

ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING IN SCANDINAVIA

AN INTERVIEW WITH SVEND-ERIK ENGH

Speaker at the
Smithsonian Storytelling Weekend
in Washington DC

by

Steve Denning



What's happening in organizational storytelling in Scandinavia? Svend-Erik Engh launched an organizational storytelling business in Denmark in 2000 and has since been active throughout Scandinavia. Svend-Erik will be one of the international speakers at the [Smithsonian storytelling weekend](#) in Washington DC on April 21-22, 2006. (He speaks on the Saturday.) Svend-Erik talked with me this week about his experience to date.

Denning: You are active in organizational storytelling in Denmark and in fact through Scandinavia, What made you do that?

Engh: I'm a storyteller. I told stories at festivals, in schools, wherever. One afternoon in the year 2000 my telephone rang. It was a woman from a group of organisational psychologists. She told me, that she was responsible for a storytelling workshop for the group. I said to her: "I don't know anything about organizations". She said it didn't matter. I should tell them what I knew about storytelling. Their job was then to connect this knowledge to what they knew about organizations.

At that time, I had been teaching storytelling for five years. When I made my presentation, I was very clear: I told the psychologists what I thought was essential for a storyteller – that you listen, while you tell, that you have to be king in your kingdom and at the time be a humble servant, that you have to make pauses, so the listeners can create their own images, that you have to have a good story. Then I told them, that their job was to connect this knowledge to their world of organizations. It was a wonderful experience, both for me and for the group of organisational psychologists.

*"Be both King
and humble
servant in the
same person."*

Denning: What obstacles did you face?

Engh: At that time, none, really. It was so easy. Both for me and for them. But later, as I became more involved into the world of organizations, I almost forgot that first and

foremost I am a storyteller, not a consultant. When I focus on my experiences as a storyteller, it is so easy. When I don't, it is hard work. 2002 was a year with mixed experiences for me. I was very busy (my bank was pleased), and therefore I didn't have enough time for reflection. I started talking about things that I didn't know much about from my own experience. (The truth is, you have to live it to tell it.) I did some jobs that went bad and you can't afford to do that when you are independent. The bad news travels very fast. So in 2003 I had little to do. Bad for bank, but good for reflections! I learned from that.

So now I'm back on the track. I focus on what I know about storytelling. People from the organizations know exactly what I'm talking about, when I put interaction upfront in storytelling, when I talk about being an authentic storyteller, when I draw a tree and tell them that this is a metaphor for a organisation. It is so easy for me and it is so easy for them. My clients now are very pleased and they come back to me.

Denning: What has been the reaction?

Eng: Tove Vejlgard is Senior Manager in Xact, an IT-consulting company here in Denmark with activities throughout the world. The company uses stories for various reasons. In the Spring of 2005, you will recall that you and I worked with a group of leaders for two days – the first day in march introduction to storytelling (you were there to introduce the springboard template) and you gave them this as home-work: tell at least one story with an organisational purpose during the next month and be aware of the impact of the story told. We met again in April 2005, without you, for sharing experiences. The day after the workshop, I received a mail from the company organizing the workshops:

*“Congratulations, Svend-Erik and Steve, for a very useful and good workshop. I especially found Steve's presentation super and yesterday with Svend Erik was really ‘a knowledge kicking day’ with focus on practical use and fine-tuning of stories,
Tove Vejlgard Schønning, Xact.”*

When I ask myself: “What did I do that day?” And when I think about it, I have to admit: “very little.” I listened to their stories and gave them my response. I gave my advice frankly and, of course, founded in my experiences for the past fifteen years. I can listen to a story about a certain company and in very few seconds I see a lot of the possibilities for that company. That is amazing for everybody, and also for me – that stories have so much information hidden within them. And for this Senior Manager it was a “knowledge kicking” day.

A lot of people come to me after a presentation and tell me that they are amazed by “my presence”. They are reacting to the fact that I create a common room with me as a communicator and them as listeners.

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Denning: You've done some work in using story in different corporate contexts. Could you give me one or two examples?

Engh: Let me give you a few examples.

Novozymes

I have done some work for *Novozymes*, the largest enzyme manufacturer in the world. A part of that company looks into the future, developing new markets and so on. It's a group of ten people. The manager contacted me for a three-day workshop:

The first day was personal stories: "Why are you here? What values do you bring into the company and does the values of the company reflects your personal values?"

The second day, we focused on wstories. "What are we as a group? As part of the bigger company?"

And the third day, I worked with springboard stories.

It was three days filled with energy and hopes for the future. Hopes that the company establish as reality.

A Project in Northern Denmark

In the northern part of Denmark, I worked in a 24-hour workshop with a mixed group coming partly from the world of sports and partly from culture life. The group was formed to strengthen cooperation between these two different worlds and to propose four projects for politicians the next morning. My job was to get the two different groups to work together and connect them with a story.

So what did I do? First, I made them tell stories. That made the group very strong. When I arrived, I brought with me two imaginary characters, Jorgen from the northern part of Denmark and Anina from Copenhagen – all I knew when I met the group was that Jorgen and Anina were supposed to fall in love, form a family and have children. How, when and what possible conflicts would be arising in that family? I would find out as I listened to the ideas for the future in the work of the group. One group created a story about a boat competition. So Jorgen fell into the water when he and Anina watched this event. Anina helped him up and that was the first intimate touch. A kiss followed quickly. So I listened to their ideas and Jorgen and Anina lived those ideas. It was very productive.

Hanne Dahl is a manager from Nibe, a small town and part of the group organizing the 24 hours workshop. She says: "It was a great experience to see the community being wowed like this during those 24 hours. These imaginary characters became living people with us in all our work – the stories were feeding the other side of the brain. So when we had to perform in front of the politicians after 24 hours work, it was filled with

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enthusiasm and energy - the politicians accepted all the cooperation ideas, because they also could feel the power that had been generated from the creation of Jorgen and Anina.”

Denning: Are some sectors more open to this than others?

Engh: No, I don't think so. It is widely spread. Public, business, international, small, big. I think it is working time now. We have a lot to do, now also in Sweden. It is great fun.

Denning: What resonates with your clients most?

Engh: The simplicity and the complexity, both at the same time. That it is so easy to ask for a story and then get the process started. Then you can get carried away, and the risk is that the work of storytelling doesn't lead to anything. You had a wonderful experience, but so what? So I mail my clients after a month, asking if they are doing any storytelling. And that resonates. The clients tell me that this reminder after a month is very useful.

Denning: How do you see the role of story evolving in the world of organizations?

Engh: Stories describe and change the world at the same time. Stories captures changes before they occur.

The Danish word, *vekselvirkning*, is a key word for storytelling and developing of the future organizations -

vekselvirkning : mutual reaction; reciprocal action; reciprocal effect; inter-relationship (the inter-relationships of the process technical measures); interaction (the interaction between people and technology at work); interplay;
with ~ interactive; (adv) interactively; reciprocally acting; mutually reacting.

Actually this is one of the biggest secrets of my art. That you listen while you tell. One of the masters of my art, Dario Fo from Italy, the winner of the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature, has stated it this way: “The audience has always been my litmus paper, every second. Are you able to listen to them, does the audience conduct you like a conductor of a major orchestra? But sorry that storyteller that get flattered and carried away; the audience can also be your wild horse, that throws you off the saddle”

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I say: “Be both King and humble servant in the same person.”

If you transfer this knowledge of mutual responsibility into the world of organizations, you will find a company in reciprocal action with the community, a leader in inter-relationship with the rest of the company, and the ground staff will interplay with the values of the company, the society and the environments. These challenges are the main challenges, that companies facing in the future.

Denning: Do you see Scandinavia as particularly oriented towards narrative? Why?

Engh: The Scandinavian welfare project is a success. The fundamental principle in this model is respect for each person involved in this project. Even though the last months events have shaken this picture, it is a basic understanding for every Scandinavian: we know that we are all in the same boat.

Our educational system is widely known for the respect for every individual. It is possible to discuss every aspect of knowledge. Discussions are rewarded. Therefore storytelling is easily understood by every Scandinavian.

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**To Hear Svend-Erik Engh in person, come to the Smithsonian Storytelling Weekend
The World's Premier Organizational Storytelling Event**

The Smithsonian storytelling weekend is a remarkably diverse, international event, with speakers hailing from UK, Denmark, Netherlands, Austria and Canada, and from within the US, from Philadelphia, California, Colorado as well as Washington DC. So if you want to get a quick overview of what's happening in organizational storytelling around the world, this is where to get it.

Don't delay - register now!

For the Friday event, go to:

<http://residentassociates.org/otoapr/storytelling.asp>

For the Saturday event, where Svend-Erik will be speaking, go to:

<http://www.goldenfleececon.org/>

For details of both day's events: go to:

<http://www.stevedenning.com/Smithsonian06-r2.html>

To watch a short video (3 megs) on the event, go to:

<http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/Smithsonian2006.wmv>

To download a brochure (96 kb) that you can share with colleagues and friends, go to:

<http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/Brochure-Smithsonian-06.pdf>