

## A Nation's Inside Stories

**A**S SOUTH AFRICA prepared for its historic transition to all-race elections in 1994, an extraordinary conference was convened near Cape Town. Twenty-two prominent politicians, activists, academics, and business leaders came together to write a group of stories, each one describing how the transition might turn out. Four of these scenarios, each with a metaphorical name, were published in newspapers for the public's review. Here's a brief summary of each story:

**Ostrich:** The white ministry sticks its head in the sand hoping the problem will go away. Violence escalates and the government is forced to negotiate with leaders of the black liberation movement under more hostile conditions.

**Lame Duck:** Both the government and movement leaders move forward, but nobody takes risks and the coalition is indecisive and uninspiring. The transition is long, uncertain, and drags down the economy.

**Icarus:** A full democratic government is immediately elected bringing a wave of reforms, but they are costly and the economy is unstable. The pendulum swings backward to inflation and recession and a retreat to an authoritarian regime becomes likely.

**Flamingo:** Like a flock of flamingoes that takes off slowly, flies high, and stays together, the parties work together in a slow but steady transition. Health and schooling are given top priority in new reforms. Economic growth is bumpy but steady.

The stories spread quickly spurring a spirited national conversation—F.W. de Klerk was quoted as protesting, “I’m not an Ostrich!”—and the flamingo scenario emerged as most desired. Recognizing the fundamental power of storytelling, South Africa’s leaders thoughtfully created the inside stories that would ultimately help an entire nation rise together.



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## What Are Your Inside Stories?

*Storytelling within your organization can be inspiring and unifying or demoralizing and divisive. The outcome is entirely up to you.*

**W**ELCOME to orientation, management's official opportunity to tell the new hires how the place works. From the trainers' viewpoint, this is a time expressly set aside for introducing fellow employees, reviewing policy notebooks, and reverently reciting that organizational pledge of allegiance, the mission statement. And when the allotted time is over—be it an hour, day or week—management will return to the dogged pursuit of its mission, safe in the knowledge that the new pups know where to go and where not to.

Except orientation is far from over, and even the newest newbie knows there's

much more to learn. Over the next few weeks—at the water cooler, over lunch, and especially on those occasions when reality and policy don't quite match up—the stories of “how this place really works” will be told. The newbie will learn and adjust, and sooner or later management will begin to wonder why the new blood seems just as tired and cranky as the old.

By-the-book orientations aren't the real problem here. More often than not, they are an example of inattention to a vitally important part of every organization's culture: *the inside stories.*



► In her book *Corporate Legends and Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool*, Peg Neuhauser draws an interesting parallel between nomadic Indian tribes of the American plains and modern day organizations. As tribes such as the Pawnee and Lakota moved from place to place, Neuhauser writes, they each carried a bundle containing significant artifacts from the tribe's past. At campfires and other rituals, this "sacred bundle" would be opened and tribal elders would recount the stories behind each artifact. While the objects themselves might be as mundane as feathers, carved sticks, or animal bones, the collection of stories—richly detailed and dramatically told—became the tribe's history and reinforced its values.

Contemporary organizations have campfires, too, with retreats being one prominent example. Orientations, staff meetings, awards ceremonies—according to Neuhauser, these are also echoes of centuries old tribal behavior, but what's frequently missing from these modern day analogs is the sacred bundle. A group will gather, the business at hand will be duly dispatched, but another opportunity to reinforce basic identity and values will be lost.

I've observed this pattern in many of my public interest clients. Even though these groups excel in their fields and have their share of impressive, uplifting stories, their history often ends up buried in annual reports, brochures, and news clip files—that is, if it's been written down at all. Meanwhile, in these same organizations' corridors and lunchrooms the oral tradition is alive and well, except the stories traded among the staff in these venues

(safely out of the earshot of management) are more about whining than winning.

### Your Sacred Bundle

To remedy this situation, Neuhauser recommends identifying a group of stories that can serve as your organization's sacred bundle. The bundle will vary from group to group, but generally it will include:

- The story of how the organization was founded. This often captures both the need for your work and the specific approach your group has taken to address this need.
- Emblematic victories that demonstrate the organization's effectiveness over time and across different aspects of your issue.
- A what-we-learned-in-defeat story, if only to remind your team that occasional misfires are inevitable and should be embraced for what they can teach you.
- At least one employee performance story that shows the levels of professionalism, creativity, and commitment your people bring to the challenge.
- One or more stories about the fundamental nature of the problem you're tackling to remind staff of the reason their time, attention, and energy are needed...every day.

Collecting stories for your sacred bundle is only the first step, though. Once you have them, you must look for regular opportunities to share them with your team and identify the best people to tell them.

Senior managers usually play the "shaman" role in most organizations, but if they are not natural storytellers, don't be reluctant to look elsewhere. The objective here is to find the people who will bring the stories to life, and to share them often enough so that any member of the staff can tell them.

### The Profane Bundle

And what about those not-so-happy tales that are already circulating in the hallways? This "profane bundle" should not be cavalierly dismissed because at least some of these stories will identify genuine problems. Having spent considerable time working in the health care field, Neuhauser reports that she has heard a few anecdotes that end on a similar note: "If only we could treat the patient's illness without having to deal with the patient." Where such attitudes prevail, Neuhauser recommends

that these stories be shared in a formal setting to explicitly address the follow-up question, "And how are we going to change this attitude?"

Naturally, staff members will be reluctant to openly tell these kinds of stories, and managers may not want to hear them. Real change is rarely easy. When they are told in conjunction with the sacred bundle stories, however, they help shape a larger picture that is positive and inspiring but

still rooted in the reality of day-to-day stuff. "The stories don't lie," says Neuhauser.

Considering how intrinsic storytelling is to human communication—and to how we *learn*—managers interested in greater organizational effectiveness should pay more attention to the inside stories. In them, they may find an answer to internal problems, but it won't be as simple as digging out and telling the good stories while squelching the bad. Organizations with healthy cultures, strange as it may sound, purposefully tell both. ■



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