Boosting team engagement with storytelling methods

In this article...

- The importance of emotional wellbeing to team effectiveness
- The use of storytelling to increase team engagement
- How storytelling can be used in change management

5 key points

1. The emerging field of neuroleadership demonstrates the importance of emotional wellbeing to individual and team performance

2. Creating the conditions in which people can perform at their best is often called "engagement", but the term tends to be both overused and poorly understood

3. Using stories and narratives is an effective way to help people bond as a team and work towards shared goals

4. Storytelling in clinical environments can help staff to make sense of events and experiences, thereby bringing about improvements

5. The transformational power of storytelling makes it a powerful tool in contemporary approaches to change management
According to Godin (2010):
“Great bosses and world-class organisations hire motivated people, set high expectations and give their people room to become remarkable”.

Engagement is about creating a culture in which the team can become remarkable; this requires individual team members and the team as a whole to have a shared purpose, as discussed in part 1 of this series (Craig and McKeown, 2015).

To quote the Chinese philosopher Confucius:
“Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life”.

Health professionals are fortunate to do daily work that is meaningful and important to society; while some may say this is a somewhat rosier view, if passion and purpose are aligned, even the most difficult days will hold meaning. Engagement is about loving what you do.

If the job of leaders is to build emotionally engaging relationships, what does strong engagement look like? According to Macey et al (2009), the following behaviours can be observed when people are engaged:

- Persistence in achieving goals, even when there are setbacks;
- A clear focus on removing and solving problems that cause setbacks;
- Adaptability in the approaches taken to achieve goals.

Conversely, a study by Robinson and Hayday (2009) found staff who are not motivated fail to show interest, listen, take responsibility and achieve goals.

If engagement is about relationships, understanding why individual team members are, or are not, fully engaged requires spending time with them. This is the person-centred leadership work outlined in part 1 (Craig and McKeown, 2015).

Engagement is about understanding team members’ hopes and aspirations, why they do what they do, and what they want to do now and in the future. This is all the more challenging because it must be done in a busy clinical environment amid many other pressures; this may be why meaningful engagement is so often missing from teams. An efficient way of approaching this challenge is through team and individual storytelling, which is an effective, affective and reflective way of achieving staff engagement (Sumner, 2009).

The role of stories in organisations
In their book Intelligent Kindness: Reforming the Culture of Healthcare, Ballat and Campling (2011) note the close relationship between the words “kindness” and “kinship”, both of which are crucial in clinical work. They suggest that kinship – the notion of people relying on each other for survival – is central to understanding the NHS. The survival of each individual depends on the survivor of the organisation as a whole; as in a family this relies on mutual respect, understanding and support.

People can learn to be a part of that family by sharing – as individuals and as teams – their experiences within the organisation. Their stories tell of their:

- Hopes and aspirations;
- Fears and failures;
- Celebrations and successes;
- The challenges and opportunities they face.

These all combine to give the collective story of the organisation.

Stories can also convey tacit knowledge, all those things we may not even realise we know but that are needed to do the right things in the right way. Tacit knowledge is not included in any induction handbook or in policies and regulations; it comes from stories shared during coffee breaks, at shift change and, hopefully, during team meetings. These stories help us:

- Connect our passions and our values to those of our colleagues and the organisation for which we work;
- Bond as a team working towards a common goal.

Without this connection, all attempts at engagement are futile.

So, what makes stories so special? Good stories entertain and teach, and they also connect with our emotions; it does not matter what the emotion is, as long as we feel something.

They also remind us of our shared humanity: we care about the characters in the story and what happens to them. Stories provide food for thought and help us to make sense of events and experiences. They teach us something about ourselves as individuals and as part of humanity, and allow us to tolerate ambiguity and contemplate complexity – important skills in today’s NHS. Stories help us find meaning in our own experiences and in the experiences of others.

Leading through stories
The importance of storytelling as a core leadership skill has long been acknowledged (Denning, 2005). Effective leaders draw on their own experiences to:

- Align values and passions;
- Articulate their vision;
- Inspire people to take actions that will transform this vision into reality.

Writing on the value of storytelling and effective framing in inspiring change across time and place, profession and class, faith and culture, Ganz (2008) cited three types of stories that can be used to link purpose to action and create true engagement (Box 1).

Organisations are collections of people, who each need a way to connect their own personal story with that of the larger organisation. It is not just the role of the leader to tell stories; everyone in a team or an organisation has important stories to tell. These might include the story that explains why they do what they do, the story that makes meaning from seemingly haphazard events, the story that cautions...
What makes a good story?

Stories are different from reports, case studies or anecdotes; as Aronson (2013) pointed out, they offer a “narrative arc, movement, unification of action, irreducible change. Meaning”. The best stories also have an emotional foundation (Martel, 2005); whether they make us feel hope, fear, jubilation, love, hate or loss, it is the emotion a story elicits that prompts us to act. Box 2 looks at how to increase the impact of stories.

The best stories are about change: either going in search of change, or change coming to us. Stories also change the reader or listener, which means they can help to bring about transformation (Schön, 1988). The best stories have a “dragon”, which represents all the things that must be overcome; without a dragon, listeners quickly lose interest. According to O’Connor (1963):

“No matter what form the dragon may take, it is of this mysterious passage past him, or into his jaws, that stories of any depth will always be concerned to tell…”.

Overcoming the dragon allows us to show the best of ourselves: courage, humility, humour, strength, cleverness, loyalty, resilience or kindness. It helps us grow in understanding and wisdom, and makes us more human. Box 3 indicates how to connect with your team through storytelling.

As Chamberlin (2006) says, stories are a way of bringing imagination and reality together, “in moments of what we might call faith”; they are about wonder and about wondering:

“To wonder how totalitarian states arise, or why cancer cells behave the way they do, or what causes people to live the streets… and then come back again in a circle to the wonder of a son… or a supernova… Or DNA.”

The close relationship between wonder and wondering means we cannot choose between them:

“If we try, we end with the kind of amazement that is satisfied with the first explanation, or the kind of curiosity that is incapable of genuine surprise. [Stories] make the world more real, more rational, by bringing us closer to the irrational mystery at its centre. Why did my friend get sick and die? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Whose land is this we live on? How much is enough?” (Chamberlin, 2006).

The way forward

This article has shown how stories and narratives can play a key role in team building and engagement; its transformational power also makes storytelling a powerful tool in contemporary approaches to change management. In a report for NHS Improving Quality, Bevan and Fairman (2014) said effective ways of connecting are central to achieving change. We suggest the age-old skill of storytelling, which many of us first experience as children via bedtime stories, offers healthcare teams an effective way of doing this.

The final part of this series will look at how to help when teams are in difficulty, and how storytelling can be placed at the heart of change.

References


