# Seth Kahan interviews Steve Denning

# The Smithsonian storytelling weekend: April 15-17, 2010

**Seth: I am talking with Steve Denning about the upcoming** [Smithsonian storytelling weekend](http://www.stevedenning.com/Conferences/smithsonian-apr-2010.aspx) **on April 15-17, 2010. Tell me, Steve, how long have you been doing these weekends?**

**Steve**: This is the tenth annual weekend. I’m excited that it keeps going on, and keeps getting better, broader and deeper. The Smithsonian storytelling weekend started out in 2001 discussing storytelling as a possible tool that might make a difference. And now storytelling has become the foundation for a whole different way of looking at the world, and interacting with the world.

**Seth: What do you mean: “a foundation for a whole different way of looking at the world?**

**Steve**: This is not about dealing with “things”. It’s not just about trying to make profits, or provide goods and services. This is about work that creates higher quality relationships with people. That’s what organizations and businesses do when they are at their best. Storytelling is one of the key elements in making that happen. It helps keep the focus on delighting customers and clients, and creating positive interactions and conversations. Storytelling is the lifeblood of how that happens. This, I believe, is the future of the 21st Century organizations. Storytelling is right at the center of it. (1.35)

Seth: So you are talking about a fundamental paradigm shift, a new frame, a different lens?

**Steve**: Well, “paradigm shift” has become a cliché, but yes: I am tempted to call it a paradigm shift. It is a fundamentally different way of thinking about the world, a fundamentally different way of acting in the world, and interacting with other people. It is radically different. You see individuals have been doing it from time to time. You see parts of organizations doing it from time to time. Now what we are seeing is whole organizations seeing: this is a different way to manage. This is a different way to run things.

This is a different way to build the future. It’s more profitable—when you delight clients, they are happy to do business with you. You make more money. It’s fun for the people doing the work. They have a ball. They enjoy delighting clients. It’s a win for everyone. It’s a win for the clients. It’s a win for the staff. And it’s a win for the organization. So why aren’t we doing it? There’s this whole movement to make people realize, make business schools realize, make managers realize, that this is a better way. It’s a better mousetrap. It has all of these pluses and very few minuses. So why aren’t we doing it? (3.06)

Seth: What kind of people come to the Smithsonian?

**Steve**: The beautiful thing is that it’s so diverse. You could be sitting next to a CEO, or a fashion designer, or a school teacher, or a manager from IBM. You could be sitting next to anyone. It’s unlike most other conferences where you can guess from the title of the conference the kind of people who are going to be there. And you tend to have a sinking feeling in your heart that you already know what is going to be said. It will be more of the same. Over the ten years, the audience has been very diverse: you keep meeting unexpected new people. And the content is unexpected. You can’t guess in advance what avenues are going to be opened up. That’s what’s exciting about it. It’s opening a highway to the future. (4.12)

Seth: What size is the group that comes to the Smithsonian?

**Steve**: We cap the audience at 120. We keep it small. No PowerPoint. This is people talking to people. Story to story. Face to face. Eyeball to eyeball. “Let me tell you what it was like! Let me tell you what it’s going to be like! Let me tell you how we made this happen!” So there’s story after story, explaining how the future has been invented, is being invented and what it’s going to be like. There’s a lot more interaction than in those large conferences. It’s face to face. Interaction is facilitated, because people are close. It’s not someone on a stage, talking down the audience in a big booming voice. This is about person to person, people talking to people. (5.08)

Seth: Do people keep coming back?

**Steve**: It’s a mix of new people and old faithfuls. We have people coming from all around the world, from Brazil, from South Africa, from England, from Netherlands or from Denmark. Some of those people only get here every two or three years. So there’s a core of people who keep returning. But there’s always fresh blood. And the event sells out. So it would be good idea to sign up soon and make sure that you can be part of this incredible event. (5.41)

**Seth: How much does it cost?**

**Steve**: It’s inexpensive. $115 for Friday, $30 for Thursday evening and $75 for Saturday. That’s $210 to discover the key to the future of the world. It’s a pretty good deal!

Seth: How about that! And what’s Thursday about?

**Steve**: Thursday night is an introduction to storytelling as a leadership tool. So if you want to learn the basics of storytelling, it’s an exciting evening with Svend-Erik Engh and Thaler Pekar. They are real masters of storytelling and show you the basics of storytelling. (6.09)
<http://residentassociates.org/ticketing/tickets/reserve.aspx?performanceNumber=219428>

Seth: What about Friday?

Steve: Friday is about re-inventing the workplace, how storytelling can help create a better workplace—exciting, more fun and more productive workplace. So Friday is an all-day symposium, with a number of exciting speakers.

We’ve got Matt May, author of *The Elegant Solution* and *In Pursuit of Elegance*. He worked in Toyota for a number of years and he’ll be telling some interesting stories and shedding light on those runaway cars. How could perhaps the best company in the world have let this happen? What have they done about it? What are they going to be doing? Is Toyota finished? Or will it emerge from this even stronger? (6.58)

Then there’s Mary Poppendieck, who was a leader at 3M for many years. She’s a blast. She’s energetic. She’s exuberant. She’s exciting. She’ll be talking about what is leadership. What do leaders really do? It won’t be a boring, ten point lecture. It will be stories about how our ideas of leadership have emerged. In particular, she will show how leaders are not necessarily people who have all the answers, but they do bring something to the table. She’ll show how they bring it to the table, and how they interact with the people who are at the table and create a conversation. She’ll be telling stories about that. She’s a wonderfully dynamic speaker. Everyone’s going to have a ball with her. (7.50)

And you’ll be there: Seth Kahan. Delighted that you’re with us again, and telling us about your exciting new book, *Getting Change Right*. You’ll be able to share stories about some of the things that we have done together at the World Bank and elsewhere as well as some of the things that you have done on your own.

Madelyn Blair will be talking about her work in story and explaining the concept and principles of radical learning and how it can be used to develop strategies for maintaining focus and achieving results.

Elizabeth Woodward, a new face, from IBM. You might not think of IBM as a stronghold of storytelling. She’ll be talking about how this plays out in a big corporation. When you’re in a cast of tens of thousands of people, how does storytelling and creating communities and a new kind of workplace and creating conversation—how does that actually happen in a giant corporation? She has an exciting story to tell. I’m delighted that she’s joining us.

And I will be there, talking about my forthcoming book, *The Leader’s Guide to Radical Management: Re-inventing the Workplace for the 21st Century*. It will be published by Jossey-Bass in November 2010. It shows how this whole subject fits together—a coherent and comprehensive view of what’s wrong with management today, and what the future of management should look like. (9.00)

Seth: And Saturday, the Golden Fleece day?

**Steve**: This is entitled, “**You, Me and We: Connecting Through Story**”. It’s a collection of different presentations and workshops on different aspects of storytelling and how you use it to communicate about yourself, and about your community. An exciting day in collaboration with George Mason University. So if you want to get the full meal, this is dessert. (10.06)

**Seth**: It’s really a beehive. You have this tremendous social interaction that’s rolling, beginning Thursday night and going all the way through Saturday night.

Steve: Right! There’s a whole lot of energy generated by the event.

Seth: That’s what I have found exciting. You can’t predict what’s going to happen. If somebody brings a new idea, some new energy, there’s every chance in the world that you’ll see something you hadn’t planned for and that’s new and exciting**.** (11.42)

Seth: How has the weekend evolved over the ten years?

**Steve**: The Smithsonian storytelling weekend has evolved over the years. The first event in 2001 was really like, hey! Storytelling! What a neat idea! What about that! People were kind of bowled over by the novelty of the idea. Since then, each year, we’ve been exploring different facets of storytelling. We’ve looked at storytelling and leadership, storytelling and brands, storytelling and conversations, storytelling to communicate who you are. The sessions have been systematically broadening the discussion as to what this amazing tool can do and how it operates and why it operates.

This year, we’re coming to a turning point in putting these pieces together. It’s not just about brands or conversations or communicating who you are, in which it is assumed that the organization pretty much stays the same. This is about a whole different way of running organizations. We now start to see how the pieces fit together. So it’s broader and deeper. And it’s more coherent than it’s ever been before. It presents a coherent picture of how organizations should be run, and why that’s different for the most part from the way they’re run today. (12.58)

To find out more, go to: <http://www.stevedenning.com/Conferences/smithsonian-apr-2010.aspx>