Storytelling and leadership as a flow

1. INTRODUCTION: purpose of the paper

Storytelling is a natural part of leadership because leaders of other people are "*Homo narrans*" (e.g. McIntyre 1981; Boje 1991; 2008). Implementing a participative leadership style involves storytelling because this increases the closeness between people. Stories may be effective and empower subordinates because they bring them to a position where both the leader and the follower are able to communicate interactively, and managers can reveal their vulnerability to their subordinates (Marek 2011, Weick & Browning 1986). Stories can be understood in terms of emotions, and furthermore, the study of emotions has recently grown in leadership literature (Gabriel, 2000, Aaltio, 2008). Storytelling requires both a teller and a listener, both an audience and an actor.

However, the focus in existing studies has usually been limited to successful leadership stories instead of stories about failures and risks (e.g. Boje 2006; Denning 2005). Stories may cause unintended interpretations within the organization (Ciulla 2005; Sole & Wilson 2002); and sometimes, the leader's empowering story may alternatively turn out to be disempowering (Boje 1999). Some views (see e.g. Parkin 2004; Denning, 2004, 2005) emphasize that narration should be considered critically like any other approach to leadership.

It has been argued that storytelling in leadership requires more empirical studies (e.g. Boje & Rhodes 2006). Studies that explore this topic as a process of failures, successes and self-reflection are scarce. We focus on the managers' narrated experiences of failed storytelling using empirical material on storytelling failures, and aim to fill the gap created by the lack of both empirical as well as critical studies in the field (e.g. Boje 2006; Sole & Wilson 2002).

Some recent approaches emphasize that storytelling is a strategy for effective communication. The diverse of organizational members have too been acknowledged, and it is the manager who has to be sensitive towards diversity in her/his communication (Barker & Gower 2010). However, also this research has no empirical data to be studied and the approach is "positive" without asking the possibility of failure in storytelling.

Our approach is linked to the sub-theme of entrepreneurial leadership in organizations, which means we aim to explore leaders that seek to have an impact by telling stories.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Leadership and storytelling are intertwined in many ways. Leadership is at the heart of organizing, and storytelling has recently been seen as a prominent and powerful approach to leadership or even a new paradigm (e.g. Denning 2000; 2005; Taylor et. al 2002; Fleming 2001; Parry & Hansen 2007). Through stories leaders can narrate who they are within the organization (Marek, 2011), or they can establish their intentions as leader (Auvinen, et al. 2013). Peters (1991) has argued that the best leaders in organizations and societies have always been the best storytellers.

Stories can be replete with meaning, emotions and moral judgements (Brown et al. 2009, Brown et al., 2005). Storytelling can offer insights into good and efficient leadership (e.g. Boje 2008; Denning 2000).

However, not all leadership stories are empowering, and a leader's story can even turn out to be disempowering (Boje 1999; Gabriel & Griffiths 2004). History usually recognizes good leaders as those who tell good stories and bad leaders as those who exclude large numbers of people from their story (Ciulla 2005). Sometimes the reasons for the failure of a story have been explored in a study; Heikkinen et al. (1999) for instance, found that the story might not touch everyone that experiences the storytelling situation, or the story might be told without skill but only because it might be "fashionable [to use a] storytelling tool for leadership" (Denning 2005; Gabriel & Griffiths 2004). Furthermore, the risks inherent in storytelling may also relate to the seductiveness of the stories as well as to their fixedness (Sole & Wilson 2002). The story might also lose its true nature and make no sense (Gabriel & Griffiths 2004).

According to Marek (2011), when using examples told through stories it is essential to ensure the story is told so that it makes sense. Furthermore, telling a good story poorly is another risk. The message actually becomes destructive to the leader's cause and credibility is lost. Building connections through listening to others' stories also truly builds trust and community (Marek, 2011). In terms of good storytelling and good storytellers, previous studies emphasize the different types of storytellers (Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990), their special expertise even with the use of narrative silence (Boje 2001) as well as other typical methods (Boje 1999).
Narrative fiction provides a set of techniques for dealing with the affective aspects of an organization. In terms of organizational behaviour, the experiences of fear, lust, humour, envy and ambition are allowed in storytelling (Phillips 1995, 629). There is also a risk of failure in using these kinds of stories. An encouraging narrative told by a leader can turn into a discouraging experience due to how followers interpret the story. A humorous and supportive leader can be transformed through organizational storytelling, for instance, into a manipulative slick crook.

2. THE RESEARCH GAP AND THE ADOPTED APPROACH

Leadership that uses storytelling often uses it in the state of flow concept used within a positive psychological framework (Csíkszentmihályi,1975). In telling stories leaders may act in a state of mind that is highly inspired, motivated, have a clear set of goals and focus on progress. The leader's act resembles that of an artist (Hatch et al. 2004) with energized motivation, involvement and enjoyment. So the risky nature of the story is not thought about at the moment of action. We also recognize that the cultural context of the story has not been taken account, even if cross-cultural issues might have a lot to do with the success of the story (Ulijn et al, 2011).

Keeping in mind the complex and risky nature of storytelling, we introduce examples of storytelling that have failed from the leader's point of view. We ask especially: 1) how the managers discovered that their storytelling had failed (e.g. audience reactions or consequences in the long term), 2) what is the difference between a good and bad story in leadership, and 3) what kinds of failures have been realized due to storytelling and what do they reveal about the risk of telling stories in general? Our paper aims to construct a framework for studying failures in leadership storytelling by introducing and analysing empirical data.

3. DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data gathering

The data consists of interviews with 13 Finnish managers. The interviewees were selected via purposeful sampling (Coyne, 1997; Flick 2007) with a view to selecting information-rich cases to learn about issues central to the purpose of the study, which is storytelling. Out of the 13 leaders, 10 ultimately talked about storytelling failures.

The interviews were thematic (Steinar 2007), and the managers were invited to retell stories they themselves had told in their organizations. We especially collected stories where, according to the respondent's own evaluation, the result had been a failure or the situation had been risky.

The analysis

Our analysis consisted of three phases. First, we identified all the stories from the interviews that contained failed narration experiences that failed to risk in storytelling and failed narration experiences. Second, we used thematic analysis (Riessman 2008; Eskola & Suoranta 1999; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008) with a view to categorize different failed experiences. As a result, we identified five different themes/categories of failed leadership storytelling: (1) diversity issues, (2) wrong audience, (3) authority and bullshitting, (4) personality and narration techniques (e.g. storytelling skills); (5) misinterpretation (e.g. an unsuitable comparison/illustration). Thirdly, and finally, we applied a content analysis to the managers' speech (the description and reflection upon the narration situation and also the story itself).

In the interviews, 10 out of the 13 managers had experienced the risk of storytelling in their own leadership work. We analysed the episodes they recalled about their storytelling failures in leadership situations.

4. EMPIRICAL PART: Risks and failures in leadership stories

In this paper we will introduce preliminary findings from the empirical analysis using the following table (Table 1), and subsequently explain the contents of the table in more detail.

Table 1: Risks in leadership storytelling, a summary of empirical findings

Theme 1. Diversity issues taken into account: linguistic, cultural and individual differences.

"I have always avoided grimacing people… It can lead to mugging at the workplace like in factories. Comic art that is based on situations is often based on someone's deviation.. It is especially important not to hurt other people's ethical values. To gypsies you should not tell gypsy jokes for instance." (O1)

"I must say this is very bound to the cultural context. Storytelling is special in North America, where all the textbooks have a special structure from the beginning to the end. … Storytelling differs in different countries." (O4)
I: "The country context matters in storytelling."
"Interpretation by researchers: You should be careful who you tell jokes to. You have to be ethical in your attitude and respect people. You have to know the impact of your storytelling. The cultural context should be considered."

Theme 2: Failed stories because of the wrong audience or situation.
"One can make a fool of oneself easily by telling stories, and lose one's authority if you hurt other people." (O3)
"If someone is nervous you should not tell stories. Sometimes morning meetings are especially difficult even if they would have needed some icebreaking…there is present the factory management who does not have a sense of humour." (O1)

"First you have to probe which kinds of stories you can tell… If customers have problems I try to create some trusting atmosphere and tell stories about my own kids or something, first they think that what in the hell do those bureaucrats know about these things, gaining trust is important…" I do not talk if I do not trust people. (O2)

"Interpretation: The audience must have the ability to listen to the story, otherwise just telling the order is needed: Knowing the object of storytelling is important. Gaining trust first is needed otherwise it is risky."

Theme 3: Loss of authority as a risk: Avoid meaningless story-telling (bullshitting).
"If the audience is patient in listening to the story, it can be better than a command. Sometimes stories are told because there are no facts – this does not go well. Then comments like 'give me the facts instead of stories' tend to come… The story gives a framework and context to facts….". (O4)
"One can loose authority in the eyes of the audience. You have to be strict in keeping to the issues of the work. A joking boss can easily lose authority and get the label of a 'clown'."(O1)
"Interpretation: Storytelling is risky because of the possibility of losing one's authority."

Theme 4: Personality strengths and narrative techniques (e.g. storytelling skills).
"If one tells the same story again and again, this repetition is a risk, people say that you always keep chewing over the same…" "You keep the label of having no matters, but just bullshitting… " "If you are very much the style of person that keeps to the facts and a controlled person, you should not tell stories just because it is fashionable, because they do not fit your personality. Sometimes storytelling does not fit a personal style. A false way to tell stories does not fit, you're your body language should fit the style…" (S3)
"Interpretation: Stories must fit the personality and the body language and the image of the teller. A bullshitting image is a risky thing."

Theme 5: Misinterpretation: An unsuitable comparison/illustration

"Once I gave a radio interview in Kuopio telling that the daily money for a serviceman is the same as the price of a carton of cigarettes. So next day I was accused of using the wrong example because you should not motivate people to smoke… it was just over a chat, but I was told that my authority should have been recognized." (S4: Commander-in-chief of the armed forces)

"Interpretation: It is not always possible to be aware of all possible forthcoming interpretations. In this case, the narration in the first hand took place in a radio interview. Later, the radio journalist contacted S4 and said that they got feedback from some dissatisfied listeners: "why does a general in the armed forces encourage people to smoke cigarettes?!". Indeed, S4 was trying to illustrate the amount of the daily allowance given to serviceman, but his message was misinterpreted because of his example (cigarettes)."

A manager (S7, business development manager in a high-tech organization) has his first presentation in a strategy meeting with his subordinates. His intentions are to communicate his vision of the strategy and also inspire them to commit to implementing it. He starts with a speech:

> *"I stood up in front of the audience, and it was a strategy meeting I have to add. My first words were that we will have succeeded in the framework of the strategy if fifty per cent of you who are in this room now are no longer working for this organization after five years [laughing]... After this a hush descended over the audience. People looked down and looked at their toes and wondered what the hell was that guy trying to say. That was the beginning of the story." (S7)*

According to the leader, the intention was to encourage the staff to be creative and find new ways of working because the company wanted to encourage individual innovation and commercialize them even through setting up subsidiary firms. It was the company's declared policy that nobody was going to be fired.

The aim was to make people aware of the new policy and encourage them, in line with company targets, but the effect, as the leader found out, was just the opposite. People felt threatened and probably hurt. The storyteller was perceived not as visionary and inspirational but as cold and discouraging. The story did not promote trust in the leader or the followers, nor did it create a feeling of togetherness. It also focused attention on the leader himself instead of on the followers, making him an achiever and maybe career orientated. Even if it was a joke, there was no laughter, but the reaction was cynical.

In all areas of influence described above, this story failed on every count, including creating trust. The risks inherent in the story are evident and they were realized in the interpretation, not the telling. Every leader must have a thorough knowledge of the situation, the organization and its narrative heritage in order to be able to use stories constructively. A story, once it has been told, may backfire for one reason or another either immediately or later, and the latter may even be more harmful.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The risks inherent in telling stories are evident from the leaders' point of view. The stories were told in situations of intense atmosphere and leadership enthusiasm, which can be understood as an act of "leadership flow". The risk of storytelling failure in this study relate primarily to context or misinterpretation. Often managers anticipate the risks by refraining from storytelling; however, there is a risk that this may also alienate the manager and subordinate from each other. In cases of misinterpretation, the manager often faces negative reactions immediately after telling the story. Sometimes the failure of the story may emerge later through negative and unintended organizational behaviour, such as resistance.

We base our findings on the leaders' own perceptions of failing, which might relate to the context of the storytelling, subsequent perceptions of it or some distant perceptions. Leadership skills vary; some people are more socially intelligent and use stories with morality in the local context, with intra and interpersonal social skills; some count on more abstract stories. The leaders can themselves become motivated and inspired through the stories, and by understanding the reasons for failures they can later reconstruct their leadership and storytelling skills.

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