

Once upon a time | How storytelling training for managers & leaders could drive employee engagement - HR Grapevine

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the role of narrative and storytelling as a leadership communication tool in driving employee engagement and managing organizational change. The author's central argument, supported by commentary from two practitioners, is that storytelling humanizes corporate communication, helps employees understand the 'why' behind directives, and creates conditions for authentic, employee-led communication cultures. Key evidence is drawn from the experiences of Michelle Jewell, Global Head of Leadership Development at Thoughtworks, and Bryan Vermes, Director of Employee Experience and Communication at Mimecast, both of whom describe internal applications of storytelling — including employee blogs, influencer identification, and leadership training initiatives. The article concludes that storytelling is a teachable capability that HR and leadership development functions can cultivate through training, feedback, and cross-functional collaboration with marketing. No empirical studies are cited, and the conclusions rest entirely on practitioner assertion and illustrative anecdote rather than controlled evidence.

Key Insights

1. Storytelling is positioned as a mechanism for translating corporate change into meaningful, relatable employee experience — addressing the 'so what' gap in organizational communication.
2. Practitioners at Mimecast identify internal employee influencers and connectors as key vehicles for authentic, peer-driven storytelling, rather than relying solely on top-down leadership messaging.
3. Storytelling is framed as a learnable leadership competency that HR teams can develop through structured training, direct feedback, and partnership with marketing functions.

Practical Takeaways

- HR and leadership development teams can establish storytelling as an explicit, expected competency for managers and leaders, supported by clear feedback mechanisms and progressive training.
- Cross-functional collaboration between HR and marketing is identified as a means of building consistent organizational narratives and shared communication capabilities.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article surfaces a genuinely underexplored dimension of leadership development — narrative capability — and grounds it in real organizational contexts through named practitioners. The

opening allegorical device effectively illustrates the communication gap the article seeks to address. Limitations: No empirical research, survey data, or peer-reviewed evidence is cited to substantiate the claimed link between storytelling and employee engagement. The entire argument rests on two practitioner opinions, creating significant selection and confirmation bias. The article conflates storytelling as a communication style with storytelling as a measurable engagement driver, without distinguishing correlation from causation. The embedded promotional segment on Modular RPO is editorially incongruous and unrelated to the article's subject matter, raising questions about editorial independence. The conclusion — that skilled storytelling leaders will lead workforces to live 'happily ever after' — reflects advocacy rather than analysis.

Organizational Practice

At Mimecast, the Director of Employee Experience and Communication identifies internal employee influencers and partners with them to champion key programs through storytelling. The company also uses internal employee articles and blogs to facilitate peer-to-peer communication. At Thoughtworks, the Global Head of Leadership Development uses storytelling as a tool during organizational change to help employees connect with new processes and strategies.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader practitioner interest in elevating communication capability as a core leadership competency, distinct from technical or strategic skills. The emphasis on employee-led, authentic communication suggests movement toward decentralized narrative ownership in organizations. The proposed HR-marketing partnership model indicates cross-functional integration as an emerging feature of internal communication strategy. The framing of storytelling as teachable — rather than innate — implies expanding scope for structured leadership development curricula beyond traditional management skills.

Validation Status: passed
