

Leadership Connex:

The Role of Story in Voluntary Sector Leadership Development in Canada

By Glory Ressler

Abstract

This selection illustrates the use of story in many forms in a major leadership development school in Canada.

Background

In Canada, the term, “voluntary sector,” refers to any non-profit that is run by a volunteer board of directors. Comprised of approximately 180,000 organizations and hundreds of thousands more volunteer groups, nearly eight million Canadians work for pay or volunteer in this sector. Managing annual revenues of over \$90 billion and assets of over \$109 billion, the sector is charged with acting in the interest of the public good. There are rich stories of how the voluntary sector has historically made a significant impact in the lives of Canadian citizens and communities, as well as in the lives of nearby neighbours and friends abroad.

But clouds, in the form of rapidly changing and complex environmental factors, have been looming on the horizon for some time. These include decreases and shifts in funding, increases in demand for service, aging demographics and a lack of succession planning, challenges in attracting donors, reporting organizational effectiveness and outcomes, new partnering and community needs assessment mandates, and general planning and management issues.

There were plenty of traditional management skills training programs and courses but few that focused on the sort of leadership required. Furthermore, voluntary sector

organizations weren't investing in their own development. As a result, it was determined that a culture of lifelong learning was essential if the sector were to thrive and realize its potential to create a vibrant democracy and caring, inclusive communities. If the voluntary sector were to decline who would be left to tell the stories of, and serve, the public good?

Purpose

The National Learning Initiative had been exploring these issues and, in 2003, received funding to develop and deliver the first pan-Canadian Leadership School. In 2004, Glory Ressler was hired to co-write and deliver the curriculum of what would come to be known as "Leadership Connex." As a result, over 332 leaders, from Halifax to Yellowknife, had the opportunity to develop their individual and organizational leadership stories and to see their connection to stakeholder, partner, community, societal and global storylines.

Process

The curriculum was based on leadership competencies which were identified through a national consultation process that gathered actual stories of leadership successes and challenges from practitioners in the field. This initiative was evaluated as a resounding success, with many anecdotal comments affirming the process. Glory seized the chance to build on this narrative base throughout the school.

Essentially, it was determined that leaders must "become the change they wish to see" through ethical, innovative, participatory and strategic responses to complex conditions, which include accountability to multiple stakeholder groups and challenges around resourcing. Success hinges, in part, on the ability to hold and articulate an

inspiring vision, mobilize support and action for its realization, and then report effectively on the impacts. Given this, Glory began to develop content modules and to facilitate exercises which highlighted the connection between storytelling, organizational visioning, planning, community consultation/collaboration, fundraising, public relations, systems thinking, and lifelong learning.

To build capacity for lifelong learning and collective change, story circles (known as “Great Conversations”) around various aspects of voluntary sector leadership were utilized that provided participants with an experience of the power of collective reflection and intelligence. In these dialogue-based, face-to-face events, people explored leadership themes and emerging issues. Personal learning around visionary leadership and professional development planning was further reinforced through a journaling component. Visioning, in organizations, was framed as the crafting and telling of “inspirational stories of the future.” Planning activities were approached from the perspective of a journey and/or map based on a story of getting from here to there. A graphic exercise recorded these plans/maps and a gallery room was established to display the results of this exercise. This room served as a rich space for networking and relationship building.

Participatory meeting processes, which also relied heavily on the sharing of stories, were introduced as tools to promote consultation and collaboration. These approaches included Open Space Technology, Appreciate Inquiry, and World Café. In the module titled, “Fundraising: Building a Case For Support,” participants were taught how to tell the stories of dreams, not deficits, in a variety of formats and platforms to donors. A publication by Bronwyn Drainie, “Telling Our Story: Communicating the

Value of Philanthropy and the Voluntary Sector,” provided the participants with a guide for considering which types of stories they needed to tell and to whom. Further skills were acquired through the development of “Popcorn Pitches,” short story briefs that described new projects or initiatives the participants were developing. The group members shared these with each other. Then they exchanged both support and constructive criticism.

The movie, *The Corporation*,” was shown and its message acted as a springboard for discussion and activities exploring ethics, community engagement, and political lobbying. Participants were further encouraged to adopt a systems thinking perspective through exercises based on the work of Barry Oshry. These exercises included identifying the historical, temporal and relational stories of different levels in organizational systems and discussing leadership strategies for encouraging organizational health and vitality. The “Theatre of Change” was also utilized as a way to understand change and try out techniques for inspiring and managing it.

The notion of a need for a lifelong learning ethos and culture was further cemented by concepts and creative exercises that promoted leadership as a developmental journey – an ongoing story of using internal transformation (learning) in order to meet external demands. Leadership was positioned as living your ideal story in service to self, organization, community and world as a way to inspire and nurture the development of leadership in others.

Impact

One of the most significant impacts of this intervention was that the leaders began

to formulate a stronger collective identity as the only sector that speaks for, protects, and serves the common good. This amazing insight would never have happened without the rich environment of stories.

Participants in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, began to see how their personal and organizational visions connected to each other and to the larger community. (Remember, this was a national initiative; there were sites all around Canada.) As a result, they are now pursuing a territorial coalition/network across voluntary sub-sectors, and centred on “building healthy communities.” This group also had a breakthrough concerning challenges around collaborating with the aboriginal peoples of the area. They came to realize that they needed to listen more to the aboriginal stories before offering their own. They viewed the story circle as an effective and culturally appropriate outreach strategy.

In the Niagara region, participants experienced a shift in their understanding of what constitutes leadership. Despite the fact that all attendees had been identified as established or emerging leaders, most individuals defined leadership in heroic and charismatic terms that referred to someone other than themselves. They typically associated leadership with the authority that comes from positions of power. Processes such as Great Conversations (story circles), peer mentoring, and Popcorn Pitches helped them redefine leadership to include a variety of styles, and highlighted that leadership comes as much from within the self as it does from titles and job descriptions.

In Ottawa, the voluntary sector storyline was already well developed. It included a history of preservation of the French language and accommodation of cultural differences. The savvy and experienced leaders found the reflective journaling process

was important for their rejuvenation. The group provided important insights into how the overall sector must broaden its story to better include Franco-Ontarian and francophone needs in Canada and identified how to further partner with each other.

In Nova Scotia, where decades of corporate and government downsizing have ravaged the economy and left people feeling disempowered, the Theater of Change allowed participants to act out stories of transformation. This approach empowered them to use their bodily experiences to identify possibility stories and to develop new skills.

Lessons

- A “hard sell” is challenging and may not be necessary. Story is hardwired into people (the formation, telling, and listening), so you just have to do it. Everybody gets it, although different people will get it at different levels.
- When doing OD work, put energy into the telling of stories. Encourage participants to discover different stakeholder stories. Help participants hear the stories not usually heard. Help them see how their own stories (personal and organizational) connect with the stories of their colleagues, communities, society, and the global story. Trust that they will, in the process, discover how their passion fits into the larger stories of which they are a part. Then help them connect their stories and collectively contribute to something greater than the sum of the parts!

Contributor

Glory Ressler, of Avalon Consulting, is based in Canada. Her international client list exceeds 75 non-profits. She has been utilizing story for individual, group and organizational development since 1991. Glory has received three “Consultant of the

Year - Voluntary Sector Innovation Awards.” Bestowed by the Canadian Peter F. Drucker Foundation and the Centre for Community Leadership, this regional designation celebrates the example of innovators and recognizes the strength of their ideas to inspire others.