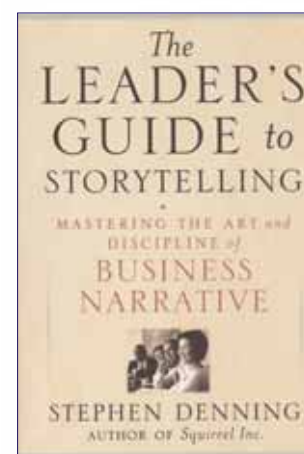


A Good Story Beats a Long Speech

p.2 VIEWPOINT: The Leader's Guide to Storytelling

Based on the book by **Stephen Denning**, Jossey-Bass, 2005



p.5 RESEARCH: Storytelling Takes Empathy and Adaptability

Interview with **Anne-Marie Søderberg**, professor of organizational communication, Copenhagen Business School (Denmark)

p.7 TESTIMONY: Storytelling: A Matter of Course at L'Oréal

Interview with **Guillaume Petit**, training director, L'Oréal R & D



Key Ideas

Effective communication is the cornerstone of numerous strategic actions: sharing experiences, motivating teams, translating company strategy into concrete actions, and inviting clients to become fully involved with the brand. But how can communication go beyond mere information gathering and become a tool that moves and drives people? How can it become a means to conveying a message and leave lasting impressions?

According to Stephen Denning, the answer lies in storytelling or the art of telling stories. Denning has mastered the discipline and written a leading book on the subject, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*. As for Professor Anne-Marie Søderberg of Copenhagen Business School, storytelling is an important strategic lever for both individuals and organizations. It is an effective tool for change management and for building a brand's image. Yet people should be careful not to misuse it – it must be employed with empathy and objectivity!

Storytelling is "intrinsic" to L'Oréal, stresses Guillaume Petit, the firm's recently appointed R&D training manager. The beauty business is all about imagination, sensitivity, and oral transmission of knowledge. So how does the cosmetic giant use storytelling and how does it help its managers to talk about their experiences and their company?

The Leader's Guide to Storytelling

VIEWPOINT

Tales and stories are normally associated with children and imaginary worlds, but they also have their place in corporate culture. Managers can use storytelling very effectively to strengthen their positions as leaders and thereby increase employee motivation, trust, and knowledge sharing. Ultimately, storytelling can boost organizational performance. Master storyteller Stephen Denning describes the seven narrative tools available to the "storytelling manager".

On September 4, 2001, HP CEO Carly Fiorina announced her plan to buy rival Compaq for \$25 billion. She spent two days talking to America's most influential investors and media and explained the reasons for the acquisition, which was considered too risky. She used analytical arguments, emphasizing what the two computer giants had in common: similar corporate cultures and strategic visions. However, the news on September 6th was not good; Compaq and HP's combined share value had already dropped some \$13 billion. Though well known for her excellent communication skills, Fiorina had failed to convince Wall Street. Instead of statistics and abstract statements, HP's CEO might have used metaphors to illustrate the advantages of such a merger in more concrete terms. Stephen Denning believes that the problem was not so much a question of communication skills, but rather one of not mastering the art of narration. For the latter is a far more effective than facts when it comes to convincing and motivating people, provoking thought, and infusing a course of action with meaning. A study has shown that when initiating and sustaining a plan such as the one described above, there is a high correlation between the success of a change program and the use of metaphor¹.

In this book, Denning describes seven storytelling tools that will help managers to achieve three main objectives:

- **Effective implementation of organizational strategy.** This is especially valid when the organization is entering a new and critical phase in its development;
- **Trust.** For managers, this means earning the trust of their peers, and for the company, that of their clients;
- **Effective people management.** Managers must ensure respect for an ethical culture and promote exchange and knowledge transmission.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY

Once an organization's strategic vision has been defined, the leader must convince others of its validity, so that the strategy can be implemented effectively. Storytelling is an excellent way of doing this.

Tool N°1: The Springboard Story

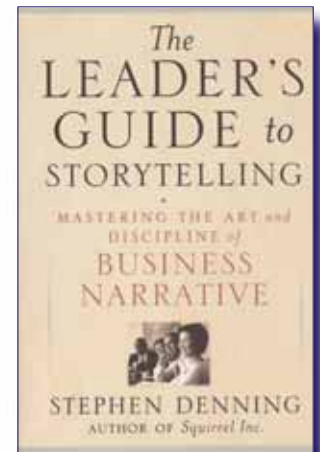
Draw inspiration from a model of success

One morning, the general manager of an international corporation summons his colleagues for a meeting, with one idea in mind. He wants to initiate a new development strategy that is both coherent and global. So he decides to tell the story of another organization that has recently implemented a similar strategy. *"You have no doubt heard about the international consulting firm that decided, six months ago, to reconsider its approach to invitations to bid. The firm has offices in Rome, London, and Paris, and they had previously been allowed to compete with each other for a same job. James Truscott, manager of the London branch, put an end to this ridiculous practice. When he heard about engine manufacturer British Engines' invitation to bid on a large consulting engagement, he contacted everyone in the consulting group who dealt with British Engines to develop a single pitch. It was an attractive proposal, and, even though they were more expensive than their competitors, Truscott and his team won the contract."*

This story is a good illustration of how managers can communicate an idea as complex and abstract as "a coherent and global development strategy". In this story, the manager refers to events that took place at a particular time. The realism of the example enables people to identify easily with the story's protagonists and the events described.

→ Useful Techniques:

- **Keep details to a minimum.** Too many facts will cloud the message. Listeners should be able to learn one or two important lessons from the story.
- **Only introduce one protagonist.** "James Truscott's" initiative proves that a change in organizational direction can be initiated by any one person.



Tool N°2: The Future Story

Share a stimulating vision of the future

In June 1995, new ICTs were only just beginning to emerge. IBM CEO Lou Gerstner summoned his engineers to a special meeting to speak to them about these developments. In his story, he "invented the future" of the computer industry, a future where there would be extraordinary opportunities for development, provided IBM develop its strategy correctly. *"The computer industry*

began with a first phase of central processors, and it then moved on to a second phase, the era of the PC. Now I want to talk to you about a third phase. IBM must adapt and produce fully collaborative, ergonomic, and reliable software that can operate on multiple platforms. Our computer departments will need to adapt to produce products that are suited to small local networks as well as to massive, cross-border, multinational global networks. You might tell me that Internet technology is still unreliable, that we don't have the right technical skills, and that there is practically no benchmarking data on the subject. That is exactly my point! These are just some of the wonderful challenges that we have ahead of us!"

There are many managers who claim to want to "liberate people's creativity" or "launch the company on the road to a better future". Yet platitudes such as these are hardly likely to motivate anyone. Gerstner took a different approach and asked his engineers to consider where a new project might lead them. He invoked the promise and size of the challenge, thereby stimulating their imaginations and creative potential.

→ **Useful Techniques:**

- **Avoid going into too much detail or looking too far ahead.** The more fact-filled a story, the greater the risk that the manager will make implausible predictions. Furthermore, strategy implementation is always an evolutionary process. Employees must not feel bound by a manager's speech or a step-by-step account of the path to follow.
- **Describe a positive future.** The future is always a stressful subject and changes in a company's strategic direction do little to alleviate associated feelings of anxiety. On the contrary. Managers must therefore do their utmost to generate feelings of enthusiasm and confidence as people become involved in a project.

WINNING TRUST

Employee and customer trust in a company depends, on the one hand, on the general manager, and on the other, on the brand, whose positioning must be clear to customers. There are two storytelling tools that can help companies to guarantee the loyalty of employees, investors, and consumers. The first focuses on the company leader, and the second concerns customers, who become "storytellers for the brand".

Tool N°3: The Identity Story

Finding out who leaders really are

Michael Dell, the founder of the Dell Computing Corporation, loves to tell the story of his first business venture. "When I was 12 years old, I decided to start collecting and selling stamps. I had become interested in philately after seeing a stamp album that belonged to my best friend's father, and I noticed that prices were rising at the time. There was something there that my mother would have termed a real 'commercial opportunity'. I advertised in a local newspaper, but that didn't come to anything, so I decided to produce my own catalogue and mail it out round where I lived. It only had twelve pages, yet much to my

The Author

Australian-born **Stephen DENNING** studied law and psychology at the University of Sydney and then at Oxford University. In 1969, he joined the World Bank, where he was manager of the Africa Department between 1994 and 1996 and program director of Knowledge Management from 1996 to 2000. He now works as a private consultant and has specialized in organizational storytelling for such clients as Shell, GE, IBM, and the US Army. Denning is the author of the acclaimed book *Squirrel Inc: A Fable of Leadership Through Narrative* (Jossey-Bass, 2004) and of the article "Telling Tales" (*Harvard Business Review*, May 2004).

surprise, I made \$2000 in just a few weeks! Early on, this initiative taught me a powerful lesson about the rewards of eliminating middlemen. I also learned that if you've got a good idea, it pays to do something about it." Dell now applies this business model in his company, Dell Inc.

It is hard to believe a person who directly asserts that he or she is an honest, visionary leader who is concerned about employees' well-being. Listeners are likely to doubt the person's sincerity. But personal stories enable leaders to reveal their real personality in a more subtle way, using snippets of information about their professional and/or personal lives.

→ **Useful Techniques:**

- **Focus on a turning point.** Allow the audience to discover you at a time when you have made a choice that has had a profound and lasting effect on your life. Disclosure of revealing facts carries considerable weight.
- **Make the narrative as detailed as possible.** Bring the story to life for the audience by providing feeling and context.

Tool N°4: The Brand Narrative

Customers as storytellers for the brand

People who advise others to buy a product because they are enthusiastic about a brand and what it represents often use storytelling without realizing it. Denning quotes a devotee of The Body Shop who explains her enthusiasm for the British cosmetics brand. "Their shops are exotic, but that's not the only thing. There are other, more important reasons for my choice. I am deeply concerned about environmental issues, fair trade, and animal testing. The Body Shop cares about these issues too and shares my values. I have spoken to some of their staff and found them to be very well informed about matters such as sustainable development and specific actions undertaken by the company. The company's commitment to their values is not just a façade!"

Denning explains that the customers have clearly integrated the brand positioning with fair trade and they have spread this "story". Indeed, the Body Shop is now an "iconic brand". •••

→ **Useful Technique:**

Identify a strong value in advance. A manager must make sure that his or her company has a simple and clearly defined set of values that customers can transmit easily. They will thus become "storytellers for the brand".

MANAGING PEOPLE EFFECTIVELY

Good management is increasingly recognized as a source of business performance. It is important to ensure that all company members are imbued with the associated good practices. The author suggests three storytelling tools that can facilitate effective management by promoting respect for ethical values, teamwork, and knowledge sharing. In short, they will reinforce all the elements of a culture of open-mindedness and dialogue.

Tool N°5: The Value Narrative

Ensuring respect of ethical practices

Tyco, the American supplier of surgical equipment, was taken over in 2002 following a financial scandal. The new management team discovered that ethical behaviour had seriously eroded over the years. But even when it came to tackling a subject as delicate as a financial scandal, storytelling enabled managers to transmit a message. They used a variety of media and conveyed that there was an urgent need for a change in mentality. For instance, the management team produced a "Guide to Ethical Conduct" for employees. The guide provided them with clear examples of some of the most common, fraudulent practices at Tyco. "*Yin, a software training specialist, makes copies of software programs to use on her home computer and to give to her family and friends.*" "Jordan's client takes him out for dinner. He then claims \$65 in expenses for a meal that he hasn't paid for." Employees were also invited to view and discuss six videos whose scenarios ranged from embezzlement of company funds to factory sabotage.

→ **Useful Techniques:**

- **Avoid coercive discourse.** "*Behavioral changes cannot be ordered, only encouraged*", Denning stresses. In this case, imposing the company ethic without providing an illustration would be unsatisfactory.
- **Choose a credible example.** Certain well-known cases of fraud are almost unbelievable². Whether managers use real or fictive cases to illustrate their point, examples must reflect the company culture.

Tool N°6: Exchange

Forging Team Spirit

Storytelling can help people to develop mutual trust and build team spirit, which is an important lever for performance. In 1996, Denning was appointed to put together a knowledge management program at the World Bank. To do so, he brought together everybody who was interested in the subject. Within just a few weeks, he had built an excellent, well-motivated team that was ready to implement a KM program in their organization. Denning explains that it was through storytelling that the members of this ad hoc team were able to develop a genuine group spirit that subse-

quently spawned creativity. "*Each newcomer was asked to recall a past experience where he or she had caught a group's attention and gained its trust*". As far as Denning is concerned, an approach based on exchanging points of view and real experiences is far more effective for forging a lasting team spirit than one that focuses on people's CVs.

→ **Useful Technique:**

Face-to-face interaction. Telephone and Web conferences do not provide the same opportunities for dialogue and empathy as meetings where individuals are physically present.

Tool N°7: The Knowledge-Sharing Story

Transmitting knowledge

In the current context of a talent crisis and spiralling retirement numbers, senior managers would particularly benefit from using the "knowledge-sharing" tool and thereby transmit tricks of their trade or particular methodologies.

Surgeon Norman Bellinger supplies plenty of detail when he often tells his students how he saved a baby with a blocked air passage: "*A few years ago, I was called in to operate on a man who had got his neck caught in a strand of barbed wire and could no longer breathe. An assistant had looked for bubbles in his throat, because they showed where air was coming out, and that's where a breathing tube was inserted. When I was dealing with the baby, this episode flashed into my mind, and I used the same procedure to save the baby*".

The doctor is not only passing on information, he is also sharing practical knowledge that is a direct result of a personal experience. Moreover, storytelling is a more appealing, less theoretical way to pass on precious knowledge to younger members of the medical staff.

→ **Useful Technique:**

Ensure that the story is detailed. Listeners must be able to grasp the whole methodological process and understand how the particular problem was resolved. The speaker needs to be a good teacher and ensure maximum clarity by telling each part of the story in detail.

Stephen Denning's wife often complains that her husband has a monotonous voice and never tells her any stories. "*And to think he tells stories for a living!*" she says ironically. The art of speaking well is certainly not innate, but everyone can develop it with the right training and plenty of practice. In his book, Denning does not claim that managers can be transformed into inspired storytellers. However, he draws our attention to the usefulness of storytelling techniques. They provide managers with additional tools to improve communication and knowledge transmission within the highly structured world of business. ■

Based on *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, by Stephen Denning, Jossey-Bass, April 2005

1. La Clair and Rao, 2002
2. Nick Leeson, a trader at Barings, covered up a loss of over £200 million, which led to the bank's collapse in 1994.

Storytelling Takes Empathy and Adaptability

Interview with **Anne-Marie SØDERBERG**, professor of Organizational Communication, Copenhagen Business School (Denmark)

Anne-Marie Søderberg has carried out several studies on storytelling in organizations. She describes what successful corporate storytelling entails and points out counterproductive mistakes. In addition, she discusses how storytelling can strategically enhance both management and marketing.

To many people, a story is a vague concept, but I have found that it is characterized by a number of fundamental properties:

- A story is made up of a sequence of actions and events along a timeline.
- A story is an account for a transition from a state of equilibrium to another situation, irrespective of whether it moves from something good to bad or vice versa.
- The selected events and actors are integrated into a given plot structure (for example with a hero and a villain) and related to the storyteller's specific project.
- Storytelling is part of identity-constructions of 'us' and 'them'.

Storytelling may be an individual or an organizational tool. In the first case, the story might be an employee's retrospective interpretation of a series of critical events in ways that legitimate his actions and serve his interests at a given point of time. For instance, during a merger process, it is worth considering how different people in the merging organizations experience the merger and make sense of the subsequent actions in the plots they construct. On the other hand, corporate storytelling would refer to the strategic story that leaders invent and communicate to employees, shareholders, consumers, competitors etc., in order to give sense to certain decisions and actions. In my research, I have looked at both of these types of storytelling and have uncovered the strategic interests inherent in storytelling.

"Internally, storytelling may be used as a tool to construct a corporate culture and identity."

When it comes to individual storytelling, why and how does the way in which people relate to some events, like a merger, have a strategic impact?

Through an analysis of individual employees' storytelling you can explore how their interpretations either support or undermine



Anne-Marie SØDERBERG's fields of expertise include critical discourse analysis, organizational and intercultural communication, and international business studies with a focus on mergers & acquisitions. She has studied psycholinguistics and literature at Copenhagen University, but joined the Copenhagen

Business School's Department of Intercultural Communication and Management in 1993. Here she is responsible for developing the interdisciplinary field of organizational communication. In 2006, she was a visiting senior scholar at Stanford University as a member of the Scandinavian Consortium of Organizational Research. Recent publications include the article, "Narrative Interviewing and Narrative Analysis in a Study of a Cross-border Merger", *Management International Review* (2006, vol. 46, 4) and the book, *Merging Across Borders. People, Cultures and Politics*, co-edited with E. Vaara and published by Copenhagen Business School Press (2003).

the organization's strategic communication about the same events. From 1994-1999, I conducted a study of a series of foreign acquisitions of a Danish telecommunications company. Once a year I interviewed Danish managers, engineers, technicians, and production workers in order to find out how people at various hierarchical levels experienced these acquisitions, and which impact they had in their daily life. During this period of five years, I made a surprising discovery. People's stories were all very different from each other, even though everyone was referring to the same events. And the same people also changed their plot from one year to another to adapt to the changes of the company and its environment, and to changes in their alliances. Their stories provided precious information about •••

••• the organizational climate and the ways in which the foreign acquisitions were perceived, and thus about the likelihood of internal support to the acquiring company's strategic plans.

Now, corporate storytelling. How can it intervene in strategy?

It can be used in the strategic development of an organization's internal and/or external positioning.

- Internally, storytelling fits into the framework of value-based management and organizational development. It may be used as a tool to construct a corporate culture and identity. In addition, when it comes to change management, storytelling can be used to convince employees of the need for change and to get them emotionally involved in it. However, to garner employee support, management must be able to tell a compelling story about the corporate past, the company's current purpose, its vision for the future, and the challenges that it must prove capable of overcoming. It is easier to identify with an intriguing corporate story than with a factual report that explains business choices that are engendering organizational changes. As storytellers senior managers thus give sense to the changes they are spearheading. Hence the importance of storytelling in change management, but also in the continual negotiation process with both internal and external stakeholders as to corporate culture and identity.

-Externally, storytelling is a component of corporate positioning in the marketplace. It may be used in PR and advertising to explain how the company and its products differ significantly from its competitors and their products. This is crucial, because of increasingly intense global competition and fewer and fewer

"Companies that are skilled at telling a good story about what they do and why are also more likely to attract and retain the best people."

obvious differences between products. Products consequently need to be presented as possessing an immaterial value, and storytelling is the right tool for the job. Moreover, companies that are skilled at telling a good story about what they do and why are also more likely to attract and retain the best people.

What exactly are the characteristics of effective corporate storytelling?

- The story must be realistic and describe what the company truly does. It must also be sustainable, meaning there mustn't be any major discrepancies between what is said and what has truly happened.
- Managers must ensure that the story is a dynamic entity. If the organization or its environment changes, the story will also change.
- A corporate story must be relevant for both internal and external stakeholders, and storytelling must involve open dialogue with them.

• The corporate story should be communicated via a wide variety of media: face-to-face communication, top management statements, internal media (in-house magazine, Intranet, corporate website, annual report, advertising, etc.). Yet despite a variety in form, the plot must remain constant.

• Leaders must be aware that storytelling is far more than a simple transfer of information. They must prove to be empathetic and capable of adapting the corporate story to specific audiences, taking listeners' specific ways of thinking and acting into account. Leaders should also consider the impact their story will have on the way in which particular managerial actions and/or critical events are understood.

• The leader as storyteller should also reflect upon his/her moral position and commitments toward other players in the organizational landscape.

Could you give us an example of this last matter of moral responsibility?

Jyske Bank, a regional Danish bank, was confronted with severe moral problems when it became known that its CEO had lied to the employees. During an annual retreat, he had announced a Swedish investment fund's hostile take-over of the bank after which an actor playing the role as the future Swedish CEO had given a talk to the employees and foreshadowed major changes, among them massive lay-offs. Later during this retreat, the Danish CEO revealed that this story was untrue and merely intended to teach a lesson about how the employees had to commit themselves even more and live the corporate values to make the Bank survive as an independent player on an extremely difficult market. But this "storytelling" manoeuvre was tantamount to manipulation of not only facts, but also employees' emotions. Indeed, there were people who suffered a loss of face during this exercise, because they had trusted their CEO unreservedly.

Could you also give us an example of an organization that has used storytelling effectively?

The biotech company Novozymes was established as an independent company after a demerger in 2001 from the healthcare company Novo Nordisk. The board of directors realised that they needed to know how the employees perceived the work place and the enzyme products, and how they envisioned the future course of the new company. Stories were collected from groups of employees in China, Denmark and USA, and other employee stories were communicated via the corporate intranet. These stories gave the leaders valuable insight into the emerging organizational culture and input to formulating a sustainable corporate vision. Another outcome of the exercise was the development of four employee archetypes and two manager archetypes which made it easier for management to communicate with people in the company with different work-views and world-views.

In sum, some companies have failed to truly grasp the potential of storytelling and have been incapable of implementing this methodology successfully. Yet others, like Novozymes, have realized that storytelling is ongoing effort involving dialogue with a wide variety of stakeholders. ■

Storytelling: A Matter of Course at L'Oréal

Interview with **Guillaume PETIT**, training director, L'Oréal R & D

Guillaume Petit has appreciated the power of storytelling for some time. The practice is widespread at L'Oréal, whose business – beauty – is not an exact science. Storytelling has proved its worth as a strategic tool, and it is used to help people share tacit experiences and knowledge as well as to illustrate the brand's image and identity. How is this practice actively propagated throughout the firm?

"At L'Oréal, we are not very good at definitive definitions!" jests Guillaume Petit, when asked about the role storytelling plays at L'Oréal. He compares storytelling to a kind of open knowledge that operates in the same way as an open system in the context of communications technology. "It is a question of knowledge that is not exclusive, but rather subject to people's interpreting it through their own experiences. It contains a combination of rational and emotional messages, accumulated experiences, and the passions of those involved. This is what I think gives storytelling an heightened dimension".

EMOTIONAL MEMORY

After acquiring experience as an industrial engineer, Petit shifted to consulting and training. When and why did he first take an interest in storytelling? Initially, like many people, he was unwittingly exposed to it. He recalls, *"At Corning, in particular, the R & D team was working on a brand new product that was largely inspired by the fibre optics that had been*

Guillaume Petit makes it clear that the primary strength of storytelling lies in its ability to rouse emotions, which in turn facilitates memorization processes.

developed a few years earlier by the founders of the telecommunications department. I remember being very impressed by these people, who came to tell us all about their adventures developing fibre optics. Today, fifteen years later, I still



Guillaume PETIT trained as a general engineer, and began his career in the industrial sector, working for Bombardier, Schneider Electric, and Corning. He spent six years alternating between Europe and America as a test engineer or industrial project manager. He then

spent seven years as a consultant for Cegos, where he specialized in innovation, project management, and KM. In 2002, he joined the L'Oréal corporate training division (Learning for Development, Corporate), where he was responsible for developing courses on the field of training. At the end of 2006, Guillaume Petit was appointed training director for L'Oréal R & D.

remember the experience very well. And even more than their anecdotes, I remember the emotion, commitment, and passion that these men shared with us. Like myself, the entire group was as all ears and listened intently to their accounts". Petit makes it clear that the primary strength of storytelling lies in its ability to rouse emotions, which in turn facilitates memorization processes.

STORYTELLING FOR...

→ Transmitting values

Later on, as quality control manager for R & D, Petit fully appreciated the effectiveness of storytelling for transmitting values. *"As Denning says", he points out, "values are not something you can dictate. A story that incorporates ...*

... values and conveys them through an example is an excellent way to influence behaviour and encourage people to ask questions and take responsibility. This was crucial for me when I was in charge of quality control". In the mid 1990s, Petit became a consultant and found recounting real events to be an excellent training tool. In addition, he insists that far from being incompatible with more academic accounts, storytelling is perfectly complementary. "Prior to a course, e-learning enables people to master the basics of a subject, so they can then spend more time sharing experiences and storytelling during the seminar itself. The trainer's role is increasingly to facilitate experience-sharing and knowledge transmission. Indeed, trainers now need new skills".

→ Ensuring knowledge transmission from generation to generation

Petit believes that storytelling is right at home at L'Oréal. "The beauty business is all about the art and technique of cosmetics. It is a blend of science and sensitivity. For example, jobs like conceiving and developing a perfume fragrance, detecting the current aspirations of men and women, or "capturing what's new", as we say at L'Oréal, cannot be summed up in an equation! And you cannot learn this business at school". As he explains, L'Oréal's expertise is more a matter of experiences accumulated over several generations than a sum of clearly defined knowledge. "Each and every person accumulates his or her own knowledge over time, so how can these many thousands of experiences be transmitted to others? The answer lies in people's describing these events. Most of our managers use this technique without necessarily realizing it is storytelling".

→ Forging the brand

Petit continues, "Because L'Oréal is made up of numerous major international brands, we are not just selling a product but also a vision. The identity of a strong brand is forged by its history, and this history is something that the managers need to be able to transmit. This mission is strategically important, because like most companies, L'Oréal currently needs to ensure that knowledge is handed down from one generation to the next, even though this knowledge is often tacit".

HOW TO TELL A GOOD STORY

So does L'Oréal offer structured courses in the art of storytelling? "We obviously offer managers and staff training courses in communication. But there is nothing quite as effective as practicing storytelling and relating personal anecdotes if you want to improve the quality of communication. Indeed, although some people have an innate talent for communicating, good storytelling still takes practice and an active effort." That said, there are concrete measures that are taken to help managers share their experiences with their colleagues. "80% of our training courses take place in-house. There are over one thousand company members whose duty is to pass on their experiences".

L'Oréal holds four- and five-day seminars on "business specialties" which sometimes involve over thirty in-house speakers. They almost always choose to talk about their experiences rather than opt yet again for a PowerPoint presentation. The training teams that run these programmes accompany speakers as they carry out this exercise. "We are increasingly keen to help them with their presentations. We meet with them for briefing and debriefing sessions where we stress selected, simple practices. For example, a story should always end with some kind of moral or lesson". In addition, a story mustn't place too much emphasis on the role of the hero. "Of course, the story should translate the reality, but it should focus on the expertise acquired and not on the person telling the story. In addition, speakers must also be careful not to overwhelm listeners with too many details. What really counts is that the message gets across", says Petit.

"The identity of a strong brand is forged by its history, and this history is something that the managers need to be able to transmit."

Speakers must anticipate their story's form and content to ensure that it corresponds to align it with the subject of the seminar. "In fact, a good story needs to get its message across and be relevant, and people should have an opportunity to react to the story. That's why we sometimes need to organize meetings where people can exchange thoughts and compare experiences related to what has been talked about. The story is there to be linked to other experiences, and there is nothing like a discussion to bring out its relevance. Moreover, these encounters enable us to ensure that the story's meaning has been thoroughly understood by all".

L'Oréal operates in a sector where experience and intuition are of primary importance, and the company is skilled at talking about its self and transmitting its know-how, especially to the youngest of its staff. "I remember a video in which Lindsay Owen-Jones tells young managers to 'go pick the brains of senior managers for all of the thousands of stories that they've accumulated during their experiences'. Jean-Paul Agon, who took over as CEO of L'Oréal in April 2006, recently addressed the HR department about its crucial role in the group. He gave them an account of how he himself had benefited from the help of certain HR people and explained how their support was decisive in furthering his career". At L'Oréal, storytelling is a technique employed by both management and operating team members. It is not just another learning tool, but rather an intrinsic part of the company culture. ■