

Four story-based practices to foster insight

by Shawn Callahan and Mark Schenk

Nick was standing in front of a wall of stories. Each A4 sheet of paper sported a single anonymous anecdote illustrating either a good or bad management behaviour, collected from Nick's company.

One story had captured Nick's attention and made him agitated: *"I can't believe this guy. Imagine answering a phone in an interview. My God, he even stepped out of his office to chat with someone who was just passing by."*

His complaints caused others in the workshop to wander over to see what was going on. As Nick was spluttering his displeasure, Paul, one of his colleagues, jumped in: *"That was my anecdote Nick, and it was about you."* Nick's face turned red and before he could say anything, another colleague added: *"It totally nails you Nick. It's spot on. You do it all the time."* By now, everyone in the workshop was watching. It seemed the next few seconds would reveal Nick's true character.

Nick's face was ashen as he looked around the room. He gathered himself and then apologised to his colleagues, adding: *"I can't promise you it won't happen again – I wasn't even aware I did this. But I can promise you that I'm going to make every effort to change my behaviour."* And to Nick's credit, he did. At the time of the workshop, Nick was the head of sales and marketing at the company; he's now the CEO.

There was a big difference between what Nick thought he was doing and what he was actually

doing. It took a story, and the willingness of his trusted colleagues to speak up, to make him aware of his poor behaviour. As a result, Nick's insight was both cognitive and emotional: cognitive in that he could rationally understand what he was doing wrong, and emotional in that he felt intense embarrassment at having discovered that the bad behaviour he had ridiculed only moments before was his own. This combination of insight and emotion created a powerful impetus in Nick to take action.

Nick is not alone in being blind to his own behaviour. We've conducted this type of story-based workshop about fifty times. First, we ask everyone to put a green dot on the most positive stories, then to put a red dot on the stand-out negative stories. The third instruction is to put a blue dot on the stories that remind the attendees of the things they do themselves. The results are always clear-cut: at a ratio of three to one, each person says they do mostly positive things, leaving the negative behaviours to those other people in the organisation. This ratio stands even when there is an overwhelming proportion of negative stories on the wall. We just don't see ourselves as doing bad things.

The same can be said of behavioural change – sometimes we start doing things differently without being fully aware of it. During one of Shawn's family's many Christmas visits to his parents, who live near the beach at Jervis Bay

to the south of Sydney, Shawn's father described how he had recently had some car problems due to a bad batch of petrol. He had had to drain his little Datsun truck of all its fuel. When Shawn asked him where he had gotten the bad gas, his father said: *"This service station was being refuelled by a tanker and it was probably churning up all the sediment in the underground tanks. I happened to fill up when all that muck was floating around."* Then he said: *"I will never again fill up at a service station if I see a tanker parked there."*

Shawn was pretty sure his dad wasn't explicitly aware of the insight he had just had. It's an example of how insights can be cognitively invisible but still result in behavioural change, and helps explain why it can be so difficult to determine why we do what we do.

Practice 1: Collect a set of anecdotes on a topic of interest. Bring together your organisation's decision-makers to seek out the repeating patterns in the stories – the behaviours. You will be surprised by the insights that emerge.

In 1419 the city of Florence had a beautiful cathedral, but it lacked a dome. So the city's wool merchants guild, which had been responsible for creating the cathedral, held a competition to find someone who could design and build a mammoth cupola for the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore. One of the entrants was Filippo Brunelleschi, a goldsmith who had come up with an ingenious design but was too afraid to fully present his idea in case it was stolen. The judges' frustrations with Brunelleschi grew and grew as he repeatedly refused to provide the detail needed to assess his entry, or an explanation for his reluctance. Then, one day, Brunelleschi suggested that each competitor take part in a test of creative skill, with the winner to take out the design competition.

The test involved taking a boiled egg and trying to balance it upright on a marble bench. Each competitor duly tried and failed. Then Brunelleschi stepped up and slammed his egg into the marble, flattening one end of it and leaving it standing perfectly upright on the bench. The selection committee discounted his performance, saying that anyone could work out how to do what he had just done. *"That's exactly my point,"* Brunelleschi retorted. *"When you see my design, you will mistake its elegant simplicity for something that is obvious – but only in hindsight."* With that, he obtained a guarantee to keep his design a secret and eventually won the competition.

Now, it's most likely that the egg story is a 15th-century urban myth with as much veracity as the story of the apple that fell on Isaac Newton's head. The lesson, however, is clear: once an insight has been gained, it can seem rather obvious. One person's insight is another's common knowledge. But there is something else to learn from this story. Rather than tell the judges straight out that he had concerns about sharing his design, and so risk their denial, Brunelleschi created a situation, the egg test, that allowed the judges to work this out for themselves. In effect, Brunelleschi triggered a new story that solved his problem.

We saw the power of people working things out for themselves in Nick's story above. People rarely like to be told what or how to think. There is even a psychological predisposition that partly explains this response. The confirmation bias has it that if a person has a strong view on a topic and you attempt to argue for an alternative viewpoint, the person merely strengthens their view; they dig their heels in. To become open to changing their mind, they need to experience your new way of thinking either first-hand or vicariously through a story.

Robert Kegan, a Harvard professor and psychologist, explains in his book *'Immunity to Change'* that we need new stories to see the world differently, and that these stories come from new experiences.

This idea was made clear to Shawn while he was conducting a workshop with eighty professors at Melbourne University on ways to improve collaboration. He began to make the point that two important behaviours for good collaboration were to make and keep promises, and to speak your mind to anyone on the team with respect and good intent. But as he spoke, he noticed a woman at the back of the room who was sitting with her arms crossed, shaking her head, clearly very unhappy with what Shawn was saying. So he stopped his presentation and asked the woman if she would like to share what she was thinking with the rest of the group. Practically before Shawn had finished his request, she said, *"There is **no** way in the world you can be open and honest with a senior professor around here."* Before Shawn could comment, she went on to tell a mini story: *"I once did what you are suggesting and I had to move departments."*

Now, no amount of clever argument or telling of familiar stories would have changed that person's mind. She had obviously had an incredibly bad experience. The only way to help her gain a new insight would be to create an experience with a different result to what she was expecting. She would then have a new story that would in turn guide her future behaviour.

Practice 2: Create new experiences for your team where they come to understand and feel a totally new way of thinking. Importantly, give them an opportunity to gain the insight for themselves. Simply telling them about it is often insufficient. It is much better for them to act their way into a new form of thinking.

A couple of years ago, a university library was preparing to move to a new, purpose-built, ultra-modern building. The move required a huge number of things to change, including the library's culture, and we were invited to help it with this aspect. The first thing we did was to collect stories from the library's employees which illustrated the current culture and values. Then we gathered everyone together for a workshop to identify the patterns in those stories.

At one point in the sense-making workshop, ten librarians were looking at a set of anecdotes about their value of 'excellence'. After reviewing their cluster of Post-it notes, they concluded that the key issue was that they needed more training. They refused to change this view despite Mark's gentle prompting that there might be something going on at a deeper level. Then Mark suggested they use a story spine to tell the story of 'training' in the library.

A story spine is just a simple story structure. Here is the one we suggested the librarians use:

In the past ...

Every day ...

But one day ...

Because of that ... (repeat three times or as often as necessary)

Until finally ...

Ever since then ...

And the moral of the story is ... (optional)

The librarians then set about creating a story that explained what was happening in the organisation around training. The story they produced was about a woman named Sue (not an actual person but a character representative of a type of person in the library) who had a bad habit of talking behind people's backs. Sue was always bitching about people on the one hand, but always said the right things to the right people on the other hand. Then, after Sue was promoted, people realised she couldn't do the job and they started bitching about her. One day, one

of the staff, who had left because Sue was mean to him, ran over her in his BMW at some traffic lights. Many people danced and were happy.

The librarians were shocked at this story. They looked at each other and, almost in unison, said: *"We don't have a training problem in our library. We have a bitching problem."* And right there and then they committed themselves to tackling bitching, which they ultimately did.

Sometimes an insight is sitting just under the surface of people's awareness, waiting to be named – as soon as it is, everyone knows it to be true. The story structure creates a safe way to talk about these types of sensitive issues because the authors of the story are illustrating the behaviours without personalising the actions.

You just haven't made sense of something until you can tell a story about it.

Practice 3: Whenever your team gets stuck and thinks there is something just under the surface of everyday practice that's creating the problems, pull out the story spine and get them to create some stories to explain what's happening.

One day an expert photocopier technician goes to help a new team member with a problem he's been trying to solve for a while but without any luck. The devices in question are not ordinary photocopiers but monster machines designed for high throughput. The new technician starts by telling the expert the story of what has happened so far, then they try a few things. When the machines display an E053 error, the expert groans and says, *"I remember the first one of these I ever had ... if it is what I think it is. I got an E053 and immediately started replacing the dead shorted dicotrons. They were blowing the circuit breaker. But as soon as I did this I created a 24-volt interlock problem and you can chase that one forever and **never** find out what it is.*

I happened to pull up the dC20 log and I could see I was getting hits on the XER board. It was an XER failure. So I replaced it, then the dicotrons, and stress-tested the bugger and the real error code displayed. You can't believe what the machine tells you."

This story is an adaptation of one of the marvellous anecdotes Julian Orr recorded while conducting his ethnographic study of Xerox photocopier technicians for his book *'Talking about Machines'*. The stories that the two technicians tell each other establish the common ground that allows them to understand what is happening when they start diagnosing the problem. It's impossible to notice anomalies unless you have a story that represents what is normal. Then, when something happens that doesn't meet set expectations, a new story is needed to make sense of the new facts. In this example, a single story is told that holds the answer. More typically, many stories are told, each one compared and contrasted with the situation at hand. Each story subtly rearranges the facts until an insight emerges.

We can systematically create insights with stories by taking scenarios from other industries or companies and applying them to the problem at hand. The IT research firm Gartner has noticed that some of the best-performing organisations actively seek out business models – fundamentally, stories of how businesses create value – from industries that are different to them yet have similar business characteristics. For example, an airport examined Disneyland's amusement parks for insights because the objective of both businesses is to get lots of people who are milling in a confined area to eventually line up: in one case to board a flight, and in the other to board a ride. Insights emerged for the airport when it viewed itself as an amusement park.

Practice 4: When diagnosing a problem (strategy development is a good example), encourage everyone to share stories that shed light on what's happening. Then systematically seek out stories from other industries that are structurally similar to yours. Get used to finding and telling these stories.

The stories we tell ourselves form the foundation for how we perceive and receive new data. Inputs either accord with our story, pull at its edges or turn it upside down. A somersault is usually an indicator of real insight. The question then becomes: Do we bury it or do we actively try and create a new story to explain it?

Stories are also fundamental in creating common ground among groups, and as we saw with the Xerox technicians, they act as a thinking device to help us reorder and arrange the facts we are receiving. Stories are essential for diagnosing and making sense of what we notice.

Stories also hold up a mirror to our own behaviours. Not only do they help us to see something new, they also generate the emotion that motivates us to take action as a result of such insights.

Lastly, we can take stories further and apply them systematically by seeking out analogies from other industries. These foreign stories are the equivalent of putting on a new pair of glasses that help us interpret the familiar in a totally new light. As a result, insight occurs.



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