The storytelling process described in this article can transform the tension and competitive agendas that often undermine change initiatives into esprit de corps and true collaboration.

The Power of Storytelling to JumpStart Collaboration

Seth Kahan

In 1996, five people in a large, multinational organization of 15,000 had a radical idea for refocusing the core business. As a first step they brought together the 60 people they considered critical to their mission's success. The goal of the event: The group of five would become the de facto owners of the change initiative, garnering the support of everyone in attendance. The biggest obstacle: Many of the 60 had competing, even hostile, agendas—securing their unified support was daunting. After everyone had filed in, the emotional tension in the room was palpable.

Just after stating the topic at hand, each person was asked to tell the story of how he/she came to be in the room. Any kind of story would do, as long as it was true. People could play it safe and describe how they got up that morning and made it from their house to the Metro to work, or they could put some of their cards on the table, drawing the connection between their careers and the meeting's importance.

Within minutes there was a dramatic change in the atmosphere of the room. It became rambunctious and fun-filled as people took successive trips down memory lane. Others chimed in to add their two cents. By the time the exercise was over, just 30 minutes later, the tone of the room was transformed, from tension, quiet, and unease to enthusiasm, laughter, and collaboration. The hard work was done.

Next, each person was asked to describe his/her ideal future for the organization. The details of these future-stories were captured on flipcharts. At the meeting's conclusion, the group of five had established itself as the shepherds of the fledgling initiative.

Storytelling launched that meeting and continued to play a fundamental role in the change initiative. The effort made rapid progress in the next two years—from an unfunded idea to a

worldwide program with $60 million in annual allocation. The program manager of the small group was so enamored with the capacity for story to spark change that he wrote a book about it.[1] I was a member of that team of five that used storytelling to work its magic. Engendering collaboration throughout the organization continued to play a pivotal role for the success of our initiative. Storytelling was used again and again—across disciplines, across organizational boundaries, and among people from many different cultures.

This global change initiative was the first of three where I applied my storytelling skills to generate high-performance collaboration among professionals at the World Bank. In subsequent years I have used these techniques while working with organizations that include the Peace Corps, National Institute on Aging, the Fulbright Association, Center for Association Leadership, and many others. I have fine-tuned the technique with the help of facilitators around the world who have put it to use. I call it JumpStart Storytelling.

Imagine a two-day think tank of business professionals coming together to address critical issues. The first session is the toughest because everyone brings their competing views to the table and kicks off the event with a prove-it-to-me attitude that says, "Show me what you can do for me." That's the kind of event that I have been asked to lead over and over again. Each time I have seen Jumpstart Storytelling propel the retreat into a high-performance collaboration event, drawing everyone together and highlighting the diversity of perspectives without pushing for consensus.

This process lifts the collective spirit and maximizes the impact of people's time together. It quickly engages participants in the business at hand and accelerates productive work. Although designed for groups of 10-100, it has been customized for as few as three and as many as 2,500. It takes 45-60 minutes regardless of the number of people, creating an esprit de corps that sets the stage for high-performance collaboration.

JumpStart Storytelling is based on my work at the World Bank where it was field tested on multicultural gatherings more than 100 times. It also draws on techniques I learned while studying under a fellowship at the Center for Narrative Studies,[2] and working as a "visionary" for the Center for Association Leadership to increase the effectiveness of professional meetings and conventions.

The purposes of JumpStart Storytelling are as follows:

- Efficiently engage every participant in the business objectives.
- Accelerate collaboration without compromising diverse perspectives.
- Effectively introduce each person to 10-15 other participants.
- Improve learning through high quality idea exchange.

Here's how to run a session of JumpStart Storytelling:

- Place people in groups of six to eight participants and ask them to think of a story drawn from their own experience that has to do with the primary business objectives of the meeting. For example, at a recent meeting of CEOs facing the prospects of competing with China, I asked them to tell a story about a time in their lives when they faced a daunting challenge that changed the way they see the world. Participants tell their stories to the other members at the table—in just 90 seconds. They only have time to relay the essence of their experience. I encourage them to give enough background to explain why the challenge was daunting, how they met it, and how their worldview changed. In other words, without saying as much, I encourage them to tell the arc of their personal story.

  Keep time, letting them know when each person has 30 seconds left, and then call for the next person after 90 seconds. "However," I tell the participants, "while it may be my job to get the whole room through the process in nine minutes (for tables of six), it's not your job. So, if your story is a little long, go with it. If your story is over in less time, move on to the next person." I encourage each group to self-manage its time so the participants get the spirit that they are in charge of their experience. This is an important element, setting the stage for the ownership that effective collaboration requires.

  When the first round of stories is done, ask the participants to look around the table, bring to mind the story that most impacted them, and remember the teller.

- Then, get everyone up out of his/her chair and find a new table with mostly new faces; it's time for the second round. People are to tell the same story they told in the first round. In U.S. audiences I typically hear groans at this point because we seem to be uncomfortable with repeating ourselves. I make light

of the situation, explaining that in other cultures people enjoy telling their stories over and over; it's a way of life. I ask people to notice what changes and what stays the same when they tell their stories a second time and to notice how interesting it is that the words may be different, but the story is the same. I use the same process as in the first round, moving people through their stories in 90-second intervals.

• Now the real fun begins. Ask everyone in the room to recall the story that most impacted them—either because they found it moving or because the information it contained was so relevant to today's gathering. Then, the participants are to get out of their seats and find the person who told that story. When they find the storyteller, they are to put their hand on the person's shoulder and keep it there. What happens next is remarkable—a live demonstration of social networking that I call "clusters and chains." The room appears to go into chaos as people search for others and move around the room with trailing chains and clusters of people attached to them. In short order, no matter what the number of participants, this process sorts itself out. The room is literally a configuration of clusters and chains, with those tellers who made the most impact having the most hands on their shoulders.

• I ask for those with the most hands on their shoulders to come to the front of the room and tell their stories to the plenary group. The participants, not the conveners or the facilitator, selected these stories. So, the information embedded in these stories was prioritized as having the most impact by the participants. We spend some time together unpacking these stories and discovering why they were chosen.

The magic of JumpStart Storytelling occurs when participants tell and listen to each other's stories, engaging the hearts and minds of their colleagues. It is a great way to begin a business gathering, involving everyone in the room. Ideas cross-pollinate, and rapport increases. The entire meeting comes to life in a way that naturally and predictably focuses the audience's collective enthusiasm on the business at hand through the participants' personal stories.

Storytelling is part of human experience. When people share their stories, listeners naturally focus their attention, engaging in the teller's experience. The deliberate and effective use of storytelling establishes links between participants and sets the stage for high performance.

To create an atmosphere of collaboration, it is necessary to shift away from a "broadcast" mode in which one person speaks while everyone else listens. By activating a "beehive"[3] in which everyone is sharing, the conversation moves off the podium and out onto the floor. This form of storytelling has the effect of filling the room with relevant activity and enthusiasm.

Social networking is one of the primary reasons people attend professional gatherings. Many transactions take place in the hallways; valuable news is exchanged, services and jobs are brokered, new members are integrated within existing communities or not. The capacity for each person to build and develop relationships during the meeting increases as they are informally introduced to others and invited to share their stories in the context of business. This sharing is personal and face-to-face, providing a rich interaction, which significantly increases the capacity of the group for social networking.

High quality collaboration relies on multiple, conflicting points of view coming together in a collective intelligence that honors the contribution of each perspective. Building community is often mistakenly thought of as creating an environment where everybody likes each other. People perform effectively without mutual admiration. Yet, it is critical to establish an atmosphere of collective aspiration built upon respect and the capacity for each person to contribute to the group's objectives. Storytelling brings together differing points of view in the spirit of collaboration.

References

[1]Steve Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Sparks Change in Knowledge-Era Organizations*, Butterworth Heinemann, 2000.

[2]The Center for Narrative Studies, run by Paul Costello, is a research and training institution recognized for its innovative peace and reconciliation effort, "The Washington-Ireland Program," http://www.StoryWise.com .

[3]*Building Beehives: A Handbook for Creating Communities that Generate Returns*, Seth Kahan, 2004, available through http://www.SethKahan.com .

Seth Kahan worked at the World Bank for 13 years. He helped lead three global change initiatives receiving international recognition for his successes, and he now leads executive retreats and delivers keynotes to more than 15,000 people per year in a wide variety of conferences, using his talent as a storyteller to inspire and entertain. He can be reached through his Web site, http://www.SethKahan.com .