

# Sensemaking and Organisational Storytelling



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(Information and Knowledge Management)**

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**DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:

## Summary

The question of how organisation leaders can successfully guide people through times of significant change, and thus transform organisations to operate successfully in a changed environment, has many potential responses. This thesis examines one possible response, namely storytelling, as a potentially useful management tool in the conditions introduced by organisational change. In particular, the reported success of Stephen Denning's use of so-called springboard stories is subjected to an analysis from the point of view of sensemaking theory as proposed by Karl Weick, using the seven properties of sensemaking as a basis of the analysis.

Chapter 1 introduces the sensemaking theory of Karl Weick, a theory which explains the process people engage when they attempt to manage complexity in their world. In particular, this chapter examines the seven properties of sensemaking, as identified by Weick as inherent in the process. Accepting the proposition that organisational complexity is responded to at an individual level, this chapter examines the properties at both that level, as well as in the specific context introduced by organisations. In addition, the implications of the seven properties for organisational leadership are considered, particularly during times of significant organisational change.

Stephen Denning's reported experiences with the use of storytelling during transformation in the World Bank are examined in chapter 2. Denning has become renowned in the field of storytelling, since his development and use of springboard stories specifically as a means of igniting action during organisational change. In addition to their specific purpose, all springboard stories have unique defining characteristics, relating to structure, format, content, style, length and timing. Each is examined in some detail, along with other contributing factors such as context, plausibility and relationships between the storyteller and listeners. Both successful and unsuccessful uses of springboard stories are considered, to obtain an understanding of the experienced effect of the explicitly noted characteristics of the stories and the storytelling encounter, as well as of implied characteristics, during significant organisational change.

In chapter 3 the insight into sensemaking theory in chapter 1 forms the basis of an interpretation of the finding of the storytelling examination in chapter 2. The experiences are considered from the perspective of the process people go through in order to make sense of complexity and interruptions in their ordered world. The interpretation attempts to identify the relationship, if any, between the effects of the use of springboard stories as

applied during change and the properties of the sensemaking process that will take place in individuals attempting to deal with the change.

The thesis concludes that storytelling, as proposed by Stephen Denning, facilitates sensemaking during times of organisational change. In doing so, storytelling enables the selection of new identities and the related implementation of actions suited to the changed environment. The impact of this conclusion on the use of traditional approaches to communicate change is considered, particularly as it relates to leadership attempts to guide people through change, and the change in leadership focus required to realise the benefits inherent in the use of storytelling.

## Opsomming

Die vraag oor hoe organisasieleiers met sukses mense deur tye van beduidende verandering kan lei en sodoende organisasies kan transformeer om suksesvol te werk in 'n veranderde omgewing het talle potensiële response. Hierdie tesis ondersoek een moontlike respons, naamlik die vertel van verhale, as 'n potensieel nuttige bestuursinstrument wanneer organisasies verander. Die gerapporteerde sukses van Stephen Denning se gebruik van sogenaamde *springboard* verhale word in die besonder ontleed uit die oogpunt van die *sensemaking* teorie van Karl Weick, en die sewe eienskappe van *sensemaking* word as 'n basis vir die ontleding gebruik.

Hoofstuk 1 stel die *sensemaking* teorie van Karl Weick bekend – 'n teorie wat die proses verduidelik wat mense gebruik wanneer hulle kompleksiteit in hulle wêreld probeer bestuur. Hierdie hoofstuk ondersoek veral die sewe eienskappe van *sensemaking*, soos deur Weick as inherent aan die proses geïdentifiseer. Die voorstel word aanvaar dat mense op individuele vlak op organisasiekomplexiteit reageer, en die eienskappe word op hierdie vlak sowel as in die organisasies se spesifieke konteks ondersoek. Die implikasies van die sewe eienskappe vir organisasieleierskap word oorweeg, veral in tye van beduidende organisasieverandering.

Stephen Denning se gerapporteerde ervarings met die gebruik van verhale tydens die transformasie van die Wêreldbank word in hoofstuk 2 ondersoek. Denning is baie bekend op die gebied van die gebruik van verhale sedert hy *springboard* verhale ontwikkel en gebruik het spesifiek as 'n manier om tydens organisasieverandering aksie te ontlok. Benewens hulle spesifieke doel, het alle *springboard* verhale unieke omskrywende eienskappe wat met struktuur, formaat, inhoud, styl, lengte en tydsberekening verband hou. Daar word in besonderhede na elkeen gekyk, en ook na ander bydraende faktore soos konteks, aanneemlikheid en verwantskappe tussen die verteller en luisteraars. Suksesvolle sowel as onsuksesvolle gebruik van *springboard* verhale word bestudeer om die ervarede uitwerking van die uitdruklik-aangetekende eienskappe van die verhale en die verhaalontmoeting, sowel as van geïmpliseerde eienskappe, tydens beduidende organisasieverandering, te begryp.

In hoofstuk 3 vorm die insig in die *sensemaking* teorie in hoofstuk 1 die grondslag van 'n vertolking van die bevinding van die verhaalondersoek in hoofstuk 2. Die ervarings word oorweeg vanuit die perspektief van die proses wat mense deurloop om kompleksiteit en onderbrekings in hulle geordende wêreld te verstaan. Die vertolking poog om die

verwantskap, indien enige, te identifiseer tussen die uitwerking van die gebruik van *springboard* verhale soos aangewend tydens verandering, en die eienskappe van die *sensemaking* proses wat sal plaasvind by individue wat die verandering probeer hanteer.

Die tesis kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat die vertel van verhale, soos deur Stephen Denning voorgestel, in tye van organisasieverandering wel die proses van *sensemaking* bevorder. Verhale maak dit sodoende moontlik om nuwe identiteite te kies en verwante aksies te implementeer wat by die veranderde omgewing pas. Die impak van hierdie gevolgtrekking oor die gebruik van tradisionele benaderings om verandering te kommunikeer, word oorweeg – veral met betrekking tot leiers se pogings om mense deur verandering te lei, en die benodigde verandering in leierskapfokus om die inherente voordele van verhale te realiseer.

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# Introduction

It has become generally accepted that, in any organisational context, change is inevitable. Recognising that change is inevitable, however, is not sufficient for successful leadership during change. In the introduction to his article on narrative leadership, David Fleming notes that “truly successful leaders and organizations of the future will progress beyond the mere recognition of the constancy of change to cultivating the qualities and skills that can maximize the potential hidden within the change itself.”<sup>1</sup>

It is reasonable to suggest that an organisation’s ongoing success is largely attributable to its ability to successfully navigate through periods of significant change and to derive benefit for the organisation from the change. The changes affecting an organisation are both external and internal, with the need for internal change frequently linked to external, or environmental, changes. The successful guiding of the organisation through times of change, as well as the transformation of the organisation to successfully operate in a changed environment, is a challenge that, like change itself, constantly faces the organisation leadership.

In the broadest sense then, this thesis is a response to the question of how leadership can guide the organisation successfully through times of major organisational change.

The question of how leaders can guide people through times of change has many potential responses. This thesis will examine one possible response, namely storytelling, as a potentially useful management tool in the conditions introduced by organisational change. Such an examination is in keeping with current trends regarding both the use and study of story within organisational contexts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fleming, D. 2001 1

<sup>2</sup> Lelic, S. 2001 2 In this article Simon Lelic of the ARK Group speaks to a number of representatives from organisations where storytelling is practiced and plays a key role in achieving specific knowledge-related objectives. Included in these conversations are Seth Weaver Kahan, senior information officer from the World Bank, and Theodor Barth, senior researcher at SINTEF Industrial Management. It is suggested that the use of story in organisational settings recently has grown exponentially. Kahan notes that "In the last four years, it has gone from an arcane subject discussed mainly by linguists and psychologists to a mainstream, albeit peripheral, topic." At the same time Barth notes that “stories are

The use of storytelling in organisations has become almost a fad in recent years.<sup>3</sup> No one has become as well known and as widely quoted in this respect as Stephen Denning. Currently a private consultant, specialising in knowledge management and organisational storytelling, his clients include organizations in the U.S., Europe, Asia and Australia and scores of Fortune 500 companies.<sup>4</sup> He conducts master-classes for the ARK group,<sup>5</sup> and has published three books<sup>6</sup> as well as numerous papers and articles focusing on organisational storytelling. He is perhaps best known for what he calls *springboard* stories, originally developed, utilised and labelled in his role as Programme Director for Knowledge Management at the World Bank.<sup>7</sup> While many of his more recent publications are based on an evolution of his understanding of storytelling as an emerging discipline,<sup>8</sup> it is his first book *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*<sup>9</sup> and the experiences reported therein, that represent the foundation of his interest in storytelling as a management tool, and that is most frequently referred to in acknowledgement of his contribution to organisational storytelling. It is these experiences and observations, obtained through his personal practice of storytelling during times of

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being used more frequently in the development of competencies in a broader range of learning situations from work-related operations to project-based and individual learning activities.” Furthermore, according to Kahan, storytelling is now recognised as a legitimate field for exploration, and experiments in its use are ongoing in businesses around the world.

<sup>3</sup> Internet searches conducted on 04 October 2006 using the Google search engine returned 24,400 hits for “Storytelling in Organizations” and 859, 000 hits for “Organizational Storytelling”

<sup>4</sup> “About Stephen Denning” on [www.stevedenning.com](http://www.stevedenning.com)

<sup>5</sup> From <http://www.ark-group.com/home/default.asp> “Ark Group is a leading provider of straightforward business information. Through our 3 core divisions we are dedicated to capturing, communicating and sharing objective experience and research, helping our clients to make real impact on their organisations and markets. Within each division our products are widely recognised as market leaders our clients look to us for insight and ideas.”

<sup>6</sup> *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (2001), Squirrel Inc. *A Fable of Leadership through Storytelling* (2004) and *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling* (2005)

<sup>7</sup> Lelic, S. 2001 1; Borchard, B. 2002 2; Adamson G., Pine, J., Van Steenhoven, T. and Kroupa, J. 2003 37

<sup>8</sup> Denning, S. 2005 xix

<sup>9</sup> Denning, S. 2001

significant change at the World Bank, that will form the subject of the examination conducted in this thesis.

While there is general recognition of the usefulness of Denning's springboard story technique, the question remains unanswered – why? Is it Denning's (unique) personality which accounts for his success or can a more objective reason be advanced?

This thesis subjects Denning's reported success stories to an analysis from the point of view of Sensemaking theory as proposed by Karl E Weick, most notably in his 1995 publication *Sensemaking in Organizations*.<sup>10</sup> As with Denning in the field of organisational storytelling, Weick is acknowledged to be a leader in the field of sensemaking, and the subject is seldom addressed without reference to his works. The word *sensemaking* itself, being a fusion of terms, is an invention of Weick,<sup>11</sup> used to distinguish the concept as new and to imply a new usage to the term describing that concept.

Sensemaking theory as a basis for examining story usage during times of organisational change is useful when one views the definition of organisation as suggested by Tsoukas and Chia<sup>12</sup> in close proximity to some of the current definitions of sensemaking.

Tsoukas and Chia describe organisation as “an attempt to order the intrinsic flux of human *action*, to channel it toward certain ends, to give it a particular shape, through generalizing and institutionalizing particular *meanings* and rules.” [My italics]

Gioia and Chittipeddi, quoted by David Fleming,<sup>13</sup> define sensemaking as a process that “involves calling into question an obsolete interpretive scheme, framing a new interpretive scheme in *understandable* and evocative terms, *providing guidance for action* toward the incipient change and exerting influence to accomplish it.” [My italics]

In a recent paper examining sensemaking in relation to the development of intelligent systems, the concept is defined as “a motivated, continuous *effort to understand*

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<sup>10</sup> Weick, K. 1995

<sup>11</sup> Browning, L. and Boudès, T. 2005 33

<sup>12</sup> Tsoukas, H., Chia, R. 2002 570

<sup>13</sup> Fleming, D. 2001 1

*connections* (which can be among people, places, and events) in order to anticipate their trajectories *and act effectively.*"<sup>14</sup>[My italics]

Weick himself, in a paper with Sutcliffe and Obstfeld,<sup>15</sup> introduces sensemaking as a process that "involves turning circumstances into a situation that is *comprehended* explicitly in words and *that serves as a springboard into action.*" [My italics]

It is clear from the above that sensemaking is required both for individuals to understand events and circumstances and to provide a basis for their future action. Sensemaking theory helps us understand this phenomenon through which individuals come to certain convictions of what they must do, and will do, given the events and circumstances they find themselves facing.

If we accept that (a) organisation is about ordering and channelling the actions of people, (b) that the action of ordering and channelling those actions is the role of leadership, and (c) that organisation and sensemaking constitute one another,<sup>16</sup> then the role of leadership is actually one of facilitating sensemaking. Thus, during times of organisational change, where leaders face the challenge of aiding people in their understanding of the change and guiding their actions to accomplish success in a new context, their challenge is to apply methods, or tools, that facilitate sensemaking within those people. Sensemaking theory is therefore a useful basis for evaluating the management tools applied during organisational change, and increasing our understanding of their value, if any.

To facilitate the use of sensemaking theory as a basis for interpretation, a brief overview of some of its key concepts is presented, focusing specifically on the properties of sensemaking.

*The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* is essentially a report on Denning's real-life events, documenting his experiences and

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<sup>14</sup> Klein, G., Moon, B., and Hoffman, R. 2006 71

<sup>15</sup> Weick, K. Sutcliffe, K., and Obstfeld, D. 2005 409

<sup>16</sup> The inseparability of organisation and sensemaking is highlighted in Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (Weick, K., Sutcliffe, K. and Obstfeld, D. 2005 410). The article notes that "sensemaking and organization constitute one another...We need to grasp each to understand the other. The operative image of organization is one in which organization emerges through sensemaking, not one in which organization precedes sensemaking or one in which sensemaking is produced by organization. A central theme in both organizing and sensemaking is that people organize to make sense of equivocal inputs and enact this sense back into the world to make that world more orderly."

observations from the application of springboard stories as a means to move people to action in a changing organisational environment. These reported events are examined in some detail, and then interpreted using sensemaking theory. For the purposes of this thesis, the basis of the interpretation will be limited to the properties of sensemaking identified by Weick.<sup>17</sup>

The results of this interpretation provide an indication of whether springboard stories are indeed useful tools during times of organisational change, and whether their potential contribution to moving people to action during such times extends beyond the unique circumstances from which Stephen Denning reports his success. The interpretation also provides insight as to why certain stories work in igniting desired action during organisational change, and others do not.

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<sup>17</sup> Weick, K 1995. 17-62

# Chapter 1

## The Seven Properties of Sensemaking according to Karl Weick

### 1.1 What is sensemaking?

*“Organizational sensemaking is first and foremost about the question: How does something come to be an event for organizational members? Second, sensemaking is about the question: What does an event mean? In the context of everyday life, when people confront something unintelligible and ask “what’s the story here?” their question has the force of bringing an event into existence. When people then ask “now what should I do?” this added question has the force of bringing meaning into existence, meaning that they hope is stable enough for them to act into the future, continue to act, and to have the sense that they remain in touch with the continuing flow of experience.”<sup>18</sup>*

Sensemaking is a term created by Karl Weick as an all-encompassing description of the human response to complexity and ambiguity. In the simplest terms the concept can be summarised (as Weick has done) as follows: “To deal with ambiguity, interdependent people search for meaning, settle for plausibility, and move on”.<sup>19</sup> The concept embodied in this seemingly simple sentence, however, encompasses a significant amount of mental processing and activity, an understanding of which is critical to understand how people respond to and manage complexity in such a way as to enable them to continue a meaningful and active existence.

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<sup>18</sup> Weick, K. Sutcliffe, K and Obstfeld, D. 2005 410

<sup>19</sup> Weick, K. Sutcliffe, K and Obstfeld, D. 2005 419

Sensemaking is a cognitive process through which people organise multiple inputs that have a number of possible meanings in order to make sense of those inputs. The process also encompasses the enactment of the sense made back into the world to impose order on it. Through the process of sensemaking the world is simplified, more orderly and has meaning.<sup>20</sup>

A more detailed and useful definition of sensemaking, as the concept is proposed by Weick, is:

“Sensemaking involves the *ongoing retrospective* development of *plausible* images that rationalize what people are doing. Viewed as a significant process of organizing, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with *identity* in the *social context* of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they *extract cues* and make plausible sense retrospectively, while *enacting* more or less order into those ongoing circumstances.”<sup>21</sup>

The concepts incorporated in the above definition articulate the seven properties inherent in sensemaking and which underlie Weick’s sensemaking theory. An understanding of sensemaking of necessity requires an understanding of these properties. Such understanding is sufficient for the purposes of this thesis and for this reason Weick’s sensemaking theory will be examined purely in terms of the seven properties. This examination, then, will form the basis of the interpretation of storytelling, in terms of sensemaking, that follows.

## **1.2 Local behaviour as a response to complex systems**

A study of sensemaking in organisations is essentially a study of sensemaking in the individuals making up that organisation.<sup>22</sup> However, the organisation itself adds unique

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<sup>20</sup> Weick, K. Sutcliffe, K and Obstfeld, D. 2005 414

<sup>21</sup> Weick, K. Sutcliffe, K and Obstfeld, D. 2005 409

<sup>22</sup> In a comparison of the managerial models of Karl Weick and Dave Snowden (Browning, L. and Boudès, T. 2005 37) findings showed that, despite differences in origin and approach between the two schools of thought, there is agreement from both that responses to organisational complexity take place at the level of the individual. ( The article concludes that “complex narratives are about individual behavior. While the organizations Snowden and Weick describe are complex systems, they see local behavior - self-organization - as the key response to non-linear conditions. Whether it is Weick’s X-ray technicians arriving at a diagnosis for the Battered Child Syndrome or Snowden’s kindergarten teachers



and specific dimensions to the sensemaking process, as members attempt to make sense in response to stimuli that are unique to an organisational environment. As we have seen in the paragraph quoted at the beginning of this chapter, organisational sensemaking is about questions asked at an individual level, and a related search for meaning that enables actions at the individual level. Thus, an understanding of the properties of sensemaking as it occurs at a personal level provides significant insight into how the process affects organisations. This understanding is particularly important for those in leadership positions in organisations – those tasked with guiding people to action, and cultivating change, in the organisation.<sup>23</sup>

If we accept that sensemaking is a pre-requisite for action, and that the response to organisational complexity takes place at a personal level, then attempts to drive action in organisations are necessarily attempts to facilitate sensemaking at the individual level. As such, sensemaking and its seven properties of sensemaking - as they occur and are experienced at the individual level - play a key role in the organisational context,<sup>24</sup> and the implications for both will be examined in the following pages.

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shaping chaotic behavior, they place the person at the center of the interpretation. The advantage of focusing on the person is this: the more self-organizing, rather than controlled, the behavior, the more likely that the right solution has a life somewhere in the system. If the communication practices among self-organizers are in fact vulnerable and attentive to the margins, their use will result in the best self-organized solution evolving to a dominant position, which is how individual action becomes a role model for others to emulate. Those influenced by the role modeling, in turn, may become a force for an idea or a project, and so on.”

<sup>23</sup> Webber, A. 1999 178 Peter Senge, originator of the concept of “learning organisation”, suggests that successful leaders are those who recognise that organisations are not like machines, and cannot be “fixed” by mechanics who introduce change and change behaviours from the top down. He suggests that successful change is achieved by “gardeners” who treat the organisation as a biological phenomenon and cultivate change. He also echoes the sentiments of Weick and Snowden suggesting that successful change relies on the successful treatment and understanding of people, and leadership interactions with people that mirror those of interactions outside of the organisation.

<sup>24</sup> In their paper considering the use of narrative to understand and respond to complexity, Browning and Boudès note that there are two primary schools of thought in this regard: that of Karl Weick and that of Dave Snowden (Browning, L. and Boudès, T. 2005 1). They note that there is a significant overlap between the work done by each, yet each is largely ignored by the other. They observe that there appears to be only one cross-reference between the two, and it is a criticism – Snowden believes the organisation examples used by Weick to support his theories are not typical. That there are overlaps in their views of

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how people make sense in response to complexity is confirmed by a review of Snowden's article with Kurtz (Snowden, D., and Kurtz, C. 2003). Despite different origins for research and approach, a number of the concepts related in the article confirm and support the sensemaking theory of Weick and, in particular, his suggestions regarding the properties of sensemaking, and how sensemaking takes place within people. These include:

1) Humans are not limited to one identity. In a human complex system, an agent is anything that has identity, and we constantly flex our identities both individually and collectively. Individually, we can be a parent, sibling, spouse, or child and will behave differently depending on the context. Collectively, we might, for example, be part of a dissenting community, but in the face of a common threat, we might assume the identity of the wider group. Identity goes deeper than norms—it determines not only reactions but perceptions and patternings of experience. Humans are thus made up of multiple dynamic individual and collective identities acting simultaneously and representing numerous aspects of perception, decision-making, and action. The correlation between this observation and Weick's theory on identity construction is clear.

2) Humans are not limited to acting in accordance with predetermined rules. We are able to impose structure on our interactions (or disrupt it) as a result of collective agreement or individual acts of free will. We are capable of shifting a system from complexity to order and maintaining it there in such a way that it becomes predictable. As a result, questions of intentionality play a large role in human patterns of complexity. This imposition mirrors what Weick contends regarding the use of cues and simple linear cause-and-effect relationships to make sense of complexity. This is also aligned to the idea of stepping out of life's flows in order to direct attention to a specific event in retrospect, thus separating events from ongoing flows in order to make sense.

3) Humans are not limited to acting on local patterns. People have a high capacity for awareness of largescale patterns because of their ability to communicate abstract concepts through language. This speaks to the importance of words in sensemaking as noted by Weick. It also offers support for the contention that leadership can influence sensemaking of a large unknown – such as an envisioned new organisational future – through the use of language to articulate the abstract in such a way as to make it seem concrete.

4) Snowden talks about the space of “unorder”, which is not a lack of order, but rather a different type of order, where there is both a sense of disorder, but also the presence of order of a sort. This is likely to be the space experienced during organisational change. He goes on to say that these are circumstances in which “cultural factors,” “inspired leadership,” “gut feel,” and other complex factors are dominant. All of these are patterns, which arise through the interaction of various entities through space and time. In the space of unorder the seeds of such patterns can be perceived, and new ways of thinking can emerge. The use of “seed” and emergent patterns is strongly aligned to Weick's suggestion of the role of cues, and especially leadership's provision of cues as seeds from which less equivocal patterns can emerge. Furthermore, the “gut feel”, “inspired leadership” and “cultural factors” suggest the role of leadership in selecting cues to highlight, as well as communicating these effectively in such a way as to make them the cues on which people feel and believe successful action can be based.

### 1.3 Property 1: Grounded in identity construction

There are three key concepts embodied in the words used that underpin the overall description of this property, and each provides a unique insight into the phenomenon of sensemaking - insight that contributes significantly to the understanding of the process as a whole. These three concepts, underlying the property, will first be considered separately, and the consideration followed by an examination of the implications of the property, in its entirety, for sensemaking.

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5) The role of retrospective assigning of simple cause-and-effect relationship between one or two selected cues and the perceived outcome, as well as the use of limited cues in order to make sense of the whole is echoed by Snowden's observations that "Humans use patterns to order the world and make sense of things in complex situations. Patterns are something we actively, not passively, create. Visually, we hold in sharp focus at any one instant a mere tenth of a percent of our visual range, so even the process of seeing is one of putting together many disparate observations. We fill in the gaps to create an experience-based pattern on which we act." The active search for patterns, and the focus on a small range of elements, is the essence of retrospection as proposed by Weick. Like Weick, Snowden also contends that in complexity "Emergent patterns can be perceived but not predicted; we call this phenomenon retrospective coherence." It is only in looking back that patterns are apparent.

6) The social property of sensemaking is also suggested by Snowden, when he talks about the fact that "All human interactions are strongly influenced and frequently determined by the patterns of our multiple experiences, both through the direct influence of personal experience and through collective experience expressed as stories."

7) Finally, Snowden's approach and framework developed and applied to assist organisations to make sense support Weick's observations about the importance of context for sensemaking and assigning meaning. He talks about "building the framework" anew every time it is used with distinctions meaningful to the current context. He notes that this is the most important step in the approach to making sense, as an approach to making sense "cannot exist devoid of context, but is always used to enable sense-making in a particular setting."

These independently researched and developed insights and observations into human behaviour and mental processing, confirm that the fundamentals underlying Weick's sensemaking theory are indeed inherent in humans, as suggested. Certainly, an understanding of these qualities, behaviours and approach to complexity are critical to understand how people respond to the complexity of their environment, and the processes inherent in that response. Weick's detailed insight into these fundamentals, through his explanations of the properties of sensemaking, is thus extremely useful in the complexity that is inherent in organisations.

### 1.3.1 *Grounded in identity construction*

Two useful dictionary definitions of the verb *grounded* and its related noun *ground* provide excellent insight into the fundamental role of identity construction in sensemaking. *thefreedictionary.com* defines the noun as being “The foundation for an argument, a belief, or an action; a basis” and “The underlying condition prompting an action; a cause”. Similarly, the transitive verb is defined as “To provide a basis for; justify”.<sup>25</sup> Identity construction – the creation and selection of identities that are able to cope successfully with the environment they face - is the underlying condition that prompts sensemaking and the actions that lead from it. It is the foundation for sensemaking, and all properties of the sensemaking process exist to construct suitable and successful identities for changing circumstances.

### 1.3.2 *Grounded in identity construction*

Sensemaking is a human phenomenon and begins with a person – the sensemaker.<sup>26</sup> Just as observers are likely to ask “Who is this person?” the sensemaker in a given context asks himself “Who is this person?” implying, of course, “Who am I?” This is the driving question behind sensemaking, and the answer is the key to making sense of the world. The answer, though, is not a simple or straightforward one – “who I am” is neither singular nor constant, and changes along with the context. Significantly, though, without knowing who I am, I cannot make sense of the world in which I find myself. Only if I know who I am, can I know what is in that world.<sup>27</sup> Thus, seeking to create and know my identity is the key to making sense of my environment and the experiences contained within it. Creating an identity is about positioning oneself in relation to the world, and at the same time positioning the world in relation to oneself, in order to confront that world effectively.

Identity is variously defined as “The set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which *an individual is recognisable* as a member of a group”<sup>28</sup>[My italics] or “The

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Grounded?p> Retrieved 28/09/2006

<sup>26</sup> Weick, K. 1995 18

<sup>27</sup> Weick, K. 1995 20

<sup>28</sup> identity. (n.d.). The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Retrieved September 28, 2006, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/identity>

individual characteristics by which a thing or person *is recognised or known*".<sup>29</sup>[My italics] The word "recognised" makes a useful contribution to understanding the role of identity in sensemaking. The implication of recognition is that there is another entity involved. A person can only be recognised by another person or being. Identities are a combination of behavioural and personal characteristics specifically chosen to obtain recognition and acknowledgement from others. That sensemaking is a socially based process will be expanded on throughout the pages that follow, but the recognition element of the definition of identity is an early indication that there is a definite social dimension to the construction of identity – the construction that is the basis of the sensemaking process.

The social aspect of organisational sensemaking is alluded to more strongly in the reference to "recognition as a member of a group". Organisations are essentially groups of people, and we shall see later that the search for identity within an organisation takes place on multiple levels: fulfilling a need to be recognised as a competent individual within the organisation, as well as a need to be recognised positively as a representative of a successful organisation, and also to be recognised as playing the role of an organisation with a positive image itself. Positive recognition of identity as a member of the organisational group plays a significant role in the sensemaking processes that take place in the minds of the organisation members, and the influence of group identity and associated recognition cannot be discounted during experiences of interruptions that result from changes in organisational identity.

### **1.3.3 Grounded in identity *construction***

The term "construction" clearly implies action. Had the property been described as "grounded in identity" it would not have conveyed the purposeful, active process of selecting or creating an identity – a process fundamental to sensemaking. This relates to the fact that identity is not constant nor a passive occurrence and that people are constantly and actively reviewing themselves in response to other people and the environment, and consciously choosing who they want or need to be, given their perspective on those people and environment.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> identity. (n.d.). WordNet® 2.0. Retrieved September 28, 2006, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/identity>

<sup>30</sup> Weick, K. 1995 20

The term is a useful one beyond its implication of action. *Construction* is variously defined as “the act of construing, interpreting, or explaining meaning or effect”,<sup>31</sup> “the process of combining ideas into a congruous object of thought”<sup>32</sup> and “drawing a figure satisfying certain conditions as part of solving a problem”. Although these definitions have linguistic, legal or mathematical bases, they provide equally useful insight into the process associated with identity during sensemaking.

In particular, the concept of creating a “figure” to satisfy specific conditions to aid with problem solving mirrors almost exactly the process of identity construction in sensemaking. When confronted with an interruption to the normal or expected flows in life (the problem), people seek to create an identity (the figure) that is equipped to deal with the conditions resulting from the interruption, thereby removing or reducing the interruption and resolving the problem. During this process, various environmental and social elements and relationships are combined and assigned value to reach a point where the combination of all of these considerations forms the basis for interpretation and assigning of meaning to the overall experience.

Thus, sensemaking is a process of active creation and recreation of personal identity, and related roles and actions, by which an individual is recognised in changing contexts and circumstances.

### **1.3.4 The implications of grounding in identity construction**

No individual acts as a single sensemaker in isolation.<sup>33</sup> No sensemaker has a single, fixed, constant identity. Instead, the sensemaker is constantly looking within for a suitable identity for the environment in which he or she finds him- or herself. If there is no identity already in existence which is considered suitable for the interaction taking place with other people and the perceived environment, attempts will be made to construct a new identity. The process of finding or creating a confirming identity – “This is who I am now” – is ongoing and will continue every time the chosen identity is no longer confirmed in the environment. The misalignment between the current identity and a

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<sup>31</sup> construction. (n.d.). Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law. Retrieved October 03, 2006, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/construction>

<sup>32</sup> construction. (n.d.). WordNet® 2.0. Retrieved October 03, 2006, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/construction>

<sup>33</sup> Weick, K. 1995 18

changing environment is not always a long-term phenomenon, but occurs on a moment-by-moment basis, and the selection/ creation process is a continuous flow through the inevitable interaction that makes up human existence. In instances where the time between a change in the environment and the creation of a suitable identity to deal with that change is lengthy, emotion and autonomic arousal are likely to be heightened, which will hinder further sensemaking.

The three drivers of identity construction are: the need to enhance the self and thus feel good about oneself; the need to appear effective and competent; and the need to feel that the self is consistent, with coherence and continuity within oneself.<sup>34</sup> The process of selecting identities during interaction takes place to fulfil these needs and to confirm within the self that the identity chosen – and recognised by others – is effective, has a positive appearance, and is not out of character for the sensemaker. There is discomfort when the self is not confirmed, and this discomfort is reduced through the process of selecting or constructing an identity that is positively confirmed both by the self, and by others in the environment.

This process, engaged to learn about identities, takes place by projecting potential identities into the environment and observing the consequences.<sup>35</sup> For sensemakers in an organisational context, identities are constantly being projected into the environment that is the organisation. This is particularly true in a changing environment, or more specifically where a change idea is introduced into the environment. Part of the process of making sense of the change and choosing actions for the changed environment will entail the sensemaker projecting various identities into the envisioned changed environment and observing the consequences – most notably, whether the projected identity will be confirmed in the new environment. People respond to organisational events and change by asking themselves: “What implications will events have for who I will be?” People will use available reference points and organisational context as tools, but the focus will always be more strongly on the self.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Weick, K. 1995 20

<sup>35</sup> Weick, K. 1995 23

<sup>36</sup> Weick, K. 1995 23-24

The role of imagination in this process of identity construction is significant. Identity is not constructed based on what other people think but, importantly, on what the sensemaker imagines other people think.

There are various references in Weick's writing to metaphorical mirrors and looking-glasses,<sup>37</sup> which relate to the idea of looking at the self, and creating a picture in the mind of how others see that self. Weick emphasises, though, that to understand sensemaking it is not sufficient simply to consider the viewing in the mirror. The viewing is only a part of a process, a means whereby the sensemaker imagines how others see him. During the metaphorical viewing, the sensemaker also imagines how the imagined or anticipated "other" implied by the mirror will judge him. This judgement is a critical driver in the identity-construction process.

A positive imagined judgement of the identity projected onto the mirror will support and confirm its selection. A negative imagined judgement will result in the selection of an alternative identity and this process will continue until positive imagined confirmation of the self is obtained. Thus, while identity construction arises from experiences and responses during interaction, this interaction need not be an actual occurrence, and the experiences and responses can – and frequently are – anticipated through imagination. The choice of identity, then, is frequently a response to the imagined responses of others.

The typical organisational design and structure, as well as the associated performance and management approaches, are likely to increase the need to achieve the feelings driving identity construction within the organisational context. There is likely to be a very real threat to a continued role in the organisation if a person is perceived to be incompetent or ineffective – thus the choice of identity is likely to be based, at least in part, on countering this threat. At the same time people need to feel good about themselves, and to feel that they have some measure of control and influence over situations: things do not happen randomly and without logic, and one can clearly "see" which actions lead to which events, and can continue to act in accordance with this insight.

Organisational life adds further dimensions to the sensemaking process, particularly through the perceived nature of the organisation's identity and its influence on its members. People in organisations use the image of the organisation to affirm their own identity. The noteworthy aspect of this affirmation-seeking process is that it is always

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<sup>37</sup> Weick K. 1995 21-24



done in a manner that confirms a positive identity for the individual. In other words: where the image of the organisation is positive, people will choose to move closer towards that image, and to strengthen their association with the organisation, and are more likely to act in accordance with organisation direction and approved behaviours. Where possible, in instances where the organisational image is initially viewed as negative, people will actively choose an alternative view of the same organisation – one that reflects positively on the organisation and enhances the self seen as the organisation. However, if the image of the organisation is perceived to be negative, and no positive angle can be found, people will move further away, disassociating themselves from the organisation and choosing behaviours and actions which support the separation between themselves as individuals and themselves as a part of the organisation.

The implication of the above is that positive organisational image is a key influencing factor in the sensemaking processes of the people associated with that organisation. Furthermore, where a negative aspect of organisational life manifests itself – for example, tainted food products in a supermarket environment – sufficient positive organisational actions with which organisation members can positively identify, and which are available to people when they “view” the organisation, can actually strengthen the association between members of the organisation and the organisation, and lead to similarly positive actions from the individuals. Note, of course, that the term “lead” may be misleading, as such a straight-line cause and effect relationship is unlikely. However, the word is used merely to demonstrate that the availability of positive images of the organisation as reference points does influence sensemaking in organisations.

The organisational influence on the selection and testing of identity through sensemaking has implications for leadership in organisations. The organisation can benefit from the creation of opportunities for the projection of individual identities to take place in a simulated or imagined environment, as well as from facilitating the creation and confirmation of identities through these simulations. These identities then become available for the sensemaker to access and select should the simulation become reality, and thus the impact of an interruption is minimised.

The implication, then, is that the introduction of change ideas in organisational environments should be accompanied by the confirmation of the identities that will be considered competent and efficacious in the changed environment. Affirmation of desired behaviours and actions should be introduced at the same time as the change idea, so that

these influence the constructed identities as well as the observed consequences from the projection of those identities into the envisioned environment that stem from the sensemaking process triggered by the change.

## 1.4 Property 2: Social

Although sensemaking as a process is generally studied from the perspective of an individual, the term sensemaker should not mislead one into focusing on individuals in isolation. In human relations there is a close link between the cognitive and the social,<sup>38</sup> and the cognitive process of sensemaking is influenced by the social dynamics within the sensemaker's environment.

Just as conduct depends on, and is a response to, the conduct of others,<sup>39</sup> through sensemaking identity is selected in response to the identity of others. People select their identities in relation to the other people in their current context, asking questions such as “Will who I am be acceptable to them?” and “Who should I be if he is he and they are them?” An identity will only be selected and maintained if the individual's perception of the social response to this identity is positive.

As noted under identity construction, it is important to remember that it is not necessary for the interaction to be a physical encounter – imagined encounters, interactions, responses and judgements are as likely to influence the sensemaking process, and in particular the selection of identity and related actions. This is particularly relevant in the organisational context, as identities and actions are chosen knowing that they are being assessed, or that that they will assessed, by others in the organisation even if those assessing are not physically present at the time identity and actions are selected. The anticipation and perception of the results of such assessment strongly influence the selection of identity.

Before actual interaction, people frequently engage in rehearsal<sup>40</sup> during which sensemaking takes place in an attempt to anticipate the conduct of others, and responses to a selected identity and its conduct. During the actual interaction, the rehearsed identity may be incrementally adjusted as responses differ to those anticipated.

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<sup>38</sup> Weick, K. 1995 38

<sup>39</sup> Weick, K. 1995 39

<sup>40</sup> Weick, K. 1995 40

Organisations are by their very nature a social context, being groups of people interacting in a network of relationships.<sup>41</sup> These relationships influence, and even determine, individual behaviour, as is the case in any social context. However, organisational structures, and the role of the individual in them, add a more influential dimension to the social property of sensemaking. Competence and image enhancement are that much more important within an organisation and move from being a psychological self-assessment to an actual requirement that is not only measurable, but frequently in fact actually measured. How one is perceived by peers and management, the identity with which one is associated in the organisational context, and the alignment of one's identity with that of the organisation have real significance and impact on one's position and progress within the organisation. It is important for people to feel that they are competent in their organisational role, and to understand which actions and behaviours will confirm a positive self-image, as well as their image in the eyes of others.

A further social dynamic introduced through organisation is that, just as each individual in an organisation experiences their own identity on at least three levels, that individual also interacts with others in terms of three levels of social response: as individuals (What will he think?), as representatives of the organisation (What will the manager think?) and as the organisation itself (What will the company think?). Thus the social influence on sensemaking within organisations is multi-dimensional and more complex than outside of an organisational context.

Leaders who acknowledge the social nature of sensemaking will recognise that any actions taken will be based on an assessment of the actions, reactions and thoughts of others in the organisation. Thus, it should be made clear that specific actions will lead to affirmation from others in the organisation. An understanding of the more influential people in the sensemaker's context can also assist leaders. A clear indication that those influential people will approve of the desired actions, and see the actor as increasing competence and efficacy, may support the drive to desired actions. It is not possible to influence individuals as if they are isolated from others in the organisation, and expect them to react accordingly. The influence of other organisation members, whether physically proximal or not, is still a factor that needs to be considered.

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<sup>41</sup> Weick, K. 1995 38

Thus, leaders do have an opportunity to influence the response to the social consideration inherent in the sensemaking process, by providing ready and confirming answers to the questions of what others will think, and what the social reaction will be to identities and related actions.

A final noteworthy suggestion regarding the social property of sensemaking is that co-ordinated action towards a common goal does not require shared meaning amongst the individuals involved.<sup>42</sup> While the social nature of sensemaking facilitates the finding of common ground for the various sensemakers involved,<sup>43</sup> it is sufficient for there to be an alignment of meaning to facilitate action of this nature. In fact, given that every individual experiences and makes sense of life from a unique perspective, it is unlikely that there can ever be “shared meaning” if the terms implies the same result of a sensemaking process taking place in different individuals. As co-ordinated action underlies the nature of organisation,<sup>44</sup> an understanding that aligned, rather than shared, meaning is sufficient for such action is particularly important in the organisational context. Aligned, as opposed to shared meaning, facilitates the contribution of more and varied inputs into the sensemaking process, and also increases the likelihood of variety in identities and actions selected to contribute to the achievement of the goal.<sup>45</sup>

## **1.5 Property 3: Retrospective**

### **1.5.1 Focused on past occurrences**

People can only make sense of that which they perceive, and only events that have already occurred can be perceived. There may only be a miniscule time lapse between occurrence and perception, but that time lapse immediately places the event in the past. Thus, perception is by nature a view of the past, and therefore people can only make sense of things that are in the past. Two significant implications of this phenomenon are that people cannot know what they are doing until they have done it<sup>46</sup> and sensemaking as a process is always focused on past events – things that have already happened.

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<sup>42</sup> Weick, K. 1995 42

<sup>43</sup> Klein, G., Moon, B. and Hoffman, R. 2006 72

<sup>44</sup> Tsoukas, H., R. Chia. 2002 570

<sup>45</sup> Weick, K 1995 43

<sup>46</sup> Weick, K. 1995 24

### 1.5.2 Identifying cause and effect

Retrospective sensemaking is a reflection on the actions that led to known outcomes. However, as Weick notes<sup>47</sup> the implied linearity of cause-and-effect is misleading. For an outcome to be known, it must have already occurred. In the same way, actions can only be known once already taken. Through retrospection, once an outcome is known, people selectively identify the actions taken to reach the outcome. The actions selected as “causing” the outcome will be those that confirm the meaning assigned to the outcome. Sensemaking is thus a process of “discovering” the causes of a given effect, rather than predicting the effect of possible causes.

Investigations have found that people who know the outcome of a complex history remember it as being a lot more determinate than the actual experience would have been.<sup>48</sup>

Retrospection always takes place from a current position in time, and is affected by anything that influences that position. The current context of the sensemaker will affect how the past is remembered. Thus, different people reflecting on the same occurrence are likely to assign different meanings to that occurrence. Each will be influenced by their current situational context and will choose to recognise different stimuli as leading to the outcome. Similarly, as the current situation changes, people may again reflect on the same occurrence and assign a different sense and meaning to that occurrence.<sup>49</sup> For example, where the outcome is “good”, the focus and emphasis of the causes will be on the positive and “good” elements, and their perceived links to the outcome will be highlighted and strengthened.

### 1.5.3 A search for order, clarity and rationality

The subjective and selective nature of retrospection, and the related simplification of cause-and-effect in relation to complex events, may lead to what is referred to as hindsight bias.<sup>50</sup> This occurs because people view the relationships between cause and effect differently, depending on whether the outcome is perceived as positive or negative.

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<sup>47</sup> Weick, K. 1995 26

<sup>48</sup> Weick, K. 1995 28

<sup>49</sup> Weick, K. 1995 27

<sup>50</sup> Weick, K. 1995 28

Where an outcome is perceived as unfavourable, people reflecting on the events that led to the outcome identify negative aspects in the processes leading to that outcome – and thus confirm their perception of the outcome. Conversely, if the outcome of the same event is perceived as favourable, reflection will confirm that the positive aspects of the process led to that outcome. While this phenomenon may lead to a factually incorrect view, in a purely historical sense, such simplification is necessary for sensemaking and for people to be able to move forward and take action,<sup>51</sup> based on their reflection on, and perception of, the past - whether negative or positive.

Retrospection continues until sense is made of the past event under review. In day-to-day experience the time spent on retrospection is minimal and occurs unconsciously. There is also generally a miniscule time lapse between small interruptions and making sense of them.<sup>52</sup> Of interest for this analysis is the retrospective process that takes place in relation to large interruptions to the flows of consciousness that people experience.

People cannot move forward, or take action, if they do not experience a feeling of order, clarity and coherence regarding an interruption to their normal flows of experience and its causes.<sup>53</sup> The sensemaking process aims to make connections of a causal nature between specific actions or events and experienced outcomes. It seeks to clarify the occurrence in the mind of the sensemaker, and to establish order from the possible chaos embodied in the occurrence. People need to be able to create links between some of the things that happened and the outcome, and they will continue to focus on and examine the past until those links have been created in a way that confirms their interpretation of the outcome.

For the sensemaker, then, factual accuracy is not an objective of retrospection. Instead, all that is sought is a *feeling* of coherence, clarity and rationality with regard to causes and effects, actions and outcomes.

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<sup>51</sup> Weick, K. 1995 29

<sup>52</sup> Weick, K. 1995 29

<sup>53</sup> Weick, K. 1995 29

#### **1.5.4 Feeling-based reflection**

That sensemaking is infused with feeling is not only apparent in the retrospective search for feeling rather than fact, but also in the influence of feelings on the actual process of reflection.<sup>54</sup>

The recall of past events is mood congruent<sup>55</sup> and current feelings will highlight events that generated similar feelings in the past during reflection and retrospect. An interruption that causes anger will lead to a retrospective focus on past events that caused anger to discover elements that generated those feelings in the past and to discover what they might suggest about the meaning of the present feelings.

#### **1.5.5 The threat of too much information**

Retrospection attempts to reduce and synthesise multiple and complex possible meanings to a single, simple meaning.<sup>56</sup> The problem faced is one of equivocality – many possible answers to a single question, each with multiple variables and influencing factors to be considered. Under these circumstances the provision of additional information does not assist, but rather exacerbates the problem faced by the sensemaker – more information means more potential meanings. Instead, what is required is the provision of values, priorities and preferences - clearer guidance on what is important and should require attention.

The above is particularly significant for leaders in organisations. Where complex changes or events are introduced into the (already complex) environment, the role of leadership is to provide clear indications of what projects matter, through the provision of priorities and preferences. The aim should be to reduce the number of possible meanings assigned to the events and changes, and to simplify cause-and-effect relationships within the complexity introduced.

#### **1.5.6 The future as the past**

Examining retrospection highlights a similar phenomenon to that highlighted in the case of identity construction, where an imagined interaction has the same impact on

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<sup>54</sup> Weick, K. 1995 45

<sup>55</sup> Weick, K. 1995 49

<sup>56</sup> Weick, K. 1995 27

sensemaking as an actual interaction. This relates to the fact that, while sensemaking takes place retrospectively, the events reflected on need not have actually happened. According to Weick, sensemaking is an issue of language, talk, and communication. Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence.<sup>57</sup>

Because sense is made in terms of an outcome, future events can be made sense of by articulating a future outcome *as if it had already occurred* and thus enabling a review of what *might have* lead to that outcome. Using the current situation as a point of departure, people can identify behaviours or actions that would negatively or positively influence the creation of the described future. It is important to note, though, especially for organisations, that sense cannot be made of the future, nor can it be “predicted”, if such an exercise is not linked to the past in some way, with a focused reflection on past events as the starting point for assigning meaning to the possibilities contained in the envisioned, and necessarily articulated, future.<sup>58</sup>

Reflection on the past to connect it to present events and an envisioned future is essential for sensemaking, and thus for the ability of people to be able to choose identities and actions that enable them to cope with change and a different future.<sup>59</sup> In order to imagine a new future, people first need to understand their current situation and context.<sup>60</sup>

The ability of leaders to describe the past in ways that support the future direction of the organisation is critical to achieving the desired future. It is through articulation and description of past events that sense is made. For an organisation in transition, or introducing a significant change idea, leadership can influence the sense made of the change by articulating the past in such a way that the change idea is assigned a causal role in a successful outcome. Through their words they can create the past that will be looked

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<sup>57</sup> Weick, K., Sutcliffe, K., and Obstfeld, D. 2005 409

<sup>58</sup> Weick, K. 1995 30

<sup>59</sup> Weick, K. 1995 30

<sup>60</sup> Katz, J. 1996 Gareth Morgan, author of *Images of Organization* (Morgan, G. 1996), notes this as a prerequisite to get people in organisations to think creatively about new images for their organisations, to create new futures. He labels this type of creative thinking “Imaginization” – creating a new context in which new things can happen. He goes on to note that Imaginization “starts with the recognition that there is a need for people and the organization in question to think and see themselves in a new way.” This suggestion, based on Morgan’s experience with organisational studies, is closely aligned to Weick’s observations about the search for identity, and related new actions.



back on, using language to filter the past in such a way as to highlight and emphasise selected cause-result links.<sup>61</sup>

By selecting and highlighting specific points for focus, there is an element of influence, and even control, over the actions that will take place to confirm the causal nature of those cues, thus reinforcing their importance in the organisation. The strength of the relationship between those cues and the outcome will also become stronger as people act to confirm their beliefs, guided and influenced by leadership, while at the same time influencing and being influenced by present and future organisational life.

## 1.6 Property 4: Enactive of sensible environments

To begin to understand this property, one should first attempt to understand what is implied by “sensible environment”. This is an environment of which the sensemaker is an inseparable part and which influences the sensemaking process. At the same time, though, that very environment that is influencing sensemaking is being influenced by the sensemaker as he engages in sensemaking. People are not separate from a static, unchangeable environment that stands apart from them; the actions they select to undertake as part of their environment actually change, and in fact create, the very nature of the environment they believe they face. Organisational structure represents such an environment, and has recently been defined, from a perspective of complexity studies, as “a pattern of interdependency that we enact.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Weick, K. 1995 50

<sup>62</sup> Webber, A. 1999 178 Peter Senge uses this definition since discovering that change implementation is not as simple as his work in *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, P. 1998) may have suggested. While *The Fifth Discipline* proposed a definition of structure borrowed from system dynamics -- which looks at structure in terms of feedback interactions within a system, the new definition of that term is "a pattern of interdependency that we enact." To understand the definition, Senge suggests consideration of “the relationships within a family, rather than those within a company: People come to relate to each other in predictable ways, which form a pattern that then defines the structure of relationships -- norms, expectations, taken-for-granted habits of communicating. Those patterns aren't fixed; they can change. And, more to the point, those patterns aren't given. Ultimately, the structures that come into play in our families are the result of the choices that we've made all along the way. We "enact" our families.” He believes that this concept applies equally to organisations and leadership.

(The principle underlying this rather circular concept mirrors that of the dual causality inherent in the retrospective process of extracting cues to explain outcomes, while using known outcomes to identify the cues to be extracted.)

Put simply, the environment influences the choice of identity, while the actions associated with that identity create the environment in which it acts. The following example demonstrates how this phenomenon may manifest in an organisational context:

If a person perceives the organisational culture to be of a particular nature, for example, one of aggressive internal competition, he will construct an identity he believes is suitable and acceptable in such a culture, and that will contribute to his success in the organisation. However, by choosing an identity of aggressive competitor, and acting in accordance with that chosen identity, he is in fact contributing to creating a culture of aggressive competitiveness. Thus, when viewing his environment – the organisation - his perception of the culture is confirmed.

The nature of retrospective sensemaking also has an influence here: if the culture within the organisational environment is perceived as above, reflection on past events will be such that behaviours and actions of an aggressively competitive nature will be identified as contributing to the success of the organisation, while “nice-guy” tactics will be found or “discovered” to lead to failure. Thus, future actions will be aggressively competitive – again contributing to the creation of the culture originally believed to exist.

The close link between self-identity and the identity of the organisation<sup>63</sup> plays a role in shaping the organisation itself. Individuals in organisations can be viewed as having, and acting out, at least two roles: that of the individual self, and as a representative of the whole. In this representative role the individual is not simply acting as an agent of the organisation, but rather as the organisation itself. The individual represents the values, beliefs and goals of the organisation and to an outsider that individual is, in fact, the organisation for the duration of any interactions. In acting as the organisation, individuals take their cues from the organisation. Through the sensemaking process they then act in accordance with those cues, thus strengthening the influence of those cues within the organisation. The organisation is thus shaped through the actions of individuals, and the focus on extracted cues, as those actions and cues become significant to organisational life. It is apparent, then, that the extracted cues in the organisation, and elements provided

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<sup>63</sup> Weick, K. 1995 21

as a point of focus, to which leadership draws the attention, have a powerful influence in shaping both the behaviours of individuals within the organisation, as well as the future direction of the organisation itself.

Note that the action contained in enactment is not always the action of creation, nor are the consequences visible in the world.<sup>64</sup> The actions may take place in the imagination and may be directed internally, rather than toward the external elements of the environment. Imagined action may not be observable, but that does not mean that the associated internal conversation and interpretation do not influence the environment through their role in future sensemaking.

Weick's reference to James<sup>65</sup> is a useful coda to the insights provided into enactment. In considering the question of whether life is worth living, James suggests that whichever answer is chosen – yes or no – can be validated, based on the belief in the choice. Essentially this implies that the answer is selected first and the reasons for the answer are then found to support it. Once an outcome is believed, and also believed to be the result of specific past actions, current actions will be adjusted to match those from the past. The matched actions will then lead to a similar outcome in the present, thus confirming belief in both those selected actions and reconfirming belief in the outcome. This is noteworthy because, if an ending or outcome is believed to be a happy one, during retrospection people will find positive supporting evidence that led to that outcome, and will act in a positive way that confirms the positive view of the original belief. The same is true for belief in an unhappy outcome.

This type of behaviour, and especially the related actions, are the essence of *enactment*. To enact is to create and define, in order to determine that which is “in” and that which is “out”, and to, through subsequent actions, further create an environment in which those actions are justified, accepted and confirmed. Thus, through enactment, the sensemaking process defines boundaries around that which will be considered and focused on, and that which will be excluded as focus points to determine future behaviour and action<sup>66</sup> - behaviours and actions that create the environment in which they take place.

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<sup>64</sup> Weick, K. 1995 37

<sup>65</sup> Weick, K. 1995 38

<sup>66</sup> Weick, K. 1995 31

## 1.7 Property 5: Ongoing

Sensemaking is ongoing, and where it starts or stops cannot be accurately determined. Duration is a never-ending flow,<sup>67</sup> and people are always in the middle of things. These “things” may be labelled projects – sequences of action that lead to the delivery of an outcome. However, things are only noticed and experienced as things when people reflect on the past from a point that is beyond it. The reflection on the past – retrospection – selects the stimuli that caused an outcome that is in the past. These stimuli cannot be recognised as stimuli at the time they occur, but only immediately after, when they are extracted and separated from the flow of duration to receive attention and focus from the person involved.

People within flows seek to complete known sequences through ordered actions and logical processes, according to their expectations. However, despite immersion in the flows, they are also aware of happenings and events around them and especially those that may impact their attempts to deliver the outputs related to the sequence in question.<sup>68</sup> Sensemaking is triggered when people experience interruptions to the flows in which they find themselves – interruptions that both disrupt the flow and impact negatively on their ability to complete the sequence in which they are engaged.

There are two types of interruption to flows that trigger conscious sensemaking:<sup>69</sup> unexpected events that occur, and expected events that do not occur. It is the difference between expectations and actual occurrences that provide occasions for explicit sensemaking efforts. These occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world. In such circumstances there is a shift from the experience of immersion in projects to a sense that the flow of action has become unintelligible in some way.<sup>70</sup>

Significant interruptions, where the difference between expectation and the reality is sizable, cause discomfort and trigger conscious sensemaking, as people seek either to

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<sup>67</sup> Weick, K. 1995. 43

<sup>68</sup> Weick, K. 1995 45

<sup>69</sup> Weick, K. 1995 100

<sup>70</sup> Weick, K., Sutcliffe, K. and Obstfeld, D. 2005 409

remove the interruption or to find an alternative response to it that will enable a continuation and the completion of a known and expected sequence of events.<sup>71</sup>

Through retrospection, people experiencing an interruption attempt to find a similar occurrence in their past, which can provide insight into the current experience. This is done by referencing relevant clear cause-and-effect relationships in the past, in an attempt to select actions that help create a future in which operations and sequences can be effectively and competently completed, and flows can continue uninterrupted.

If the retrospective view does not provide recognisable reference points – called cues - with which to make sense of the interruption, and if the available identities are not sufficient to enable a selection of an identity that is able to act competently in the context created by the interrupted flow, then emotion is introduced.<sup>72</sup> Sensemaking is by nature an emotional and feeling-based process. The time delay between an interruption and assigning meaning to it is filled by emotion, which is a non-responsive activity – people experiencing emotion are unable to act effectively to move forward. The greater the delay in finding meaning, the greater the emotion experienced.

A continued inability to complete the sequence leads to arousal – an autonomic response to ongoing interruption to sequences.<sup>73</sup> Arousal first manifests as a narrowed focus on selected known cues in the existing process and inattention to peripheral cues. This focus on the selected cues is an even more determined attempt to complete the interrupted sequence as it had previously existed. This narrowed focus results in a disregard for peripheral cues. These cues may, in fact, present a useful alternative response to the interruption, and enable the completion of a new sequence. Thus, ignoring peripheral cues frequently leads to an initial inability to carry out the new process required as a result of the interruption. It is only when the focus is shifted to new cues, cues that enable an alternative response to the interruption and the successful completion of the sequence - albeit differently to the expected - that people can make sense and move forward. To act and move forward following an interruption to sequence and flow, people need new cues on which to focus. In many instances, these new cues are previously peripheral cues to which attention has been drawn.

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<sup>71</sup> Weick, K. 1995 44

<sup>72</sup> Weick, K. 1995 45

<sup>73</sup> Weick, K. 1995 45

Organisational change events interrupt the ongoing flow of organisational life in which people find themselves and need to operate.<sup>74</sup> The greater the significance of the change, that is, the more fundamental the shift between the current flows and the future flows resulting from the introduction of the change, the greater the experience of interruption felt by the members of the organisation. Additionally, where the people of an organisation identify strongly with the existing identity of the organisation, a change or perceived threat to that identity threatens their own individual identities. As members attempt to make sense of the interruption introduced by the change, they will experience emotion and arousal as described in the preceding paragraphs.

Where retrospection does not provide a relevant past for reference, arousal increase and people will be unable to complete the new and different sequences required, and will thus be unable to contribute effectively in the new environment created by the change. Until relevant cause-and-effect relationships applicable to the interruption are found in the review of the past, retrospection will continue. The focus will thus remain on the past, resulting in an inability to act with the required future-based orientation.

Heightened arousal therefore has a significant impact on the successful and sustainable implementation of organisational change – people experiencing autonomic arousal are likely to avoid or resist the change, as they fail to find cues with which to respond to it effectively. The availability of cues on which to focus retrospective attention during times of organisational change is thus critical to facilitate the transition to the “new world”. In such situations leaders not only need to draw the attention to, and focus on, appropriate cues from the new environment, but they also need to provide coherent links between those cues and the new context.

## **1.8 Property 6: Focused on and by extracted cues**

The human mind cannot comprehend a complex environment in its entirety, as there are an abundance of dimensions which need to be considered in attempts at comprehension. In such environments, there are a myriad of potential reference points, which Weick labels ‘cues’, that could be utilised to make sense of the environment. Additionally, there are a myriad of relationships between those cues that make up the environment. A cue can

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<sup>74</sup> Weick, K. 1995 45

be described as a specific and unique character or element within a context that can become a point of focus used or referenced to describe or understand the context.

In order to make sense, people select specific elements from within an environment on which they can focus attention in order to assign meaning to the greater context from which the element was selected. The ability to interpret complex environments is as a result of the recognition of subtle cues, the ability to pick up human and technical details, fantasies, and alternative histories.<sup>75</sup>

In Weick's sensemaking theory the specifically selected elements on which attention is focused from among all the possibilities within the whole are labelled "extracted cues" and he defines these as follows:

*"Extracted cues are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring."*<sup>76</sup>

A deconstruction of the above definition provides useful insight into this sensemaking property for the purposes of any interpretation based on sensemaking theory.

### **1.8.1 Extracted cues**

It is significant that, when discussing sensemaking, a distinction is made between cues and extracted cues. The whole - of which sense is trying to be made - is essentially the sum of a vast number of cues. Sensemaking attempts do not consider all of these available cues. Instead a small number of cues are selected out of the many possibilities as being sufficiently representative of the whole, and are "elevated" above other cues and the whole itself as being important for making sense.

Logical next questions relate to what determines which cues are extracted and what contributes to their familiarity. The response to these questions leads to another important aspect of this property: frame or context.<sup>77</sup> The term "frame of reference" is generally recognisable as a description of the underlying beliefs, experiences and perceptions upon which people base their actions and behaviours. It is thus used as a synonym for context.

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<sup>75</sup> Browning, L. and Boudès, T. 2005 37

<sup>76</sup> Weick, K. 1995 50

<sup>77</sup> Weick, K. 1995 51

The word “frame” is particularly useful as it implies a boundary between that which is inside and that which is outside. Consider a framed painting: the frame serves to draw the attention to that which the artist has chosen to depict, or highlight, and also serves as a divider between that which is part of the consciously created artwork and that which is not.

In the same way, a frame in the context of sensemaking can be seen as a boundary between events from which the person will potentially draw cues and those which will be excluded. The frame, or context, of the sensemaker results in attention being drawn to specific cues - cues that are within that frame. Thus, context is a major influence on which cues will be extracted.

Additionally, in relation to sensemaking, context also influences how the extracted cues will be interpreted. Weick talks about noticing and sensemaking as two parts of a process influenced by context. He, referencing work by Ring and Van der Ven,<sup>78</sup> defines noticing as the process by which cues are extracted, and sensemaking as the process by which meaning is assigned to those cues.

The role of context is particularly significant in that process of assigning meaning to cues that are extracted. It is context that reduces or eliminates equivocality and multiple meanings. All cues have a myriad of possible meanings, but the context in and from which they are extracted reduces the number of possibilities, and limits the number of plausible alternative explanations of their role in causing an outcome.

In organisations the context is generally made up of an individual’s current projects, workflows, location, team and team members, experiences and so forth. Thus, each individual has a unique context within the organisation as a whole, and makes sense in terms of this context, interpreting cues from a personal context-based perspective. For this reason, the same event will be interpreted in different ways by different people<sup>79</sup> and the response to these events will also be different, despite a seemingly shared organisational context.

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<sup>78</sup> Weick, K. 1995 52

<sup>79</sup> Weick, K. 1995 52



### 1.8.2 Simple and familiar

Extracted cues are simple and their dimensions are limited to a number which the human mind can comprehend. Complexity in cues would present the same problem to the sensemaker as is presented by the complexity in the whole they represent. Sensemaking is a process engaged to deal with complexity, and complexity in a cue is likely to trigger another level of conscious sensemaking. Thus cues extracted and highlighted in organisations to facilitate sensemaking need to be simple and distinct from the complexity of the whole they represent.

Familiarity of the cue is equally important. The process of retrospection is an examination of past events in an attempt to find a recognisable, plausible cause of a current situation, to use elements from the past to assign sense to the present. If there is no recognisable cause – which will become a cue if it does exist in the frames of reference of the sensemaker – sense cannot be made and retrospection will continue. In the absence of familiar cues, emotions will come into play and heightened autonomic arousal is likely. The search for familiar cues will mean that people focus on a narrowed or alternative context, where familiar cues can be found, and will “ignore” the changed context and thus not act productively in the new world.

### 1.8.3 Cues as “seeds” not predictors

The term “seed” in relation to extracted cues is a useful one, as suggested.<sup>80</sup> A seed is not an end-point; it is the initial point of something that is going to be far greater than the seed. This end-point looks nothing like the seed, but will always be related in some way to the seed. However, one must also remember that the seed does not contain the whole, nor can it predict or predetermine the exact outcome. The whole from which the seed has come – Weick uses the example of an acorn always leading to an oak tree<sup>81</sup> - reduces the number of possibilities for outcomes contained in the seed. However, continuing with the analogy, the acorn is not sufficient to know exactly what the oak tree will look like, or how it will grow and develop – only that it will be an oak tree.

Thus, extracted cues do not contain predictions of behaviours or perceptions, and observers of sensemaking cannot determine the outcome of action by examining the

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<sup>80</sup> Weick, K. 1995 51

<sup>81</sup> Weick, K. 1995 51

extracted cues. One of the reasons for this is that the sensemaker himself cannot and does not predict his actions as a result of the cues extracted. The cue merely guides and limits the possible outcomes and actions in response to the data. In the organisational context a carefully chosen cue (seed) highlighted from within a desired future environment (tree) created through disruptive change can assist in the development of a future of the envisioned type through behaviour, even though it cannot predict or dictate the specific design and form of that future.

Cues are extracted retrospectively, often as a means of justifying behaviours and actions in the present. At the same time the present behaviours and actions will be taken to confirm the choice of extracted cues. There is thus no one-way causal relationship between the cue and the actions of the sensemaker; neither is one a predictor of the other.

Thus, in times of organisational change leaders can reduce the indeterminacy of the actions and reactions of people in response to the change by extracting and highlighting familiar cues within the change environment on which people can focus and through which they can assign sense to the greater change event.

#### **1.8.4 Developing a larger sense**

Once extracted, the role of specific cues, and the nature of the focus on these cues for purposes of sensemaking, is particularly important.

Cue extraction takes place from within the context of a greater whole - a significant occurrence, generally one which disrupts life as it is known. In order to make sense of the whole, which causes a significant interruption, people seek familiar smaller points of reference within the whole on which to focus their attention. These are elements of which they can make sense, and with which they are therefore able to cope. These become the extracted cues that are then used to make sense of the whole.

Two important characteristics of extracted cues are highlighted by Weick, referencing James: a cue, once extracted, is “taken as equivalent to the entire datum from which it comes” and is thus treated as if it is the entirety. Additionally, once extracted, the importance and influence of that cue on the consequences seems greater and more obvious than that of the entire range of possible cues from which it was extracted.<sup>82</sup> The extracted character “thus taken suggests a certain consequence more obviously than it was

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<sup>82</sup> Weick, K. 1995 49-50

suggested by the total datum as it originally came.” This implies that people will more easily recognise an extracted cue, or highlighted element, as having an obvious causal impact on an outcome. They will accept that that impact is both more likely and probable than they would recognise and accept the same cause-effect relationship between an entire complex range of cues, or elements, and the outcome. An extracted cue highlights distinct implications that are less apparent from an undifferentiated whole.

For the change agent or leader this means that, while people may find it difficult to recognise the link between a change idea and its consequences - when that idea is presented as a whole - they will more easily recognise the relationship when the consequences are tied to specific elements from within the change idea.

Extracted cues are not viewed within the whole of the context, but are actually taken out of that context and are focused on separately – becoming an assigned surrogate for the context in its entirety. Meaning assigned to those cues is then assigned to the whole, without the whole ever being examined to the extent that the specific cues have been examined. Identities, actions and behaviours selected in response to the extracted cues will thus also be applied in response to the greater context.

Furthermore, each sensemaker has, and will retain, a strong faith in his or her extracted cues, and will continue to use these as a reference point during sensemaking. These cues are used to draw connections between events and to create links in the mind. These links are then acted upon as if they are real, and these actions increase the strength and substance of the created connections.<sup>83</sup>

Weick relates this phenomenon to the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy: from the selected cues within an outcome, people draw links to the outcome and act upon those links. Thus the prophecy is that the cue has led to the outcome. Through acting on those links, the connections are strengthened at the “expense” of other possible cues and links, and adjustments are made to both the prophecy and the link between that prophecy and the selected cues. The result is that the prophesied outcome is realised – as a result of the constant adjustments. Thus it is not really a prophecy at all, but rather a changed remembering of the events in such a way that the outcome seems an inevitable result of those remembered events. This leads to a strengthened belief that a repeat of the action based on the extracted cue will lead directly to the identified consequence.

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<sup>83</sup> Weick, K. 1995 54

The implication of the cue extraction property of sensemaking for leadership is clear.<sup>84</sup> The role of leadership is to create and provide cues for people to focus on in the midst of an interruption to their expected flows. The attention of members should be drawn to specifically selected cues, which positively support the case for change. Leaders need to create the links between selected events, actions and behaviours and desired outcomes, and actively encourage people to focus on these. In this way, elements supportive of the change receive focus, and elements in conflict with the change environment shift to the periphery and out of the frame of reference of the organisation's members.<sup>85</sup> Influencing the choice of cues used to understand a change, across contexts, influences the choice of behaviour in relation to that change. Furthermore, that influence extends into the future and the selected cues remain an ongoing reference during further sensemaking attempts.

Thus, an important role of leadership during times of organisational change is to increase the number of frames, with highlighted familiar cues and clear causal links, available for reference by their people during interruptions in their work flows – interruptions for which they require frames and cues to make sense.

### **1.9 Property 7: Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy**

Sensemaking is not a scientific or mathematically deductive exercise; it is a process of finding a reasonable and plausible fit between events and outcomes in order to explain, and attach meaning to, the outcomes.

The extraction of cues; the role of memory or retrospect; the subjective creation of links between cues and outcomes; the selection of “causes” based on a decision about the ending – these characteristics of sensemaking are indicative of the subjective and selective nature of each of the sensemaking properties, and thus of sensemaking itself. Thus, accuracy in the process seems unlikely. Fortunately, though, it would appear that for sensemaking accuracy is nice but not necessary.<sup>86</sup> Weick gives several reasons<sup>87</sup> why accuracy is not important for sensemaking. These reasons provide useful insight into how people respond to and treat complex data during the sensemaking process.

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<sup>84</sup> Weick, K. 1995 50

<sup>85</sup> Weick, K. 1995 50

<sup>86</sup> Weick, K. 1995 56

<sup>87</sup> Weick, K. 1995 57-60

If we assume, as Weick suggests, that within the flow of duration people are involved in “projects”<sup>88</sup> then accuracy is only considered to the extent that accurate data contributes to the successful completion of the current project. Accuracy is assigned to those cues which enable the overcoming of interruptions. People filter stimuli to retain only those that facilitate mobility and action, and those which they believe provide an opportunity for them to do something to influence the outcome. The filter and distortion of stimuli is necessary for people to cope with the large amounts of data that are generated and flow around them, and to identify those cues that are relevant and matter to their specific project and those that represent “noise” in the environment.

It is through this process that people choose to focus on specific cues from past events and to draw causal links between only those chosen cues and the overall event. People focus only on those actions they feel they can undertake successfully, which seem possible to implement in their environment, and which will make them look good in that environment. Given that the selected cues are extracted through a process of filter and distortion of the myriad of potential cues within the complexity of the environment, this assignment is unlikely to be truly accurate.

Sensemaking recognises complex wholes and then seeks to find simple, single points of reference, or cues, from the past through which meaning can be found that explains the whole. Given the number of potential meanings, based on the number of potential cues, sensemaking is essentially a selection of *a* starting point, rather than *the* starting point. At most, the search for cause-and-effect relationships between cues and outcomes will highlight a link similar to that in the current project. However, the influence of the present on the memory of the past means that accuracy is unlikely.

In the time-sensitive environment of organisations, where speed is favoured, accuracy is only a factor for short periods, as people seek to act boldly to continue sequences and complete projects. People filter out data that detracts from their ability to act and respond with energy and motivation.

People who want to act tend to seek to simplify rather than elaborate<sup>89</sup> and a focus on accuracy can lead to unwanted immobilisation. The implication here is that in order to act and move forward, people search for a simplified version of the truth, containing

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<sup>88</sup> Weick, K. 1995 45

<sup>89</sup> Weick, K. 1995 60

sufficient “facts” to launch further action, rather than for a detailed and accurate representation, where the search for accuracy itself becomes the focus of action. Most noteworthy is that sensemaking takes place because people want to act and act boldly.

Thus, accuracy is not necessary for sensemaking. What is sought is plausibility and coherence – a logical and reasonable explanation of outcomes and their causes, that aids understanding of masses of data, and reduces equivocality of meaning.

Leaders describing the past in an attempt to facilitate sensemaking in their people, and especially to ignite future action based on that past, are dealing with people who are reviewing their description from two perspectives, essentially asking two questions: “From my experience, does it seem as if things really could have happened that way?” and “Can this really be made to work in my world?” These questions point to two significant influencers of the sensemaking process: context and identity. Cues created and provided by leaders are interpreted by members of the organisation based on who they are and what they are involved in at the time their focus is directed to those cues. The highlighted cues and the provided context from which those cues are drawn will need to be plausible when subjected to such interpretation, where “plausible” can be taken to mean, for example, possible, reasonable, likely, logical or believable.

According to Weick, while accuracy is not necessary for sensemaking, what is necessary is: “Something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to construct. In short, what is necessary for sensemaking is a good story.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Weick, K. 1995 60-61

# Chapter 2

## The Springboard Stories of Stephen Denning

### 2.1 Organisational Change in the World Bank: Need and response

From the outset, the use of story as proposed by Denning is focused on catalysing change in the organisation.<sup>91</sup> His experience during attempts to communicate, introduce and successfully sustain organisational change in the World Bank led him to his view that stories were the only medium that worked to achieve his objectives.<sup>92</sup>

Denning's documented experiences related to a significant organisational change – one that led to a completely new identity for his organisation. That new identity was defined by completely different processes and deliverables for both the organisation and the individuals making up the organisation.

The identity of the World Bank was initially established as a financial business, and the most significant monetary and energy investment was made in this aspect of the

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<sup>91</sup> Denning, S. 2001. xiii - xiv

<sup>92</sup> Unknown 2005, 31. Although Denning notes that he effectively “stumbled” onto the use of story to effectively communicate significant changes to the organisation, this finding does not appear to be unique. In an article in *Human Resources Management* a key theme is that “storytelling can be used effectively at a time when an organization is about to undergo huge changes, and when those at the top need managers and other employees to envision what the organization will be like, and their role in it, after the changes. Human nature tends to make us apprehensive, maybe downright scared, of change, with a consequent reluctance to go for it enthusiastically. In the absence of a time machine to let people see that the future organizational change is not such a bad thing after all, the nearest you can get to it is their own imagination, fired by a “story-like” explanation of what is involved.”

business.<sup>93</sup> Other areas of operation - that of transaction co-ordinator and knowledge broker - had evolved out of the initial business and were taking place on a reactive and case-by-case basis.<sup>94</sup> Early suggestions of a change in the focus of the business were met with resistance.

Denning notes:

*I've been having little success in getting anyone to accept that our organisation has anything other than a financial future that is an extrapolation of the present. The word bank is in the very name of our organisation. "We're a bank, right?" the managers say, with a tone of finality, as if that settles the matter.*<sup>95</sup>

The financial function and aspects of the organisation are considered to be the reason for its existence, and a change to focus on knowledge is seen as a distraction from that reason.

*The suggestion that we might have anything other than a financial destiny is akin to attacking something hallowed, undermining the fundament, or tampering with the very fabric of our reality.*<sup>96</sup>

It is obvious that the identity of the organisation was very well established, and that members of the organisation had strong associations with that identity. The introduction of a radical change – one that had little relationship or alignment to the existing identity – was very likely to be experienced as a major disruption to both the organisational flow, as well as to the operational flows of the individuals in their various contexts in the organisation.

However, it is equally apparent that the existing identity - that of being a financial service provider - was no longer necessarily leading to positive responses from a client perspective. The issue of information management as a means to improve the success of the organisation was considered significant enough to warrant management attention<sup>97</sup> at

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<sup>93</sup> Denning, S. 2001 5

<sup>94</sup> Denning, S. 2001 6

<sup>95</sup> Denning, S. 2001 11

<sup>96</sup> Denning, S. 2001 12

<sup>97</sup> Denning, S. 2001 4



the highest level. Despite being considered peripheral to the organisation's identity, knowledge and information were growing as a demand from clients.

*These clients were increasingly dissatisfied with merely receiving the expertise of the individuals who happened to have been assigned to handle their affairs. Instead they were beginning to insist on getting the best expertise from around the globe that the entire organization could provide, and if we couldn't offer that, they would go elsewhere to find it.*<sup>98</sup>

The threat to the existing identity was serious and Denning goes on to note that "Unless a new mode of operation could be invented, these businesses were at risk of unraveling."<sup>99</sup> This was clearly not a time for incremental change, or a shift within existing frames of reference, but for innovative change and the creation of brand new frames within which to operate. Existing flows and sequences were not merely going to be disrupted, but practically destroyed. Such change would have significant cognitive and emotional impact at all levels of interaction in the organisational context, and would trigger related responses in the people within the organisation.

In addition to the impact on organisational identity, the change idea also threatened the identities of individuals in the organisation on a more personal level. The change to the identity of the organisation did not only mean a change in the external operations and the social context of the organisation, its clients and environment. The change of focus to knowledge and the movement of information through the organisation required a change in structure and operational divisions. Sharing knowledge across teams, and not only within teams, was required. People who had achieved success in roles aligned to financial services and its associated processes would not necessarily be able to achieve similar success in the unknown knowledge processes and activities.<sup>100</sup> Existing experts now had expertise that was no longer considered to be the key to success. At the same time, of course, opportunities for new experts, in new spheres, would have arisen.

This is the environment into which Denning introduced the use of springboard stories to communicate proposed change ideas, and to motivate people to action that supported those change ideas. Through the springboard stories, he contributed to a successful

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<sup>98</sup> Denning, S. 2001 6

<sup>99</sup> Denning, S. 2001 6

<sup>100</sup> Denning, S. 2001 27

transition through the significant organisational change, and a successful, sustainable organisation transformation.<sup>101</sup> It was in this context of dramatic change and perceived organisational threat that Denning discovered that only story worked to achieve his, and the organisation's, transformation objectives.<sup>102</sup>

## 2.2 The Springboard: Story in practice

### 2.2.1 Narration, invitation and imagination

The narrative capability of humans is a unique, fundamental cognitive process, which is crucial to the interpretation and reconstitution of cultural, social and personal reality.<sup>103</sup>

Before venturing into a detailed analysis of the specifics of springboard stories, it is worth taking a step back to briefly consider their potential effect, and impact, resulting from their inherently narrative format, in more general terms. This mirrors Denning's own contemplation of the effect of using a narrative format to communicate with audiences.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Kurtzman, J. 1999. 2 Denning's suggestion that he used storytelling to communicate and drive organisational change is in line with suggestions by cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner's view of what the role of leadership involves. From his work in studying multiple intelligences – a concept he developed he notes that “the basic point is that leadership involves the creation of powerful narratives, narratives that are much more than mission statements or messages. They are actually stories where there are goals and obstacles, where good and bad things can happen along the way and where the people involved feel part of an enterprise that's trying to end up in a better place. The more you're trying to create a new business, or change a business radically, the more important is the story you tell.”

<sup>102</sup> The use of stories at 3M to convey strategic messages and to guide people in a new strategic direction provides another practical example in support of the use of stories to communicate and direct organisations. A culture of storytelling is embedded in the way 3M operate and Shaw, Brown and Bromiley (Shaw, G., Brown, R., Bromiley, P. 1998) note how the use of stories for other purposes within the business (culture, myth etc) inspired the use of stories for strategic purposes. The abstract for their article notes “business plans can be transformed into strategic narratives. By painting a picture of the market, the competition, and the strategy needed to beat the competition, these narratives can fill in the spaces around the bullet points for those who will approve and those who will implement the strategy. When people can locate themselves in the story, their sense of commitment and involvement is enhanced. By conveying a powerful impression of the process of winning, narrative plans can mobilize an entire organization.”

<sup>103</sup> Sinclair, J. 2005 56

<sup>104</sup> Denning, S. 2001 55-70

Quoting extensively from literary essayist Sven Birkerts, Denning provides useful insight into the mental and emotional processes that take place when people experience storytelling. While, according to Denning, Birkerts bases his theories on written stories and their readers,<sup>105</sup> Denning's own experience suggests that the processes noted are equally applicable to all forms of storytelling.<sup>106</sup>

When listeners follow a story, they take a virtual journey with the storyteller and project themselves into a different mental location - that in which the story takes place.<sup>107</sup> When the transition is successful, listeners become active participants in the story and in the creation of the virtual world of the story. They are immersed in the different world and project themselves fully into that reality, experiencing an almost trance-like state, which significantly affects the way in which the events in the story are received, processed and reacted to.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Denning, S. 2001 60

<sup>106</sup> Denning, S. 2001 60

<sup>107</sup> Denning, S. 2001 59

<sup>108</sup> Sturm, B. 1999. The mental state of the story-listener is the subject of a paper by BW Sturm, in which he examines what he calls "storylistening trance". His findings support Denning's suggestion that the *heard* story triggers a mental change and unique response in the listener. The paper notes that "people who listen to stories can undergo a profound change in their experience of reality. The normal, waking state of consciousness changes as the story takes on a new dimension; listeners seem to experience the story with remarkable immediacy, engaging in the story's plot and with the story's characters, and they may enter an altered state of consciousness." Of particular interest in the context of Stephen Denning's observed audience experiences are the six characteristics of the storytelling trance identified by Sturm:

1. Realism: the sense that the story environment or characters are real or alive
2. Lack of awareness: of surroundings or other mental processes
3. Engaged receptive channels:
  - visual (both physical watching and mental visualization)
  - auditory (both physical hearing and mental "chatter")
  - kinesthetic
  - emotional
4. Control: of the experience by the listener, or someone or something else
5. "Placeness": the sense that the listener "goes somewhere" (often "into") another space
6. Time distortion: the sense that subjective time moves at a different speed than objective, clock time

When the world of the story is familiar to the listener, the transition into that world is quicker.

In the springboard stories the world described is familiar to the listener, which thus enables a quick mental transition to that world. Through the narrative format of the story, listeners are invited to, and unconsciously do, live the life and situation of the protagonist. Immersed in the story, it is as much the listener's identity as that of the protagonist that is examined and observed in the co-created virtual world.<sup>109</sup>

The springboard stories introduce a real person, with a specific identity, in a real-life environment and situation similar to that of the audience.<sup>110</sup> Through the narrative nature of the springboard story, listeners also journey through the triumph and affirmation of the protagonist, experiencing what it would be like to fulfil that role in the situation experienced in the created world. The familiarity of the situation plays a further role here in facilitating easier analogous action and application in the real world of the listener. In the shortened and structured world of the story, the audience feels a connectedness that is more direct and vivid than their reality. Inside the world of the story, the audience's lives "appear as through a lens that makes sense, as though the hazy fragments of experience for once come suddenly into focus."<sup>111</sup> This focus then facilitates a remapping of their lives to the universe, with clearer links between the two.

From the relative safety of the physical story environment, the listener is able to take a mental journey to the problems and successes of the virtual world of the story. The immersion in the story, and the virtual life and experiences that accompany it, make those experiences real for the listener.<sup>112</sup> However, the virtual world of the story provides an opportunity for listeners to test actions and consequences with less emotion and arousal than would be the case with attempts in the real world. This is not only as a result of the lack of actual experienced consequences and responses, but also because the stories

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<sup>109</sup> Denning, S. 2001 64

<sup>110</sup> Denning, S. 2001 51

<sup>111</sup> Denning, S. 2001 61

<sup>112</sup> Sturm, B 1999.

actually promote relaxation during the storytelling encounter through the effect narrative has on the chemicals and hormones in listeners.<sup>113</sup>

### 2.2.2 When to tell the story

The virtual journey that listeners take when story is the medium of communication has an impact on the success of the story from the perspective of the timing of the storytelling. Denning's experience has been that springboard stories worked best when used at the outset of engagement with the audience.<sup>114</sup> This can be attributed to the fact that listeners had projected themselves into the mental location described in the story and that further engagement with the audience then takes place from a perspective influenced by and incorporating the characteristics within the world of the story.<sup>115</sup>

Where the story is used as the opening of a presentation, questions and responses from the audience are likely to flow from the context of the specific elements and relationships in the story. At the same time, these questions and responses have a focus on the future and successful resolution of similar problems. Where analytical presentations are used first, and story as a later attempt to explain those presentations, people focus on different aspects and fail to see the story's message as the key area of focus.<sup>116</sup>

Denning notes that where the analytical information, or a status update on the implementation of an organisational change initiative, is presented ahead of a story, the focus and attitude of the audience is quite different.<sup>117</sup> He has found, in those instances, that the audience is critical and sceptical, and dwell on the initiative's problems, rather than looking forward to solutions and positive outcomes. This is clearly as a result of the absence of the mental state created by the narrative format of the story, which reduces the likelihood of acceptance of the ideas contained in the story. The audience remains focused on the past – which is where only the problems exist – as opposed to the future, which the story shows has solutions in response to those problems.

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<sup>113</sup> According to an article in *Human Resources Management* (Unknown. 2005 32) "Research shows that while listening to stories, biochemical changes take place in the brain; levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) drop and levels of immunoglobulin A rise. So listening to a story can promote relaxation"

<sup>114</sup> Denning, S. 2001 150

<sup>115</sup> Denning, S. 2001 150

<sup>116</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

<sup>117</sup> Denning, S. 2001 152

The timing of the use of the stories in the context of the entire change process can also be seen to play an important part in the success of the stories in generating action and forward movement. Each of the stories was presented early in the change process and, generally, ahead of the actual change initiative being implemented. This ensured that they were available as a reference throughout the introduction of the change, and as input into responses at various times in a changing context. That those experiencing the change, and that had heard the stories, would use the stories as a reference is likely because stories are easy to remember.<sup>118</sup> Thus, once heard, they are likely to be retained in the memory of the listener. This retention means that they are available to the individual at times when reflection on the past is initiated. A later review of the information in a listener's memory will include a review of the story and its elements. Thus, by including very specific elements, and highlighting specific cause-effect relationships through the medium of an easily remembered story, the storyteller can facilitate easier recall of those elements and relationships at a later date.

### **2.2.3 Know your audience**

Where success in the use of storytelling was achieved, Denning was familiar with the issues facing the people in his audience.<sup>119</sup> He understood their environments and had experienced similar environments himself. The problems he chose to highlight were problems that he knew the audience were grappling with, or had grappled with.<sup>120</sup> For him, the story could be told from the perspective of a person who relates to the audience and to whom the audience could also relate. The understanding of his audience, their context and the likely predicaments faced in that context enabled him to frame the stories in the language of the listeners. The recognised vocabularies and concepts communicated therefore reduced the social anxiety that is caused by unfamiliarity.

The storyteller needs to know and understand the audience and their experiences, to be able to launch the story from a point of reference with which the audience is familiar, will

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<sup>118</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xv

<sup>119</sup> Denning, S. 2001 57

<sup>120</sup> Webber, A. 1999 178 Peter Senge notes that that "A change effort has to have some relevance to people. It has to have some connection to them. It has to matter." Thus, Denning's knowledge of the challenges facing his listeners, as well as the familiarity of the predicament in the springboard story, are critical to his success in driving change.

recognise, and through which will be prompted to remember their own similar experience. This memory, along with the successful outcomes arising from the change idea presented in the story, will then contribute to the co-creation of a story and a related selection of actions in terms of that idea, actions that are suitable for the current change and future world.

#### **2.2.4 In the beginning: Stumbling across the springboard story**

Denning makes reference to having “stumbled” on the springboard story and devotes an entire chapter to how this came about.<sup>121</sup> In essence, while searching for ways to implement knowledge management in his organisation and sustain it successfully, he himself heard a story – the *Zambian story* – that triggered his thinking as to how the story’s content could be replicated in his environment. Denning initially relates the *Zambian story* as follows:

*Clearly the twenty-first century is going to be different. But how? The story of a health worker in Zambia offers the possibility of viewing the future, which, I suggest, is going to be like today.*

*Thus, in June 1995, a health worker in Kamana, Zambia, logged on to the Center for Disease Control Web site and got the answer to a question on how to treat Malaria.*

*This true story happened, not in June 2015, but in June 1995. This is not a rich country: it is Zambia, one of the least developed countries in the world. It is not even the capital of the country: it is six hundred kilometers away. But the most striking aspect of the picture is this: our organization isn’t in it. Our organization doesn’t have its know-how and expertise organized in such a way that someone like the health worker in Zambia can have access to it. But just imagine if it had!...*

*...And if we can put all these elements in place for the task teams, why not for the clients? They have exactly the same needs as the employees. Imagine: if we do this, true partnership can emerge. Moreover, a whole group of stakeholders around the world who currently lack access to the intellectual resources of the organization will suddenly be in the picture. It will enable a different relationship with a wider group of clients and partners and stakeholders around the world. It adds up to a new organizational strategy.*

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<sup>121</sup> Denning, S. 2001 3-16

In this first instance, Denning experienced the story as a listener and not as the storyteller. It was the hearing of this one story that led to all his other actions noted in the book. At the first hearing he accepted its plausibility to the extent that he felt the actions and outcomes could be mirrored in his organisation, and he thus acted accordingly. Later, as storyteller, he felt a need to verify the accuracy of the story further. This verification did not confirm accuracy in the purest mathematical sense though. He questioned other parties who had encountered similar circumstances to that described in the *Zambian story* and who had apparently witnessed the technology in *Zambia*. This was taken as sufficient “evidence” that the *Zambian* part of the story was plausible. A visit to the website noted in the story confirmed the existence of the information and this was taken as sufficient evidence that a health worker in *Zambia* could have found the information required, as per the story.

Neither approach involved a first-hand account or experience of exactly what had happened, or precisely how the events had occurred, yet were considered enough to confirm the accuracy – actually plausibility – of the events in Denning’s mind, and thus actions based on that plausibility were initiated. The very use of the story for other audiences to increase the understanding of the complex change idea and ignite related actions was based on Denning’s own acceptance of the plausibility of the story, which facilitated mobility and action in him as listener.

## **2.3 Characteristics of the springboard story**

### **2.3.1 Short and simple: Sparking a second story**

We have seen that the narrative format invites listeners to enter a world they are co-creating. The springboard stories facilitate an even more active role in that creation, by containing only limited detail about the story-world.<sup>122</sup> In each, a lot is left unsaid about both the background and the details of the specific events described.<sup>123</sup> Listeners are required to provide the “missing” elements to fully create the world and complete the story in their own minds.

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<sup>122</sup> Denning, S. 2001 50

<sup>123</sup> Denning, S. 2001 67



Denning makes reference to the phenomenon of the “two voices”<sup>124</sup> experienced during storytelling, which is useful to understand what happens when listeners need to make connections and complete the detail provided by the storyteller through the springboard story. During a storytelling encounter the listener hears the voice of the storyteller telling the explicit story. At the same time though, listeners also hear their own voices in parallel with the storyteller’s, creating a version of the explicit story in their own minds, and in their own voice, making it more real for them, and a story which fits the reality of their context. Through this process of creation, the story becomes their own. However, completing the story in their own voice means that the story in their minds is not the same as that told by the storyteller. This is as a result of the influence of their existing knowledge and experience.

The influence of existing knowledge and experience is not merely accommodated by springboard stories, but plays a planned and significant role in their success in igniting action in the organisation. Denning notes that communicators of change ideas need to realise that the listeners’ minds are not empty receptacles into which information is being transferred, and that the information transferred is not accepted unchanged into those minds.<sup>125</sup>

Listeners already have a significant amount of information in their minds before the story is told and the storyteller needs to understand that the message conveyed does not replace, but is added to, the existing information. In terms of igniting action in terms of change, the addition of the story message has a noteworthy effect on subsequent reflections on the existing information.

In order for people to view the same events in a different way, there needs to be an addition or change to the content of their minds through which they view the events. The familiarity of the predicament described in the springboard story connects the listener to known events in their own past. However, the resolution to the predicament, as encapsulated in the story, is unusual in relation to previous experience and is therefore unexpected. This unexpected response, which embodies the change idea, is noticed as new and different in the light of existing information. These noticed elements are added to information in the listeners’ minds, updating and modifying that information. Future

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<sup>124</sup> Denning, S. 2001 61

<sup>125</sup> Denning, S. 2001 82

views of existing information will be influenced by the new and unexpected development presented by the change proposal in the story.<sup>126</sup> Thus, successful stories lead to listeners viewing the information they already have in a new way: making new connections and establishing new patterns, and understanding connections between things in a different way.<sup>127</sup> This combination of new and existing information, with personal connections made between included elements, triggers the generation of a new story in the minds of the listeners.

More importantly, the existing information in a listener's mind, generated from within their unique context and environment, means that gaps in the story will be filled in a way that completes the story for that listener in the context of their environment.<sup>128</sup> Listeners are able to visualise the missing links from the perspective of their own context and to add patterns and meaningful linkages accordingly.<sup>129</sup> As a result, the newly created second story in each mind fits perfectly into the contextual environment of each listener.<sup>130</sup> This new story belongs to the listeners and provides them with feelings of ownership and control over its events and outcomes.<sup>131</sup>

The vicarious experience enabled through the narrative format, blurs the boundaries between the identity of the protagonist and the identity of the listener.<sup>132</sup> At the time the change idea is introduced into the story, the listener's identity is already deeply entwined with that of the protagonist. The virtual world created in the mind of the listeners is extrapolated almost unconsciously into their own contexts and this organisational reality becomes the perspective from which the change idea is viewed.

Thus, through the story events, the listeners can project themselves into a vision of their own context, seeing themselves as the protagonist, and observing consequences over which they now have control because it is their story.<sup>133</sup> The ideas and actions in story in

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<sup>126</sup> Denning, S. 2001 127

<sup>127</sup> Denning, S. 2001 83

<sup>128</sup> Denning, S. 2001 68

<sup>129</sup> Denning, S. 2001 69

<sup>130</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

<sup>131</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

<sup>132</sup> Denning, S. 2001 59-62

<sup>133</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

the listener's mind are no longer strange and external. The successful springboard story shifts the listeners' focus away from the explicit details of the story and towards how the ideas in the story could work in and, through their own actions, affect their context.

### **2.3.2 Same spark, different story**

Denning notes that the effective springboard story does not need to be updated over time during the introduction of the change idea.<sup>134</sup> The change idea is embodied in the specifically limited details included in the story. Given that, in the absence of peripheral detail, listeners use their context to make connections between those specific details and the outcome, a change in context is likely to result in a change in the connections made.

The search for connections and links that are meaningful in listeners' worlds allows for the assigning of multiple and varied meanings to events in the story as current circumstances change. The story provides a continuous point or frame of reference during the implementation of the change idea, with listeners interpreting it in different ways and assigning its content a different meaning each time they reflect on it when trying to make sense of their changing environment. Each reflection results in the gaps in the told story being filled in different ways, and different linkages being granted attention and importance.<sup>135</sup>

The narrative format provides unlimited points of comparison and contains an array of potential hidden connections.<sup>136</sup> At any time, then, a reflection on the events of the story could highlight connections other than those made previously. Thus the changed context of the audience gives them a new way of looking at the same story.

### **2.3.3 A single protagonist**

Each of the successful springboard stories is told from the perspective of a single protagonist.<sup>137</sup> This is by design, not coincidence, as Denning's experience has revealed that the perspective of a particular individual makes crafting a story that wins listeners' sympathy easier. Understanding a specific individual's predicament engages the

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<sup>134</sup> Denning, S. 2001 69

<sup>135</sup> Denning, S. 2001 69

<sup>136</sup> Denning, S. 2001 70

<sup>137</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xix

imagination and emotion, which is the value of the narrative format of the springboard story.<sup>138</sup>

In Denning's specific situation the use of springboard stories was a response to the complex nature of the World Bank as an organisation and of its operations, which is such that its employees generally find it difficult to comprehend.<sup>139</sup> The large volumes of money involved, in particular, are beyond the understanding of the average individual. Trying to communicate that complexity and the associated volumes of money and transactions is a significant challenge and people find it difficult to think about those aspects of the organisation. The problem with trying to communicate all variables impacting the organisation and its activities is that the human mind is simply not able to deal with so many dimensions of complexity.<sup>140</sup> The springboard stories, however, serve to reduce the view of the organisation to a single recognisable and familiar individual, facing a single problem that is solved by specific delimited actions by that individual and the implementation of a few key changes to the organisation. The protagonist<sup>141</sup> is an actor whose actions in terms of the change idea provided solutions that were previously not probable.

Denning further emphasises the importance of the single protagonist in his 2005 publication *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*.<sup>142</sup> People's emotional response to a team or group is not the same as with an individual – particularly an individual who carries out the change idea successfully.

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<sup>138</sup> Denning, S. 2001 125

<sup>139</sup> Denning, S. 2001 11

<sup>140</sup> Denning, S. 2001 111

<sup>141</sup> The dictionary defines protagonist variously as “the leading character, hero, or heroine of a drama”, “an advocate of a social program” and “the leader or principal person in a movement”. protagonist. (n.d.). Dictionary.com Unabridged. Retrieved August 24, 2006, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=protagonist>. Each of these definitions supports the choice of word used to describe the central character in the springboard story. The associations with “leader” or “hero” are positive –the protagonist is one who takes action, makes things happen and achieves positive results. In the context of the springboard stories, protagonist actions have truly significant impact, creating positive results not only for a client, but also for the protagonist and for the organisation.

<sup>142</sup> Denning, S. 2005. 57

The springboard story structure is that of the hero's journey – an archetypal narrative pattern that has deep roots in the human psyche. The journey in the story follows a protagonist who sets out to achieve something difficult, met challenges and obstacles on the way, but then through initiating different actions, finally triumphed. Despite the simplicity and “typical-ness”, this kind of story resonates deeply with people.<sup>143</sup>

This is because people tend to see their lives as a similar journey, with goals they are trying to reach and obstacles along the way that have to be overcome. It is interesting to note that this view of life is seldom an accurate representation of the reality of how life is approached, and that life is seldom as linear as the hero's journey suggests. However, this does not prevent people from articulating their lives as such a story.

Through the narrative format of the springboard story, listeners journey vicariously through the triumph and affirmation of the protagonist, experiencing what it would be like to fulfil that role in the situation experienced in the created world. The familiarity of the described world plays a role in facilitating easier analogous action and application in the real world of the listener by enabling a quicker transition between the story-world and reality.<sup>144</sup> Broader impact is achieved using a story where the protagonist plays a typical role in the business<sup>145</sup> and more so when the person in the story operates in a similar environment to that of the listeners.

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<sup>143</sup> Kurtzmann, J. 1999. 2. Denning's views and description of the story structure that works are echoed by cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner in an interview with *Strategy & Business* magazine, relating to his assertion that leaders all have a common ability to tell stories that engage people and compel them to act or feel. His response to questions regarding the nature of stories that leaders could achieve success provides a simple view of the basic structure that supports their activities: First, a story must have a goal that is stated and that is recognizable; a person needs to know whether he or she is getting closer to it or not. Then there will invariably be some kinds of obstacles. These also must be recognizable. And there must be various approaches for dealing with these obstacles, which can include avoiding them, neutralizing them, finding allies, pushing them off on adversaries or even framing things differently so that the obstacles aren't seen as obstacles anymore. And then you need to plot your course and measure how you are doing with reference to the goal and the obstacle. If this is simply an intellectual exercise, though, it doesn't work. People have to be brought into the story viscerally and feel that, yes, this is my story, I want to be part of this."

<sup>144</sup> Denning, S. 2001 59

<sup>145</sup> Denning, S. 2001 124

Listeners “are thus inside the story, projecting themselves into the situation, living the predicament of the protagonist, feeling what he or she was feeling, experiencing the same hopes and fears.”<sup>146</sup> The listener becomes the protagonist in the story in their own minds. By living the life of the protagonist, and specifically in the situation created by the predicament, the listener will feel the helplessness, inability to respond to environmental and client needs and the general pressure on feelings of competence of that protagonist. The structure of the story, with the inclusion of the happy ending in which the protagonist achieves feelings of competence and successful response, means that the listener also experiences these feelings. The immersion in story events through the narrative format means that it is as much the listener’s identity as that of the protagonist that is examined and observed during the storytelling encounter.<sup>147</sup>

In each springboard story, the protagonist cannot continue to perform effectively as long as a predicament remains unresolved. Through the introduction of the change idea into the protagonist’s environment, enabling new actions, the protagonist is not only able to continue working effectively, but has actually achieved a new level of delivery, showing competence as well as increased efficacy.

In the Chile story, for example, the actions of the protagonist, made possible by the implementation of the change idea, result in “the client [being] delighted.”<sup>148</sup> This affirmation of the protagonist and his actions is also articulated as part of the story and it is immediately clear to listeners that the identity has positive results for the person concerned.

#### **2.3.4 A familiar predicament**

The predicament described in each springboard story, and the accompanying dilemma faced by the protagonist, is specifically chosen for its familiarity to the listener. The familiarity of the role and predicament in the story reminds people of a dilemma that they frequently encounter<sup>149</sup> and thus the story is actually an invitation to listeners to reflect on their own past, rather than to focus on the details of the story. Personal experience is more

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<sup>146</sup> Denning, S. 2001 68

<sup>147</sup> Denning, S. 2001 64

<sup>148</sup> Denning, S. 2001 35

<sup>149</sup> Denning, S. 2001 86

memorable than an event that happened to someone else, and people remember what happened to them more easily than events that happened to someone else.<sup>150</sup> Through the narrative format, each listener sees himself/herself in the story and unconsciously relates it to his/her own experience, asking questions such as “When did something like that happen to me?”

The familiarity of the predicament engages listeners from the perspective of their context and assists with the creation of the new world in their second story, sparked by the springboard story. Through familiarity, the story-world mirrors their own world enough to enable a relatively easy shift between that world and their organisational reality.<sup>151</sup> This shift enables listeners to consider the springboard story elements in their own contexts, overlaying those contexts on the explicit story, and creating a new story that fits the reality of the listeners’ contexts. The exact occurrences in the story are not important; what is important is the recognition of the overriding problem described.<sup>152</sup> The successful story sparks recognition in the audience that they are as likely to be threatened by the challenges introduced by the predicament, and that, in their current context, implementing usual actions, they will be unable to overcome the predicament successfully.

The importance of familiarity is highlighted if one considers the successful use of the Zambian story with listeners in the World Bank, where the overriding change idea embodied in all of the stories – knowledge management – was not an entirely new concept. While it did represent a fundamental shift from the existing core focus and identity of the organisation, it had been happening, as proposed by the change agents, in various instances and contexts in the organisation.<sup>153</sup> It was for this reason that examples could be found as reference points which could be highlighted to the organisation members through the springboard story. The predicaments described in the story were familiar to listeners and it was the memory of similar predicaments, and the inability to resolve them through existing means, that sparked reflection and the selection of actions

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<sup>150</sup> Morgan, S. & Dennehy, R. 1997. 495

<sup>151</sup> Denning, S. 2001 59

<sup>152</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

<sup>153</sup> Denning, S. 2001 8

to overcome the identified predicaments, as actually experienced by the listeners in their organisational contexts.

### 2.3.5 Strange...

Journeying vicariously as protagonists through the springboard stories, listeners familiar with the predicament described are likely to have an expectation of the probable actions and outcomes, based on their own experiences in the current world of the organisation. In most instances, the expectation is either that no actions could be taken to overcome the predicament, or that the actions taken would lead to only partial or limited success. As a result of the change idea, however, the protagonist is able to take unexpected actions – actions that were not enabled prior to the introduction of the change idea - and the environmental responses and related outcomes differ significantly from the expectation.<sup>154</sup>

Thus, while the stories present a familiar predicament, the resolution of the predicament is new and thus introduces an element of strangeness.<sup>155</sup> This element of strangeness represents the spark which leads to updating of the listeners' mental content required to change the way they view events. The springboard story provides clear links between new and unexpected actions and behaviours, and the successful resolution of a familiar predicament. The listeners, reflecting on the story events from the perspective of their own unique contexts, transfer those actions, behaviours and related links to their reality when creating the second, analogous, story that fits their context.<sup>156</sup>

Note, however, that while strangeness and the introduction of new elements into a familiar context are necessary to change the views listeners have of the world, events in the story must not be excessively strange.<sup>157</sup> When the story is too strange people tend

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<sup>154</sup> Denning, S. 2001 126

<sup>155</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xix

<sup>156</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

<sup>157</sup> Kurtzman, J. 1999 2 This view is supported by the developer of the concept of multiple intelligences, Dr Howard Gardner, who suggests that “everyone has millions of stories in their minds already and that for a new story to have any impact it has to win a Darwinian kind of contest: It must slay the competing stories. That's very difficult to do, and most of the time it won't work. Either the story will be assimilated into something that is already known or it will be seen as being so at odds with what's already known and believed that it won't have any impact. The best storytellers are those who can tell a



then to focus on the details of the explicit story and not on the possibilities of the change idea to move the organisation forward.<sup>158</sup>

In contrast to the successful use of the Zambian story in the World Bank context, the strangeness of the story from the perspective of the audience in Bern contributed significantly to the failure of its use in that context. For those listeners, the story related completely unfamiliar concepts and events. This was not a story from their context or, at least, a similar context. The predicament described was not one to which they could relate, or which would have triggered a memory of a similar experience. Unlike listeners in the World Bank, listeners in the Bern agency had not experienced the change idea in any way, and even the supporters of knowledge management were not certain of its nature and what the change would entail.<sup>159</sup>

The questions and comments from the audience immediately suggested that the change idea could not work in, and was not suited to, their organisation. Listeners felt that the idea suited the larger agency Denning represented, but not the smaller one with which they were associated.<sup>160</sup> They also questioned whether the idea was ahead of its time for any organisation in Switzerland. Clearly the difference between their past and the future described in the story was too great for them to shift mentally between the story-world and their reality and make the mental leap in understanding required to drive actions suitable for the envisioned new world.

### **2.3.6 ...but true**

While the successful springboard stories introduce an element of strangeness, each also describes a predicament that is “eerily familiar”.<sup>161</sup> The balance between familiarity and strangeness is important, and contributed to the stories being believed and considered plausible by listeners.

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story that's strange enough to get people's attention but not so strange that the people can't eventually make it part of their own consciousness.”

<sup>158</sup> Denning, S. 2001 127

<sup>159</sup> Denning, S. 2001 95

<sup>160</sup> Denning, S. 2001 98

<sup>161</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xix

From an observer's point of view, it is difficult to provide any real insight into the plausibility *per se* of the stories used by Stephen Denning. Plausibility is a subjective attribute, in that each person's context and experience will determine whether the story seems possible, reasonable and believable. The neutral observer, who is not part of the World Bank, cannot assess whether the stories he has used are plausible in that context. And, as we have seen, the multiple contexts experienced by individuals within the overall context of the organisation<sup>162</sup> render any generalisation regarding plausibility equally impossible. What can be assessed, however, is the reaction to the stories: the questions asked or not asked, the actions taken after hearing the story and the related success of implementing the change proposal embodied in the story.

The reaction to the Zambian story is immediately action-orientated.<sup>163</sup> Listeners ask how they can make it work in their environments and seek guidance on the next steps – the actions required to make the change happen in their contexts. Denning notes that the questions are not about whether the change could be made to happen, but rather how the change could be made to happen. This is a fairly clear indication that the story is believed and its events and actions considered reasonable enough to attempt to transfer these into the reality of the listeners' contexts.

The noticeable energy and positive body language observed in the audience would also appear to indicate acceptance of the plausibility of the story.<sup>164</sup>

That the stories were considered plausible is further indicated by the acceptance of the extrapolation used in the instances where the desired future is not completely or explicitly embodied in the historical events described in the factual portion of the story. In the Chile story<sup>165</sup> some of the elements are explicitly fictional – an imagining of what the future could be like, even though it had not yet manifested in that way. However, the extrapolation as part of the historical account articulates the future, providing it to the listeners as a point of reference, as if it had already occurred.

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<sup>162</sup> Weick, K. 1995 53

<sup>163</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

<sup>164</sup> Denning, S. 2001 24, 36

<sup>165</sup> Denning, S. 2001 36

The fact that no-one objects to the imaginary elements, and that people immediately focus on what the future might be like<sup>166</sup> and what would be required to create it, indicates that the story was accepted as plausible, and a fair and reasonable description of likely events, sequences and outcomes.

The familiarity to the audience of the protagonist, predicament and context in the story contributes to its events being considered likely, and the story's basis in reality increases the potential for it to be considered reasonable, as events have actually occurred as described. Where listeners do not perceive the story to be plausible, it fails to have a springboard effect. In such instances, as happened with the audience in Bern,<sup>167</sup> listeners find it difficult to move beyond questioning the truth of the story details, and instead remain focused on the past events described in the story. The future-focus required to move through and beyond the change idea is not enabled.

From the perspective of the listeners in Bern, there were no past events against which the plausibility of the story and its details could be tested. As a result, energy and focus were devoted to elements that could be identified and accepted as plausible.

The first question asked is about the technology and software used to create the presentation slides.<sup>168</sup> The listener in question is choosing to focus on a narrowed area that is controllable and understandable, almost in rebellion against having to deal with the content and message of the story.

The effect of this first question is greater than simply to detract from the message of the presentation and to create a subject tangent for one listener to engage in, along with the storyteller. It immediately provides a reference point on which the rest of the audience can focus their attentions, which is evidenced by the entire group immediately engaging in discussions around technology – both that used to tell the story, and that as experienced in the broader organisation.

From Denning's experiences, it is apparent that plausibility - believability, the feeling that the story "rings true"<sup>169</sup> - is indeed critical for the successful use of springboard stories.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Denning, S. 2001 37

<sup>167</sup> Denning, S. 2001 93-103

<sup>168</sup> Denning, S. 2001 96-97

<sup>169</sup> Denning, S. 2001 38

### 2.3.7 A real past

One of the key characteristics of the springboard story, and one that is shown to be critical to the formulation of all of the stories described, is that the stories were all based on real examples.<sup>171</sup> Each provided a view of a past event where implementation of the change idea had already worked and had contributed to the success of the protagonist and the organisation he represented. As such, these stories have what David Fleming refers to as “tag-back”<sup>172</sup> value for the communication of meaning and value. Stories that emerge from the history of the organization become powerful tag-back tools for the present and the future. Tagging back creates a more complete perception of the current situation by linking it to the narratives of the past. The power in the tag-back story lies in the fact that the ambiguity-opportunity cycle is already complete. Thus, reviewing past success provides a map for navigating the terrain of the current cycle.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> The view expressed by Denning, arising from his practical experiences with plausibility, is supported by a study conducted by Martin and Powers, and summarised in Sinclair, J. 2005 (56): In 1980 Martin and Powers set up a second study with MBA students, which provided more evidence on the cognitive effects of storytelling (Martin & Powers 1983). In this study they handed out a policy statement that was read by all students. The policy statement claimed that a company would avoid mass layoffs in times of economic difficulty by asking employees to take a temporary 10 % cut in pay. Again, they distributed three forms of supplementary material: 1) a story, 2) a table of statistics or 3) the combination of story plus statistics. However, they used two versions of the story and statistics, which either supported or disconfirmed the policy statement. The supporting story’s protagonist feared he would lose his job, but the manager assured him that he would keep his job with a short-term pay cut. The disconfirming story’s protagonist faced the same situation and was promptly fired. The stories were otherwise identical, only the ending was changed. The students who received the combination of the story plus statistics read either supporting versions of both or disconfirming versions of both. Martin and Powers found that the students presented with only the supporting story alongside the policy statement believed the company’s claims more than any of the other groups and showed higher commitment to the company. However, the opposite pattern of effects was found when the information disconfirmed the policy statement. The disconfirming story was found to have an impact equal or less than the impact of the disconfirming statistics or the combination of disconfirming story plus disconfirming statistics. Apparently, the subjects dismissed the disconfirming story as the single exception to the general rule. Thus Martin and Powers concluded that if a story is to have a strong impact, it must be congruent with prior knowledge.

<sup>171</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xix

<sup>172</sup> Fleming, D. 2001 4

<sup>173</sup> Fleming, D. 2001 4 Fleming goes on to say that leaders must be able to find the narrative link between a story and the current situation – which supports Denning’s view on the use of stories of real past events

These examples were not simply hypothetical cases based on the organisational environment, but described actual events that had taken place (and could, should the listeners have wished to do so, be verified through research or meeting with the people involved).<sup>174</sup> While, as a result of context, the story as told by the actual protagonist may differ from the story told by the springboard storyteller, these differences are unlikely to be significant.

The story removes uncertainty about how the change idea could theoretically work by clarifying exactly how it has worked, and how it can work again.

### **2.3.8 Embodying the change idea**

The springboard story is brief, yet encapsulates a significant hero's journey. The past event is described from the origination of a predicament or dilemma, through the need and attempt by a protagonist or actor to resolve it, through the implementation and impact of a specific phenomenon – in these stories the change proposal – to a successful resolution as a direct result of the existence of the change proposal in the environment of the story.

Denning refers to the fact that springboard stories embody the change proposal to the fullest extent.<sup>175</sup> His stories exclude any other possible contributing environmental factors, peripheral to the change idea. In relatively few words, he constructs a straight-line flow of events: Predicament → Change Idea → Resolution. Within this flow, his description of the actions made possible through the change idea is such that the link between the change idea and the results is a logical one. The simplification of the change idea and its results also provides clarity as to how the change idea can work in practice. The actions taken to resolve the predicament in each story demonstrate changed behaviours. These behaviours are exactly those required in the envisioned organisation – the vision that is the driver of the change idea.

The clarity of cause-and-effect relationships provided within the successful stories contributes to listeners being able to grasp the specific changes needed to reach the new

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to communicate the significant change of the current context, as well as his search for different stories to communicate different aspects of the change idea.

<sup>174</sup> Denning, S. 2001 3-16

<sup>175</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xix

world described.<sup>176</sup> In each story the successful outcome was strongly tied to specific actions, facilitated by the change idea: malaria was treated in an out-of-the-way place,<sup>177</sup> a client was “delighted with the responsiveness”,<sup>178</sup> and a task manager could go back to a client with the best information that could be gathered on a specific topic.<sup>179</sup>

At this point it is useful to consider the less explicitly noted hero in the springboard stories: the changed organisation. While the single protagonist is the focus of the explicit detail, and his actions are clearly highlighted in the story, the actions are possible only because of the nature of the organisation that exists in his world. The described organisation, in which the protagonist is able to take action that leads to success, is different to that of the listeners’ current reality, and the difference is directly as a result of the change idea proposed.<sup>180</sup> Thus, both the central and peripheral “characters” embody the change idea. All successes – at both individual and organisational level - are shown to be directly as a result of the change idea.

In many instances, in order to facilitate this full embodiment, extrapolation and the introduction of a fictionalised version of what could have happened were introduced into the stories.<sup>181</sup>

In these cases, the change idea is specifically embodied in a description of an imagined organisation, whose success is as a result of elements that do not exist in the reality of the listeners’ organisation. The resulting positive image of the imagined organisation rests specifically on the implementation of the change idea. In fact, according to the details included in the springboard story, it is only the change idea that creates the positive image for the organisation – an image that is not possible in the absence of the change.

The “happy endings”<sup>182</sup> – real or imagined - in each story were a clear result of the introduction of the change idea and listeners recognise that it will be actions taken in relation to that change idea that will create a similarly successful future and happy ending

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<sup>176</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

<sup>177</sup> Denning, S. 2001 23

<sup>178</sup> Denning, S. 2001 33

<sup>179</sup> Denning, S. 2001 66

<sup>180</sup> Denning, S. 2001 23-24

<sup>181</sup> Denning, S. 2001 33

<sup>182</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xx

in their actual context. Stories are compelling when driven by a clear explanation of the cause-and-effect relationship between an action and its consequences.<sup>183</sup>

Through the springboard story a clear link is made between the change proposal and the outcome, and this link is a key focus of the story. Discussions following the telling of the story do not focus on whether the organisation should implement the change proposal, but on how it should be done,<sup>184</sup> the implication being that the idea of the change proposal has been accepted. In the minds of the listeners the change idea is accepted as a requirement to achieve organisational success in the areas described in the story, and implementation of the specific change elements highlighted in the story will solve the organisation's problems in the areas described.

It is also apparent that the springboard story used changes, as different aspects of the change idea require focus, attention and implementation. Although each story embodied knowledge management as the overriding change idea, different stories focused on and embodied specific aspects required in the successful knowledge-based organisation. Denning uses a metaphor of "planting" for dynamic growth and living change to express the purpose of the springboard story in relation to the change.<sup>185</sup> The aim of these stories is to provide specific elements, incorporated in the overall change proposal, on which people in the organisation can focus their attention and energy after hearing the story, to make the story come alive in their own contexts.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Denning, S. 2004 6

<sup>184</sup> Denning, S. 2001 15

<sup>185</sup> The nature of the focus and specific actions of the listeners implemented in, and influenced by, their unique environments cannot be predicted in any detail. From the successful telling of the story, the storyteller can only know that actions taken will be closely aligned to, and supportive of, the change idea. This is shown by the examples of success in implementing facets of the change idea following the telling of certain stories, but more notably by the example of the absence of certain actions and elements, deemed essential for successful change by leadership, in the listeners' implementation after hearing stories that planted the seeds of the change idea as a whole. (Denning, S. 2001.p.43) Thus, although the change idea was being implemented by the listeners, the exact nature of that implementation, and the actions chosen to facilitate it, could neither be predicted nor dictated by the story

<sup>186</sup> Webber, A. 1999 178 Peter Senge notes that "Just as nothing in nature starts big, so the way to start creating change is with a pilot group -- a growth seed." Similarly, we have seen cues in sensemaking

There are a huge number of dimensions and related potential points of focus within both the complex organisational and change contexts.<sup>187</sup> Stories are purposefully selected to ensure that they do not have any distracting elements that could shift the focus from the specific aspect of the change idea that the storyteller wants the audience to focus on, and later act upon.<sup>188</sup>

This embodiment of more limited aspects of the overriding change idea is observable in all of the springboard story examples that Denning relates.

In the *Zambian story*, for example, the focus is on website accessibility and the availability of relevant information through that accessibility.<sup>189</sup> No other dimensions, or possible contributing factors, are highlighted or considered in relation to achieving the positive outcome described. Similarly, the *Yemen story*<sup>190</sup> focuses specifically on the contributing role of communities of practice. Here, technology also played a role similar to that in the *Zambian story*, but this is now moved to a peripheral status and serves only as a connector of the story parts and the attention of the storyteller is focused on a different specific aspect of the change idea. As a result, communities of practice become a focus for the audience, both within the storytelling context and in their own work contexts. The *Yemen story* was chosen to drive people to establish and sustain communities of practice – something which Denning as change agent and leader felt was imperative to successful implementation of the change idea – and its focus on that element as being a primary cause of organisational success achieved the desired result.<sup>191</sup>

The construction of the brief springboard story around a very particular aspect of the change proposal is the reason that the *Zambian story* was not the story used to communicate the specific and pressing need for communities of practice, which, as progress was made, Denning came to realise was a critical element required to sustain

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likened to seeds, and Denning noting that the ideas and concepts embodied in the springboard stories are seeds, planted to enable living and dynamic responses to change.

<sup>187</sup> Denning, S. 2001 110

<sup>188</sup> Denning, S. 2001 32

<sup>189</sup> Denning, S. 2001 10

<sup>190</sup> Denning, S. 2001 49

<sup>191</sup> Denning, S. 2001 51



knowledge management successfully in the organisation.<sup>192</sup> While the Zambian story certainly showed how the change idea contributed to success, it did not specifically show that communities of practice were a contributing factor. It was not sufficient to tell a story about any aspect of the change idea, the chosen story had to highlight and draw attention to the specific phenomenon that Denning wanted people to act upon. Hence, the story chosen to draw attention to communities of practice as an area of behavioural focus was the Yemen story.<sup>193</sup> It is worth noting some of the construction elements, words, phrases and timing of the elements used in this story, as it provides a neat summary of all the characteristics of a springboard story, and also effectively demonstrates the embodiment concept:

- Only two short sentences are used to provide the background;
- The second, only slightly longer, paragraph describes the unexpected happening and related predicament;
- After six brief sentences, the actions that led to resolution of the predicament are described. The lead sentence of this portion of the story immediately introduces the element on which Denning wishes people to focus:

“So the team contacted the staff of the help desk of the education sector, who were in touch with the *community of practice* in the education sector”;

- The rest of the third paragraph builds on the introduction of this element, describing its contributing actions and linking it quickly and tightly to the timely and successful resolution of the predicament:

“...within a forty-eight hour time frame the task team could be sitting down with the client and discussing the solution to the problem”;

- Only after the element of focus has been highlighted, and strong clear links established between that element and success, is time spent on what might have been if the element had not been in place to contribute as it did;
- The next paragraph builds on the possibilities of success, by reflecting on what could be achieved in addition, as a result of the success of the resolution of the first predicament. Again, this extrapolation is described only a few sentences after

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<sup>192</sup> Denning, S. 2001 43

<sup>193</sup> Denning, S. 2001 48

the focus has been placed on the specific change element. The highlighted element is fresh in the minds of the listener and the link between that element and possible further success will be clear in their minds;

- In the final paragraph, the element is highlighted again, and its role emphasised once more – ensuring that it is the concept that is heard last:

“Although the magic of technology is enabling this to happen rapidly, what underlies the transformation are people – people operating in *communities of practice* where sharing is the normal way of operating, so that when a request comes from Yemen, there is *a human community that enables* the help desk to find precisely the right piece of expertise.”

Thus, after an extremely brief lead-in, almost the entire story focuses on the selected element required for successful change, and its relation to that success. Note also how technology in this story is relegated to a supporting role, mentioned in passing, in contrast to the *Zambian story*, where a focus on the Web and electronically available and accessible information was made to be the change imperative.<sup>194</sup>

The Yemen story was a response to the potential vulnerability of the knowledge management process as a result of the absence of a very specific behaviour, namely the establishment and maintenance of communities of practice.<sup>195</sup>

In that particular instance, a number of elements of the change idea – knowledge management – had been implemented. There was focus on these elements, which were indeed considered to play a contributory role in a successful change. People were active in a number of different spheres, which had either been highlighted by leadership, or extracted by the individuals’ themselves, as a causal requirement for success. However,

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<sup>194</sup> Denning, S. 2001 24 The *Zambian story* focuses on the organisation of information to make it accessible to a broad dispersed audience electronically. The story is introduced with “A health worker...in Zambia, logged on to the Center for Disease Control and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria.” It goes on to note that “Our organization doesn’t have its know-how and expertise organized in such a way that someone like the health worker in Zambia can have access to it. But just imagine if it did!” Through the story, Denning goes on to describe a future in which workers inside and outside the organisation have access to “just-in-time” and “just-enough” material at their fingertips via computer desktops, thus enabling a real partnership between the organisation and users, leading to a new strategic direction for the organisation.

<sup>195</sup> Denning, S. 2001 43-51

the establishment and maintenance of communities of practice was not one of the elements receiving attention or required to be acted upon. With the significant amount of activity taking place, it was a challenge to draw attention away from the current focus to the specific “new” change element that leadership recognised as being crucial to the successful implementation. It was not sufficient to make people aware of the concept, but also to make them focus ongoing attention and energy on it specifically, elevating its importance amongst all the other possibilities contributing to the change.

Questions after the Yemen story was told were supportive and focused on how to make the changes happen.<sup>196</sup>

Rather than being considered one of many contributing factors supporting successful change, through the story communities of practice were perceived by the listeners to be the single factor necessary to achieve that success and they thus acted accordingly.

With repeated telling of the story to a number of different members of the organisation, the energising effect is spread and significantly – from Denning as a change leader’s perspective – in terms of knowledge management: “We are back on track.”<sup>197</sup>

Given that the environment before the telling of the story was seen to be vulnerable specifically because of the lack of communities of practice, it appears reasonable to assume being “back on track” actually means that the required communities of practice were in fact implemented and sustained, and thus the element of vulnerability in the changed environment was removed.

The structure and presentation of the Yemen story is echoed in all the other stories that have been used successfully in the context of promoting and implementing the knowledge management change idea in the World Bank. Creation of context is brief and just sufficient for the audience to recognise the situation as familiar. The predicament is sketched and then the change idea is introduced. The description of the change idea is the core of the story, and the body of the story focuses on what the change idea offered the protagonist in the predicament situation and how it was only through the change idea that the predicament could be resolved. At the same time, the connection between the change idea and the outcome is created and emphasised. A vision of a successful future growing

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<sup>196</sup> Denning, S. 2001 50

<sup>197</sup> Denning, S. 2001 51

out of the successful past occurrence described is then articulated, again emphasising the role of the change idea as the “cause” of this successful future.

With the *Zambian story*, Denning notes that “the discussion moves on to a positive search for ways in which an analogous approach can be implemented in our organisation, in the kinds of work we do, the clients we deal with, the countries we work in, and the potential costs, risks and benefits.”<sup>198</sup>

The *Chilean story* elicits a similar response: “Why don’t we do it?” they keep asking, “What’s the next step?”<sup>199</sup>

It is thus clear from a reading of each springboard story used that only one or two specific elements of what is a very complex change idea in a very complex organisation are related during the storytelling. Consequences, which can actually be seen to be the result of the implementation of the change idea as a whole, are related to the elements highlighted in the story as if those specific elements led directly to their generation. To a neutral observer outside the organisation and unaffected by the change at the time of occurrence it seems obvious that the actual actions and events that led to the successful change within the organisation, as noted in the stories, were far more complex and multifaceted than the stories indicate. In relating his experiences, Denning constantly provides the reader with additional information and insight into that complexity, which supports the view that much more than storytelling about *Zambian workers* was needed in order to facilitate and implement successful change. However, what is equally noticeable is how much of the change-related activity was launched from a storytelling encounter, as listeners took ownership of implementing the change idea in their areas, based on their recognition of certain actions and behaviours as being imperative to achieve success.

### **2.3.9 Happy endings: a premonition of the future**

A review of the springboard stories documented by Denning confirms a consistent articulation of a positive image for the organisation in question.<sup>200</sup> This is particularly true

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<sup>198</sup> Denning, S. 2001 15

<sup>199</sup> Denning, S. 2001 24

<sup>200</sup> It is important to recognise that the happy ending is a key story element only where the specific purpose of the story is to motivate. (Denning, S. 2004 2) There are other circumstances, such as learning and knowledge sharing, where a focus on negative outcomes may have more value, given that people tend to learn more from failures than from success. However, if the objective is to spark action in terms of a

in the extrapolations used in certain instances. In these instances, a future view of the organisation is created that shows success in meeting internal as well as external client needs. The organisation, as envisioned, provides solutions to problems, achieves success in areas beyond its current scope, supports people and is recognised as a positive contributor to society. Although Denning places an emphasis on the identity of the single protagonist, it is the nature of the organisation created by the change idea that appears to have significance for listeners in the organisational environment. The actions and behaviours of the protagonist are not questioned when the story is used to introduce the change idea. The questions and understanding gained relate instead to the organisational changes and actions needed to become the organisation that is described in the story.<sup>201</sup> The close link between the actions of the individual, the change idea and the ability of the organisation to deliver successfully in the sphere of need described is always a focus of the springboard story, with the successful organisation emphasised as the end point of all that takes place.

The Zambian story:

*“Our organisation doesn’t have its know-how and expertise organized in such a way that someone like the health worker in Zambia can have access to it. But imagine if it had!...Imagine: if we do this, true partnership can emerge...It will enable a different relationship with a wider group of client and partners and stakeholders around the world.”*<sup>202</sup>

The Chile story:

*“What will happen in the future? What we have learned from the Chile experience is now recognized as being valuable...This will only happen if three conditions are in place...In this way, the know-how is made available quickly, inexpensively, for all the world to use.”*<sup>203</sup>

The Yemen story:

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change idea in a disrupted world, the story needs to contain sufficient and believable evidence in support of a positive outcome resulting from the specific actions.

<sup>201</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

<sup>202</sup> Denning, S. 2001 24

<sup>203</sup> Denning, S. 2001 34

*“Without the organization’s knowledge-sharing program, things would have happened very differently...Nor does the approach stop with merely satisfying the individual client...There is a dramatic acceleration of cycle time in providing advice from what used to be weeks, to a matter of minutes.”*<sup>204</sup>

The Zambian government story:

*“As a result, the task manager, instead of being unable to make a contribution to the problems, was in a positions to provide a broad spectrum of advice from around the world, just enough and just in time.”*<sup>205</sup>

The Pakistan story:

*“I think it’s fair to say that in the past we would not have been able to respond to this kind of question within this time frame...What actually happened was something quite different...so the task manager... was able to go back...and say: this is the best that we as an organisation can put together on this subject, and then dialogue can start...now we can incorporate what we have learned in our knowledge base so that any staff in the organisation anywhere at any time can tap into it...anyone in the world will be able to log on and get answers to questions like this.”*<sup>206</sup>

It is clear from each of the examples that the successful springboard story describes a potentially positive image of the organisation that is closely tied to the change proposal. It is this part of the story that Denning indicates is important to drive listeners to action.<sup>207</sup>

Because the stories are complete in the sense that the outcome of the change idea is included, the resolution of the predicament is provided as a mental reference at the same time that the disruptive predicament itself is. Listeners therefore hear, absorb and will be able to recognise, all the elements in the story in a similar future situation in their environments.

In support of the suggestion that the end of the story is important for action, is the reaction of people after one of his first major interventions where he used the Zambian

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<sup>204</sup> Denning, S. 2001 50

<sup>205</sup> Denning, S. 2001 153

<sup>206</sup> Denning, S. 2001 166

<sup>207</sup> De Cagna, J. 2001 3

story. These audience members asked “Why don’t we do it? What’s the next step?”,<sup>208</sup> which is a definite indication of acceptance that the change idea can and should be implemented, and that the audience is no longer reflecting on the past event, but rather focusing on the future and how to act to create a similarly successful organisation in their context. Additionally, the questions are framed with personal action in mind – listeners use “we” and are looking for an active “step”.

The stories all contain an element of “what if...” and recognise that, in the environment of the audience, the changed environment does not yet exist. Within the comfort of the narrative the audience is invited and enabled to experience the implementation of the change idea, and its results, on an environment very similar to their own – without actually having to deal with and process the change in their reality. The springboard stories ask listeners to “Imagine if we...” – to consider what the world would be like if they acted in a new and different way. The storyteller stimulates the listeners to reflect on their own actions and situations, in the sense of “Suppose that I...”<sup>209</sup>

Thus, in terms of the specific change idea, the story is not an explanation of what is happening during implementation. Rather it is a description of what people can expect from the change idea.

In Denning’s example of the Chile story,<sup>210</sup> we are first introduced to the use of extrapolation, where the factual story does not embody the change idea to the extent desired. The extrapolated part of the story completes a hypothetical picture of the successful resolution of the factual predicament as a result of the change proposal. Here the story is one of an envisioned future that has not yet taken place. According to Denning, the audience does not question the extrapolation – which they are aware is not the reality of what has happened – nor demonstrate resistance to the envisioned future. He attributes this largely to the plausibility of the story – both the factual and extrapolated portions.<sup>211</sup>

The extrapolated part of Denning’s stories is essentially a strategic vision for the organisation. Through the story the vision is linked to actual past events and possible

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<sup>208</sup> Denning, S. 2001 24

<sup>209</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

<sup>210</sup> Denning, S. 2001 33

<sup>211</sup> Denning, S. 2001 34

individual actions, making it an outcome within the control of the individuals in the organisation.<sup>212</sup> This sense of control and ownership, created through the springboard story, has a positive impact on the listeners' decisions to act to realise the vision.<sup>213</sup>

Once again, through Denning's Bern experience, the importance of context is highlighted as a contributor to success. With the Bern listeners, where the springboard story failed, the vision failed to connect to the listeners' past in a way that gave them a sense of control. Instead, the proposed change introduced elements that represented an extremely significant shift for the organisation and its people, and had no connection to their real past. After the encounter, Denning notes that the audience felt that the change idea would create a rush into the future, opening "the sluice gates of the future (that would) drown their habitual patterns of action."<sup>214</sup>

The successful story changes the way people "think, worry and dream about themselves and the organisation."<sup>215</sup> In this way, people create and re-create the identity and future of the organisation and the role that they will play in this new future. They then begin making decisions and behaving in terms of this new vision of the future. The story provides a premonition of what the future might be like<sup>216</sup> and presents an opportunity for the listener to begin responding to that premonition. The springboard story is merely a

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<sup>212</sup> The use of story in this context has become a powerful function for the medium in organisations, particularly for those attempting to guide people in terms of a strategic vision (Forman, J. 1999, p2). Forman notes that "Data and analysis must make sense if executives' agendas are to be heard and supported in the highly charged arenas that have come to be known as "normal" organizational life. The most important agendas are those that create an organization's strategic reality, its long-term future direction. One successful approach an executive can use to get the attention of important stakeholders is to tell stories that capture their interest and gain their support. When successful, strategic stories are an executive's way to convince his or her audience to "picture this future for the organization; find it compelling and achievable, and support its enactment." Rather than the stuff of legend, "story" in this context means an argument for a particular vision of an organization's future, an argument that makes sense for two reasons: 1) the beginning of the story leads to the middle and it, in turn, leads to the end, and the order of events has a kind of inevitability, and 2) in each phase of the story, the executive forges powerful links between the strategic reality he or she advocates and the data that support it."

<sup>213</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

<sup>214</sup> Denning, S. 2001 100

<sup>215</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xiv

<sup>216</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xix



launch pad for the creation of a new story in the mind of the listener, a story that brings the ideas in the original story to life for each listener, extrapolated into their own context, and therefore re-creating the change idea in a living environment.<sup>217</sup> This re-creation of the change idea in a unique context helps create the organisational future described in the story.

The springboard stories engage the imagination, and encourage listeners to imagine a new and different future and the actions necessary to create that future. In the Zambian story, for example, the invitation is explicit:

*“Our organization doesn’t have its know-how and expertise organized in such a way that someone like the health worker in Zambia can have access to it. But just imagine if it had!”*

The listener is then guided towards the desired actions to create the future through the imagining process, with a clear indication that the listeners have a key role to play in those actions and thus that future. The imagined future is clearly positioned as a result of the actions of “we”:

*“And if we can put all these elements in place for the task teams, why not for the clients?... Imagine: if we do this, true partnership can emerge.”*

The story paints a picture of the broad strokes required to achieve an envisioned outcome, and invites and actually expects each listener to fill in the details of what will be required to achieve both the required broad strokes as well as the envisioned future in their own environment. Each individual listener is encouraged to select the actions he feels will change the environment successfully, and then to act in terms of the changed environment.

Listeners then begin acting based on a vision of the future created at the time of the story. These actions, conducted in the reality of the organisation, then serve to create the future reality, which had previously only been envisioned.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xx

<sup>218</sup> The characteristics listed in this chapter are those noted explicitly by Denning as being those that distinguish stories that have the “springboard” effect – the effect of launching action in individuals in response to a change environment. Although some storytelling experts have questioned Denning’s approach, and even mocked his proposals, calling them “a fairly silly approach to story” (Boje, D. 2006) it is interesting to note how closely the springboard story characteristics are aligned to

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the four characteristics of a good story, as proposed by Wilkins and summarised by Zemke: Wilkins believes the most powerful culture stories have four common characteristics:

1. They are concrete. That is, they are told about real people, describe specific actions, have a strong sense of time and place, and in some way are connected (in listeners' minds) with the organization's philosophy. This mirrors Denning's view that the effective springboard story is told about a real past event. In *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling* he emphasises the importance not only of providing specific dates and times in relation to the protagonist in the story, but also of introducing them at the outset of the story. This facilitates quicker acceptance of the story and its events, as listeners immediately identify with the protagonist (Denning, S. 2005 57)

2. They are common knowledge. For a story to be effective, people not only must know the story, they also must know that others know it and act in concert with its guidance. The familiarity of the contexts, protagonist and predicament in the springboard stories ensure that people immediately recognize the story as being likely in their environment. It is a story that could as easily have been told in their own context. The familiarity speaks to typical organisational occurrences, and listeners recognize not only the individual but also the organisation within in the story. Additionally, the same springboard story was used consistently to different audiences within the organisation to convey the same message about the change the organisation was undergoing. In interactions outside of the story, in terms of the change, the story would have been a common reference point, generating the use of common language to address the change, and making the story common knowledge in the organisation. Denning alludes to this phenomenon when he notes how the listeners begin acting in terms of the change, with people taking on new roles and playing these roles in response to the story's guide for behaviour. (Denning, S. 2001 27, 89) Snowden has noted that, with purposeful stories, "the simple memorable form communicates complex meanings and is self-propagating. Self-propagation is an important concept for usable stories. An effective story will spread like wildfire through an organisation without altering its core meaning" (Snowden, D. 2004 5). Denning notes on a number of occasions that the *Zambian story* was heard by most levels in the organisation, that it had become the pivot for the entire knowledge management change idea, and that at a point its shelf-life had expired suggest that the story had become common knowledge in the organisation, as per Wilkins.

3. They are believed by some group. Stories, metaphors and archetypal myths are generally instructive. A story that directs action in a given organization not only makes a point, it also is believed to be true of the organization and is taken as serious guidance. The plausibility of the springboard stories are noted as a requirement for their success throughout *The Springboard* (Denning, S. 2001) –the stories have to be believed by the listeners in order to have a catalyzing effect. The actions described in each provide insight into desired actions beyond the story, and are seen as possible and likely in the reality of the organisation.

4. They describe a social contract. The story must describe how things are to be done - or not to be done – in the organization, and the associated rewards and punishments. The embodiment of a change idea in the springboard story is such that the story becomes a guide as to how things should be done in the

## 2.4 Unhappily ever after: The Story does not always work

We have seen from the references to Denning's experience in Bern that stories do not always have the desired springboard effect, and are not always successful in driving listeners to action. This is often as a result of the absence of one or more of the characteristics of a successful springboard story. However, there are other factors which may contribute to the failure of the story to achieve its objectives, and these are briefly examined here.

### 2.4.1 Unknown storytellers and listeners

A major contributing factor to the reported failure of the springboard storytelling experience in Bern was the lack of familiarity and relationship between Denning - as storyteller - and the listeners.

In Bern the presentation was given to a group of managers from a small public-sector agency. Unlike the previous presentations, they were neither members of the World Bank nor were they knowledge managers. In those contexts, as evidenced by most of the story encounters, including that of the London presentation at a knowledge management conference,<sup>219</sup> Denning's position, role and expertise had contributed to his ability to speak the language of his audience. Furthermore, it had contributed to the listeners' acceptance of him as storyteller.

In the known and shared context of the World Bank, Denning was able to make and share his own connections between knowledge management and solutions to predicaments that organisation members experienced in similar contexts in the organisation. In the Bern situation he and his audience did not share knowledge of any past events. In particular, he was unaware of the events and predicaments of their context. As he notes, on arrival, "Here in Bern, I have less of a sense of what I am getting into."<sup>220</sup>

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"new" organisation resulting from the change idea. It is clear in each – via the happy ending – that there is reward for taking actions such as those described and taken in the story.

Thus, it appears that the springboard stories and their specific characteristics meet the requirements of powerful organisational stories – stories that, according to Wilkins, "symbolize the overarching purpose and philosophy in a way that inspires and teaches" and "provide enough suggestion about how participants should act [so] that they know what to do once they have been inspired."

<sup>219</sup> Denning, S. 2001 55, 90

<sup>220</sup> Denning, S. 2001 94

During Denning's meeting before the presentation, he is concerned with trying to establish what the audience, and the broader organisation, are expecting from him, and who they think he is.<sup>221</sup> Similarly, on meeting the audience, and based on the slight knowledge gained through the introduction process, he immediately tried to think how to adjust what had been planned for the group. This adjustment continued through the presentation.<sup>222</sup>

Thus, as a newcomer to the environment and storyteller in an unknown context, Denning was obliged to spend time and energy trying to assess the social dynamics of both the environment as a whole and of the audience specifically.

Denning was equally unknown to the audience, both as storyteller and as a person. Listeners had been instructed to attend his presentation and had not come with the knowledge of who he was or why he was there in the context of their organisation. Just as he was trying to gain an understanding of who the listeners were, they were focusing energy on trying to assess who Denning was and what role he was playing on behalf of the organisation.<sup>223</sup>

#### **2.4.2 Unknown social dynamics and culture**

The influence of the organisation, as a determinant of behaviour in the storytelling encounter, as well as on behaviour in general is acknowledged in this observation, as well as in the listeners' reference to the organisational culture, its members and nature as reasons why the change could not work. Furthermore, the members attending were instructed to do so and did, despite their personal views. This is also an indirect indication that the role and social influence of others – in this case probably more senior managers and leaders - in the context of the listeners.

Denning notes that the audience was made up of people with different responses to the change idea.<sup>224</sup> Yet, it would appear that after the presentation all questions and comments were negative.

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<sup>221</sup> Denning, S. 2001 95

<sup>222</sup> Denning, S. 2001 96

<sup>223</sup> Denning, S. 2001 95

<sup>224</sup> Denning, S. 2001 95

As soon as one person expressed some negativity, it created an atmosphere where it was socially acceptable to express similar negativity. This social dynamic within the audience probably points to a similar dynamic within the greater organisation, in all likelihood strongly influenced by those who were willing to speak up in the presentation, thus gaining and maintaining political power in the social arena.

With no knowledge of the individuals in the audience, having had no time to meet them before, the problem of understanding the social considerations and needs of those people on a personal level was further exacerbated.

Presenting the change idea needs to be aligned to a positive response that is likely and desired in the organisation, and, in the Bern example, the outcomes and related approval in the story were apparently not important in the context of that audience. The social acceptance gained by the protagonist as a representative of the organisation in the story was not an influential consideration for the Swiss agency and its people, and did not represent a desired response or outcome. However, Denning's unfamiliarity with the organisation and its social structure and network meant that he could not present alternatives that would have spoken to the social acceptance needs of his specific audience. The rewards of changing identity and actions, both at a personal and organisational level, were not sufficient to drive a change in the minds of the listeners.

### **2.4.3 Story in an analytical framework**

Where springboard stories are not used first during interactions, their success in igniting future orientated action is reduced. This is the case when using story as a means of later explanation or evidence to support a more analytical presentation of the change idea and related future.<sup>225</sup>

Where the story is not introduced at the outset of an interaction, and the narrative format is not immediately engaged, the audience is not invited into the virtual reality of the story world. This means that during further interaction, listeners are not acting through their "lived" experience in the reality co-created in the story. Elements in the story are not the initial focus. Instead, facts presented in the change presentation receive the primary focus and the story elements introduced later will be examined in the context of the earlier analytical presentation.

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<sup>225</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

The specific change ideas that the leaders want the listeners to focus on are not highlighted sufficiently in the analysis and they are likely to spend time and effort attempting to find their own reference points amongst the possibilities available. It is this search that the presenter experiences as an inability to “see” the value of the change idea and perceives as the listeners’ pedantic questioning in terms of the details of the story.

The analytical mode that the listeners are engaged in is reflected in their response to the story: Questions relate to current limitations, how typical the situation described is, how different the situation is to anything in their reality.<sup>226</sup> There is a clear inability to move forward, and instead the focus remains on the explicit detail of the story and the present environment in the organisation.

#### **2.4.4 The written springboard story**

The brevity of the oral springboard story can pose a challenge to attempts to transfer it to a written format. Such attempts to present the stories in written format proved significantly less successful than the oral format that naturally took place in an interactive environment.<sup>227</sup> This phenomenon is interesting when considered in the context of what Denning proposed earlier regarding the effect of narrative on the listener.<sup>228</sup> Much of what Denning suggests occurs during the oral storytelling is derived from the work of Sven Birkerts, which itself focuses specifically on the read story. The contradiction might, however, be attributed to the unique and specific nature of the springboard stories used. The springboard story is terse and contains little detail and even less background information. It is the performance and intonation of the storyteller that provides the engagement required for the listener to enter the world of the story. Simply transferring that same story to paper is not sufficient to mirror the level of engagement that occurs

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<sup>226</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

<sup>227</sup> Denning, S. 2001 135-137

<sup>228</sup> Denning, S. 2001 59-62

with an oral rendition.<sup>229</sup> The story in written format does not invite and enable listeners to live within the story – a phenomenon arising from the oral format which contributes to the successful selection of related actions. The written story is observed objectively, and not lived vicariously. Written stories require much more background information, contextual detail and engaging elements if they are, in any way, to echo the invitation into the virtual world that is so easily issued through the oral narrative format.

#### **2.4.5 Storytelling itself is too strange**

The final, and most oblique, indication of circumstances where storytelling may fail is found in the description of what is referred to as the traditionalist attack on the Pakistan story.<sup>230</sup> In this instance, those who find the use of story rather than analysis unfamiliar attempted to deconstruct the story to find out why it had a catalytic and energising effect on the organisation and its members. A manager interrogated the events as presented in the story, questioned its validity across the broader organisation, the level of accuracy and truth in the story, the connections between events described and the outcomes, and the role of other events not included in contributing to the outcome. Although this example is used by Denning largely to indicate that a high level of accuracy and detail is not necessary to increase the validity of the story in terms of energising people and generating actions for change, it provides interesting insight into what can happen when, irrespective of the content, listeners reject storytelling as a means of examining the past, or launching actions for the future.

The individual in question was a “traditionalist” accustomed to using an analytical perspective to understand the past, present and future. The existing state and approach of the World Bank was familiar and strongly identified with. The use of analysis formed the basis of describing the past and attempting to understand and articulate the future and followed a clear and expected pattern. In contrast, the expected flow “beginning with definitions, followed by premises and evidence, ending with linear inferences” is absent

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<sup>229</sup> Sturm, B. 1999 In Sturm’s study on the “story-listening trance” that people experience during an effective storytelling encounter, listeners interviewed mentioned a variety of positive influences on achieving that state, including: the storytelling style, the story content, the storyteller’s ability, the storyteller’s involvement in the story, and the sense of a rapport between the listener and the storyteller. The influence of these elements would naturally be greatly reduced using a written format for a broad audience.

<sup>230</sup> Denning, S. 2001 174

with the use of stories.<sup>231</sup> Thus, the stories can fail irrespective of their structure, content or message, simply because they are stories and used in an environment where the idea of story and storytelling is not accepted or understood, and makes no sense to the listener.

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<sup>231</sup> Denning, S. 2001 174



# Chapter 3

## Making Sense of a Story

It is necessary to win both minds and hearts in order to motivate people to take action with energy and enthusiasm, and to recognise that one is dealing with people – people who cannot be separated from emotion and feeling in their approach to life.<sup>232</sup> When organisational survival often depends on disruptive change, leadership has to inspire people to act in different and often unwelcome ways – ways that cause emotion and arousal and disturb the expected flows previously known in organisational life.<sup>233</sup> Essentially, leadership has to inspire people to find new identities that can respond effectively to disruptive changes.

These changes – both to the organisation and to the way of acting – are initially seen by people in the organisation as being complex, difficult, disruptive, strange and counter-intuitive. This leads to feelings of bewilderment, and uncertainty of how to act and what to do. There is further discomfort from uncertainty as to whether people are able to do the new things required, and whether they have the skills and knowledge to perform in the changed environment. The new cultures that accompany major changes often involve

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<sup>232</sup> Webber, A. 1999 178 In this interview Peter Senge highlights the difference between how people and relationships outside of the organisation and inside of the organisation are viewed, and questions the reasons for this difference. He notes that “In our ordinary experiences with other people, we know that approaching each other in a machinelike way gets us into trouble. We know that the process of changing a relationship is a lot more complicated than the process of changing a flat tire on your car. It requires a willingness to change. It requires a sense of openness, a sense of reciprocity, even a kind of vulnerability. You must be willing to be influenced by another person. You don't have to be willing to be influenced by your damn car! A relationship with a machine is fundamentally a different kind of relationship: It is perfectly appropriate to feel that if it doesn't work, you should fix it. But we get into real trouble whenever we try to "fix" people. We know how to create and nurture close friendships or family relationships. But when we enter the realm of the organization, we're not sure which domain to invoke.”

<sup>233</sup> Denning, S. 2002 1

concepts, attitudes, and skills that are not understood in the first place, nor accepted if understood.<sup>234</sup> The new attitudes, skills and actions required essentially require people to find a new identity – an identity that can act effectively in a new environment. It is not enough for successful and sustainable change that people act differently. What is needed is a complete shift in identity to one that has a desire for the actions required in the changed environment; one that becomes the kind of person that acts successfully in the organisation of the future, and thus contributes to the organisation's continued success.<sup>235</sup>

Given the inseparability of emotion from cognition, a useful way of inspiring and persuading people is by uniting an idea with an emotion.<sup>236</sup> Through making an emotional connection with the audience, they can be stimulated both intellectually and emotionally towards whatever course of action is required, so that they want to become the kind of people you are describing. It has been widely suggested that one of the best ways to do this is by telling a compelling story. Much of what Stephen Denning suggests about the success of the use of stories in his organisation is supported by storytelling proponents in many disciplines.<sup>237</sup> In particular, story is considered to be more successful in moving people in organisations than traditional analytical techniques. However, other than

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<sup>234</sup> Denning, S. 2002 4

<sup>235</sup> Denning, S. 2006 4

<sup>236</sup> Fryer, B. 2003 52

<sup>237</sup> Examples include, but are not limited to, Wilkins, A. 1984; Snowden, D. 2004; Shaw, G., Brown, R., Bromiley, P. 1998; O'Neill, J. 2002

descriptions of what happens when story is used as a medium,<sup>238</sup> there is little further information given by proponents of storytelling as to why story is a successful medium for generating the shift in identity required for successful, sustainable organisational change.

The examination of Weick's sensemaking theory regarding the seven properties of sensemaking has shown that the search for successful identity is the foundation of sensemaking. In light of the above, times of disruptive change in organisations therefore represent occasions for sensemaking amongst organisation members. We have also seen that successful sensemaking – the making of sense and assigning of meaning – is a requirement for people to be able to move forward through disruptions to their normal and expected flows. Sensemaking theory thus gives us a useful basis to assess whether stories, in this case specifically Denning's springboard stories, do in fact contribute successfully to catalysing change by inspiring people to act in a chosen manner, and thereby aiding in moving people through significant organisational change and disruption.

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<sup>238</sup> Fryer B. 2003 51-52 Leading screenwriter, Robert McKee, advocates storytelling as a means for senior executives to win both hearts and minds of people in organisations. Of interest here, though, is his description of what a story does, and what information it contains. His word choice is useful, as one can easily see the alignment between the story structure and content and what has been shown to be inherent and influencing for sensemaking: "There are two problems with rhetoric. First, the people you're talking to have their own set of authorities, statistics, and experiences. (*Context*) While you're trying to persuade them, they are arguing with you in their heads (*Social interaction; internal conversation*). Second, if you do succeed in persuading them, you've done so only on an intellectual basis. That's not good enough, because people are not inspired to act by reason alone.

Essentially, a story expresses how and why life changes. It begins with a situation in which life is relatively in balance; everything is fine. (*Normal flows*) You expect it will go on that way. (*Expectation*) But then there's an event—in screenwriting, we call it the "inciting incident"—that throws life out of balance. (*Interruption*)

The story goes on to describe how, in an effort to restore balance, the protagonist's subjective expectations crash into an uncooperative objective reality. (*Expectation-reality gap*) There is a struggle to deal with these opposing forces, calling on the protagonist to dig deeper, work with scarce resources, make difficult decisions, take action despite risks, and ultimately discover the truth. (*Cannot continue or complete sequence using old ways; need to find new ways to complete*) Good storytellers almost always tell a story about the fundamental conflict between subjective expectation and cruel reality. (*Trigger for sensemaking*) [My italicised insertions]

The preceding chapters have provided a foundation on which an analysis of the storytelling experience of Stephen Denning, in terms of Karl Weick's theory regarding the seven properties of sensemaking, can be based.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Research done in the sphere of intelligent systems has revealed a number of insights into sensemaking (Klein, G., Moon, B., and Hoffman, R. 2006 72) which provide an interesting sidebar to the one-on-one nature of the analysis that follows. The research used methods of cognitive task analysis in many studies of how domain practitioners make complex decisions in dynamic environments. This independent research, and some of the findings in relation to sensemaking flowing from it, supports the inference that many of the characteristics of the springboard stories play a role in facilitating sensemaking. The insights are particularly interesting as they were developed in a completely different sphere.

1) Research shows that when human decision makers are put in the position of passively receiving interpretations, they're less apt to notice emergent problems. This finding suggests that simply relaying information to people is not sufficient to engage them, and to facilitate the noticing necessary in sensemaking. The springboard stories require listeners to participate actively in creating a second story that is unique to, and incorporates elements from, their context. Only enough detail is given to stimulate creation within the mind of the listener, with additional detail, linkages and patterns the result of their own mental processes. Thus the passivity that hinders sensemaking is avoided.

2) A second finding is that sensemaking is more than simply connecting the dots and describing it as such misses the skill needed to identify what counts as a dot in the first place. While relating dots is critical, but the analyst must also determine which dots are transient signals and which are false signals that should be ignored. These dots referred to by Klein et al. are the cues referred to in Weick. The need to identify what a dot is, and which dots are critical, are central to sensemaking. We have seen that the springboard story makes clear the dots that are to be connected, clearly highlighting specific elements requiring attention, and specifically ignoring or downplaying those that are considered peripheral. The story thus facilitates the recognition and identification of the dots required in the change environment.

3) Researchers have shown that more information improves performance up to a point, but after that point additional information isn't helpful and can sometimes even degrade performance. This suggests that there is a risk of "too much information", and supports Denning's approach of limiting detail. The success of the springboard stories is, in part at least, likely as a result of the limited information contained within them. This is particularly true if one considers the amount and complexity of information in a large organisation, and especially a large organisation undergoing major change and transformation. Adding a significant amount of information into that environment is unlikely to achieve success in performance, or to facilitate sensemaking. Apart from the brevity, the very use of story is a useful reaction to the large amount of information and messages experienced in an organisation. Stories are a means of making communication captivating, setting it apart from the overflow of mundane messages. (Sinclair, J. 2005 53)

4) The best participants in an exercise that tested focus, and the ability to remain on the right path, were the ones who jumped to an early speculation but then deliberately tested it. Their initial hypothesis gave

## 3.2 Role players and response: identity construction

Denning's experiences show that there are a number of identities that come into play during the storytelling encounter. Given the importance of identity in the sensemaking process, and the importance of sensemaking for moving forward, the insights from his experiences, coupled with the sensemaking implications, are noteworthy.

### 3.1.1 The protagonist's identity

Within the springboard story, the use of a single protagonist, who makes the archetypal "hero's" journey, facilitates sensemaking by introducing a successful and positively confirmed identity within the context of a change idea. This speaks directly to the fundamental objective of sensemaking: the search for and creation of successful identity.

Denning's suggestion regarding people's simplification of their lives into a story<sup>240</sup> mirrors what sensemaking theory suggests about the retrospective assigning of linear cause-and-effect, as well as the use of selected extracted cues to make sense. Life is complex and, through articulating it as a hero's journey, the complexity of the reality is reduced to a linear simplicity. Experiences in life are reduced to essentially a few basic elements, or cues: the attempt to move forward, an obstacle to be overcome, actions taken to overcome the obstacle and the successful continuation of the move forward. Thus, the told story echoes the story that listeners have in their own minds, and the life of the protagonist echoes their lives.

The familiarity of the protagonist, his context and the predicament faced contributes to listeners believing that they too could be that protagonist in their own context, achieving similar success. The identity presented then becomes a likely and reasonable option for the listener during sensemaking efforts in the context of the organisation and the change idea. Through the description of the specific protagonist and the familiarity of the

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them a basis for seeking data that would be diagnostic. This approach was more useful than the "open mind" approach that's basically a passive mode of receiving data without thinking hard about them. This, too, is supported by the active role required from the listeners of the springboard stories. The story invites, and in fact expects, the listener to actively consider the happenings in the story in terms of their own context – testing its plausibility and possibility of success. At the same time, based on those virtual tests, listeners are encouraged to adjust the story and its elements in their own minds until a similar story is found that fits their context and will achieve success.

<sup>240</sup> Denning, S. 2005 57

predicament, listeners can picture themselves in that position, with the same identity. This is because, through the storytelling encounter, the identities of the protagonist and listeners are entwined and distinctions between the two are blurred. The view of events in the story is from the perspective of the protagonist.

In *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*<sup>241</sup> Denning provides additional insight into the effective use of a single protagonist in the story from a sensemaking perspective, when he suggests that the protagonist must be introduced at the beginning of the story. Listeners experiencing significant change look for an identity with which they can identify; they are searching for an identity through which the change can be managed. Introducing the protagonist at the outset provides such an identity and the rest of the story is experienced from the perspective of that identity. This early identification, coupled with the intertwining of listener and protagonist identities through the story, and the familiarity of the protagonist, enable the immediate envisioning of the listeners' life as that of the protagonist and the translation of that vision into the reality of the listeners' contexts.

While the initial tendency is to view the dilemma as the disruption in the story, it is important to consider that, where the stories were successful, the dilemma described, while unusual, is specifically chosen for its familiarity to the listener. Thus, although a disruption or problem in the more traditional sense, the experience is in fact recognised as part of the natural flow experienced by both the protagonist and the listener.

In the springboard stories, listeners familiar with the predicament described inevitably have an expectation of the possible actions and outcomes, based on their own experiences in the current world. Thus for the specified audience the actual interruption occurs when the protagonist takes unexpected action, and the environmental responses and related outcomes differ significantly from the expectation. Listeners are thus driven to make sense of the actions as well as the outcomes, as both are articulated in the brief story and both are unexpected.

The identity of the protagonist is immediately identified with, and the negative impact of a predicament, as well as the positive confirmation obtained as a result of the change idea, is strongly tied to the recognised identity. The "new" successful identity in the future world is grounded in the "old" identity that probably exists in the audience, but was not successful without incorporating the change idea.

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<sup>241</sup> Denning, S. 2005

The three drivers of identity construction are the need to feel competent, the need for self-enhancement, and the need for coherence and continuity.<sup>242</sup> The protagonist in the springboard story initially does not have an identity which fulfils those needs. The predicament provides a disruption to his ongoing workflow and he cannot continue to perform effectively as long as the predicament remains unresolved. An inability to solve the problem is likely to lead to feelings of incompetence and inefficacy relating to the expectations associated with the role of the protagonist. These feelings are further likely to impact negatively on the protagonist's self-image. The identity of the protagonist, which is intertwined with that of the listener, at this point is thus not positively confirmed, and sensemaking, with related actions and behaviours with a view to creating an identity that will be affirmed, will be triggered.

The introduction of the change idea into the protagonist's environment and context, however, leads to resolution of the predicament. By relaying this in the springboard story, the listener is immediately made aware of the impact on identity. The protagonist is not only able to continue working effectively, but has actually achieved a new level of delivery, showing competence as well as increased efficacy. At the same time, solving the problem enhances the protagonist's self-image (based, in part, on the perception that both client and organisation will have enhanced views of the protagonist as a result). Thus, the introduction of the change idea confirms a positive identity for the protagonist.

The structuring of the springboard story immediately introduces and confirms an identity that is positively affirmed in the future created by the introduction of the change idea. For the listener, the specific identity is now available for selection should the change idea occur in his own context. More importantly, the listener can recognise that the change idea contributes to the creation of a successful and positively confirmed identity – competent, efficient and enhancing – in similar contexts, such as his own.

The role of the springboard stories in facilitating sensemaking during times of change is greater than simply providing an indication of successful identities which people can select in response to interruptions. The manner in which these identities are provided, and the response and actions facilitated through the narrative nature of the stories, play an equally key role.

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<sup>242</sup> Weick, K. 1995 20

The intertwining between protagonist and listener means that identity selection is not observed, but rather enacted, enabling the creation of positively affirmed identities in the minds of the audience. Immersed in the story, it is as much the listener's identity as that of the protagonist that is examined and observed in the co-created virtual world.<sup>243</sup>

All of the successful stories provide a view of a past event where implementation of the change idea has already worked and where it has contributed to the affirmation and enhancement of the identity of the role players. The change idea introduced in the springboard story facilitated actions by the protagonist that led to a successful outcome, which affirmed the protagonist's identity: malaria was treated in an out-of-way place,<sup>244</sup> a client was "delighted with the responsiveness",<sup>245</sup> and a task manager could go back to a client with the best information that could be gathered on a specific topic.<sup>246</sup> At the time the change idea is introduced into the story, the listener's identity is already deeply entwined with that of the protagonist. The virtual world created in the mind of the listener and extrapolated almost unconsciously into his own context and organisational reality is the perspective from which the change idea is viewed. Thus, in the same way that the identity of the listener is threatened by the familiar predicament in the world of the story, so too the identity of that listener is positively confirmed by the successful outcome achieved by the implementation of the change idea.

Listeners essentially live the entire change experience vicariously through the story.<sup>247</sup> The story is specifically designed to highlight a predicament faced by the protagonist – an unexpected event and therefore an interruption triggering sensemaking. It is thus this predicament, as well as the resolution as a result of the change idea, that listeners experience vicariously within the specific storytelling intervention. As a result, they have an applicable frame of reference, as well as an appropriate identity, added to those available to them in order to make sense should similar predicaments arise in the real world. That the affirmation is also articulated as part of the story is noteworthy, as it serves to reduce the uncertainty surrounding the selection of a similar identity in a similar

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<sup>243</sup> Denning, S. 2001 64

<sup>244</sup> Denning, S. 2001 3

<sup>245</sup> Denning, S. 2001 3

<sup>246</sup> Denning, S. 2001 166

<sup>247</sup> Denning, S. 2001 86



context – it is clear to a listener that the identity has positive results for the person concerned.

The familiarity of the environment enables listeners to recognise it as an environment in which they too have to select an identity. The story thus provides a means of observing the consequences of an actually created identity tested in a relevant environment. The listeners can project themselves into a vision of their own context, using the positively confirmed identity of the protagonist in the story as their own, and observe consequences over which they have control because it is their story.<sup>248</sup> In this way, the story of success through the change proposal becomes part of their own identity, and these identities – launched and created from the original story - then enact the change proposal.

Thus, the role, circumstances and actions of a single protagonist in the springboard stories do more than engaging emotions and empathy. They actually contribute to the identity-creation process in the audience by providing a strong and clear indication of a successful identity in the envisioned future world and establishing the elements required to create and maintain this successful identity.

### **3.1.2 The organisation's identity**

A review of the springboard stories documented by Denning confirms a consistent articulation of a positive image for the organisation in question. This is particularly true in the extrapolations used in certain instances. In these instances, a future view of the organisation is created that shows success in meeting internal as well as external client needs. The organisation, as envisioned, provides solutions to problems, achieves success in areas beyond its current scope, supports people and is recognised as a positive contributor to society. Thus, the people in that organisation are able to confirm a positive identity through association with the organisation and its identity.

Importantly, the springboard stories present a description of the successful organisation that does not exist in the current context. The successful springboard story describes a potentially positive image of the organisation that is closely tied to the change proposal. The positive image of the organisation rests solely on the implementation of the change idea. In fact, it is the specific change that creates the positive identity for the organisation – an identity that is not possible or available in the absence of the change.

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<sup>248</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

Although Denning places an emphasis on the identity of the single protagonist, it is the identity of the organisation that appears to have significance in relation to the identities of the audience, where that audience is made up of members of the organisation. It appears to be the organisation's enhanced identity that is important in driving listeners to action, and we can see from sensemaking theory that it is in all likelihood a result of the strong association of individual's identity with organisation identity. It will be apparent to the listener that creation of the organisational identity and image, as proposed in the story, will be the creation of a positive identity with which the individual can associate and maintain a positive and enhanced self-image.

The actions and behaviours of the protagonist are not questioned when the story is used to introduce the change idea. The questions and understanding gained relate instead to the organisational changes and actions needed to become the organisation that is described in the story.<sup>249</sup> It is the identity of the organisation that drives the listeners to action, as they seek ways to create the organisation that is featured in the story.

The springboard stories ask listeners to "Imagine if we..." – to consider what the world would be like if they acted in a new and different way. The storyteller stimulates the listeners to reflect on their own actions and situations, in the sense of "Suppose that I...".<sup>250</sup> Both of these invitations strongly suggest an underlying question, which applies to all the events contained in the story, namely "What implications do these events have on who I will be?"<sup>251</sup> The invitation to reflect both as part of a greater organisational "we", as well as an "I", provides multiple additions to the available identities of the listener. It also speaks to the various influencing factors in identity selection – choosing identity as an individual, choosing identity as a representative of the organisation, and as the organisation itself.

The springboard stories present elements and actions of the organisation, specifically of the organisation as it would be after successful implementation of the change idea embodied in those elements and actions, alongside an indication of a positive social response to those actions and elements. Thus listeners will focus and act on those

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<sup>249</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

<sup>250</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

<sup>251</sup> Weick, K. 1995 23

elements to confirm the positive identity of the organisation as described in the story and, through their enactment of the change idea, actually create the organisation described.

With the Bern experience, the role of identity construction, as understood through sensemaking, also extended to the perceived threat to the organisation's identity represented by Denning as an unknown person and also by the radical change idea he was communicating. The questions and comments from the audience immediately suggested that the change idea could not work in, and was not suited to, the organisation. Listeners felt that the idea suited the larger agency Denning represented, but not the smaller one with which they were associated.<sup>252</sup> They also questioned whether the idea was ahead of its time for any organisation in Switzerland – an unavoidable characteristic of their organisation's identity. Listeners immediately defended the existing identity of the organisation, and thus their own, in the face of a change for which they did not have an available identity to respond effectively.

### **3.1.3 The storyteller's identity**

The familiarity of Denning's identity as experienced by the audience would, like the identity of the story's protagonist, also increase the likelihood that the audience would recognise and accept the change idea as being a good idea. The thought process in the mind of the listener is likely to be: "Someone like me, with the same experiences and challenges, supports the change idea, is acting accordingly, and is successful in the organisation, therefore I, who am like that person, should be able to act in the same way and achieve similar organisational success."

By immediately presenting the story and predicament from a point of familiarity, the audience is less likely to spend time trying to assess Denning's identity and what it means for them. The focus can then be on the story, the change idea and the future, and hence the journey through sensemaking can be taken in partnership rather than in a potentially adversarial relationship.

Much of what has been suggested in the preceding paragraphs is confirmed when one considers Denning's failure with the use of a springboard story as reported in the Bern example. The role of identity construction in sensemaking is particularly noticeable when it is not facilitated.

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<sup>252</sup> Denning, S. 2001 98

Denning opens the chapter relating to the Bern presentation by saying “We learn more from our failures than from our successes.”<sup>253</sup> This observation is a timely one, as it is in this experience that a factor in the storytelling experience that is only implied in the successful experiences is most noticeable: the sensemaking process taking place within the mind of the storyteller during the encounter. In Bern the presentation was given to a group of managers from a small public-sector agency. Unlike the previous presentations, they were neither members of the World Bank nor were they knowledge managers. In those instances Denning’s position, role and expertise had provided him with identities that were competent and effective for those circumstances – and would have been viewed as such by the audience. Through his own retrospective process, he found cues and connections between knowledge management and solutions to predicaments that organisation members experienced in similar contexts in the organisation. In the Bern situation retrospection would not have elicited any past known events with which he could make sense of speaking to that audience – making sense of their context, experience and change environment. As he notes, on arrival, “Here in Bern, I have less of a *sense* of what I am getting into.”<sup>254</sup>

The storyteller’s search for an appropriate identity is, as with any person, ongoing and social. During Denning’s meeting before the presentation, he is concerned with trying to establish what the audience, and the broader organisation, are expecting from him, and who they think he is.<sup>255</sup> He is trying to define his role in their change efforts and thus who he needs to be during the interaction with organisation members. At the same time, he is trying to establish the other identities that will be in the room. This concept continues during the presentation when, on meeting the audience, he immediately tries to think how to adjust what had been planned for this specific group. He is reacting to his perceptions about the perspectives of the audience and trying to find a new identity to be successful in the interaction with them. This adjustment continues through the presentation<sup>256</sup> as, without better knowledge of the audience members and their contexts and identities, the search for an appropriate identity that fulfils the requirements of identity construction in sensemaking does not yield results. This inability to construct an overriding identity for

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<sup>253</sup> Denning, S. 2001 93

<sup>254</sup> Denning, S. 2001 94

<sup>255</sup> Denning, S. 2001 95

<sup>256</sup> Denning, S. 2001 96

the specific social interaction, and the related constant adjustment, impacts on the ability to convey the story successfully, as there will be an absence of strong, consistent, identity-based action.

Thus it appears that, just as a sense of identity impacts on the actions that the audience take – either virtually during the story, or in the organisation as a result of the story – the identity of the storyteller impacts on his actions as storyteller and change agent, and therefore on the story experience and story success in catalysing change.

Time and energy was spent by the audience attempting to assess Denning's identity in relation to their own and in relation to their context.<sup>257</sup> This attempt to define Denning's identity would have been driven by, and coupled with, a related search for self-identity ("If he is he, then who am I?"). Without knowledge, or a perception, of the storyteller's identity the creation of self-identity is made difficult and will continue to divert the focus of attention from the story. The focus on a search for identity means that the ability to focus on the story and the cues it introduces is reduced, and the continued search for an appropriate identity also means that identity-based action cannot take place. This is because, as long as the mind is engaged in a search for identity, there is an absence of a specific identity on which to base actions.

#### **3.1.4 From virtual to reality**

Denning himself points to the contribution of sparking story co-creation – a key characteristic of the springboard stories - in enabling identity construction.<sup>258</sup> The stories created in the minds of the listeners allow them to create the appropriate identity for themselves in the situation described. Thus, in the change environment, there is a sense of control in the identity chosen; it is not an identity forced upon the individual by unknown circumstances, or by external change agents. Rather, the choice of identity is a decision made willingly by the individual, knowing that it will be affirmed in the changed environment.

Furthermore, the springboard story stimulates the creation of a similar story in the mind of the listener, and this second story is mentally extrapolated into the reality of the listener's unique context. The confirmation of the identity in the original story also

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<sup>257</sup> Denning, S. 2001 95

<sup>258</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

provides confirmation for the parallel identity in the second story, thus providing a confirmed identity for selection in the reality of the listener's context. The implication of this is that, when the change idea is introduced into the real context of the listener, the anxiety of choosing an identity and related actions in that context is reduced, as the social acceptance of an identity like that of the protagonist in the story has already been confirmed.

### **3.3 Actual events, actions and plot: retrospection**

Meaning that is transferred is recalled far better when it is presented as a story. Cognitive science has shown that memorable information is more likely to be acted upon than information that remains unconscious and not retrieved from memory,<sup>259</sup> which makes the more easily remembered story an important contributor to retrospection.

When reflecting on their own past, while drawing on the elements described in the story, listeners can move forward through the change proposal from the perspective of their role in their own world. The familiarity of the role and predicament in the story reminds people of a dilemma that they frequently encounter.<sup>260</sup> The story is an invitation to reflect on their own past and guides listeners to the specific elements upon which the change agents wish people to focus.

By structuring and relating the story in this way, and describing the past event in terms of the change proposal and related success, the story generates a specific view of that past in the minds of the listeners. The story draws the listener to give attention to two cause-and-effect relationships: one between the actions of the protagonist and the results, and one between the change idea and the results. Thus, when attempting to assign sense to that past event, people have selected points of reference available to focus on as being the logical cause of the event.

The structure and content of the springboard story facilitates the realisation of the required feeling of coherence, clarity and rationality regarding the change idea and a

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<sup>259</sup> Sinclair, J. 2005 58. Additionally, the idea that story is memorable is also supported by Alexander Laufer, quoted in an interview with Simon Lelic of the ARK Group (Lelic, S. 2001 3). Laufer notes that "Moreover stories are memorable. The messages stemming from a particular experience tend to stick."

<sup>260</sup> Denning, S. 2001 86

successful outcome in the organisational environment, and thus enables people to cease retrospective processing and to begin moving forward.

Support for this suggestion comes from the reaction of people after one of Denning's first major interventions where he used the *Zambian story*. These audience members asked "Why don't we do it? What's the next step?",<sup>261</sup> which is a clear indication of acceptance that the change idea can and should be implemented, and that the audience is no longer reflecting on the past, but rather focusing on the future and a move towards it. Additionally, the questions are framed with personal action in mind – listeners use "we" and are looking for an active "step".

From Weick and Senge we have seen that people can only meaningfully envision the future when speculation about that future is tied to reflection of the past.<sup>262</sup> This presents a useful perspective for considering Denning's observation that the *springboard stories* work best when presented at the beginning of interventions (meetings, presentations, conversations), and where any analytical content or detailed theory are presented after the story.<sup>263</sup>

Denning notes that where the analytical information relating to the change idea or envisioned future world, or a status update on the implementation of an organisational change initiative, is presented ahead of a story, the focus and attitude of the audience is quite different.<sup>264</sup> He has found, in those instances, that the audience is critical and sceptical, and dwells on the initiative's problems, rather than looking forward to solutions and positive outcomes. Given what we know about the retrospective process in sensemaking, it would appear that in such a scenario listeners are attempting to make sense of the change idea, but are not able to achieve the feelings of coherence, logic and rationality required to end the process and move forward. The change idea presented in this way is not grounded in the past and cannot be viewed through the lens of a familiar past event upon which listeners can reflect in order to assign meaning to the current change. The question Weick poses - How can I know what we did until I see what we

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<sup>261</sup> Denning, S. 2001 24

<sup>262</sup> Weick, K. 1995 30; Webber, A. 1999 178

<sup>263</sup> Denning, S. 2001 150

<sup>264</sup> Denning, S. 2001 152

produced?<sup>265</sup> – resonates here. The analytical information attempts to convey what is being done with regard to the change, but in the absence of a final product, people will find it difficult to make sense of those actions, and will thus not be able to move from retrospection to future-orientated action. The criticisms and focus on the flawed details represent the attempt of people to make retrospective sense of a given situation, and the related inability to do so in the absence of an historical account of the results of the change idea.

In contrast, the story as the initial part of the presentation of the change idea provides listeners with a historical reference. The story, with its logical flow between cause and effect, answers the question that Weick poses – How can I know what we did until I see what we produced? - in the minds of the listener. The product is clear and made explicit in the story, as are the actions that led to that product. Knowing what was produced enables the listeners to make sense of the actions taken, and the story clearly presents the change idea as what was done to produce the outcome that has been observed. At the outset, then, the retrospective process is focused on the story and the same search for coherence, clarity and rationality is fulfilled by the elements, content and structure of the story. With the story highlighting a familiar predicament and quickly bringing the different aspects involved in resolution together in an organised manner (coherence), using few words to concisely articulate the specifics from start to end (clarity), and making clear and almost singular connections between the change idea and the “happy ending” (rationality), listeners are able to stop the retrospective process and use the results of the reflection to begin to look and move forward. This future view, and the move from reflection to action, is experienced from the time following the completion of the retrospective process, and thus from the completion of the telling of the story. Hence, introducing the story as early as possible will be more successful in igniting action in a change environment, as people are able to make sense of the change idea and begin to move forward earlier.

Denning’s own view of how stories can be effective in changing organisations, through enhancing or changing perceptions, captures the essence of how storytelling facilitates retrospective sensemaking of new ideas most effectively:

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<sup>265</sup> Weick, K. 1995 30



“While every creative idea must be logical in hindsight (otherwise we could not appreciate its value), this doesn't mean that the idea has to be logical in foresight, or that the communication of the idea has to be by logical persuasion of its merits. In fact, if the idea is big, bold, and different it is going - initially - to look very illogical because of the perceptual fields of the listeners. A story is thus a way of making a strange new idea familiar and comprehensible and acceptable to a potentially resistant audience.”<sup>266</sup>

The specific structure of springboard stories further facilitates sensemaking through its articulation of an envisioned future that has not yet taken place, and the clear links made between that future and known past events. This linkage enables the use of extrapolation and fictionalisation, which is not questioned by listeners.

While this can also be attributed to the plausibility of the story – both the factual and extrapolated portions<sup>267</sup> - the retrospective property of sensemaking suggests that it is also the close and explicit link between the factual historical occurrence and the fictionalised, or envisioned, future world that plays a significant role in people's acceptance of an extrapolated future. Additionally, the very act of articulating the envisioned future as if it already exists contributes to sensemaking in the mind of the listener.

The extrapolated part of Denning's stories is essentially a strategic vision for the organisation. Presented on its own, such a vision is a description of an environment which does not yet exist and is frequently an inadvertent attempt to get people to view the future in their minds without reflecting on the past. However, the presentation of the extrapolated future as a connected outcome to the factual and meaningful past casts a different light on the view of that future. The first portion of the story provides the known past elements that, during reflection on the past, provide the feelings required to assign sense to the past and move forward towards a future to which sense can be assigned using those same elements as reference. The extrapolated portion articulates a vision of the future, a future closely coupled to the past and its familiar elements. Through the story, the familiar and factual elements from the past are immediately and explicitly linked to the envisioned future. Moreover, the extrapolation brings the envisioned future into the current context. The extrapolation of the future, included as part of a story about the past,

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<sup>266</sup> Denning, S. 2002 5

<sup>267</sup> Denning, S. 2001 34

invites people to view the future as if it had already happened. The outcome is presented as being the effect of the causes that took place. Denning is thus articulating a history that did not actually occur, but could have – the extrapolated springboard story creates a history for its audience to incorporate into the future envisioned through a change proposal, and thus facilitates retrospective sensemaking of that change proposal. The organisational future resulting from the change proposal is thus no longer simply a vision, or an unknown entity, but a new frame of reference for ongoing sensemaking and related action amongst organisation members.

The “happy ending” described in the springboard story, explicitly linked to the change proposal, will result in the listener making a strong link between the change idea and the associated positive outcome, and remembering the outcome as being a direct result of the change idea. The extrapolated future provides an insight into the outcome of what could be perceived as a complex and multi-faceted occurrence, and thus removes uncertainty associated with the change idea and its impact on the reality of the listener. The simplification of the causal relationship between the change and the outcome - a key characteristic of the springboard story – is likely to be a contributing factor to the move towards action, even if it may not provide all the detail, background and peripheral information that would be a more accurate and complete description of events.<sup>268</sup>

The timing of the use of the stories in the context of the entire change process can also be seen to play an important part in the success of the stories in generating action and forward movement. Each of the stories was presented early in the change process and, generally, ahead of the actual change initiative being implemented. The stories all contain an element of “what if...” and recognise that, in the environment of the audience, the changed environment does not yet exist. The audience is thus invited and enabled to experience the implementation of the change idea, and its results, on an environment very similar to their own – without actually having to deal with and process the change in their reality. The interruption can be identified with, but it is not an actual disruptive experience at the time of hearing the story. It is important to note that, because the stories are complete in the sense that the outcome of the change idea is included, the resolution of the interruption is provided as a reference at the same time that the interruption itself is.

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<sup>268</sup> Weick, K. 1995 28

Listeners therefore hear, absorb and will be able to recognise all the elements in the story in a similar future situation in their environments.

Through an understanding of the retrospective nature of sensemaking we know that an interruption to the normal flows experienced by people triggers sensemaking, and that this sensemaking process seeks to find references in the past with which to make sense of the current interruption. By using the stories, as described, before the change idea is introduced in the organisation, a relevant and, in terms of the change idea, useful reference is created in the minds of the organisation members. The interruption caused by the actual implementation of the change idea in the organisation is thus reduced by the familiarity of the interrupting event and the required actions to manage the interruption created through the storytelling process, and the sensemaking process is facilitated and accelerated. Thus, in terms of the specific change idea, the story is not an explanation of what is happening during implementation. Rather it is a description of what people can expect from the change idea, a reference to look back on when the change idea interrupts the normal workflow, and an articulation of what the history of the organisation could be through the implementation of the change. The history contained in the springboard story provides answers sought during the efforts to make sense of the present.

Although sensemaking can be facilitated, the process itself cannot be dictated, and takes place at a personal level, with unique perspectives and outcomes. Through the limited detail and emphasised cause-effect links of the springboard story, the storyteller can provide the seeds from which listeners can make sense. However, this approach recognises that sense will be made in, and influenced strongly by, the context of each listener. In the absence of detail, listeners are encouraged to fill in the gaps in a way that completes the story for them in the context of their environment.<sup>269</sup> Participating listeners are able to visualise the missing links in their own context and to add patterns and linkages accordingly,<sup>270</sup> establishing causal links for themselves, using the influence of their current context.<sup>271</sup>

The told story can, at most, trigger the creation of a new story in the minds of the audience, a story which combines the elements of the heard story with the information

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<sup>269</sup> Denning, S. 2001 68

<sup>270</sup> Denning, S. 2001 69

<sup>271</sup> Weick, K. 1995 26

that already exists in their minds. Denning's experience has shown that the successful story leads to listeners viewing the information they already have in a new way: making new connections and establishing new patterns, and understanding connections between things in a different way.<sup>272</sup> This mirrors almost exactly the findings of the investigations into retrospection and sensemaking noted in Weick.<sup>273</sup>

By completing the story in this way, listeners can create their own feelings of coherence and continuity required to make sense and move forward from retrospection.

Familiarity supports the quicker generation of a sense of coherence and rationality, and listeners are thus able to move forward through the retrospective processing aimed at making sense of the predicament described.<sup>274</sup>

Perhaps the most simple, yet most telling, indication that the use of stories plays a contributory role to retrospection is the observation that stories *remind* listeners of a dilemma that they frequently encounter in their own professional lives.<sup>275</sup>

The told story provides links between new actions and behaviours and the successful resolution of a recognised problem. The listeners, reflecting on the story events from the perspective of their own unique context, transfer those actions, behaviours and related links to their context when creating the analogous story.<sup>276</sup>

Where the story is too strange for a particular audience, sensemaking in terms of the change idea will be hindered, as it is likely that attention will be focused on the explicit story details, rather than the message they carry. A strange story will interrupt normal flows and present an unexpected version of events. Listeners will treat the story events in the same way as any other interruption – they will try and make sense of them in order to move beyond those events. This will happen quickly if the story provides feelings of coherence and logic. However, if the story itself is incoherent and illogical to the listener, time will be invested in trying to generate those feelings with regard to the story and

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<sup>272</sup> Denning, S. 2001 83

<sup>273</sup> Weick, K. 1995 26

<sup>274</sup> Weick, K. 1995 29

<sup>275</sup> Denning, S. 2001 86

<sup>276</sup> Denning, S. 2001 87

forward thinking will not be possible, as listeners need to continue the retrospective process, focusing on the past events described.<sup>277</sup>

This was most apparent in the experience in Bern. The agency had not experienced the change idea in any way, and even the supporters of knowledge management were not certain of its nature and what the change would entail.<sup>278</sup> Their past experience would not have provided any references that would assist in making sense of the new idea introduced in the story. The interaction was essentially an attempt to provide a vision of a future, but without a past to reflect on that would have assisted members to make sense of the change and feel a logical, clear and coherent flow between past actions and similar actions in a new future world. The difference between their past and the future described in the story was too great for them to make the mental leap in understanding required to make sense of events in a way that could drive actions suitable for the new world. This resulted in a focus on the details of the story, and how different the environment, predicament and actions described were from their own environment. Attention remained focused on the past.

Finally, the two seemingly contradictory characteristics of the successful stories, that is, completeness in terms of presenting the full event sequence from beginning to end, alongside incompleteness in terms of detail, influence the successful use of the story to ignite action through their contributing role to the retrospection inherent in sensemaking.

The completeness aspect - the full embodiment of the change idea – means that the story does not need to be updated over time.<sup>279</sup> Throughout the change implementation the story remains the same, in that it is independent of the current change, as it describes an actual event which has happened. Changing circumstances today do not affect the happenings of yesterday. Paradoxically, changing circumstances today do affect how the happenings of yesterday are remembered. The lack of detail in the story, and the implied invitation to listeners to make connections and links that are meaningful in their world allows for the assigning of multiple and varied meanings to events in the story as current circumstances change. The story provides a continuous frame of reference during the implementation of the change idea, with listeners interpreting it in different ways and

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<sup>277</sup> Weick, K. 1995 29

<sup>278</sup> Denning, S. 2001 95

<sup>279</sup> Denning, S. 2001 69

assigning its content a different meaning each time they reflect on it when trying to make sense of their changing environment. Each reflection results in the gaps in the told story being filled in different ways, and different linkages being granted attention and importance.<sup>280</sup> The elements of the story could be found to be connected in various ways, and in fact the particular elements noticed in the story could be different at different times of reflection. It is these phenomena that provide a broad scope for making retrospective sense of the events in the story in a way that enables a move towards action in a changing environment, for which the story is a past reference. Thus the changed context of the audience gives them a new way of looking at the same story.

### **3.4 Happy endings through selected actions: enactment**

The springboard stories immerse the protagonist, and at the same time the listener, in the environment described, both in the initial predicament phase and in the problem-resolution phase, making it clear that the environment in the story influenced the actions taken, and that the actions taken also influenced the successful environment that marked the end of the story. The “happy endings”<sup>281</sup> were a clear result of the identity of the organisation created through the implementation of the change idea, and the identity of the protagonist as an actor whose actions in terms of the change idea provided solutions that were previously not probable. In terms of identity, the individual’s association with organisational identity – seeing himself as the organisation – is of particular importance. The change idea in the organisation created an environment that facilitated individual success in the story, and listeners recognise that it will be actions taken in relation to that change idea that will create a similarly successful future in their actual context.

Through the virtual journey in the story, people create and re-create the identity and future of the organisation and the role that they will play in this new future. The experience of the familiar story-world as real, and the easy transition between that world and reality, leads listeners to begin making decisions and behaving in terms of this new vision of the future within the reality of their context and thus in the organisation. Listeners begin acting based on a vision of the organisational future created at the time of the story. These actions, conducted in the reality of the organisation, then serve to create the organisational future described in the story, transforming the vision into reality.

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<sup>280</sup> Denning, S. 2001 69

<sup>281</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xx

The use of stories thus acknowledges the influencing role of the people in the audience, recognising that it is the actions of those people that will create the desired environment. It also facilitates the retrospective sensemaking of the future required in order to begin acting as a result of the influence of that future.

Simplistically, the causal and enactive relationship between the world of the story and the real world of the organisation can be depicted as a circle beginning with the actions described in the story. Actions taken in the story create the environment which enables other actions taken in the story. The environment thus described in the story becomes an imagined future in the real world, which then influences the actions of the listeners as they attempt to make it a reality. The imagined future is then made real through those actions, and the environment in that future enables the successful implementation of actions of the type taken in the story. Thus, the actions of the listeners create the future which they believe is necessary in order for them to act in that way.<sup>282</sup>

It is perhaps worth noting that the oral communication of the springboard story and the co-creation process that the narrative format invites also facilitates enactment during the storytelling encounter. The reaction of listeners enables the storyteller to adjust the story and the storytelling emphasis based on the recognition of which elements resonate with the audience. Through this emphasis and other adjustments, listeners adjust their responses and views from within their co-created story. In this way, the storyteller is creating the environment in which he is telling the story, and the listeners are creating the environment in which they are both listening to and creating a story relevant to their context.<sup>283</sup> The lack of detail in the springboard story provides for more flexibility in its telling, as there is more scope, for both storyteller and listener, to add in detail and “colour” around the straw-model that the basic story represents, and to influence and respond to the storytelling environment accordingly.

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<sup>282</sup> Webber, A. 1999 178 With regard to learning for change, Peter Senge notes in this interview, that “the first round of change activities somehow led to second-order efforts. The original group would spawn a second group, and gradually new practices would spread throughout the organization.” This mirrors the idea of the actions of some creating an environment which then support further actions of the same type.

<sup>283</sup> Denning, S. 2002 4

### 3.5 Relationships within and beyond the story: social

The social property of sensemaking is, in itself, not a property that can be influenced. One cannot create more or fewer social circumstances, or affect the level of social consideration in an individual attempting to make sense of an event. It is, however, a property that must be acknowledged at all times, as it is present and influential at all times.<sup>284</sup>

Perhaps an initial advantage of the use of stories is that the nature of storytelling is itself social. Stories are told based on the assumption of an audience, whether physically present or imagined, and whether present at the time of the initial telling or considered likely to exist at some point in the future. Thus storytelling assumes a social context and interaction and, in fact, relies on them for its very existence.

The harmony between the social nature of storytelling and the social nature of sensemaking is more likely to aid sensemaking, albeit indirectly. Certainly, the two processes are less likely to generate feelings of conflict than would be the case during attempts to marry two processes with conflicting natures.

We have seen that the search for identity, in the light of the social considerations of the sensemaking process, is an attempt to find an identity that is positively confirmed by other people and their identities.

Sensemaking theory has shown us that there is a rehearsal process that takes place before interactions between individuals.<sup>285</sup> A sensemaking process takes place before the interaction, based on the anticipated and assumed identities and reactions of the other parties involved in the interaction. It is reasonable to assume then that the listeners in Denning's audience have gone through a process of sensemaking before they interact through the storytelling encounter. To that encounter they will bring identities linked to the context in which they experience the organisation. That context will include the social considerations and perceptions used to facilitate the sensemaking process. This knowledge and experience of the context in which they operate in the organisation plays a significant role in the success of the springboard stories.

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<sup>284</sup> Weick, K. 1995 38

<sup>285</sup> Weick, K. 1995 40



The springboard stories acknowledge that any attempts to make sense of an organisational change will necessarily take place from the perspective of, and be strongly influenced by, the context of the sensemaker. They also acknowledge that related actions will be selected based on the sense that can be made of the change idea in that context and the associated belief that the actions taken will lead to success. Listeners will also use their context and the people within in that context to evaluate the meaning of “success” insofar as that success positively confirms their identity in the environment resulting from the change.

Through their involvement in the story process, listeners are able to consider the reactions of their social environment to the elements in the story and to select actions based on those reactions. Listeners are then able to live the story in their context, confident that the social reaction will be positive and that they will be seen to be competent and their status in the organisation enhanced. This is the ultimate value of the stories’ recognition of the importance of social context in making sense and choosing actions.

An additional thought concerning the social nature of sensemaking and the role of the springboard story in deriving organisational benefit from this phenomenon is perhaps more of an inference based on an understanding of the social property and is not specifically noted by Denning. Each of the stories was related to a group of people from within the organisation. In some instances audience members were from the same level in the organisation, or had similar roles. Examples given included “an enterprise-wide committee of senior managers charged with orchestrating organizational change”,<sup>286</sup> and the “entire senior management team”.<sup>287</sup> In other instances there were both managers and staff present.<sup>288</sup> From our understanding of the social nature of sensemaking, it is reasonable to assume that the reaction to the story, the identity created through the storytelling process, and the planned and subsequent actions will be influenced by the presence of the other members of the audience.

If, for example, some members of the management team immediately respond positively and assure the storyteller and group that the change can be successfully implemented in their context and that they will be able to act to achieve that success, it is very likely that others will also want to appear as able to act and achieve success for the organisation,

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<sup>286</sup> Denning, S. 2001 23

<sup>287</sup> Denning, S. 2001 25

<sup>288</sup> Denning, S. 2001 49

from within their specific context. Where management and staff are together in the audience, staff are likely to respond in a way that they believe will enhance their image amongst management. Management will also want to maintain a positive image amongst the staff. Thus, by presenting the change idea in a social environment, the social properties of sensemaking and the related drive to action are further influenced and in turn influence the actions taken.

The Bern example is useful in highlighting the various levels and influence of social interaction and consideration that surround attempts to make sense of interruptions, current context and organisational change.

Denning, as a newcomer to the environment and storyteller in an unknown context, spent time and energy trying to assess the social dynamics of both the environment as a whole and of the audience specifically. The need to try and establish this understanding, during rather than ahead of the interaction, and the related need to create a suitable identity for the social context, impacted on his ability to make sense of the situation and act accordingly.

The influence of the organisation, as a determinant of behaviour in the storytelling encounter, as well as on behaviour in general, is acknowledged in this observation, as well as in the listeners' reference to the organisational culture, its members and nature as reasons why the change could not work. Furthermore, the members attending were instructed to do so and did, despite their personal views. This also indicates the role and social influence of others – in this case probably more senior managers and leaders - in the context of the listeners.

Denning notes that the audience was made up of people with different responses to the change idea.<sup>289</sup> Yet, it would appear that after the presentation all questions and comments were negative. The need to search for cues to express the unhappiness felt about the change led to the selection of a cue, expressed by one person, which then became a common cue through which those in the group with similar negative emotions could express their feelings.<sup>290</sup> As soon as one person expressed some negativity, it created an atmosphere where it was socially acceptable to express similar negativity. This social dynamic within the audience probably points to a similar dynamic within the

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<sup>289</sup> Denning, S. 2001 95

<sup>290</sup> Denning, S. 2001 97-98

greater organisation, in all likelihood strongly influenced by those who were willing to speak up in the presentation, thus gaining and maintaining political power in the social arena.

For the storyteller who is foreign to the environment and context of the audience, the social dynamics that influence the choice of identity and related actions can have a negative impact. Presenting the change idea needs to be aligned to a positive response that is likely and desired in the organisation, and, in the Bern example, the outcomes and related approval in the story were apparently not important in the context of that audience. The social acceptance gained by the protagonist as a representative of the organisation in the story was not an influential consideration for the Swiss agency and its people, and did not represent a desired response or outcome. However, Denning's unfamiliarity with the organisation and its social structure and network meant that he could not present alternatives that would have spoken to the social acceptance needs of his specific audience. The rewards of changing identity and actions, both at a personal and organisational level, were not sufficient to drive a change in the minds of the listeners. With no knowledge of the individuals in the audience, having had no time to meet them before, the problem of understanding the social considerations and needs of those people on a personal level was further exacerbated. Thus, a lack of insight into, and understanding of, the ever-present social dynamic in an organisation impacts on the ability of the storyteller to respond to it in a way that facilitates the sensemaking.

### **3.6 “It probably did, and could, happen that way”: plausibility**

We have seen that plausibility is important for sensemaking and it is plausibility that is sought during the retrospective process.<sup>291</sup> Plausibility is essentially recognised when potentially causal elements and outcomes are viewed in such a way that connections between the two can be made and those cause-and-effect connections appear to be clear, likely and reasonable. The brevity of the springboard story brings the elements and outcomes into close proximity, and also brings the connection between the two into clearer focus.

The construction of the stories immediately reduces the likelihood of the question “Could this have happened?” arising for the story as a whole and thus provides a plausible

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<sup>291</sup> Weick, K. 1995 56

framework from within which cues can be highlighted. The story's familiarity enables the listener to consider its elements in his own context, overlaying his own context over the explicit story, creating a new one that, along with the cues provided, is "true" for his context in a way that cannot be dictated by someone outside of that context.

Sense will always be assigned to the story based on the context of the listener, and the elements of the story, added to the information already housed in the mind of the listener from his experience in his environment, will be used to test the plausibility of the events described.<sup>292</sup> This process of recognising and testing is accelerated by the familiarity of the protagonist as created by the predicament, which further reduces the ongoing need for the question "Could it have happened?" with regard to the problem situation described.

In terms of accelerating forward motion, and specifically motion towards action, Denning's experience of the difference in reaction when the story is told at the outset of an interaction, compared to the reaction when a technical analysis is presented first and the story after, provides an interesting echo to one of the reasons why people don't search for accuracy in order to make sense. Where analytical detail is presented at the outset, people expect and seek a level of accuracy, as such analysis does not allow for creativity and personal interpretation.<sup>293</sup> Although the story then presented does not have the same qualities, neither does it expect the same unemotional and rigid response, it becomes subjected to the same search for and application of accuracy. In such situations people begin to examine the story itself and do not respond to the embodied message. They query the accuracy and believability, as well as whether the story has broad appeal, or whether there are some specific details that account for the suggested outcome, and which are unique to the single story described.<sup>294</sup> In this mode the audience is unable to move beyond the story itself and focuses their sensemaking energy on the one specific past event, unable to find the coherence and logic necessary to provoke future-orientated action in similar change environments.

In contrast, when using the springboard story with the story presented at the outset, sense of the change is made sooner, and future information – both immediate and more distant -

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<sup>292</sup> Denning, S. 2001 10

<sup>293</sup> Denning, S. 2001 62

<sup>294</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

is interpreted, and responded to, from an elevated level of understanding and with an action-orientated mindset.<sup>295</sup>

Within the story, the outcome produced is successful and enhancing to the protagonist and, most importantly in this regard, the actions described are specific, reasonable in terms of broader application, possible in the listeners' contexts, and clearly have a direct influence on the successful and self-enhancing outcome described. Thus the story provides the plausibility required to make sense and move forward, while supporting the filtration of "noise" and peripheral stimuli that do not drive action and mobility.

The noticeable energy and positive body language observed in the audience would also appear to indicate acceptance of the plausibility of the story, as that property has shown us that the process used to filter stimuli is carried out in such a way that only those stimuli leading to action and mobility are used as a reference to determine plausibility. At the same time, through enactment, this acceptance of plausibility drives the action and mobility that confirms the plausibility. Thus the visible energy and move toward action based on those elements in the story indicate acceptance of plausibility of those story elements.

Thus, for a brief period of time, the story brings a number of seemingly disparate concepts and elements together in a way that assists listeners to assign meaning to what is essentially a complex issue.<sup>296</sup> The story acts as a filter, rendering the complex simple by highlighting linear causal relationships from within a multitude of non-linear causal relationships. These linear relationships are unlikely in the real world and therefore the story unlikely to be accurate in the purest sense. However, the linearity is needed for the human mind to deal with the complexity inherent in major organisational change, and if the linear reduction to a cause-and-effect sequence for the story appears reasonable and logical, sense can be made of the complex change, based on the simple story.

A more explicit example of the role of plausibility and specifically its role in action-orientated sensemaking is given by Denning's reported attempts to verify the Zambia story and his actions based on his acceptance of plausibility.

None of his attempts to verify "accuracy" involved a first-hand account or experience of exactly what had happened, or precisely how the events had occurred, yet were

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<sup>295</sup> Denning, S. 2001 15

<sup>296</sup> Denning, S. 2001 37

considered enough to confirm the accuracy – actually plausibility – of the events in Denning’s mind, and thus actions based on that plausibility were initiated. The very use of the story for other audiences to increase the understanding of the complex change idea and ignite related actions was based on Denning’s own acceptance of the plausibility of the story, which facilitated mobility and action in him in the reality of his context.

### **3.7 Simplicity, with limited detail: focus on selected cues**

Even before using stories, Denning’s efforts to communicate his change idea allude to the role and importance of cues in a changing environment. When trying – and struggling – to convince individuals of the change idea, he notes that he found himself “jettisoning anything that didn’t fully connect, and accentuating any ideas that seemed to strike a chord and resonate”.<sup>297</sup> Thus, he was focusing attention on some things and ignoring others. However, these instances appear to be less about a leader drawing the attention of people to chosen cues supporting a change, and more about manifestation of the need people have for cues that resonate with their context. It was the listener in these cases that determined which cues would receive focus – cues that were extracted from the listeners’ current frame of reference, without leadership intervention. The use of story changed this relationship, and it was he, as storyteller, who selected the cues to be focused on and guided the attention of the audience to those specific cues.

The specific nature and structure of springboard stories influence two key aspects relating to cues. Firstly, they highlight specific cues and draw the attention and focus of the listeners to these cues and their causal relationship to a positive outcome. Additionally, they specifically recognise the importance of context and make active use of the existing frames of reference of the audience members in an attempt to ignite action and future-oriented thinking.

The stories highlight specific elements, actions and behaviours as cues within the change idea. The surrogacy assigned to cues means that these specific elements, actions and behaviours will be seen and treated as the change idea. Reasoning will be as follows: if the element in the story can lead to success, then the change idea that includes that element can lead to success. Importantly, the entire change idea is reduced to those elements highlighted in the story. This means that the power that lies in the hands of the

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<sup>297</sup> Denning, S. 2001 9

storyteller is quite significant. The story is selected to highlight and communicate specific aspects of the complex change idea. These aspects, above all others, will receive attention through the implementation process, and listeners will see successful implementation of the highlighted aspects as successful implementation of the change. Thus, if important aspects required for successful change are excluded as contributory factors in the story, and others included, the process going forward from the storytelling encounter could move in a completely different direction than that desired, simply because those driven to action will do so with a focus on the highlighted cues, and not the intended cues, which remain amongst the myriad of possibilities.

This limited focus on specific elements, and the exclusion of peripheral activities and detail, supports the sensemaking process by extracting cues from a large number of possibilities on and by which sensemaking is then focused.

People will more easily recognise an extracted cue, or highlighted element, as having an impact on an outcome. They will accept that that impact is both more likely and probable than they would recognise and accept the same cause-effect relationship between an entire complex range of cues, or elements, and the outcome. In the shortened and structured world of the story, the audience feels a connectedness that is more direct and vivid than their reality. Inside the world of the story, the audience's lives "appear as through a lens that makes sense, as though the hazy fragments for once come suddenly into focus."<sup>298</sup> This focus then facilitates a remapping of their lives to the universe, with clearer links between the two. These observations further support the suggestion that storytelling, in its role of highlighting cues and strengthening perceived connections, is a useful and natural means of contributing to sensemaking in the members of an audience, and thus to the performance of related action.

The use of a story early in interventions further supports the sensemaking process in relation to the role of cues. In this way, the cues contained in the story are immediately highlighted and attention drawn to them. Sensemaking efforts throughout the rest of the intervention, as well as beyond, will be focused on and by those cues. Denning has experienced this himself and he notes that where the story is used as the opening of a presentation, questions and responses from the audience flow from the context of the

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<sup>298</sup> Denning, S. 2001 61

specific elements and relationships in the story, but with a view of the future and successful resolution of similar problems.

Where analytical presentations are used first, and story as a later attempt to explain those presentations, people focus on different aspects and fail to see the story's message as the key area of focus.<sup>299</sup> The specific change ideas that the leaders want the listeners to focus on are not highlighted sufficiently in the analysis and they are likely to spend time and effort attempting to find their own cues amongst the possibilities available. It is this search that the presenter experiences as an inability to "see" the value of the change idea and perceives as the listeners' pedantic questioning in terms of the details of the story.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

<sup>300</sup> Denning's different experiences using analytical presentations first and using story from the outset can be explained by the effect that story has on enabling a creative response to perceived threats, such as those introduced by change (Parkin, M. 2004. 44). During periods of change, individuals become anxious and their capacity for creative thinking plummets. We have seen that this is likely to be because changes are interruptions that disrupt the normal and expected flows, and that the resulting inability to complete planned sequences leads to autonomic arousal – a narrowed focus on the task at hand, and an inability to consider much beyond. Mary Parkin notes that the brain operates differently when a threat is perceived – using less sophisticated creativity from the neo-cortex and more basic survival-type thinking from the brain stem area. The reaction to information presented in the shape of a story is different to information presented in the left-brain analytical style. Storytelling, being interactive and complex, requires that listeners engage both the left and right hemispheres in order to manage information. The biochemical changes that have been found to take place in the brain during storytelling encounters further reduce stress and increase relaxation, enabling the use of the creative zones of the brain. These processes help bypass the analytical functions, and make people more receptive and open to new ideas. The triggered creativity enables people to make new mental connections between seemingly unrelated concepts.

The findings regarding the effect of storytelling on the brain support the experiences Denning has had with the springboard stories and also offer further insight into the contributing role the stories play in sensemaking. The reduction of cortisol, and therefore stress during the encounter, is equivalent to a reduction in arousal, which reduces the likelihood of a narrowed focus on known cues at the expense of new cues useful for the changed environment. Furthermore, this reduction in stress, coupled with the engagement of the higher levels and both hemispheres of the brain, makes listeners more receptive to the new ideas presented in the context of the change idea. In particular, the ability to make new connections and to see new patterns and linkages supports sensemaking efforts, as this is a critical element in the process. The springboard story, with limited content, is structured in a way that actively encourages the personal identification of links and patterns, thus further building on the nature of a storytelling encounter. Thus, through the use of story listeners are more open to accepting and making



Storytelling does not only acknowledge and take into account the differences in the context of the audience members, but its use actively encourages listeners to use their own context to influence the implementation of the change idea proposed and highlighted by the story.

Using story, the individual is encouraged to select the actions he feels will change the environment successfully, and then to act in terms of the changed environment. This acting in terms of the change can be assumed to be a result of the cues highlighted at the time of storytelling, as it has been shown that people maintain faith in extracted cues and use them as references on a sustained basis.<sup>301</sup> Thus, successfully highlighted elements and actions required for successful change are likely to be referred to on an ongoing basis as people move beyond the story and through life in the changing organisation.

The absence of detail in the stories used therefore serves at least two purposes: it allows people to complete the details in their own minds, as best applicable in their own context, and thus to enact their environments accordingly; and it ensures that the included elements, and their influence on a successful outcome, are clear and noticeable and available as extracted cues for later reference during retrospective sensemaking attempts.

The sustained use of cues and the influence of context on interpretation are neatly summarised in Denning's observation that the stories used do not need updating as the organisation moves through change, or as the audiences change.<sup>302</sup> The value of the story lies not in the story itself, but in the meaning assigned to events in the story by the listener. We have seen that the stories are constructed and presented in a way that encourages listeners to provide patterns and linkages between described events. These additions to the story and the related interpretation of what the story means are based on the context and current situation of the listener. If the context and situation change, the patterns and links are created differently and the story is interpreted differently.<sup>303</sup> The same story is taken to mean something different. Thus, people update and add to their available references to make sense of the change using the same story. Thus the story and

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sense of the newly introduced and highlighted elements and cause-and-effect relationships presented by leadership, and required to move forward and act in the new organisational environment.

<sup>301</sup> Weick, K. 1995 53

<sup>302</sup> Denning, S. 2001 69

<sup>303</sup> Denning, S. 2001 69

the events it describes remain a point of reference and focus when people look back for elements in the past which can be applied to make sense of a current unexpected situation or change, making the springboard story a valuable asset in facilitating sensemaking.

From the Bern example it is apparent that, where highlighted cues are not familiar, or related to the context of the listener, the storytelling encounter fails to ignite action and catalyse change.

In that instance, the proposed change introduced elements that represented a significant shift for the organisation and its people, and clearly indicated a major interruption to the expected sequences and flows.<sup>304</sup> After the encounter, Denning notes that the audience felt that the change idea would create a rush into the future, opening “the sluice gates of the future (that would) drown their habitual patterns of action.”<sup>305</sup> In the absence of appropriate past events to deal with the new interruption, listeners to the proposal would have sought to find any points of reference that they could use to make sense of the situation and that they could focus on and feel a level of control. We know that, from a sensemaking perspective, autonomic arousal would increase until a suitable response to the interruption could be found.<sup>306</sup> We also know that people will initially choose to focus on known cues that are a part of expected flows, even if unsuited to deal with the new world that the interruption creates.

That this process occurred in this encounter becomes apparent when the first question asked is about the technology and software used to create the presentation slides.<sup>307</sup> The listener in question is choosing to focus on a narrowed area that is controllable and understandable, almost in rebellion against having to deal with the interruption that the content and message of the story represents. This narrowed focus, on a known – though possibly unsuitable – cue, is typical of the response of someone experiencing autonomic arousal as a result of interruption to the expected sequence.

The effect of this first question is greater than simply to detract from the message of the presentation and to create a subject tangent for one listener to engage in, along with the storyteller. In the absence of familiar cues in the change proposal, the technology cue

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<sup>304</sup> Denning, S. 2001 100

<sup>305</sup> Denning, S. 2001 100

<sup>306</sup> Weick, K. 1995 46

<sup>307</sup> Denning, S. 2001 96-97

presented by this one audience member quickly becomes the cue on which the rest of the audience can focus. This is likely to be reflective of two aspects of sensemaking. The first echoes that noted in the previous paragraph: the technology aspect, as a cue, presents an element from the entire fabric of the unknown change idea that is familiar and that has relevance and impact in the world of the listener. Again, there is an implication of autonomic arousal, the early stages of which lead to a narrowed, generally quite intense, focus on known cues from the old known world. In the uncertainty of the proposed change, technology is an almost “tangible” aspect on which to grasp. The second aspect relates to the role of feelings and emotion in sensemaking. The audience is clearly uncomfortable and unhappy with the change idea. At the same time, their technology-related questions indicate feelings of discomfort and unhappiness, and even hostility,<sup>308</sup> towards technology. During sensemaking, people tend to remember past events that generated the same feelings and have the same emotional tone as the events experienced currently.<sup>309</sup> Explanations for their reactions to the current interruption are chosen because they feel the same. In this case, the feelings generated by the introduction of technology, and the status of technology in the Swiss environment, were chosen as a reference point to react to and attempt to make sense of the change idea proposed in the story.

From the above, we see the negative effect that occurs where the story ideas and events are unfamiliar to the audience and do not stimulate the selection of a past event that can be related to in order to make sense of the current interruption the story introduces. The same process will take place within the listeners, but they will choose other events with which to try and make sense of the change. Those events may not only shift the focus from the change idea, as contained in the story, but also change the reactions and later actions taken in terms of the change, as the patterns and connections identified between causes and effects are no longer related to the implementation of the change idea. The observation that the storyteller needed to know more about the audience and their experiences, and felt the need to adjust the presentation for this specific audience, offers indirect support for the importance of being able to launch the story from a point of reference with which the audience is familiar, will recognise, and through which will be prompted to remember their own similar experience. This memory, along with the

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<sup>308</sup> Denning, S. 2001 98

<sup>309</sup> Weick, K. 1995 49

successful outcomes arising from the change idea presented in the story, will then contribute to the co-creation of story and actions in terms of that idea, and that are suitable for the current change and future world.

The Bern experience emphasises the powerful influence that cues have, and in particular the importance of the provision and highlighting of specifically chosen cues by leadership during times of organisational interruption. People need points of reference to focus on, and in the absence of cues highlighted by leadership, will find others to fulfil their need.

In Bern, technology was selected as a cue, in the absence of a suitable alternative. Listeners then focused entirely on the technology aspect, despite repeated attempts to show that technology was not the focus of the change.<sup>310</sup> Once chosen as a cue, the link between an element and the whole becomes stronger and clearer in the mind of the sensemaker, and shifting the focus from, or changing the perceptions about, those links becomes increasingly difficult.

The role of emotion and feeling in sensemaking is once again apparent in the Bern example. Just as the “happy endings” would be remembered as cues that generated positive feelings, cues with negative emotional connotations will influence the emotional response to the current change.

The importance of not only extracting, but clearly highlighting, cues in order to stimulate action during organisational change is echoed in the various instances of failure reported by Denning in relation to the springboard stories. In each instance, behaviours and actions were chosen based on elements other than those embodying the change idea.

Where the story is related as a means of later explanation or evidence to support a more analytical presentation of the change idea and related future,<sup>311</sup> elements in the story are not the initial cues highlighted for focus. Instead, facts presented in the change presentation will be the cues receiving focus and the story elements introduced later will be examined in the context of the earlier analytical presentation.

The absence of familiar past events and cues with which to make sense of the present and future, and the associated arousal, is likely to lead to a focus on cues which are familiar,

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<sup>310</sup> Denning, S. 2001 97-100

<sup>311</sup> Denning, S. 2001 14

even if unsuited to the new world. Thus, listeners ignore the cues presented later through the story and strongly couple cues from their existing world to the change idea and future.

In presenting the stories in a written format, without emphasis and guidance from a storyteller representing leadership and supporting the change idea, people are in a position to choose their own cues in their own context of the change. The uncertainty of the change leads to a focus on cues that they feel they can control and a disregard of peripheral cues. In this case, the focus shifted to the degree to which the stories represented the divisions of the organisation equitably. This aspect enabled readers to argue and establish a position on an issue not related to the change idea itself. Thus, the focus was on that which was known, and avoided the new and unknown elements introduced by the story. This approach to unwanted interruptions is further echoed by the fact that many people chose not to read the stories at all, thus ignoring the cues contained in the stories, as well as the stories as a cue, completely.

The absence of a strong voice, guiding the creation of the secondary story, providing the cues and frames within which that story is created, highlighting the patterns and enabling the living of the story while hearing it, diminishes the impact and success of the story experience.

### **3.8 The complete story: reducing vicarious autonomic arousal**

The plot of each springboard story facilitates ongoing sensemaking during the storytelling encounter, by immediately providing alternative responses to interruptions that enable successful completion of a desired sequence or project.

The virtual world in the listener's mind is modified by the context and experiences of the listener. The world of the story becomes essentially a reflection of the world of the listener, with recognisable flows and sequences, a recognised identity and expectations of events and actions.

Thus, the listener actively recognises and experiences the interruptions in the story, but from a perspective influenced by their context and identity. The emotional response and arousal created by the interruption are felt by the listeners, and they too seek to remove the interruption or to identify alternative responses to ensure continuation of planned sequences and positive confirmation of identity

Each springboard story contains a number of elements that are experienced by the protagonist as interruptions. The initial interruption is a need or client request that could not be predicted and that was directed quite specifically at the individual in question. In each case, the need was not part of the normal activity or project flows and was therefore an unexpected event.

The second interruption occurs as a result of the first. The unexpected nature of the requests and needs defines them as interruptions. However, in each case there was the possibility that a response to the request was readily available and accessible to the protagonist, through the normal project activity flows in their context in the organisation. If that were indeed the case, the impact of the interruption caused by the request would have been greatly reduced and the interruption removed through the normal continuation of the project sequence.

This, however, does not happen in any of the stories. The current nature of the organisation and context in which the protagonist operates does not enable him to respond adequately to the initial interruption. This inability to respond is labelled as the predicament in the springboard story.<sup>312</sup> The predicament prohibits the protagonist from continuing his normal activities. The predicament also threatens the identity of the protagonist, creating the possibility that he will be viewed as incompetent and ineffective by the client. This interruption magnifies the impact of the initial interruption and will trigger a new search for alternative responses, new attempts to remove the interruption and renewed efforts to continue with the normal project and activity. In reality, this process of sensemaking and the related search for alternative responses or solutions could take a significant amount of time and energy.

However, the springboard story takes a specific direction and is constructed in a consistently specific way to reduce the emotion and arousal associated with the interruption, and to enable sensemaking and related forward motion in the protagonist. This is done by immediately introducing the change idea as the provider of alternative responses to the predicament. The links between the change idea and a successful response, and thus transactional outcome, are clearly defined. The change idea is clearly positioned as an alternative response to the interruption. In addition, this alternative not only allows the protagonist to continue operating, but actually contributes to the

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<sup>312</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xix

continuation of action on a more self-enhancing basis – demonstrating increased competence to the client. The search for alternatives is a far less time- and energy-consuming process, as a most appropriate alternative is made immediately available.

The paradox of “familiar yet strange”<sup>313</sup> introduces an interesting perspective on interruptions in the springboard story. Inasmuch as the predicament represents an interruption for the protagonist, it is important for retrospection that the predicament is familiar to the audience. For the audience, the recognition of the predicament as an interruption may be more muted than for the protagonist, and this is balanced by the fact that the predicament is familiar to an extent, but still contains strange or unusual elements. In contrast, the change idea and particularly the response alternatives it presents are unexpected for both protagonist and audience. The expected flow of events does not happen, and the unexpected flow of events that does happen leads to previously unachievable success.<sup>314</sup> Thus, the introduction of the change idea also represents an interruption. However, in this case the interruption is one that generates positive emotion<sup>315</sup> through enabling a meaningful response to a request, quicker delivery of requested information, and better-quality information to fulfil that request.

The outcome in the story provides an affirmation of the listener’s own identity, and ensures that that identity is recognised as useful in similar situations. Actions in the reality of the change environment will be taken by the listener on the basis of the story-world experience, and because the story embodies the change idea, these actions will, in turn, create the change environment in the reality of the listener, who is now an enactor.

### **3.9 Telling the story early: reducing autonomic arousal during change**

The springboard story contributes to sensemaking beyond the storytelling encounter by providing potential answers in the search for responses to interruptions in the reality of the change environment.

Sensemaking is ongoing and thus it is necessary to consider the nature of events beyond the storytelling encounter, where the organisation members are no longer audience

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<sup>313</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xix

<sup>314</sup> Denning, S. 2001 126

<sup>315</sup> Weick, K. 1995 47

members but active and productive contributors, responsible within, and for, the ongoing life and processes in the organisation. The true value of the stories used by Stephen Denning can only be assessed through consideration of the role, if any, that they play in the greater organisational context in support of successful change and associated action from the people making up that organisation.

In the changed World Bank environment opportunities for new experts, in new spheres, would have arisen – opportunities for new identities to be constructed to face a new context successfully. These new identities would be affirmed in the new environment, and those who selected them and acted accordingly would find themselves positively confirmed. The threats to the existing individual identities would also be experienced as interruptions and would trigger sensemaking.

The changes that were introduced into the World Bank were significant interruptions and would most certainly have triggered sensemaking caused by arousal. It is during these sensemaking processes that the value of the use of story to catalyse change and ignite action is realised. Let us consider the original *Zambian* story by way of example.

It is first important to consider the status of the attempts to introduce the change idea, in this instance knowledge management as a whole, prior to the use of the specific springboard story. The process of trying to introduce the change idea was a difficult one, as people did not want to listen. Most people did not see the idea in the same way that Denning could and his attempts to convince them were not overly successful. He notes that, “To them, the notion was strange and incomprehensible and outlandish, almost contrary to common sense, as if coming from another planet.”<sup>316</sup> People approached about the change were resistant as they were not unhappy with the way things were. They identified strongly with the organisation and felt safe within the existing state. Suggested changes to the organisation, implying that it needed improvement, or was not adequate in some way, were taken as implying that the individuals themselves needed improvement, or were not adequate, and people reacted as if hurt by those suggestions.<sup>317</sup> Given an understanding of the role of interruption, emotion, arousal and sensemaking, these reactions are neither unexpected nor unusual. The people in question had no past experience that provided the means to make sense of this radically different and new

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<sup>316</sup> Denning, S. 2001 9

<sup>317</sup> Denning, S. 2001 13



environment, and they remained locked into the retrospective process, unable to take action in the new context and move forward.

Through the journey inside the story, the listener has experienced the interruptions, felt the emotion, experienced the arousal and, due to the specific characteristics of the springboard story, discovered the actions and behaviours that lead to success in that environment. In the case of the Zambian story, the organisation, availability and accessibility of organisational knowledge was experienced by the listeners who entered the world of the story, before they experienced it as a real change in their real existence and context. From our understanding of sensemaking, we can see that this would have had two effects during the introduction of the change idea into the reality of organisational life: the interruption would have been less significant as the change is not as unexpected as previously would have been the case and, more importantly, levels of arousal would have been reduced as a personal review of past experiences to find a relevant one to deal with the interruption and associated arousal would have elicited the story experience and events. This experience would contain a relevant frame of reference with cues on which to focus, an affirmed identity for selection in the changed environment, and clear indications of actions that would lead to successful outcomes. Thus, by hearing the story at the outset of the change implementation, before the change interrupts the flows in the organisation and in the lives of the people within it, listeners are able to make use of it in the retrospective process of sensemaking, obtaining the feeling of coherence they require to cease focusing on the past, and to act in accordance with a move to the future.

Through the sensemaking process that is facilitated during the storytelling encounter, listeners are able to select identities for the new environment. Through their active participation in the story world, and their creation of new stories that are aligned to, and based on, their context in the organisational environment, they are able to immediately select actions and behaviours that will confirm their identity in the coming changed environment. Thoughts and planned actions in this regard are expressed in their questions: “Why don’t we do it? What’s the next step?”<sup>318</sup> Listeners leave the storytelling encounter acting in accordance with the identity that they have identified as being a suitable and enhancing one in the new environment. Through these actions, as we have seen from the

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<sup>318</sup> Denning, S. 2001 24

explanation of the role of enactment in sensemaking, the listeners actually shape the environment that they believe they are acting in. This change in the environment, then, is no longer seen as an interruption, as it is not imposed on the regular flows experienced by the members of the organisation. Instead, the change flows from the members themselves, as they act with a sense of ownership of the idea. People are energised and motivated to make their ideas reality and in turn, through this energy, create the environment in which their ideas flourish.<sup>319</sup>

During actual experience of the change implementation, where client needs are met more efficiently and comprehensively, and identities are positively confirmed, and the interruption to previously standard processes therefore causes positive emotions, a reflection on the past will highlight cues that generated similar feelings. Included in these cues will be the lived stories, which led to “happy endings”,<sup>320</sup> thus confirming the change idea and related actions as being the reason for the positive outcome and feelings. The change environment will thus continue to be enacted through those actions identified in the story that embodied the change idea.

Each story was used early in the interactions in which the change was to be communicated and action ignited. This immediately engaged the listeners to participate in the story-creation process, and to become active protagonists in the change environment in their own contexts. Each story, even if used during the change process, introduced an aspect of the change idea and related behaviours and actions that were not yet taking place, or were not taking place effectively and consistently. The Chile story, for example, used extrapolation to articulate a future and actions that were not yet taking place in the organisation.<sup>321</sup> With the Yemen story, the communities of practice required for sustainable knowledge management – a very specific element among many others that were implemented – were not being created and sustained.<sup>322</sup> In each instance the change idea represented an interruption for which organisation members would not have had a past experience to reference during attempts to make sense of the change. However, by positioning the story first and facilitating the creation of a relevant reference, the actual

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<sup>319</sup> Denning, S. 2001 27

<sup>320</sup> Denning, S. 2001 xx

<sup>321</sup> Denning, S. 2001 33

<sup>322</sup> Denning, S. 2001 43

implementation could move forward as people could move forward and act based on their ability to make sense of the element of change, through finding a past experience that created the feelings necessary to stop retrospection and enable action. Each time a new direction of action was required during the change process, a new story was created and presented, creating new frames and cues for reference and focus throughout the changing process, and thus moving people through that change.

### **3.10 The story as interruption**

The “traditionalist attack” on the Pakistan story provides an interesting sidebar into the importance of sensemaking in generating and enabling actions. Although this example is used by Denning largely to support the structure of the story, and to indicate that a high level of accuracy and detail is not necessary to increase the validity of the story in terms of energising people and generating actions for change, an understanding of sensemaking shows us that the failure of this story to energise this individual is a result of his own inability to make sense, not of the story contents and messages, but of the phenomenon of storytelling itself.

The individual in question was a “traditionalist” accustomed to using an analytical perspective to understand the past, present and future. The existing state and approach of the World Bank was familiar and strongly identified with. The use of analysis would have formed the basis of all past attempts to make sense of events, and a reflection on the past to attempt to make sense of the storytelling phenomenon, would not have yielded a similar experience with which to assign meaning. The use of story itself would be seen as an interruption to the expected flows and sequences of understanding the organisation and its identity. As noted, the expected flow “beginning with definitions, followed by premises and evidence, ending with linear inferences” is absent with the use of stories.<sup>323</sup> Thus, for the analytical minds in the organisation sensemaking efforts will first and foremost be focused on attempting to deal with the interruption caused by the use of stories, before any attempt to make sense of the interruptions within the story can take place. Given the previously noted absence of relevant past events and cues with which to address this interruption, the focus is likely to be narrowed to that which is known, as a result of autonomic arousal. It is this narrowed focus on the known that led to the

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<sup>323</sup> Denning, S. 2001 174

analytical interrogation of the facts represented in the story and the reality of the current organisation.

# Conclusion

The challenge facing organisation leaders in their quest for organisational success and sustainability in an era of inevitable change is essentially the challenge of shifting identities in a complex environment.

Organisations are complex systems, made up of social networks of people, and complexity is responded to, managed and acted upon at a local level. Thus, where leadership aims to shift the identity of the organisation, the focus of attention needs to be on shifting identities at the personal and individual level. People not only need to act differently, they need to be different people.

The search for, and ability to create, identity is a fundamental human need, and is the key driver of the organising required to respond effectively to complexity and to identify and implement suitable actions in the face of the disruptions and uncertainties the complexity introduces into the flow of organisational existence. In order to facilitate a shift in identity for both the individual, and thereby the organisation, leaders need to facilitate the creation and selection of the required alternative identity in the minds of the people who need to shift.

The process of organising and selecting identities which can act is sensemaking, and thus leaders essentially need to facilitate sensemaking in people if they wish to move people forward in a changed environment, and spark actions that support the sustainability and success of the new world. From the preceding pages it can be concluded that leaders seeking media to assist with the required facilitation of identity shift, and therefore sensemaking, are likely to achieve success through the use of storytelling.

In particular, springboard stories as developed and used as suggested by Stephen Denning facilitate each of the seven properties inherent in the sensemaking process, and thereby enable the creation and selection of successful identity and actions for the new organisation environment that arises as a result of significant change and related disruption.

In addition to the reported effect and value of the narrative format inherent in story and storytelling, the successful use of stories to ignite action during times of organisational change lies in their contribution to sensemaking among organisation members. The

success of the springboard stories has been shown to be independent of the storyteller (Denning) and the organisation in which they were told (The World Bank), and rather dependent on their ability to address the needs of people trying to make sense of a world which no longer contains that which has been known and expected.

The stories address fundamental and deep-seated human needs, and enable the human desire to be able to act, and act boldly. This is the true value of storytelling, a value that renders storytelling not a fad, but rather a powerful tool that simplifies complexity and enables new actions and identities in response to significant change.

The preceding pages have not only suggested storytelling as a means of communicating organisational change and igniting related action in individuals, but also an indirect criticism of traditional approaches to organisational change and attempts to obtain “buy-in” from those affected by the change.

A typical experience of organisational change is one where leadership decide on a change that they believe needs to be implemented. Staff are frequently kept uninformed while leadership develops the concepts and all the related detail, along with presentations detailing all the mathematical, financial and graphical implications of the change and what the anticipated organisational benefits are. Included in the presentations are descriptions of what will need to be done in the new world, and indications that there will be no place for the old way of doing thing. Every aspect of the change is included in the presentation, to ensure that people are aware and informed of everything that the change entails.

The detailed presentations are then presented at various interventions and made available in detailed brochures, with requests for questions to be raised at any time. Questions are generally responded to with additional information.

Where people do not “buy-in”, as is often the case, special change management interventions are implemented – often incurring considerable expense – to try and gauge why people are not receptive to the change, and to try and convince them otherwise.

Analysing storytelling in the context of sensemaking has indicated a number of reasons why the traditional approach generally fails to contribute to successful organisational transitions, especially retaining and successfully utilising existing staff.

The level of detail included in change-related presentations mirrors the complexity of the change itself, and does not enable the simplification of that complexity as required for

people to make sense of it. Furthermore, people cannot picture themselves amongst all the technical and quantitative detail. Telling a story presents the change in such a way that it can be processed – reducing the number of included components, and simplifying the relationships between the fewer included components.

The typical leadership approach of limiting communication with staff until details are finalised is often as a result of a commonly held – and heard – belief that until things are certain, sharing information is pointless and possibly misleading, and increases levels of discomfort through the uncertainty. In these instances, people have the entire complex change idea thrust upon them as a completely new concept, and one that significantly interrupts their normal work flows, and differs from previous expectations relating to organisational life. Telling relevant stories throughout the development of the change idea, and during the planning for its implementation and outcomes that is happening at a leadership level, gives people an opportunity to consider and make sense of limited aspects of the change at different times.

Apart from providing more manageable quantities of information to which people need to assign meaning, through sensemaking, presenting the information in the story-format provides a less stressful and more relaxed environment in which to process the change idea and its elements. The use of the stories ahead of the introduction of the change idea provides people with reference points during their retrospective review of the past which will be triggered by the interruption the actual change idea introduces. This is in contrast to the traditional approach of non-communication ahead of the change, which does not provide any reference points for making sense during the introduction of the change into the organisational environment of the affected people.

That stories simplify complexity, and provide reference points for retrospect, further places them in direct contrast to the traditional “big-picture” presentation format. This format frequently presents all the detail involved in the proposed change, with each element afforded the same attention and level of importance in terms of generating success. A significant number of elements are included in the presentation, and the audience is frequently expected to consider and realise the importance of each and all of these. A carefully constructed story, with limited detail, highlights just one or two actions that are required to achieve success through the change. These actions are extracted from all the possibilities and made focal points for the story audience. The story reduces the number of options of which people need to make sense, and provides them with an

indication of the level of importance of the possible options. Implementing the change idea is thus reduced to the implementation of specific and limited actions, and the anxiety associated with making the decision as to which actions are the “right” ones is also reduced. This enables a change of focus within people from deciding “what” actions should be implemented to “how” required actions should be implemented.

Finding oneself and one’s role amongst the volume of technical data generally presented in support of the change idea is both a difficult and stressful experience. The world associated with the change idea is one in which existing roles and actions no longer fit, and the presentations are usually structured and pitched at an impersonal and generic organisational level. The nature of the presentation, and the need to present to various audiences within and without the organisation, means that there is seldom capacity to tailor it to the individuals making up the audience. Such presentations do not, and cannot, take the personal context of each listener into account when communicating information about the change idea, and focus instead on the impact at an organisational level.

Use of a springboard story-type to communicate the change idea reduces it to the experiences of one familiar person, in a familiar context, dealing with a similar change to his environment. While the change idea remains as significant at the organisation level, the story speaks to its significance at an individual level. Additionally, people do not have to find themselves amongst vast quantities of data; the role of a successful person in the change environment is not only highlighted in the story, but is made central to the success of the change. Rather than creating feelings of being controlled by an inevitable and intimidating change, the story creates feelings of a person – significantly, a person just like the listener – being in control of the change, making it happen and contributing to the organisation’s success in the new world. Through the intertwining of the identities of the story protagonist and the story listener, the feelings of control, creation and contribution become the feelings of the listener, and these feelings assist in catalysing related actions in the changed environment.

In addition to the personal nature of the change as presented using the story format, the specific brief nature of the springboard-type story - with its invitation to fill the gaps and make personal connections – means that it can be used for various audiences at different times, without having to be significantly altered. Unlike the traditional detailed presentation, which relies on completeness and comprehensiveness of data and thus significant preparation and effort by the presenters, the springboard story engages the



audience to create the detail, around a limited number of focus points presented in the story. The same story will enable the assignment of different meaning to the same elements in different contexts, whereas a detailed analytical presentation has limited scope for interpretation and multiple meanings in varying contexts and circumstances.

We have seen that making sense of a change is a requirement for people to be able to move forward through the change and act successfully in the world the change introduces. A fundamental sensemaking concept that has to be remembered is that it is a personal process – sense cannot be made on behalf of someone else. Thus, leadership cannot *make* something make sense for their people; they can only facilitate sensemaking. Traditional presentations tend to attempt to communicate the sense the leaders have made of the change, with an expectation that this sense can be transferred to the people with whom it is being shared. Listeners are then asked to accept the change as leaders understand it and act accordingly. Storytelling, in contrast, encourages and enables sensemaking in listeners, using the story as a basis for the process, not as an attempt to capture the process as experienced by leaders. Where traditional presentations can be seen as an endpoint of leadership sensemaking efforts, stories can instead be seen as a starting point for sensemaking efforts in the organisation's people.

Springboard stories are simple in content and provide a fairly uncomplicated means of communicating complex changes and igniting related action, suited to the changed environment. However, leaders and change agents should not be misled into thinking that the apparent simplicity of the technique, and the value that it offers, replaces or reduces the effort required from leadership to successfully move people forward during times of change and disruption. Rather, the stories require a different type of focus, effort and awareness from leadership.

During times of change, the traditional search for words to describe an unknown future will need to be replaced with a search for appropriate past events through which the future can be narrated as if it had already occurred. (Interestingly, the inability to find suitable stories where success has been achieved through the introduction of the change idea is a potentially useful indicator that leadership can use to question the value of the change idea in terms of achieving future success.)

Given the importance of context for sensemaking and, in particular, in terms of realising the value of story through its facilitation of the sensemaking process, leadership needs to be actively aware of the contexts in which people operate within the organisation. We

have seen that stories are effective tools for facilitating sensemaking where they are plausible in the context of the listener, where events and characters are familiar, and where the storyteller is familiar with the context of the audience. Thus, although one aspect of the value of stories is that they can be used with various audiences and at various times, the story itself needs to be carefully chosen for those multiple audiences. That choice must be based on the context of the audience in relation to the change, and this can only be done where context is known and understood by those wishing to facilitate the selection of new identities and related actions suited to the change.

Storytelling is interactive and requires true engagement of the audience to be successful. The springboard story, in particular, depends on engagement and the establishment of a relationship between storyteller and listeners. The story designed to spark a second story and actions does not work on paper, or without some level of connection and shared understanding between the storyteller and the audience. This ability to engage people through story requires different skills to those of traditional presenting, and introduces a new challenge for those needing to communicate change. The skill required is no longer that of being able to use eloquent words to tell people about the change and the future, but to share information with them in such a way that they are able to describe the change and future in their own words in their own minds. The ability to facilitate this type of self-discovery, sensemaking, and action-decision in relation to organisational change is where leadership power is gained through the medium of story.

Storytelling is thus a powerful medium for both individuals wanting to act and contribute to a changed environment and for those wanting to facilitate the actions and contributions required to successfully change the environment. However, success in the use of storytelling in this way depends on leadership not only telling the right story, but also on telling the story right.

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