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The official, the unofficial and the deceit: the effect of management practices on corporate storytelling in the workplace

Introduction
Companies always say that employees are their most valuable assets. However, few organisations act accordingly during these unsettled economic times. Like so many organisations, continuous global pressures have put a strain on the way in which organisations have adapted to using corporate stories to deliver difficult news about the organisation in order to discourage ambiguity in the workplace. This can be something as simple as the organisational core values becoming dislodged and not cultivating the essence of the working environment. In such a case an organisation may collapse under the weight of its own complexity, and as such, corporate storytelling will have a critical part to play in maintaining the cultural energy of an organisation. The significance of a corporate story having the chance of surviving its life expectancy and the ‘entire organisation speaking with a single voice’ (Langer & Thorup, 2006, p.374) is vital to the construction of a collective shared meaning. The use of corporate stories between organisation members as well as formal communication by senior management can begin to paint a picture of variations in which an individual can threaten the stability of an organisation.

A good corporate story is only as good as the storyteller-in-charge of relating the message to receptive listeners. Therefore, a clearly constructed and unambiguous story is worth a Grammy nomination. However, instead of recognising the value of an accurate story, many organisations still fall short of realising that the use of stories can be a problem for organisational communication in a number of ways.

Central to this case study is the exploration of a new conceptual framework which will identify some of the organisation’s communication problems in the use of corporate storytelling. The focal point of this paper is an actual workplace event which was subject to multiple interpretations. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to describe the shared meaning (actual event) that emerged from the collective sense-making process in the organisation studied, and to identify themes that were indicators of the collective understanding. The approach taken in this study also allows an interesting insight into the origins of these elements. It is not intended that this research illustrate ideal organisational behaviour or best practice. Rather, I sought to present realistic, issue-based problems faced by managers and the organisations they represent.

Implications for HRD practices
The dynamic and global environment in which modern organisations operate is imprinted by increasingly keen competition (Johansson & Heide, 2008). In response to the changing environment, organisations are going through major re-engineering, restructuring, or downsizing changes (Zorn et al, 2000). However, maintaining good management practices to support organisations in times of crisis (Wiedmann and Buxel, 2005) still remains paramount. Meanwhile a prerequisite for communication is recognised as a critical tool to
inform and create understanding (Johansson & Heide, 2008) in which to provide staff with an all-inclusive blanket sense of trust (Langer and Thorup, 2006) during these difficult times. When managers construct and initiate stories which are inaccurate, this will often lead to turmoil (Newell et al, 2001). It is in this context that these stories will travel on an intricate journey and begin to regale their audience with their bespoke lullaby in order to control the communal groups within the organisation.

A new era for critical HRD has emerged as research and teaching seek to embrace organisational issues of power, politics, ideology and status: the ‘undiscussable issues’ according to a review of papers presented to the AHRD (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). Yet, these undiscussable topics can help seek out the difficulties and the complexities which might characterise HRD, challenging and questioning assumptions, traditions and what are often taken-for-granted assumptions (Alvesson, 1991; Habermas, 1987). In other words, they might help us to understand more effectively the real tensions facing management as part of their daily roles and responsibilities in today’s complex world. I am of the opinion that the role of HRD is faced with uncertainty and difficulty due to how organisations react to and ‘perceive the world’ (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996, p.195), demanding immediate answers to some complex questions amidst the current issues facing many managers today.

There is, however, the danger that internal HRD practitioners are being forced by internal factors, such as being subject to management (Johansson & Heide, 2008) demands on how to survive through this never-ending uncertainty. Indeed, the notion of organisations stimulating high employee participation and commitment through employee coercion or subtle manipulation in furtherance of (McGuire et al, 2001) management exploitation is widespread. Thus, the importance of good management practices has followed from the realisation of repeated high-profile corporate scandals that have highlighted the emerging view of ‘workers and society as mere resources or worse as objects of abuse’ (Hatcher & Lee, 2003, p.55).

Yet, at the same time, it could be argued that the relentless arduous struggle to convince organisations of the value of HRD and its contribution that it brings could provide an easy target for attacking its practices on the grounds (Fenwick, 2004) of weaknesses and limitations of orthodoxy (Sambrook, 2004) in this complex world. Anderson (2009) argues that too many HRD managers work in a complex environment and potentially are being pulled in differing directions by the priorities of diverse organisation stakeholders. Meanwhile senior managers will continue to engulf the HRD field, by influencing how HRD is practised within a particular organisation (Sambrook, 2004). Thus, so far HRD practices have been unsuccessful (Fenwick, 2004) in meeting the needs of today’s organisations (Trehan & Riggs, 2011).

As previously mentioned, senior managers who are in the driver’s seat can determine the direction in which the pendulum will swing (McGuire et al, 2001). Thus, HRD practitioners give rise to listening and observing (Sambrook, 2004) their management manufacturing consent and compliance (Antonacopoulou, 2000; Storey, 1995; Townley, 1994; Legge,
1989) from staff. This theatrical performance will imprint greater restrictions on HRD, which open up, and trigger, on going workplace issues, all of which are not anticipated (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). What is more critical is the hesitation from organisations to admit that these malevolent management practices are in action. Furthermore, the sensitivity demonstrated here is not something that any senior management board would want to publicise openly, or even have their staff reading about in the quarterly internal staff newsletter or the yearly annual report.

**Persuading the chaotic workforce**

Storytelling is the ancient art of conveying events (Camilleri, 2008), which includes metaphors that influence our everyday life (Coles, 1990). Therefore, storytelling has become a ‘valuable means to communicate the events that shape’ (Kirsch, 2004, p.223) a company’s culture, and keep staff up to date with the continual changing work environment, its management structure and processes. Tietze et al (2003) postulate that storytelling provides an appreciation of the organisational processes undertaken. They believe that the approach reveals how sense-making is used to interpret as well as create meaning in a potentially chaotic world. By addressing those activities that have a significant impact, a company will ensure its storytellers seek to create a sense of engagement or dialogue (Camilleri, 2008) with the staff and provide just enough clues to attract the audience’s imagination, intellect and emotional responses (Begiebing et al, 2004; Denning, 2004, 2005). It could be argued that, by adopting this approach, there is a danger that this may lead itself ‘halfway between fact and fiction’ (Czarniawska, 1998, p.14) connotations. Based on this theory, real-time storytelling can provide the storyteller with the ‘opportunity to morph and change the story based on the reactions’ (Camilleri, 2008, p.32) of their intended audience.

Stories are a great means to create a shared understanding (Kirsch, 2004); they accomplish what no other form of communication can – they can get through to our hearts with a message (Whybrow & Rogers, 2003). Yet, the reason to tell and share stories is a fundamental device of human social sense-making (e.g. Barthes, 1966; Bruner, 1986; Czarniawska, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988; Weick, 1995a). The nature of such stories and the reason why they are constructed will provide corporate information or political advantage. Furthermore, these stories are chosen because the outcome will seek greater decision-making control for the storyteller(s). The reality, however, is that as people interact within an organisation context, some individuals will take ‘delight in sabotaging’ (McLean & Marshall, 1988, p.4) the official story. A more subtle approach however, can arise from ‘confusion about the [true] meaning of’ (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p.30) these stories and the real reason to convince and capture the wider audience.

In a fast-paced environment where time is paramount, the dispersion of power and authority will be widespread. Therefore, an individual with the intent to divulge a story in a constrained environment could create an outcome of their choice. Under these circumstances, it is uncertain how individuals will be able to identify who ‘speak[s] [the] truth’ (Grey & Mitev, 1995, p.76). If the environment is unstable, however, the use of
stories can lead to a series of attacks, defence, tit-for-tat actions, and endless interpretations of a story (Gold, 1998).

**Differentiating types of storytellers**

Gabriel (1995) and Boje’s (1999) contributions to the type of storyteller in the workplace were evaluated by the proposed conceptual framework (Fig. 1), which I adopted (see Table 1).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boje</th>
<th>Gabriel</th>
<th>Writer</th>
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<tr>
<td>Superman/Superwoman Leader</td>
<td>Hero</td>
<td>Tarnished Hero</td>
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<td>Heroic Leader</td>
<td>Heroic Survivor</td>
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<td>Princely Leader</td>
<td>Victim</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bureaucratic Leader</td>
<td>Object of Love</td>
<td>Villain</td>
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<td>Them &amp; Us</td>
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Table 1 Compare and contrast organisation storytellers

A storyteller will generally provide an insight into how manipulation is used by individuals in authoritarian roles. A ‘Heroic Storytelling Leader’ (Boje, 1999, p.4) could be a person who likes to be the centre of attention. However, Gabriel’s interpretation of a ‘hero’ (1995, p.485) will often be perceived as a resourceful, imaginative trickster (Gabriel, 1991a, 1991b). The hero will be a common character in many organisational stories. Their approach to managing other individuals will include instilling charm and spirit into their day-to-day life. Another contributing factor is their ability to engineer and ‘manipulate language to control’ (Fairclough, 2000, p. ix) people’s perceptions. Gabriel’s definitions on storytellers were more aligned with the characters identified with the writer.

**The company and the storytelling project**

The study is firmly located within one organisation; for the sake of anonymity, the organisation is given a pseudonym. Company A1 is a global conglomerate in engineering consultancy offering a broad range of professional services for both private and public sector clients. With a workforce of around 15,000 people (3,000 staff in the UK) the business has become one of the largest international consultancy groups. The company operates in the following sectors: property; transportation and infrastructure; environment; and management.
Chart 1: Company A1’s organisation structure

The company has international experience and works in over 50 countries with 200 offices worldwide. Chart 1 illustrates the structure of the organisation. This research has focused on the following three parts of the global business: Company B1 (UK Division); Company E1 (International Division); and Company F1 (Central Services Division). The company’s vision is to be the leading expert providing a multidisciplinary service in the engineering environment. To fulfil Company A1’s vision their activities are based on their core values (see Table 2).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
<th>Excellence</th>
<th>Sustainability</th>
<th>Innovation</th>
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Table 2  Company A1’s core values

The organisation’s vision and core values define the culture of the group. Furthermore, their values are supposed to motivate staff. However, due to increasing market pressure the company has been forced to make a series of redundancies throughout their global operation in order to survive the competitive environment. The United Kingdom (UK) operation has incurred the highest loss of staff, resulting in the breakdown of trust, ‘conflict and miscommunication’ (Kirsch, 2004, p.225) between staff and management.

The study illustrates how the organisation communicates during an uncertain and complex event. From the description above, the paper examines how the coexistence of official and
unofficial stories within an unstable working environment can introduce a number of different types of misinterpretations. Factors such as the organisation, the culture, the management structure and organisational stories will reveal why Company A1 is experiencing problems. As a consequence, if we presume that the relationship between management and members of an organisation is flawed, expecting people to be honest in the absence of a supportive organisational culture may be a challenge.

The conceptual framework: the corporate storytellers
A good starting point for understanding this study is the process by which individuals make sense of organisational stories within a microenvironment. In explaining this process, the introduction of a new conceptual framework (Fig 1) provides a diagrammatic presentation of the main shapers of organisational stories.

![Figure 1 Conceptual framework: the cause and effect for corporate storytelling](image)
These range from societal influences through to the individual members of an organisation. Within this diagram, a number of interrelating and imbedded factors represent a corporate story. A societal story is taken to refer to the norms, corporate values, beliefs and collective expectations of individuals at large. The efficacy of these stories, however, challenges competing or contradictory storylines. These factors shape the early stages of a story's journey through its organisational existence.

One of the implications of this is that the existing communication styles of the organisation appear to have dominated the approach by which official stories become intertwined with multiple layers of unofficial stories in order to control a microenvironment. The challenge, as I see it, is to create a factual convincing story to influence the intended listeners. In short, the intention here is to focus on the complicity of an event that arises from the actions of a corporate narrative. In building on this work, composing stories through alternative sources from the perspective of corporate communication is a conventional way of engaging with the wider community. Depending on the organisational structure, however, these stories will become congested as they journey through the various managerial thresholds. The challenge is so great that stories must succumb completely to an array of misinterpretations, bringing a threat of multiple complex issues. The resulting stories vary in effectiveness, with some achieving the admiration and sheer popularity of a successful delivery. By contrast, some stories are imbued with multiple conflicting values and misapprehensions.

Methodology
As a participant observer, a series of workplace stories were collected in a workplace setting that made up the discourse environment of a multidisciplinary office of 200 staff – the West Midlands office. The West Midlands office was chosen because it is one of the largest regional multidisciplinary offices with representation from all the divisions outside of London (the head office). The regional office is characterised by the dominance of vocational groups such as mechanical engineers, electrical engineers, public health engineers, structural engineers, civil engineers, infrastructure engineers, fire engineers, vertical transportation engineers, environmental planning engineers, project managers, human resource managers, commercial managers, business development and marketing managers, information technology engineers, and administration support.

Research methods can commonly be divided into two categories: qualitative and quantitative. In this case, a qualitative research method was used to deeply examine the communication activity and behaviours (Invernizzi et al, 2012) during this study. The main objective of this study is to explore the implications of a single corporate story for influencing an organisation’s corporate communication through a combination of manipulation, status and language. As Yin states, a case study is useful to examine ‘a situation in which the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’ (Yin, 1993, p.59). This research approach can accommodate a rich variety of data sources, including triangulated observations, interviews, ethnographies and documental analysis (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Thus, interviews often become the primary data source.
because interviews are a highly effective way to gather rich, empirical data, particularly when the phenomenon of interest is highly episodic and infrequent (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

For this reason, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, and all the participants (10 in total, representation from each of the divisions) were interviewed individually. The interviews lasted between 1½ and 2 hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The company’s annual report was also analysed including press releases, company bulletins and news updates published on the company’s intranet in order to follow how the communication was being communicated. I also attended two state-of-the-nation meetings as a participant observer.

The following sections provide an appreciation of the conceptual framework in action. This is illustrated by a real-life workplace event which is followed up by a series of stories told by the interviewees. The intention here is to draw upon the different interpretations of the stories and the meaning ascribed to this single event. This will reveal how stories become imbedded in an organisation over time. From the perspectives held here, these stories can change the behaviour in the workplace. To discover whether these accounts were true, I would have to have examined multiple participants of the same story. Given the sensitive nature of the data collected, the issue of confidentiality of any interviews would have to be ensured. This research, however, studies the way that stories are formed, changed and interpreted, and for this the objective truth does not need to be known.

Crafting the event
This case study is based on a factual event which lasted for 8-weeks within one regional office. The study tells of a single event in which a group of senior board directors (storytellers-in-charge) from each of the divisions (B1, E1 and F1) conveyed an official story in an unstable working environment. Over the past four years, the organisation has experienced severe financial difficulties due to the current global economic climate which has resulted in several rounds of redundancies. In order to make sense of often ambiguous fast-pace environmental challenges, it is necessary to examine the way in which corporate values and beliefs can be interpreted in uncertain times. The proposed critical incident travels through each stage of the conceptual framework (Fig 1) providing an insight into how a story can be misinterpreted at every stage of the framework. Let us first take a detailed look at the three stages.

The story (stage one)
The global economic climate had put a significant financial constraint on the organisation. The organisation had previously experienced a reduction of its workforce. However, this time the approach undertaken by management to make the announcement of more job losses was distinctively different. As a response to these pressures, blanket communication took place within the organisation.
The chief executive officer (CEO) conveyed an official ‘state-of-the-nation’ story to each of the divisional managing directors. The storytellers-in-charge disseminated the story to all the officers who were on the senior management board (divisional directors). On Friday 13 February, every organisation member received an email informing them that there was to be a staff meeting on Monday 16 February and that everyone had to attend. On the morning of the staff meeting, each divisional director made a statement to their respective workforce at exactly the same time. In the first public statement, the storytellers-in-charge announced that the global economic climate had placed a significant constraint on the organisation. That being so, if the organisation was going to get through these difficult times, it would have to make some strategic decisions. ‘People are the most valuable assets of the company’ was repeatedly echoed by the divisional directors throughout the 30-minute gathering. Each divisional director said that ‘management wanted to include staff in this difficult time’ and suggested that staff had a week to put forward any ideas that could help save the company money, and that the meeting would be reconvened in a week’s time to discuss the submitted ideas in more detail. It is uncertain, however, whether the divisional managing directors compared their proposed ‘scripts’ before sharing them with their respective divisional heads. After the state-of-the-nation meeting with the organisation’s members, it was apparent that there was a discrepancy between what each of the divisional directors had said and what they were reluctant to say. This two-stage approach chosen by the organisation could have been deliberate, to delay the inevitable news that was to follow.

*The four Ps mechanism*

The official (state-of-the-nation) story was supposed to carry a single and unambiguous message, which is illustrated in stage one of the conceptual framework (Fig 1). As part of stage one, the four Ps (people, position, place and process) demonstrated how the storytellers in charge of conveying the message to their respective organisation members delivered the story. To give a demonstration, at the first meeting on 16 February (place), senior management (position) provided a sense of inclusiveness. The organisation’s members (people) were advised that during these challenging times, everyone would play a part in any decisions made by the organisation. The workforce were granted a week to put forward any cost-saving ideas for the organisation to consider. This was an unexpected invitation (process) from management seeking help from their organisation members.

*The first illusive announcement*

Between the first and second state-of-the-nation meeting there was no official communication from the UK chairman, although according to one interviewee:

*I believe there was supposed to be an announcement by the UK chairman initially but that never happened.* (Staff A)

In reacting to the announcement, the following two messages were published on the company intranet. Table 3 shows sections of a statement from the chief executive reporting a successful financial year.
This morning we announced our Financial Results for 2009, reporting on a good year for Company A1. Revenue increased by 36%, we successfully integrated the new businesses that joined the Group in 2008.

However, it cannot have escaped anyone’s attention that we now find ourselves in unprecedented and very challenging times. 2010 will be a difficult year. Despite the positive achievements of the last year, we are not immune to the developments that have hit the markets in which we operate.

While some of our markets, like Energy and Pharmaceutical, are holding up well, others are suffering from the global economic downturn, with clients forced to put projects on hold or delay investment.

Last year’s excellent performance leaves us in good shape, and now we must protect our current strong position. In the next few weeks, we will publish a strategy document to explain our plan for addressing the current challenges. This will focus on the operational priorities of providing the best service to clients, maintaining a healthy cash flow, and ensuring we match costs to revenue.

Thank you all for your hard work and support during 2009, which has placed us in a strong position to overcome any challenges that the coming year will bring and respond rapidly when markets improve.

2 March 2010 – Company A1

Table 3 Corporate announcement by chief executive, Company A1

This message (Table 3) from the chief executive is the only official communication received informing the organisation’s members of the state of the business. The message focuses on keeping external clients happy to ensure that the budgets will be maintained. However, there is no mention of staff well-being.

Stage two: organisation members search for plausibility

In the second public announcement, when the organisation members met with the management, the narrative had changed. The workforce was advised that the cost-saving ideas put forward had already been considered by senior management, but had been rejected. Management did not offer an explanation or provide any examples of the suggestions submitted. The organisation’s members were then advised that some of them would be made redundant. The official story was no longer stable in stage one. The second meeting had reframed the official story and caused the narrative to undergo an array of reinterpretations. The official story, therefore, was no longer stable in the social environment. Instead, the account was challenged.

An element of confusion developed with the construction of these divisional stories, as the workforce began retelling the supposedly corporate story. As these narratives travelled around the various professional communities they were modified and reinterpreted. Each division cascaded their own reinterpretation of the cynical stories, and therefore, the social community took on the role of becoming surrogate storytellers. Equally, however, the organisation’s members sought to disentangle each of the divisional official stories by seeking to understand them, question them and compare them. Recognising that everyone could be a storyteller, whether in pole position or further down the hierarchy chain, was a key factor. Members of the organisation were willing to exchange divisional narratives,
regardless of whether the information’s accuracy was an important factor. In this area, the primary objective was to construct the most influential divisional anecdote within and between the working environments. The significant path along which each story unfolded demonstrated how the chain of events evolved. These stories had established a common ground – a sense of belonging for the non-senior board organisation members.

The second illusive announcement
The only official announcement from the UK chairman after the initial two state-of-the-nation meetings is shown in Table 4. The message is carefully worded and there is no reference to staff welfare or any acknowledgment of the cost-saving ideas that were suggested by the organisation’s members, and no explanation as to why they were rejected. Again, the emphasis of the communication focuses on maintaining client care.

Early last week the CEO, with Group Financial Director and International Managing Director, E1, announced the Financial Results for Company A1 for 2009. In the context of the past few months, which have not been easy for any of us, some of you may have been surprised to learn that on paper 2009 was a good year for Company A1, with a 33% increase in revenue compared to 2008.

Whilst some businesses are affected more than others, the impact has not just been felt in our business units but applies to support areas as well, across all levels of staff, from our Executive Committee downwards. The process is difficult for all concerned, especially those of us directly affected, but I can assure you that the steps we are taking are absolutely essential to ensure that we remain resilient through the recession and emerge stronger in the longer run.

I would like to thank you all for your continued dedication and hard work and remind you that client care, both internal and external, is the key to our future success. Communication on the measures we are taking to further streamline our Business, reinforce our market position, and differentiate our products, will follow in the next few weeks.

9 March 2010 – Company F1

Table 4 Corporate announcement by UK chairman, Company F1

The précis in Table 5 is the chairman’s statement from the annual report (Company A1, 2009). The statement provides an honest explanation compared to the indirect and vague internal messages communicated to the workforce. This statement was published prior to the UK chairman’s communication.

Chairman’s statement – people
At the end of the year, we employed over 15,000 people and we are continuing to recruit personnel to handle work in sectors where we have a growing presence, such as energy, sustainability, clean water, process engineering, and education.

However, we have also had to make reductions to staff operating in the private sector and it is likely that further cuts will take place as we adjust our resources to align with our revenue. It is with a natural reluctance that we have to release some of our valued workforce and we are conscious of the need to handle these both professionally and sensitively.

Chairman, 5 March 2009

Table 5 Chairman’s statement, Company A1 annual report 2009
The organisation members’ verdicts

Following the second state-of-the-nation meeting, and as the organisation members became engaged in the storytelling, the stories flowed on one single topic – the resilience (redundancy) process. The following stories offer an insight into the views of three members of the organisation of the actual sequence of events. In each event, the organisation’s members engaged more deeply in telling their stories, which reflect the understanding of what was important to them. The collective stories focus on management and members of the organisation. These ideas are expressed in these two accounts:

‘Our core values are supposed to demonstrate how we are to behave and work with one another and it is not working. I mean, we have just had a classic with the redundancy process. A meeting was called over a week ago to inform staff that they were looking to having to make cuts. They wanted staff’s suggestions on what we could do. Everybody was asked to go away and think about it, and we would meet again the following Monday to talk about it and see what suggestions had been put forward. So, everyone went away, and had a week of worry. They came up with thoughts and ideas, and turned up the following Monday. Staff put all these suggestions forward and all of them were dismissed or they had already thought about it, and already considered it. However, not one suggestion was taken up or even attempted to discuss with staff, and management announced that they were going to have to lose staff, and some of us will have to go under consultation, and we do not know who you are yet. So, we all walked out of that meeting thinking what the heck was last Monday all about, it was a scam! It was a cover-up. I think the company has done it with the best intentions, but actually, it backfired because people are not stupid. Now that it is all out, they know and feel a bit cheated because nobody likes bad news but sometimes bad news delivered out of the blue is a kind of way of prolonging it because they had a week where everybody was worrying when 90% need not have worried. It was extended for another week of deceit and worry to circulate the business when it was clear the management had already made their mind up which was clear from none of the suggestions even being considered. It was clear that they were not even going to look at the suggestions put forward, and now straight away there is relief with people but now an element of distrust is in the air. I do not think that is good because the atmosphere has been tarnished’ (Staff B).

‘The whole redundancy process, oh sorry, the resilience plan, was one big joke. The first I heard about these redundancies was when my line manager rang me to say that she had to speak to me face to face urgently. However, before she could see me I had already found out because the first staff meeting had taken place. When my manager eventually did come and see me she was very cagey at our meeting – even after I asked her if I was at risk. If she had just been more upfront then I would have respected her more, but to travel all the way from down south and still not be open and honest with me… then that just takes the biscuit. What made it worse was these so-called inclusive meetings with staff and making us feel part of the process when in fact they had already made their minds up weeks or even months ago. So what happened to our bloody core values? Oh let me guess, they were on sabbatical’ (Staff C).
In order to analyse the impact, the second official story had created mistrust and scepticism, which had incited a divide between management and the workforce. That being so, the organisation was no longer seen as a victim of circumstances and the management as heroic survivors struggling to keep the organisation afloat. It is with this comfort cover that management had provided the organisation members with a means to avoid feeling the anxiety associated with this familiar situation. The fragmented professional communities, however, had changed their attitude towards each other. The resilience event had persuaded the social community to foster a collaborative think tank that had stimulated the members to reveal and share their interpretations with their divisional counterparts. Based on the interpretations offered by these two stories, the following anecdote by a senior director supports the interpretations made by the organisation members.

‘We had ten meetings in the space of 2 months prior to the first resilience announcement to staff. We already knew and had the list of job roles that were at risk within our company, but were sworn to secrecy. We were told that all the companies were doing exactly the same thing. Oh, except for Company B1B, they are the only company not in the same position as everyone else. In fact, they are looking to recruit because they have so much work on. So you don’t know how stressed I was in having to still conduct my duties and at the same time knowing that I was going to have to let go some of my team. So yes, the whole performance of the staff meetings was just a protocol because we had to’ (Director A).

The public sharing of these stories had encouraged a new dimension of trusting working relationships, individual to individual, discipline to discipline and company to company. Considering the circumstances, this resilience event demonstrated a trust in the place of work among the non-senior board members of the organisation. This had created more effective collaboration and dialogue in the workplace. The competitive nature of the organisation below top management level had been reduced because of the accepted shared community meaning. The circulation of these unofficial stories was a significant mechanism for sharing and disseminating information. Yet, the construction of the event influenced the nature of the five characters. Depending on the modified story, these characters were played in different ways. The initial state-of-the-nation meeting revealed the first character – the ‘victim’. The organisation members were made to believe that the organisation (management and staff) were going to make the decisions together about how to resolve the organisation’s problem. The notion provided a ‘comfort blanket’ for staff to continue to trust the organisation. The second meeting, however, hampered the relationship.

In terms of the second official story, the event had created mistrust and scepticism in the members of the organisation’s attitude towards management. They had simply used the narrative as a means to introduce confusion. The reaction that followed the communication had incited a ‘them and us’ divide between management and the staff. Asking organisation members to be truthful in the absence of a supportive organisation culture is a challenge. Bearing that in mind, it could be said that there was a conspiracy of silence and denial. The organisation was no longer seen as a victim of circumstances and the management as
heroic survivors struggling to keep the organisation afloat. The situation had stimulated the organisation’s members to reveal and share their interpretations with their divisional counterparts. Equipped with their respective adapted stories, members of the organisation were applying them to the organisation’s situation.

**The evolution of the five storytelling characters**

Contributing to such an event, the story’s characters’ roles had developed in the light of the second state-of-the-nation meeting, which immediately became more problematic. These attributes were ‘them and us’. The members of the organisation believed that the demeanour of the management had changed. The organisation was no longer a ‘victim’. Instead, the unofficial stories perceived management as a villain, or at least a tarnished hero. By comparing these reinterpreted unofficial divisional stories, members of the organisation sought to gain a better understanding of the ‘values they [supposedly] live by’ (Baker & Boyle, 2009, p.79). The organisation’s corporate core values, however, did not appear to shape the meaning of these shared communications. There were fundamental differences between the divisional narratives that could have influenced the official story. It was uncertain whether either of the management stories were the official version. As these stories were repeatedly retold, their meaning would ‘shift and change without warning’ (Barker & Camarata, 1998, p.446). The organisation is faced with a challenge in that members of the organisation could interpret the same story in multiple ways.

As for the outcome of the second state-of-the-nation meeting, this had caused the official narrative to encounter unofficial interpretations. It appears from the event that there are great lengths an organisation will go to in order to conceal their true intentions. Inappropriate decision-making at any level can impact on corporate communication, but the danger is greater when the decision-maker’s power is, for all purposes, incontestable. The way in which these stories were told might have been an advantage to the organisation. In times of uncertainty, all management communications will be scrutinised for their validity. As illustrated here, management’s plan to spin stories had led the organisation members to seek alternative realistic stories. As Denning (2006, p.42) suggests, ‘there is no single right way to tell a story’. However, he also highlights the fact that ‘using a story with negative tonality will generally fail to spark [positive] action’. Some of the adapted stories construed the senior management board (divisional managing directors) as ‘tarnished heroes’. The organisation sought to pretend to consult with its workforce, when management had already made their decision prior to the two state-of-the-nation meetings. The notion was that the management hierarchical structure had systemically sought to disempower the social environment using top-down manipulation and control.
The Good Employer’s Guide communication

Following both state-of-the-nation meetings, the official divisional storytellers were reluctant to communicate with their organisation members. For the same reason, the original announcement from management to members of the organisation about being joint partners to discuss business matters was no longer an item on their agenda. In fact, they were not visible around the business. This situation, too, justifies the difficulties management has in being straightforward and divulging all relevant information. A few days later, one division sought to keep up appearances by asking their workforce to participate in an external opinion survey for the ‘Good Employers Guide’ award (see Table 6). A sense of discontentment from organisation members echoed this sentiment by one director:

‘We’ve not seen our managing director since these redundancies started and he’s made no attempt to visit any of the offices but now finds time in his busy diary to send this email asking us to basically lie about how good the company is when motivation is at a low because staff are apprehensive about losing their jobs’ (Director B).

The establishment of different views acknowledged that the lack of explanation from any of the senior management, including the UK chairman, could have provoked the situation even more. By their own actions, the management hierarchy had increased the risk of large, calamitous decisions. As such, the organisation’s decision to keep silent throughout the process could have motivated the existing patterns of meaning and practice. The decision, by contrast, to communicate a clear and precise ‘state-of-the-nation’ message to the external environment (stakeholders) could have given additional cause for apprehension to the organisation’s members. But, as noted, a disparity between the internal and external story was evident. This might account for why the organisation...
seemed to be more interested in crafting an attractive external story to provide a more appropriate explanation for its stakeholders rather than to its workforce.

The ‘heroic survivors’ who had not been made redundant at the end of the process continued to share their unofficial stories. The event had tarnished the organisation’s cultural values – in particular, trust. Such a fragmented setting had allowed an ambiguous workforce to collaborate and confide in each other. The result of this cross-divisional dialogue was a fragmented and complex web of lived experiences upon which every single organisation member drew upon their own interpretations. In other words, in unstable settings, true collaboration is possible when members of an organisation trust one another to speak honestly. In this organisation, members had a shared reason to solve problems more readily as they were more likely to ask questions.

Stage three: a closer look at cause and effect – group cohesion

Earlier on in this study, three influential factors were identified as causing problems for corporate communication. These issues were ‘history’, ‘structure’ and ‘mistrust’. These concepts contributed to the way in which unofficial stories were disseminated, distorted and reinterpreted. The social environment was already discouraging open communication between divisional communities. Unresolved historical issues between the divisions were causing these unofficial narratives. The configuration of the organisation had also influenced these divisional stories. The divisionalised hierarchy had encouraged unofficial stories to remain self-contained and protected by each regional management’s power base. This power base can be found not only at senior board level. Its control had also filtered through to various levels of management. The combination of historical issues and the multifaceted structure of the organisation had led to mistrust within the internal environment.

The constraint of time

It is perhaps not surprising that these concerns can take time to rectify. Storytelling within a variable environment will encourage stories to be negative and ambiguous. It is also important to note that this approach will provide access to perceptions of and reactions to an organisation’s tales. The complexity and contradiction of these accounts can also provide greater misunderstanding and resistance in the social environment. In such an unstable setting, unofficial stories might not be rebutted. Storytellers will construct a story with the intention of dressing up the contents with the appropriate attire for the occasion. Dominicé claims that ‘the world of interpretation is dependent on the dialogue that takes place’ (2000, p.63). It could be argued that individuals who share specific stories will tell them in a way that appears to be compatible with the social setting. Even when these unofficial stories enter the public domain, they may deviate ‘out of the comfort zone’ (Tyler, 2007, p.573). This approach will have the added benefit of bringing the story into closer proximity with obscure issues in the organisation. Essentially, expanding the story supply network will be an effective way of distributing and disseminating the stories to a wider captured audience. Whether the strength of these accounts is sufficient to retain a monopoly on internal barriers is a key element. When such a setting is observed, it will
provide the teller with the freedom to decide how and when to orchestrate elements of the social environment.

**Group cohesive collective sense-making**

It is important to note that the ‘resilience event’ had influenced and shaped the interpretations of the unofficial storytellers. A plethora of ideas to deal with the uncertainty caused the communal management to engage with and display attitudes that would have been frowned upon in normal circumstances. In a dispositional circuit of senior management power, a blanket of fear was imposed on the social environment without considering the short, medium and long-term effects on the workforce. Similarly, these unofficial stories could have made a systematic impression on the organisation’s culture and behaviour. The mass of surrogate storytellers were fluent because each member’s reaction in dealing with the bad news meant that individuals had the power to maintain control over their domain.

Using this framework, I was able to evaluate more accurately to what extent an organisation can disassociate itself from its corporate stories and create mistrust within the social environment. Then, by comparing divisional stories, the vocational communities were able to construct an understanding of the event. Based on the stories mentioned above, this study found that, as stories are told and retold, Weick’s sense-making (2001) could be illustrated within these practices. Under such circumstances, the presence of conflicting divisional stories had influenced ‘everyday social interaction’ (Walsh & Ungson, 1991, p.60) and interpretation of the communal environment. In addition, to these shared modified accounts, members of the organisation would ‘generalise these ideas so that they become part of the culture’ (Kahlbaugh, 1993, p.80, 99). If we accept that, acquiring a suitable size audience is a key factor, which means that this approach will not be carried out in isolation. Due to the lack of visibility of the management, the social community had the opportunity to modify and challenge the official story. That being so, senior management were able to shape and influence the workplace, and observe the consequences. At no time did they make an attempt to reduce the possibility of misinterpretations, and therefore, each division viewed the event in a cynical way. Too often, however, each divisional member would have a different appreciation of what took place and too many connotations would be exaggerated. The findings indicated that the various professional communities had interpreted and modified the official story through collective perceptions to determine the outcome of the event. It is evident that management underestimated the extent to which their members would monitor what they did, as opposed to what they (the organisation) envisaged should have happened.

**Conclusion**

Based on the analysis, I can conclude that not all organisation stories, like this one, deal with corporate storytellers, though this case study illustrates how the official stories which were circulated about ‘resilience’ increased and were reinforced by multiple interpretation. The problem, however, is the degree to which corporate storytelling can be articulated and determined by the unpredictability of the social community. This produced an unsettled
In this study, the working practice between the professional communities had been hampered by apprehension and fear generated by the stories told by the divisional storytellers. Once the professional communities had arrived at a shared understanding, they had the opportunity to compare their divisional narratives by decoding the actual event. The emphasis on the state-of-the-nation meeting was strongly criticised. In particular, the sequence of events did not flow appropriately, however, from the early sense-making stage when the organisation’s members were struggling to survive the continuous uncertainty facing them.

The questioning of dominant control played out by the various storytellers illustrated that these narratives were powerful and effective by the validity which these tellers created by providing specific details of the event. As a result, these stories also caused a negative effect because some members of the organisation had an ‘emotional attachment’ (Gruen et al, 2000, p.37) to these anecdotes. Under these circumstances, individuals and professional communities could potentially increase the level of control that they exercise over their working environments by using stories, which will conceal ‘more than they reveal’ (Hall, 1959, p.53). This sort of event has been shown to shape the unambiguous social environment in a number of different ways. For example, these stories unify the professional communities in recognising that they ‘share vested interests’ (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003, p.26) in this turbulent organisational environment.

In this study, corporate stories surface in uncertain times revealing fragmentation and mistrust within and between social communities. As expected, I found that these stories had a ‘powerful force that holds everyone captive’ (Jameson, 2007, p.199) and can shape the social structure to reflect an organisation’s culture. However, even in this research where senior management have a strong appreciation of the importance of organisational culture, there is still a lack of deeper understanding of how organisations operate in this unstable economic climate. Therefore, understanding how organisations facilitate storytelling in a way that supports the working relationship is a contributing factor.
Furthermore, ‘leaders should model proper behaviours (e.g. trust, common cultures, vocabularies, meeting times and places) in order to’ (Tseng, 2011, p.605) make stories unchallenged.

My case study has enabled a critical glimpse of the darker side of management practice within today’s organisational life. This is important to consider for future studies since the gap between research and practice is increasing. Importantly, the case study data generated gives us a powerful insight into how HRD pressures dominate the workplace.
References


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