus on Chapters 4, 6, 8, 10, and 11.

Although I focus on business cases and their analysis, various journeys outward will continue over the course of the book to include fictional narratives, philosophical and social thought, stories of scientist-essayists, and relevant theory drawn from a variety of disciplines, always as an effort to return to business better prepared for working with stories than had we not ventured out. Explorations of storytelling in business will hold the biggest share of our attention, with cases—which are in effect *stories* constructed from extensive interviews and other primary and secondary research—that represent best practices in storytelling for business. Enjoy the journey.