

The Story of the Future, Told in a Day

Building the Energy to Achieve the Future

“In truth, they were becoming their stories.”

Just Imagine

Imagine this: you have been working independently within your organization for years. The project engages your intellect, inspires your creativity and continually exceeds the expectations of management. Then, one day, a new system is introduced that requires you to join a team of people to do the same work. What do you think the future will hold?

Or, imagine this: you are a member of a close, accomplished team. Though you work well together, you also recognize that your synergy is dependent in part on an energetic and empathic leader. One day an email message arrives from management: your leader is being transferred, and the team has been assigned a replacement. How do you think the group will respond?

Put yourself in these scenarios, and you will experience a phenomenon that occurs regularly in today’s workplace: change. The introduction of a new system may mean that someone who has worked solo for years must learn how to be a team player. When management restructures, a highly regarded leader may suddenly be gone, and the group who depended on her must now maintain quality with an unknown personality at the helm. Change within organizations is said to be the one constant. The challenge is to help people affected by the change move through it with greater ease.

A New Story Creates Incentive to Change

Let’s step back for a moment. Change is inevitable, of course. It usually requires the transition of leaving a place of comfort, or at least of the familiar, and learning the ropes of something new. And, if we think back to changes in our lives, it is often the transition – more than the new system or person – that was most daunting. Bridging the gap from the old to the new often requires an incentive.

Creating a new story about the future helps people to bridge the gap by offering ideas of what is on the other side – ideas that have been self-generated. I call these Future Stories.

The process of creating Future Stories becomes a container within which participants feel inspired to explore new ideas to contribute to the future. They begin by exploring what is available from the present that can be used to build the future. In other words, Future Stories are grounded in the reality of today. The descriptions of the future that the stories explore must reflect the here-and-now, rather than be a vision that is unattainable.

Our examples have focused on forced change, but the process of creating a Future Story can also be used when a group decides it is time to refresh its own thinking.

Building the Bridge in a Day

I can illustrate the process of creating Future Stories by telling you a story of my own. One of my clients requested that I facilitate a Future Story workshop as part of my ongoing contract when a number of sub-units were scheduled to begin working as one large team. This was a situation in which reorganization had hit - again. Just the year before, the teams had been put into a new formation, and now they had to repeat the same process, this time with new people added and an expanded mandate that was totally new to the organization.

Altogether, there were about 40 people involved. Some of the members knew each other, but most of them had not worked together. They all understood that the success of their new mandate was dependent on one another's abilities – and they had to develop multiple deliveries by the end of the first year. My client wanted to bring them into focus so they could launch the new organization with a cohesive, energized outlook.

I knew that whatever I did would only be the start. I had to get them feeling good about themselves and about the group as a whole. They had to want to do their best, knowing that their individual efforts would only be recognized as a contribution to the whole. The challenge, then, was to help them find themselves in a larger story – in one day.

One day is not much time to create a story about an endless future. But, where some people see constraints as problems, I try to see them as an opportunity to design in a new way that will achieve more than I could imagine.

I felt lucky with this group. I believed that I could give them a wonderful start – a story from their future – if only they could imagine it. And I felt that I could help them do just that.

The following is a step-by-step description of how the process of creating Future Stories helped this group to cross the bridge. Before we began, the client and I determined that a day-long format would succeed if it was held off-site with enough physical space to accommodate the activities I felt were important. And so the day arrived.

Who is in Your Future? Reveal the Characters to Build Cohesion

The room was sunny and bright, and as people wandered in they stopped, looked around, and selected a table with familiar faces. Knowing that they needed to learn about each other before the Future Story could be told, I used a standard introduction technique to help them share their recent accomplishments.

I asked them to find someone they didn't know well and to trade stories about a time within the last year when they each discovered something exciting in their work. When the interviews were complete, I asked each person to introduce their partner by telling their story and stating the strength they heard in the story.

They got right into it, and after the last story was told - this took about an hour - they had a whole new perspective on who they were and what they brought to the table. I heard

responses such as, “I didn’t know you did that.” “Can you help me with...?” I felt the energy moving in a positive direction, and could see they were beginning to see each other through new eyes.

Units Speak for Themselves

Each of the sub-units had received instructions about a week before the workshop. They had the same three directives: first, make sure the presentation will help the participants gain an understanding of your unit, second, use any medium or format that will help you to get your message across, and third, do it all in seven minutes. The units followed their instructions to the letter – especially the second point – so we enjoyed skits, reviewed colorful graphs and illustrations, and listened intently to the ups and downs that different units had been through.

Seeing the Potential

At this point, we had a feeling of familiarity for each other as individuals from the earlier interviews, and a new appreciation for the distinct aspects of every unit. It was now time to reflect on what they had heard, so I provided a process to help them articulate the thoughts and feelings the two opening exercises had activated.

Participants gathered in groups of eight to discuss one of five different questions that was placed at each table, and to post the points from their discussions on a flip chart. The questions, listed below, were designed to help the group explore what was meaningful to them as they built their new future:

- What excites you about what you have learned about our bits and pieces?
- What is the most unexpected thing you heard today?
- What do you see that allows us to be leaders in our organization?
- Where is our service most needed?
- Where is our greatest potential?

After the discussions, the sheets of flip chart paper listing the points from each group were taped along the walls.

As I listened in on the group discussions I was reminded of a scene from the movie, *Apollo 13*. It was one in which the scientists in Houston had to devise a solution using only the objects that were available to the astronauts in the spacecraft. They were faced with having to fit either a round object in a square hole or a square one in a round hole – but either way, the scene begins with them dumping a boat-load of stuff on a big table. As I heard the dialogues about the talking points: what was exciting, what was unexpected, and what their greatest potential might be – as well as the other points – I had the feeling that the people in this room were staring at a similar bounty of working parts. I described the scene to the group and told them that, just as NASA did, now they could begin to build something.

An Organization from Different Perspectives

It was now time to shift gears and explore the ingredients of a Future Story.

I ask people to consider basing a Future Story on one of the following four perspectives of an organization, as each one describes an organization from a different perspective.

1. **Identity**, which is all about who the members of the organization are together
2. **Values**, which describes why the organization exists and how the members work together
3. **Mission**, which is about what the organization seeks to accomplish
4. **Measures**, which are the methods that demonstrate what the organization has accomplished

These different perspectives are critical to the process of creating Future Stories, as they work together, yet each stands on its own. When Future Stories are developed for each perspective, each story exists side by side with no conflict between them. This being said, the four perspectives eventually evolve into one story. Once the four perspective stories are told and processed, the emerging result is one Future Story.

After I introduced the perspectives, everyone was invited to two Walkabouts. This is an unusual term, and I chose it intentionally, as it is the foundation of the following exercises. Originally, a Walkabout was a nomadic excursion into the bush made by an Aborigine. It was then broadened to apply to a journey made by any seeker in search a higher level of truth.

Walkabout I: Grok the Day

In the first Walkabout, people connected the points from the discussions (of the five questions) to the four perspectives. The flip chart sheets from the earlier discussion were still taped to the walls, and there was a flip chart for each perspective in the corners. People were asked to walk quietly through the room, reading the points from the discussions, and to think about the perspectives as they reviewed the list. They each carried a large pack of Post-Its, and when the discussion sheet inspired them to do so, they jotted down a thought about one of the perspectives. They then posted it to the flip chart with the appropriate perspective.

Here's an example of how this might work: if under the discussion list for "Where is our service most needed," the group had listed "keeping to the schedule is good customer service," someone might recognize this as a value. If so, they would note "we value timeliness," on the Post It, and adhere it to the flip chart for "values."

My intent was to create a space in which participants could integrate recently learned information about each other, the various sub-units, and the ideas generated in the small group discussions of the workshop thus far. Readers of Robert Heinlein's 1961 novel, Stranger in a Strange Land, may be familiar with the term "grok." This was the verb Heinlein used to describe the experience of having a thorough understanding of something – in other words, to grok it. The first Walkabout is a subtle exercise designed to help participants grok the essence of what they had learned.

This approach encourages participants to draw on information that has been delivered via auditory, visual and experiential methods throughout, and to allow it to surface into a thinking realm as they move about the room. In this way, the exercises combine different learning styles with physical movement, as well.

When the Walkabout was complete, each person had contributed at least one sentence that reflected what they heard, read and thought for each of the four perspectives. They were invited to write more than one sentence, and most of them did. They created wonderful phrases. “We incubate ideas,” wrote one person, and another said, “We are a world recognized leader in providing a wide range of knowledge and learning services to our clients.”

At this point in the day the participants went to lunch outside of the meeting room.

Walkabout II: Self-Select A Perspective

In the second Walkabout, the group was asked to move from one flip chart to the other, reading the sentences that were posted in each perspective (values, identity, mission, measures), and to form a new group by staying with the perspective that attracted them. They were also told to maintain roughly equal-sized groups, and to adjust the size if one was becoming too big. This process continued to build a cohesive community, as everyone negotiated about the group sizes in good spirits.

This Just in From 2005!

The newly formed groups were asked to write a future story about their new unit that would reflect their chosen perspective. They were directed to draw from the segments of the day: their own stories, the unit presentations, and the discussion points. The story had to be in the present tense.

To help them, I asked that they imagine themselves as reporters, writing a piece about their new unit – but the year was three years in the future. I asked them to “write the story in four to six sentences, keeping the sentences simple so that they are easily understood and remembered.” I suggested that they feel free to use the words already offered on the Post Its, or to create their own.

I gave the groups about thirty to forty minutes, as I wanted them to create something they could feel connected to and proud of. I wanted to encourage their “second wind,” when the wisdom of the group is able to express itself.

Crossing the Bridge: Future Stories Come to Life

The next step demonstrated the power of story. Each group read their stories to the full group, and I allowed time between each reading for comments, as doing so helped the larger group embrace the story.

People found common language and themes in the stories. I heard one person say, “Hey, there’s my sentence!” when listening to another group. I also encouraged them to honor

each story – but in reality, I did not need to. The stories were all met with applause, and some even earned cheers.

The feeling of energy, creativity and inspiration in the room was palpable. It was as if the individuals who entered the room in the morning were not the same as those who were reading the stories of their future - and in fact, these people had changed. They had already bridged the gap, and gone from one situation to another – and all through the process of story. Their faces were beaming.

I could tell they felt proud, happy and hopeful. This was a great springboard to the next exercise, which focused on the actions they wanted to take to make those stories come true.

Sample Story from the Mission Perspective: ABC Wins President’s Award for Excellence!

A unique group of professionals have been acknowledged in the organization as this year’s winners of the President’s Award for Excellence. In a statement from the president’s office, the group was recognized for: Innovators in knowledge creation, gathering and dissemination in a global context, global leadership in providing knowledge and learning products for clients in support of the organization’s mission, champions at enabling organizations and people to realize their full potential through knowledge and learning management systems. “ABC are miracle workers,” said the president. For more information and help, please see our web site or knowledge sharing and learning information services or Sam or any member of the ABC Team.

Making Those Stories a Reality

I chose to keep the whole group together for this exercise. At this point the cohesiveness facilitated a seamless discussion. The group identified specific actions quickly, and in concert.

You must assess whether this kind of work can be done in plenary or not, as depending on the size of the group, you can divide them up or keep them in plenary. In our case, even with a group of 40 participants, they did this work all together. Either will work. If it is possible to do this in plenary, however, doing so offers several advantages. First, it is a different type of interaction, and groups need to change activity type to allow for different preferences and working styles. Second, it takes advantage of the high energy in the room. They have just enjoyed seeing themselves in new stories together, and this gives a great feeling of satisfaction. Doing the action planning together can leverage this energy, and in this case, it did.

Final Closing

There are many ways to close the work session. I asked the group to answer this question: “What is one thing you will do differently starting tomorrow as a result of what you have done today?” I stood back and enjoyed listening to the high level of commitment they had created for themselves.

The Story Never Ends

A Future Story workshop continues on – into the future – long after the Post Its are packed away. I had written the stories down as they were being told, and then sent them to every member of the group through email a few days after the workshop. This was important, as it indicated that their stories were of value, that each person is a part of the stories, and that everyone is needed to make them come alive.

I saw the full group the next week as a part of my ongoing work with the client. They had already begun implementing their stories. They sounded so much more “alive” than they would have if they were simply implementing their plan. In truth, they were becoming their stories. By the end of the first year, they had already achieved much of what their stories had anticipated would occur three years in the future.

I was later asked to help design a workshop when a new manager was brought into the group. She requested a retreat to get them all on the right track, and when I talked to the group about it, the first thing they wanted to do was post the stories on the walls for her to see. They felt those stories would convey another dimension of who they really were -- a dimension that couldn't be captured nearly as well in a presentation. Stories have enormous staying power and on-going relevance, and they were hoping that their new manager could catch the energy. Could she? That, my friends, is another story.

In Conclusion

In one day, a group of forty individuals who were asked to work together for the first time created stories that allowed them to see a common future. They clearly wanted to work together – and they did so, successfully.

In the beginning of the article I asked you to imagine a couple of scenarios. Now, try again: Imagine a new set of recruits integrating into their unfamiliar environment within one day. Imagine a newly formed team creating a shared vision through story. Imagine if your organization could create a new story for itself – about anything. Just imagine.

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