

Stories reveal the soul of companies

Barbara Rose

chicagotribune.com

YOUR SPACE

November 5, 2007

Every organization swirls with stories: cautionary tales about failure and firings, inspirational ones about overcoming difficulty, nostalgic stories about the good old days.

Some rise to the level of folklore. Most take the form of packaged memories, but they are less about the past than about where an organization is headed.

"They represent a web of assumptions about what sort of organization it is," says consultant Stephen Denning, whose books include "***The Leader's Guide to Storytelling***." "They determine what people spend their time on and how they function."

Sometimes, content matters less than the telling. The mere act of repeating stories is a bonding ritual, or an exclusionary gesture.

At Aloft Group Inc., a branding consultancy based in Newburyport, Mass., executives in its Los Angeles offices still talk about a triumph in 1981, more than a decade before their group merged with the Massachusetts firm.

"I had to teach the [Massachusetts] staff to respect that and celebrate with [Los Angeles] a little bit" when they told their story, says Aloft President and Chief Executive Matt Bowen.

Yet everybody laughs when someone tells the story of how Aloft persuaded a plastics manufacturer to hire people to rake sand in a Zen garden at a major trade show. Instead of a conventional booth, the company installed a "stress-free manufacturing zone," where potential clients relaxed before hearing the company's pitch. The story usually gets retold before a coming presentation.

"It's not about the idea," Bowen says. "It's about convincing the client it's a good idea. It's used as encouragement to say, risk is OK."

Setting the standard

At Emmett's Tavern & Brewery Co., based in West Dundee, every employee knows the story about Frank.

Frank Walaitis was on his way home after a long shift when he spotted his dinner customers. The couple, who had lingered after their meal, was standing outside in a drenching rain, huddled under an umbrella, peering under the hood of their stalled car.

Walaitis pulled alongside, jump-started their engine and sent them on their way, a gesture that converted them from satisfied diners to longtime loyal customers.

Emmett's chief executive, Andrew Burns, tells Frank's story at every new-employee orientation to illustrate employees' ability to make a difference.

"People get it right away," Burns says. "Every company has its stories and its champions. They are the people that get the culture and can broadcast it."

But there's a risk when management tells a purely positive story, Denning says. If the characters are too good to be true, people are tempted to conjure up negative stories about what actually might have happened.

A good story, whether the spin is positive or negative, travels fast.

"If it's true and insightful and interesting and contains the unexpected, the kind of story you feel the urge to retell, it will spread like wildfire," **Denning** says.

But the reaction is equally intense when managers broadcast stories that don't ring true, he adds. "That starts off a huge river of anti-stories" that ridicule and satirize the official version, he says.

A gut feeling

Sometimes a story gets reduced to a tagline, an often-repeated phrase summing up what everybody believes.

Author and consultant Tamara Erickson talks about a successful multinational with a very structured, risk-averse culture. Turnover is relatively high among new hires.

"When they leave, we all look at each other and say, 'The suit was too tight,'" the human resources director told Erickson. "We just shrug our shoulders. After a few years, we lose almost no one."

At Royal Bank of Scotland, senior managers meet every morning to discuss the day's priorities, no matter where they are.

"A lot of companies hand out these little laminated cards that say, 'We believe in teamwork,'" Erickson says. "That's not the same as having some powerful story to tell, like, 'The management team meets every morning, even if you're in Hong Kong and have to wake up at 3 a.m.' One you get intellectually; the other you feel in your gut."

Sometimes stories remind people of their purpose.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, a summer camp in Utica, Miss., operated by the Union for Reformed Judaism became an evacuation center, and the organization e-mailed congregations asking for donations.

"They had so much stuff they needed a warehouse. Before you knew it, we were running a relief center serving thousands of people," recalls Daniel Rabishaw, a regional director in suburban Northbrook for the New York-based organization. "It's a story we now tell congregations to remind them why it's important to be part of a big community.

"Sometimes we remind ourselves of that story when we're pushing paper and doing all the other things that large organizations require."

Unintended touching gesture

Daniel Rabishaw, a rabbi, tells this story to rabbinical students:

Newly ordained, he was asked to deliver a eulogy for a 95-year-old man. It was raining, and he stood under a tent at the grave site, water pouring in rivulets under his feet.

The only mourners were seated before him on a bench: the man's eightysomething widow, his niece and a third woman with whom he had been having a longtime affair.

As Rabishaw was about to read the eulogy, the niece raised her hand. She asked to speak, but when she stood up her heel caught on the edge of the grave and she started to fall. When Rabishaw grabbed her, his eulogy fluttered out of his hand and into the grave.

While the niece spoke he ran to get a copy of the eulogy from his car, fearing the worst about how the service was going.

When it was over, the widow put her hand on Rabishaw's shoulder. "That was the most touching gesture I've ever seen, giving him the eulogy to take with him to eternity," she said.

"There's a few things I learned," he tells students. "Always carry an extra copy of the eulogy. And when people are looking for something, whatever it is -- comfort, reassurance -- they will find it. You never know how you're going to touch people."

E-mail your best story to berose@tribune.com

www.chicagotribune.com/business/chi-mon_space_1105nov05,0,6899740.column