STRATEGIC APPLICATION OF STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATIONS

Toward Effective Communication in a Diverse World

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Internal and external workplace diversity and the technology-induced time constraints of multinational competition make the challenge of improving organizational communication bigger than ever. Narrative paradigm or the "storytelling" theory has been proffered as an effective cross-cultural communication tool, but this article presents the idea that storytelling goes beyond that and fills the diverse communication needs of today's heterogeneous workforce. It presents a model of storytelling as a complete organizational communication tool, discusses how to effectively apply storytelling in the diverse work environment, and proposes some opportunities for further research.

Keywords: *cross-cultural; storytelling; narrative paradigm; organizational diversity*

INTRODUCTION

Evolving multinational working relationships provide a rich source of information, products, and business opportunities for every corporate venture. With this global interaction, however, comes the challenge of effectively communicating among work groups with different backgrounds. Tight deadlines and time pressure hinder the ability of any group to build relationships (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). In the past, individuals and organizations were given time to study and adapt to the changing environment

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of the business world. The past two decades, however, have brought about increased expectations for the availability and immediacy of goods and services because of the advantages of using technology in worldwide business ventures (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002), thereby imposing time constraints that deter members from having or allowing the time needed to network and build relationships between diverse organizational members.

In fact, even the operationalization of the term *diversity* has evolved with the global market changes. Today, workforce diversity is defined as the need to work competently with the expanding heterogeneity, including gender, age, race, religion, and ethnicity, of the organization (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2006). Both verbal and nonverbal communication norms differ among the organizationally diverse workforce of today, as do the differences between individualistic and collective cultures. To further explain the robustness of this new workforce, we will introduce the organizational *diversity continuum*, a visualization of the many layers of diversity that an organization encounters each day—internally and externally.

> Both verbal and nonverbal communication norms differ among the organizationally diverse workforce of today, as do the differences between individualistic and collective cultures.

With this complex structure of human interaction comes the greatest challenge—how to communicate among and between these groups. One communication technique that has drawn recent research interest for this process is that of storytelling, or Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT). It recognizes that storytelling is a cross-culturally accepted method of communicating. We propose that other assumptions of NPT fit the overall organizational diversity communication challenges as well.

This commentary, then, will progress as follows: We will discuss NPT and its application cross-culturally and how it also offers a key communication solution across the diversity continuum. We will provide a model integrating storytelling and the diversity continuum across the organizational context and discuss the many ways the application of good storytelling benefits the heterogeneous workforce. Finally, we will discuss the exciting research opportunities that exist for scholars to further their

understanding of the richness of the organizational diversity continuum and for managers to apply storytelling to their organizations to help foster better relationships and communication among their members.
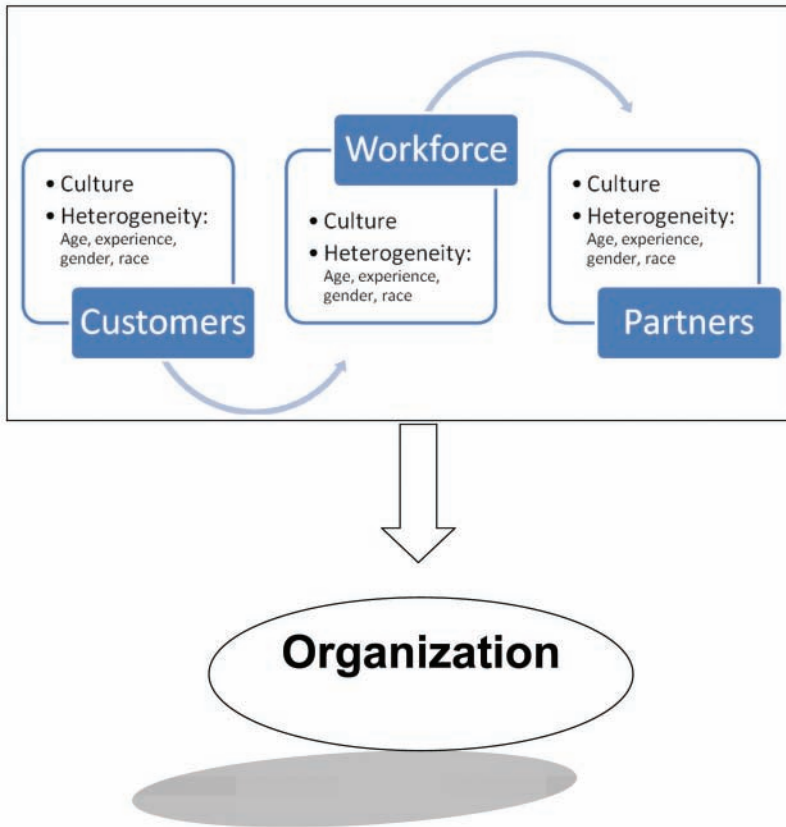
WORKFORCE DIVERSITY

Researchers and practitioners understand that diversity is "noticeable heterogeneity" ("Diversity," n.d.). This definition recognizes not just culturally different backgrounds, so often synonymous with diversity, but also the rich system of differences that exist between all people.

Small and large business transactions are often conducted cross-culturally, and this cross-cultural platform ranges from domestic companies with internally diverse workforces to transglobal enterprises with geographically dispersed virtual teams (Grisham, 2006). The changes in worldwide economies and technology provide a wealth of business opportunities that challenge even the most advanced company's ability to effectively integrate and manage the diversity of the all its subsystems, including workforce, customer base, and vendor supply chain (Hulten, 2006). Therefore, we define the *organizational diversity continuum* as follows: the levels of workforce diversity, within cultures and between cultures, with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, and personal experiences that occur within a firm and between a firm and its partners and stakeholders (see Figure 1).

Between cultures there are inherent differences that may seriously affect a business relationship. Individualistic versus group cultures, low-context versus high-context cultures, formality of communication, and frequency of communication (Bandyopadhyay, Robicheaux, & Hill, 1994) all feature cultural communication norms that can further challenge the intercultural communication issues. The inability to grasp these differences and understand the need for cultural competency has been ascribed as the reason for many international business failures (Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006).

There has long been an assumption that individuals should "want" to assimilate when introduced to a new culture in order to get along and succeed in the business world. Instead, some research has shown that people do not want to set aside their cultural values, lifestyle preferences, and identities in work life. Organizations must then realize they are responsible for making themselves sensitive to the diverse needs of different groups of people (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2006).

Further complicating the cultural differences, however, is that within each culture there exists a heterogeneous mix. As an example, age differences in the workforce continue to increase as the fastest growing age-group is

Figure 1. Organizational Diversity Continuum

45- to 54-year-old people, and workers remain on the job later in life (Kidwell, 2003). So the differences in learning, training and managing the workforce based on age composition and all other diversity characteristics, when added to the culture differences, create an incredibly complex challenge to understanding and communicating with the contemporary labor force.

In addition to attempting to foster effective communication along the organizational diversity continuum, businesses must also deftly manipulate the rapidly changing global system of how businesses function.

As more information is presented more quickly, employees find that they must approach work differently . . . as uncertainty and complexity grow, the

time available to act and react grows shorter as market conditions shift and change without warning. (Barker & Camarata, 1998, p. 446)

Thus, the extended time formerly used to assimilate to new ventures and new cultures is a no longer a luxury available to the competitive business entity. Rather, businesses must find their way toward a "swift communication" environment in an attempt to help all members, regardless of where they fall in the organization diversity continuum, understand each other and work together, thereby helping the organization to achieve its competitive goals. Based on its inherent assumptions and proven effectiveness in cross-cultural communication, it seems that the increased and effective use of NPT might be the best solution to the challenges of organizational diversity.

NARRATIVE PARADIGM THEORY

As a theory, the power and scope of NPT are derived from its ability to communicate and assess values, and the interpretation of those values summon human action (Cragan & Shields, 1998). Much like social exchange theories (Blau, 1964), NPT is an exchange of information that is value laden, but in a manner that is familiar and shared along the organizational diversity continuum. Stories are memorable, easy to understand, and establish a common ground with others that create credibility. Narratives also create a sense of empathy from a cognitive and emotional position to help us understand the experiences and world views of others (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2006).

Additionally, NPT recognizes human beings as innate storytellers and posits that all forms of human communication are best relayed as stories (Cragan & Shields, 1998). "Stories help us to make sense of what we are, where we come from, and what we want to be" (Soin & Scheytt, 2006, p. 55). NPT also assumes that humans use rationality and logic to assess stories as listeners and recreate a reality based on what is presented to them (Cragan & Shields, 1998). This interesting combination of a sender's innate ability to tell stories and the theory's assumption of the receiver's ability to logically evaluate the story's content offers an intriguing opportunity for NPT to be used more regularly in the global business environment to allow a swifter and more effective form of organizational communication.

Storytelling has already been recognized as an excellent business tool in many organization areas. It has been used for introducing change

(Boje, 1991), change management (Boje, 1991; Kahan, 2006), communication (Finlay & Hogan, 1995; Jones & LeBaron, 2002; Stutts & Barker, 1999; Wylie, 1998), design management (DeLarge, 2004), leadership (Driscoll & McKee, 2007; Grisham, 2006; Harris & Barnes, 2005), and organizational learning (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2006), to name a select few.

Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) promoted the phrase "swift trust" to explain how the time taken for trust building was no longer part of the global business environment. Members of international teams were required to forego the standard face-to-face and time-consuming social exchange formerly used to establish a social context among members and instead develop "swift trust" based on the exchange of personal electronic communication. The teams found to establish the initial and final highest levels of trust were those exchanging the greatest amount of social information early in the process (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Conversely, the failure of virtual teams has also been attributed in part to poor communication and team socialization (Hugo & Vu, 2007).

This relationship development was found to be critical to the team's success and supported the premise of social exchange theories that humans form relationships using a subjective cost-benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives, and the perceived benefits cause action (Blau, 1964; Miner, 2005). Another underlying assumption of storytelling theory is that the stories themselves are value laden and thereby allow for quick member processing, belief, and behavior (Cragan & Shields, 1998). NPT, therefore, helps to bypass the more time-consuming social exchange cost-benefit analysis normally recognized as being necessary part of enriched relationships (Barker & Camarata, 1998), because the exchanges are inherent in the story itself. This swifter processing promotes swifter action on the part of the organization members.

Therefore, the power of NPT in recognizing that everyone is a storyteller, that humans use rationality and logic to assess stories as listeners and recreate a reality based on what is presented to them, and that stories are value laden and result in listener beliefs and actions provides an intuitive view of the untapped efficacy of using stories for communication in a global business environment. This ability to swiftly and effectively share and understand business information along the organizational diversity continuum and the resulting swifter actions and reactions allow organizations to move more quickly and competently through their fast-paced environments. The constant need for businesses to work

more effectively and efficiently and the vital need for communication to facilitate these processes offer opportunities to business leaders to explore even better ways to communicate. Storytelling offers a cross-culturally and interculturally familiar and comfortable method to help accomplish this.

The Storytelling Model of Organizational Communication (STMOC) proposed in this article is a hybrid of the individual and organizational socialization and communication needs and adds the organizational diversity continuum business communication needs to recognize the importance of heterogeneity and time. It then positions storytelling as an effective way to communicate in this environment to arrive at enhanced organizational communication and performance.

The STMOC discusses the effective use of storytelling in an organization to help develop a "swift communication" environment. This swift communication environment can foster a symbiotic understanding among all participants from a cognitive and affective standpoint, leading to behavioral actions that benefit the organization. These benefits include improved understanding of and participation in the organizational culture, increased cohesiveness among team members, and higher quality relationships among both internal and external members. By raising the overall quality and timeliness of information exchange in the organization, it can help lead to more effective and long-standing business relationships both within and between organizations—a significant pathway to garnering strategic competitive advantages in a global working environment (Beckett-Camarata, Camarata, & Barker, 1998).

Time itself is a socially constructed element and is experienced via people's cultural interpretations to make sense (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Interestingly, other areas of cross-cultural organizational relationships such as cooperation (Cook et al., 2005), general exchange (Kiyonari, Foddy, & Yamagishi, 2007), and trust (Kiyonari, Yamagishi, Cook, & Cheshire, 2006), as empirically measured, do not seem to be as culturally bound. In other words, these critical elements of the organizational relationship can be rapidly established, even cross-culturally, with the correct intercultural communication technique.

A review of Figure 2 shows the interaction between NPT and Social Exchange Theory as the need to communicate and establish social relationships is paramount to achieving effective collaboration. In addition, with today's richly diverse employee and customer community, both of these must incorporate the cultural differences of all organizational members.

Organization Results:

Improved Communication

Stronger Relationships

Increased Productivity

Goal Attainment - Organization and Invidividual

Story-Telling:

- Value Laden
- Innate
- Action-Oriented
- Cross-Cultural

Organizational

Diversity

Continuum

Model

Social Exchange:

- Swift Communication
- More Immediate Cost/Benefit Value Exchange
- Swifter Action

Figure 2. Storytelling Model of Organizational Communication

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The strengths of storytelling as a communication method, recognizing all humans as storytellers with the ability to send and receive messages that establish a value-laden reality, establishes a common ground among all participants and provides a faster method of establishing a social relationship. This enhanced exchange of communication allows for swift evaluation and

reaction in a competitive business environment, thereby allowing for the accomplishment of corporate and individual goals among all participants.

With this existing support for the cross-cultural power of storytelling and its business application, and the critical need for a communication tool addressing the organizational diversity continuum, it follows that storytelling is a viable solution to promote cogent communication and assist in the development of organizational understanding, building stronger employee relationships and therefore increasing business productivity.

ORGANIZATIONAL DIVERSITY CONTINUUM AND STORYTELLING

In 1999, *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* published a special issue devoted to culture and the use of narrative to enhance cross-cultural communication. It recognized the need to make connections among cultures and that storytelling had become a popular means of expanding the understanding of organizations and cultures (Blyler & Perkins, 1999). Varner (2000) recognized the need for intercultural business communication to become its own unique construct, apart from other previously studied intercultural communication needs such as medical or religious. The world of global commerce, however, is still challenging corporations to effectively communicate within the organizational diversity continuum and time critical parameters.

In 1992, Charlton and Huey composed a list of characteristics necessary to interact productively in a multicultural society, including accepting there are many ways to communicate effectively, expanding ideas of acceptable goal accomplishment behavior for goal and quality achievement, respecting other cultures and integrating diverse groups, and learning effective cross-cultural communication methods. In 2002, former International Communication Association President Cindy Gallois restated this need in her annual address: "It is also crucial to understand intercultural communication as simultaneously intergroup and interpersonal, to incorporate both aspects into interventions, and to advocate for such training to improve intercultural relations" (Gallois, 2003, p. 5).

Narrative paradigm, or storytelling, has a history of being used to successfully communicate in an organizational setting. Boje (1995) stated that storytelling in organizations helped create a collective sense of institutional memory and could help with creating a future vision. Many researchers have recognized storytelling as a way to relay to employees more about

their organizational cultures (Barker, Rimler, Moreno, & Kaplan, 2004; Smith & Keyton, 2001; Stutts & Barker, 1999). Organizations have used storytelling to promote organizational learning (Barker & Camarata, 1998; Lämsä & Sintonen, 2006) and as a way to more effectively leverage human capital (McLellan, 2006).

Stories serve a persuasive communication function for organizations by representing personal, interpersonal, and corporate perspectives. They help reduce organizational uncertainty by quickly disseminating information, frame organizational events through their value-laden features, and promote organizational culture identification by establishing a social context for members (Smith & Keyton, 2001). This social context has even been successfully developed using stories as virtual communication tools, too (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Shane, 2001). Leaders in particular have used stories to relay their trust, empathy, power, and communication across cultures (Grisham, 2006). NPT has also been shown to be a powerful sensemaking mechanism (Kelly & Zak, 1999) and a corporate communal knowledge–making tool (Graham, 1999), critical elements in today's business communication environment.

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Despite these organizational successes with storytelling, NPT has not received the attention it deserves, and seems to be neglected in the education of professionals (Kelly & Zak, 1999). It is also not a part of the organizational communication norms that have been established, and efforts to change these norms are difficult (Suchan, 2006). Because poor cultural communication skills have been shown to create countless negative consequences in terms of lost business, lost productivity, accidents, and damage to a company's reputation, it is imperative that management acknowledges the existence and source of the miscommunication problems (Knotts & Thibodeaux, 1992) and work diligently to fix them. Below are some key areas of organizational uncertainty that would benefit from the effective use of storytelling as a method of communication.

AREAS OF APPLICATION FOR STORYTELLING

Taking into account the critical need for effective and timely global communication (Macnamara, 2004), and the amount of positive research in applying storytelling as an organizational communication method, it seems the time has come for the strategic use of the NPT of communication to handle the challenges of effectively communicating at all levels in the organizationally diverse environment.

It has been suggested "that communication fills an organization-making function rather than just an organization-maintaining one" (Barker & Camarata, 1998, p. 444), and narratives are viewed by many as a way to organize and coordinate all aspects of the organization making function (Quinn & Dutton, 2005). In his 2000 book, *The Organizing Property of Communication*, Cooren presented a theory of communication that stressed storytelling as a way to relay both the text and context of a conversation, thereby leading to coordination and effective interpretation of the message and creating action.

Global organizations require a myriad interpersonal and social exchanges to survive, and previous research has positioned storytelling as a successful means of accomplishing these exchanges. Lämsä and Sintonen (2006) found that participatory narrative in organizational learning helped stimulate empathy among organizational members, allowing them to imagine their own position and the position of their diverse counterparts. Kahan (2006) coined the phrase *JumpStart Storytelling* to describe his method of using stories as a way to jump-start a team project in change management, resulting in high-quality collaboration and cohesiveness among members.

Stories have been shown to be effective in introducing change (Boje, 1991), a means of establishing and shifting power (Boje, 1999), a way to convey complex ideas (Harris & Barnes, 2005), and a historical and contemporary method of communication (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996). It has even been used in the government sector as a way to establish dialogue in public administration research (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). Wylie (1998) posited that storytelling could sell products, services, and ideas and build on corporate culture. Finally, organizational leadership has a long list of narrative successes including using stories to convey authentic leadership characteristics (Driscoll & McKee, 2007), cross-cultural leadership effectiveness (Grisham, 2006), polishing leadership images (Wylie, 1998), and trust in leadership (Harris & Barnes, 2005).

Research shows, then, how storytelling is effective in bringing about a sense of community—that in which listeners can easily understand and

find common ground with their fellow listeners. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) studied the tight deadlines under which today's global teams operate and found the environment left little time for any relationship building. Therefore, a solution such as storytelling that is readily understood and easily implemented by all participants can function, perhaps most critically, as a sensemaking device to help participants and their groups derive a stronger self and organizational identity (Bird, 2007).

The storytelling method of communication seems to foster a timely and symbiotic cognitive and affective understanding among all organizational participants, regardless of the level of diversity. By establishing this swift communication channel, participants are more likely to act and further communicate in ways that benefit the organization and establish a firm basis of organizational learning. This improved learning will help increase corporate culture understanding, cohesion among team members, and quality relationships among both internal and external members.

EFFECTIVE APPLICATION OF STORYTELLING IN AN ORGANIZATION

Stories have long been used a metaphor for learning, and storytelling is one of the world's oldest teaching tools (Spagnoli, 1995). They are seen as both a window and a mirror, allowing people to look out at the world and offering a reflection back (Finlay & Hogan, 1995). Interculturally, stories have shown to be extremely powerful tools.

> Stories are the fabric of our lives . . . When we aim to interpret what happens in cultures different than our own, we mostly obtain information via stories, or other types of narrative, that are presented to us in different ways, for example through movies, novels, newspapers, or comedy. (Soin & Scheytt, 2006, p. 55)

Many benefits of storytelling in an organization have been established by professional research. The way stories are told, however, affects how well the story is received and acted on. Initially, both the audience and purpose of the narrative must be firmly established, and after that, the type of story, tone, and style must be considered for optimum effectiveness. "Thus, the challenge to any learning approach lies in the process of bringing abstract, theoretical ideas to a practical level and make them understandable in everyday practices" (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2006, p. 109). In addition to stressing the need for practicality, they also cited the importance

of *participation* of the organization members in the story process. Kahan (2006) published a story of how to use his "jump-start" collaboration process in new work groups, particularly those designed to affect change. He stresses the participation of all members equally and the immediate collaboration that occurs when each is engaged to tell a story about their participation in the group (Kahan, 2006).

Denning (2006) believes "there is no single right way to tell a story," but also states that "using a story with negative tonality will generally fail to spark action." (p. 42). The types of stories that are told should be based on the desired results. When discussing the use of "springboard stories," stories to encourage change, Denning (2006) advocates a minimalistic approach to allow listeners to form a new story using their own context and action plans. This is similar to Lämsä and Sintonen's (2006) recognition that participants will imagine their own views and positions when given a good narrative. Ideas for finding effective stories are to adapt others stories to fit your purpose, use your own business tales and constantly look for new stories in your organization (Wylie, 1998).

Using others' stories and applying them to your organization is an excellent way to *share knowledge*. In this case, stories are not necessarily being used to generate action but, rather, to show cause and effect (Denning, 2006). Stories are also a powerful way for people to learn through hearing the experiences of others (Harris & Barnes, 2005). Recently, a youth football coach was describing a practice drill from the previous afternoon. He explained that he had told the players how to run the drill several times, but each time they did it incorrectly. In exasperation, he called them over and began to tell them a story, using one of the player's father's jobs in the example. He explained that if the father performed his job without listening to exactly what the client wanted, he might not be hired back or allowed to continue working on the job. This would affect the other employees (the player's father owned and operated an electrical contracting company) and their success as well. The young men returned to the field and performed the drill perfectly. By using a story completely unrelated to football, the coach was able to convey how a team member not listening and performing as needed would affect the entire success of the team.

Truth in storytelling is seen as an important element in effectively conveying the message. Guber (2006) stresses that stories that are true to the teller, audience, moment, and mission are the ones that will motivate listeners to action. He discusses how salespeople can use a product story, how managers can tell stories of short term sacrifice resulting in long term gain, and how CEO's can advocate a company's mission to entice investors,

set goals, and inspire employees. The key behind the success of these stories, however, is the authenticity of the storyteller which he posits as "a crucial quality" (Guber, 2006, p. 55).

Although there are many ways to tell stories based on the needs of the organization, creating good narratives is just like any worthwhile venture—there is an investment of time and effort. Preparation is key and includes careful consideration of both the audience and the purpose to ensure the story is being directed to the right people, in the right manner, to create the desired results. In addition, just like any good communication, the tone, style, and format of the story must be appropriate to the organization's needs. Guber (2006) suggests practicing the story to solicit feedback from a different audience. This will help revise the story and allow the storyteller to gauge audience reaction before delivering the final product. He also suggests an interactive story approach to help the audience feel that they have participated. Finally, the conclusion is paramount to help drive home the message and inspire the audience with a strong takeaway.

FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Because the formal use of narratives in effective organizational communication is still a fairly new concept, there are several questions that offer future research opportunities:

1. At what level of the organization is storytelling most effective? Research has shown that storytelling works well as a leadership communication tool and between group members, but effective storytelling at the management level might prove to be the best use of this model.
2. What are the consistent characteristics of an effective organizational story? The elements change based on the message, but future studies could develop a framework for helping members devise the most compelling narratives.
3. Why are organizations not using storytelling more consistently as a communication method? Kelly and Zak (1999) offer that narratives provide an excellent sensemaking mechanism in organizations, yet they are not used nearly often enough. Suchan (2006) posits that strong communication norms exist in organizations and are difficult to change. Therefore, although stories are shown throughout history to help impart knowledge, implement widespread change, and motivate teams, they are still not part of the organizational communication mainstream. Perhaps the area of storytelling training is an excellent opportunity for future growth.

In short, the opportunities for continuing research based on the changing needs of the organization, the organizational diversity continuum, and the untapped potential of storytelling are extensive for the communication scholar.

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CONCLUSION

The STMOC model introduced in this article takes into account the significant communication needs of today's diverse business environment and positions storytelling as a way to establish an immediate and vital social connection among members. The organizational diversity continuum recognizes all heterogeneity in the workforce. It takes advantage of the NPT assumption that all people are storytellers and that listeners immediately recreate a reality based on their interpretation of these stories. This combination delivers an understandable and value-laden message to each listener. Via social exchange theories, once these values are interpreted, they prompt action from the listener. NPT offers a proven and effective way of communicating and assimilating between various cultures in a timely manner, thereby establishing a swift trust environment that enhances effective response time to competitive business challenges. By using NPT, organizations are meeting the communication needs of most internal and external employees using the same communication device, thereby reducing miscommunication and all the problems that result.

We have all been subject to bad storytellers, and listeners lose interest when stories are not delivering the value that makes them such a rich form of communication. Careful preparation and consideration of the audience and purpose of the story will lead to developing an effective narrative that will achieve the desired results across the entire organizational diversity

continuum. The organization can now use its time and talent to work on reaching its goals in a competitive yet nearly limitless global environment.

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