



PowerPoint and Organizational Storytelling: Q&A with Steven Denning

By Cliff Atkinson

*As program director of knowledge management at the World Bank from 1996 to 2000, Steve Denning learned a few things about organizational knowledge sharing. In his acclaimed book, **The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations**, he describes how storytelling can serve as a powerful tool for organizational change and knowledge management. As a leading authority in the role of storytelling in organizations, Steve says that PowerPoint can sometimes stand in the way of telling a story, and other times it can advance it.*

Cliff Atkinson: Steve, what is the importance of stories in organizations?

Steve Denning: People think in stories, talk in stories, communicate in stories, even dream in stories. If you want to understand what's going on in an organization, you need to listen to the stories. Moreover, if you want to get anything done in an organization, you need to know how to use story to move people.

CA: What is a "springboard" story, and how can it ignite action?

SD: A springboard story is a story that can communicate a complex idea and spring people into action. It has an impact not so much through transferring large amounts of information, but through catalyzing understanding. It can enable listeners to visualize from a story in one context what is involved in a large-scale transformation in an analogous context. It can enable them to grasp the idea as a whole not only very simply and quickly, but also in a non-threatening way. It works like a metaphor -- you tell a story about the past where something has already happened and invite the audience to imagine a future where this isolated example happened much more widely.

CA: How do you respond to critics who say that storytelling is a) unscientific, b) unsupported by facts, and/or c) inauthentic?

SD: a) *Unscientific:* Management theorists who claim to have a scientific approach to management are kidding themselves and their audiences. Management involves dealing with human intentions and purposes, which are not amenable to scientific observation and measurement. You can easily see this from the numbers of management advisers around. In chemistry, or physics, or the other real sciences, you don't have large armies of advisers floating around, advising on what's the right answer to physics or chemistry or whatever. Scientists themselves can see what's right or wrong. Something is observable or it isn't - end of discussion. In management, there is no such scientific clarity, and hence clouds of advisers swarm around like locusts most claiming to have a scientific approach, which of course is just a story aimed at giving the speaker cognitive authority over everyone else and to call the shots. The activity is interesting, even exciting, and important, but it's not scientific.

b) *Unsupported by facts:* There is a growing body of case studies, full of facts, about the impact of story. My book, *The Springboard*, on the World Bank is full of facts about what happened there. More work is under way. For skeptics who ask: Why should I try what you recommend? My reply is: If you have something that's working, and you're able to persuade skeptical audiences of transformational ideas with what you're already doing, then go ahead, be my guest, and use what's working for you. I can make this offer without fear because the problem is that the traditional approaches actually don't work at all, when you're dealing with difficult skeptical audiences. Story works in the *hard* cases, when nothing else works.

c) *Inauthentic:* The claim that storytelling is inauthentic and that something else (analysis? abstractions?) is authentic is ridiculous. Anyone who argues that, should study the meaning of authenticity. Authenticity emerges from stories that are true and that ring true.

CA: *What do you make of the criticism of PowerPoint lately that has been fueled by Edward Tufte's essay, The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint?*

SD: Tufte's essay is a cranky piece and I can understand the crankiness of anyone having to sit through the average PowerPoint presentation in a business context. But it's a bit like writing an essay on *The Cognitive Style of the English Language* and arguing that because most written English these days is flaccid, poorly written and ill-thought-through prose, therefore we should abandon the English language. PowerPoint is a tool and a very flexible tool. The problem is not the tool but rather how it's used.

Images are an important mode of communication, and for some people, the main way in which they learn things. PowerPoint is tool that can be used to reinforce oral communication with visual images. For some people, words alone are fine. But why not use both words and images? The problem isn't PowerPoint. The problem is how it's used.

CA: *What is the appropriate amount of data that should be conveyed in a story?*

SD: People can't absorb data because they don't think in data. They think in stories. If you give people a story, then they can absorb the meaning of large amounts of data very rapidly.

CA: *When can PowerPoint stand in the way of telling a story? When does it facilitate it?*

SD: When a speaker simply reads out abstract bullet points, as one hears so often, one doesn't need to look at the audience to know that they're not listening. When that happens, then you get the look that I depict **here**. If on the other hand, the speaker is thinking in stories, and talking in stories, and telling those stories with feeling and imagination, then PowerPoint images can support and underline the main elements of the story. Images can strongly reinforce the story. Amusing images, if well chosen, can be particularly effective in advancing the story; for example, **here**.

CA: *What does a slide reveal about the person who presents it?*

SD: The same thing that anything we do reveals about us. If the slide is dull, repetitive, unimaginative, dull and boring, then it tells everyone what sort of person we are. If the slide is insightful, playful, spirited, passionate, incisive, then it tells us something else.

CA: *What is the appropriate relationship between a speaker, his/her body, projected media such as PowerPoint, and the audience? How does movement play a role among them?*

SD: Body language, tone of voice and eye contact, are hugely important in communication. If these are exciting and dynamic and energizing, then the speaker could almost be reading the telephone directory and the audience will be inspired. If they're not, then the speaker might be unveiling a Nobel prize-winning theory but no one will be listening. See more on this **here**.

CA: *What can people do to develop their storytelling skills, and to learn how to produce the visual media that enhances them?*

SD: Practice, practice and more practice. It helps if you can get access to a mentor who will share what has already been learned and apply that to your particular case. You can read my books, like *The Springboard* or *Squirrel Inc.: A Fable of Leadership and Storytelling* (May 2004). You can read articles, like my *Telling Tales* in *Harvard Business Review* in May 2004. But in the end, you can no more learn to tell stories by reading books and articles than you can learn to ride a bicycle by reading a book about it. You have to get on the bicycle and try it. It helps if you have a clever coach. But ultimately you have to do it.

The good news is, however, that we are all storytellers. We've simply been browbeaten into thinking that this is some kind of arcane skill that only a few people have. As Jerome Bruner has documented, we all do it spontaneously from the age of two onwards, and go on doing it throughout our lives. When we get into a formal setting, we succumb to what our teachers have told us, and start to spout abstractions. But once we realize that our listeners actually want to hear stories, then we can relax and do what we all do in a social setting and tell stories.

My **workshops** show that even people who don't think of themselves as storytellers, quickly discover that they can tell a story sufficiently well to get their point across, once they remind themselves of a few basics that they instinctively know but have forgotten. Storytelling is our native language. It's easier to listen to. And it's easier to tell than abstractions. And it's the way to get things done in a modern organization.