

## **True Storytelling. How to succeed with your implementation.**

### **Bridge the gap between ongoing changes and longing for meaning in the organisation.**

#### **Abstract**

*This article introduces a special approach to storytelling, called True Storytelling, that bridges the gap between call for efficiency and change and longing for meaning among employees, thereby facilitating the implementation of changes and furthering innovation. The method is also useful as an analytic tool for organizations, and provides a link between the individual and the collective that strengthens developments. In a case-study, a Danish municipality seeks to implement a new educational approach that will support children's learning and well-being. The purpose of the article is to provide some new hypotheses and observations on how to succeed in such processes.*

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#### **A Danish-Canadian Hybrid**

Research shows that for every young person who receives education over and above primary school, he/she generates up to DKK 4 million in value to society over a life time as a result of an average of DKK 50,000 per year after tax, as opposed to if he/she did not have an education<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, great value can be achieved by strengthening children's and young people's well-being and learning and transition to education and work.

In the municipality of Hjørring in North Jutland, Denmark, the school management is implementing a new educational effort called Professional Learning Communities which will strengthen young people's learning and well-being and subsequently strengthen the above-mentioned transitions. Professional Learning Communities are inspired by how schools in the Canadian state of Ontario have managed to improve student's grades and break their social heritage. The Canadian school system has inspired the latest Danish public school reform. Professional Learning Communities are, in short, a qualification of teamwork, where executives and employees at all levels share knowledge for the benefit of children's learning and well-being. For example, if a student has a learning challenge or thrives poorly, focus must be placed on the challenge; A team is set up to solve the challenge based on a professional language, thereby creating a change that brings the student forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd, 2015

[https://www.ae.dk/sites/www.ae.dk/files/dokumenter/analyse/ae\\_erhvervsuddannelserne-betaler-sig-tilbage-for-svendebrevet-er-i-haenden.pdf](https://www.ae.dk/sites/www.ae.dk/files/dokumenter/analyse/ae_erhvervsuddannelserne-betaler-sig-tilbage-for-svendebrevet-er-i-haenden.pdf)

However, the Professional Learning Community approach does not just transfer one to one from a Canadian context into a Danish context, although it has proven to be successful. One of the causes is resistance to change in general, which was further underlined by the school reform. Another issue is that the Canadian concept formation is more based on CV and grades. The issue in Canada is something like: "Do your best and talk about how you can do better?" While the Danish approach is more holistic and encourages students to "just" do their best. In addition, the Canadian school system traditionally is quite centralistic, and the room for leadership by school managers is very narrow because it is governed from above<sup>2</sup>.

This is unlike a more decentralized tradition in Denmark, where managers have more responsibility. In Canada, there is thus a greater tradition for abiding to what is being done by the executive management. And when research in change implementation shows that 70% of change does not persist, it is not surprising that an implementation process of Professional Learning Communities can be costly<sup>3</sup>. Research points out that the lack of implementation is due to the fact that decisions are often taken by a small group of senior executives; that there has been no involvement and that the employees in many cases don't understand the strategy. It is not clear and meaningful to them.

In order to prevent the challenges involved with the implementation, Hjørring Municipality works with Fair Management, which is a management approach that combines framework setting and involvement to create an experience of trust, fairness and meaning: For example, the management, based on a well-considered assessment of the challenges of the municipality, decided to implement Professional Learning Communities. Managers and employees have been trained and have had the possibility to provide input in the process.

In addition to the work with Fair Management, the executive management in the municipality considers that there is a need to support implementation further through work with storytelling. This is based on the hypothesis that narratives and stories can create engagement and understanding, as documented in various research projects.

### **True Storytelling as an implementation tool**

For implementing professional tools such as Professional Learning Communities, an approach, known as True Storytelling, can be applied. This approach is inspired by Professor David Boje's work on Quantum Storytelling<sup>4</sup> and the leadership approach called Protrepics, rooted in the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who founded a leadership academy in ancient Greece. The access prototype is later developed by Professor Ole Fogh Kirkeby<sup>5</sup>. Protrepo means turning the individual towards what is essential, which is relevant to True Storytelling. In addition, meaning and value is being developed through reflections on stories and concepts. In connection with our

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<sup>2</sup> Folkeskolen/07/2017

<sup>3</sup> McKinsey Quarterly(2008): Creating Organizational Transformation. McKinsey Global Survey Results (2010): What Successful Transformations Share.

<sup>4</sup> Ie. "Being Quantum – Ontological Storytelling in the Age of Antenarratives", David M. Boje, Tonya L. Henderson, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014

<sup>5</sup> "Proteptik – filosofisk coaching i ledelse", Ole F. Kirkeby, Jens Larsen o.a. SL forlag 2008

work on Quantum Storytelling and True Storytelling<sup>6</sup>, the essence is addressed by working with space/room and so-called antenarratives, or: pre-stories.

The overall idea of True Storytelling is to create coherence and meaning between the strategic efforts on a macro level, and the commitment by employees and managers to implement the strategies in the organization. See Figure 1.

It is a significant point that the macro level does not work without the micro level and vice versa. There must be a strategy on the one hand and some to execute it on the other side. One might say that it is an expression of power levels in the organization and that one can suppress the other if the strategy is not communicated and accepted. The trick of implementation is to tie the two levels together. True Storytelling as a bridge builder also becomes an organic and dynamic method that needs continuous care. It is by virtue of the interaction between the individual and the organisation as a unit, that innovation is redeemed and results are created for the entire organization. This is not a quick fix, but an on-going process between the macro and micro level.

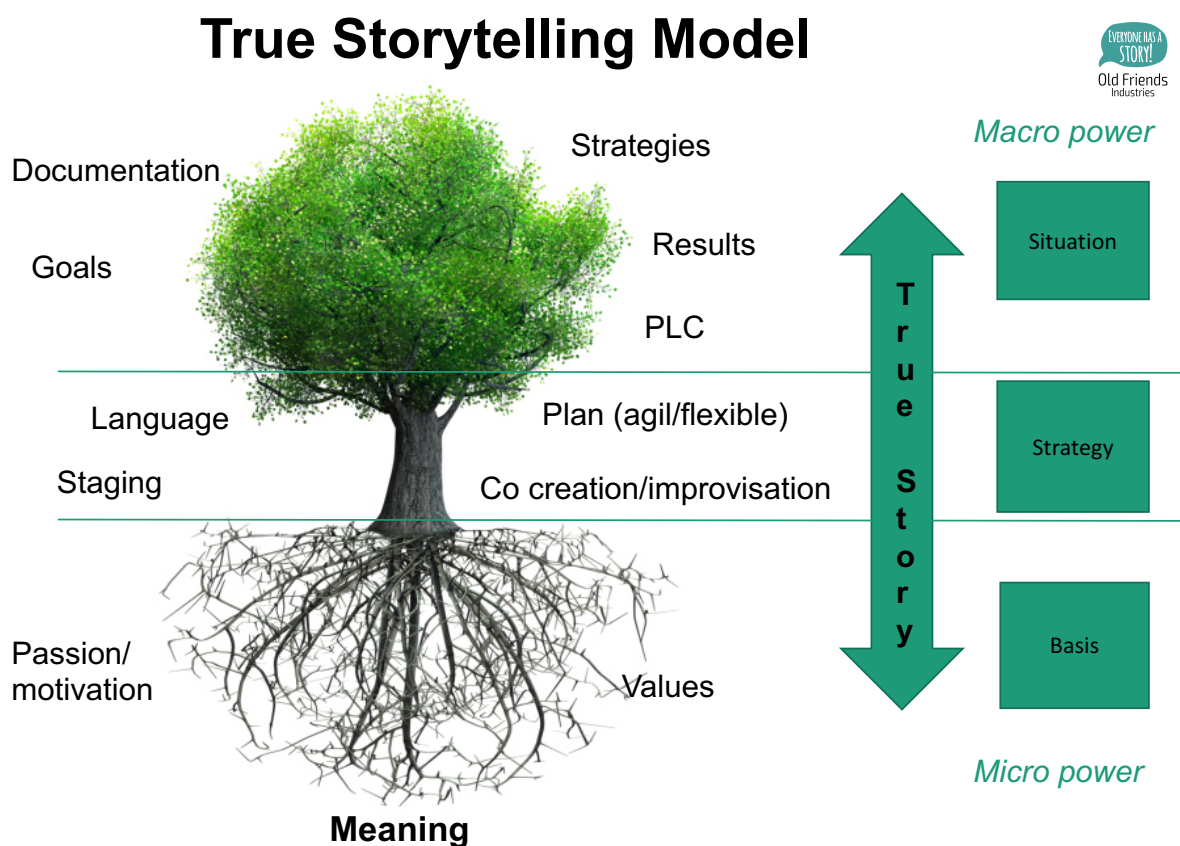


Figure 1. Model by Old Friends Industries, 2017

<sup>6</sup> [http://oldfriendsindustries.com/?page\\_id=960](http://oldfriendsindustries.com/?page_id=960)

### **Practical example of True Storytelling**

In the following we will try to suggest how we believe True Storytelling tools can be folded out in connection with the implementation of Professional Learning Communities in Hjørring Municipality. However, the method and analysis tool can help implementing many types of strategies and changes.

In the work with True Storytelling, there are a number of areas, managers should adhere to in order to succeed in implementing:

1. Managers must appear authentic and experience the effort as true and meaningful themselves.
2. They must be able to create stories that are motivating and inspiring to the employees.
3. They must create stories with a clear plot that creates direction and help employees prioritize.
4. They must use an engaging and sensible choice of words.
5. They must be able to help employee-stories on their way and be open to experiment.
6. They must consider staging/scenes and include scenography and artefacts.
7. Finally, managers and employees working with True Storytelling must be able to reflect on the stories and point out how they create value.

To help further this, the manager might include their own stories or stories of crucial moments in their life as well as embracing different spirits in the group. Basically, it's about showing you want to be there for the other part.

### **You must be motivated to motivate others**

It is not enough to know what Professional Learning Communities are and follow an instruction to implement it in the organization. The risk of failure is great. Research<sup>7</sup> shows, for example, that 80% of how we experience recognition from other people is expressed by the face; meaning that even though you say one thing, your face or body may show something completely different.

In performance art and the theatre, the term "subtitles" is used, which may be contrary to what is actually said in the dialogue. It is therefore important that the individual manager finds her own truth in her narrative about the efforts of Professional Learning Communities. So, even though the manager through questions and narratives to the employees wants to show appreciation of the community and seeks support for implementation, the body language is true to what is perceived.

At a meeting in connection with the planning of the implementation of Professional Learning Communities there was a manager who said after being introduced to True Storytelling: *"What I immediately find meaningful about True Storytelling is that I have to tell the story that is true to me and not the correct one or the one I have been assigned by my own management. As long as my story is within the limits that I and my senior management can accept."* The quote describes well the spacious aspect, which is an essential part of True Storytelling and inspired by Quantum Storytelling, where there is room for the manager to make their own interpretation of the story as long as it is within the overall framework of the strategy.

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<sup>7</sup> Relationer – Et dialektisk perspektiv, Anne-Lise Løvlie Schibbye, Universitetsforlaget 2002

Authenticity and creation of meaning can be brought about through a protreptical process where the manager dives into the meaning and importance of Professional Learning Communities, putting herself on the line and making it true. The point here is that the manager herself must be motivated to motivate her employees.

### **Motivational narratives as opposed to oppressive**

Room or space, as mentioned, play a crucial role in Boje's storytelling research. It's the ability to work dynamically, organically and spaciouly, which is often crucial for making sense. This applies both to the individual manager's ability to catch the story and reinterpret it as we saw in the previous section and in the manager's ability to tell stories that open up and motivate.

Looking at implementation processes in a narrative perspective, one can often see that the reason they failed is that the narrative often has been hijacked by the executive management and is too strictly staged. Contrary to the oppressive narrative, it is a motivational and inspiring narrative that allows employees and middle managers to understand themselves in a holistic way as a person and discover the knowledge and experience they carry with them. In other words, the manager must 'master the judgement' in the sense of waiting to make a decision after being open to dialogue and criticism.

In a theater context, you can compare the manager with the director who gives many instructions down to the detail or the director that creates frames, guides, but also creates room for the actors to fill the role and even draw on their life experiences and professional experiences. In the example of Hjørring Municipality's implementation of Professional Learning Communities, the danger could be to tell a too narrow story about the new effort. Narrow understood in the sense that there is a high degree of micro-management clearly emphasizing why it is important to work with Professional Learning Communities. It may be ok in the beginning to give a description and understanding of the development activity. Conversely, the danger is that the staff and the management's spaces are narrowed so much that they find it difficult to believe that they have a real freedom to interpret themselves how to work with Professional Learning Communities.

And so the manager loses the opportunity to create something *together* with the employees, which is crucial for a good result and outcome. One can say, according to the True Storytelling model, that they remain on the macro level and do not include the roots; employee engagement and value perception.

This is why we choose to ask certain questions to the managers and to the different teams: The question "Tell the good story about how the team works with Professional Learning Communities?" will automatically narrow down the potential answers as there must be some specific elements and criteria present. A more spacious and motivating question could be: "Tell the good story about the team?" or "Tell a good story about a team that has helped a student prosper?" The likelihood that there will be more answers to the last question is large and although not all answers have something to do with Professional Learning Communities, there is a high probability that they will do it in a direct or indirect way.

In any case, stories can open up reflection that can put the story into perspective with Professional Learning Communities and the concepts that are essential. And here the manager must pay attention to both accommodating the positive and negative fundamental moods or spirits that can arise in the dialogue. At the same time, the last two questions or perspectives on storytelling allow the manager and employees to identify themselves with the story in a meaningful and true way, leading to greater motivation and increased opportunity for implementation and anchoring in the organization and in the daily work.

### **The importance of language**

How do you create stories that have the space needed to be motivating and not oppressive? Generally, the stories must support the overall strategy, but conversely, they must not kill the commitment. So the dilemma, as with all executive management, is: "How to manage without the employees loses the commitment. And how to involve without the manager losing control?" That's something the individual manager has to work with in a dynamic and improvisational process and have the courage to experiment with.

This issue also includes the ability of the manager to work with the language. It is about creating a poetic and living language that the target audience can identify with instead of using a scientific and monotonous language, which often characterizes strategic interventions such as Professional Learning Communities in the form of, for example, models describing a process with the concepts focus, commitment, academic language and change. The manager's task is to break free from the professional language without losing focus. They are still the backdrop on which they are spoken, but they must be made alive and sensual.

### **A clear plot differs significantly from the less important**

The job as a teacher or as a school manager in Hjørring Municipality is complex and many experience that they are being given more and more daily tasks. In addition to teaching, there are meetings, student plans, etc. All these tasks create what some researchers have called 'professional dementia'. To avoid it and create simplicity and direction, it is an essential part of the manager's task - and ultimately also the task of the employees - to focus on a clear plot.

The plot entails strengthening the student's learning and well-being through work with Professional Learning Communities. *That* is the core task that has to be moved into the middle of the target disk, creating direction and thus calmness. Sure, we also have to solve the other tasks, but it is the job as a manager in Professional Learning Communities that will be central.

This focus on the clear plot and the thread also helps to prioritize the essential from the less significant and thereby reveal or outsource "Hidden cost"<sup>8</sup> which contributes to weakening implementation and innovation in the organization. For example, one can see that the individual and the team constantly ask themselves: "Is the action I spend time now enhancing students' learning and well-being?" If yes, we can continue work if "no" we must have clarified whether it is essential to spend time and costs on it and if it ultimately helps to weaken the work on the core task.

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<sup>8</sup> ISEOR, Socio-Economic Institute of Firms and Organisations, Lyon, France: "Release the untapped potential of Enterprises through Socio-Economic Management, 2008

We argue that the challenge in many implementation processes is to fill in more and more without removing anything. So instead of making the pile bigger and bigger, we need to help make it smaller, so the main issues are in focus. Experiences from other implementation projects focusing on a clear plot and creating stories about the core task include greater efficiency and better well-being because it creates clarity and meaningfulness<sup>9</sup>. And it can be seen directly in the form of a positive result on the bottom line.<sup>10</sup>

### **Help stories evolve and enhance courage to experiment and reflect**

Implementation requires involvement and co-operation to succeed. If employees cannot see themselves or identify with the stories that management tells, it does not matter and they will not adopt them. Therefore, the manager must see the communication as an organic exchange that has to be continuously adjusted and innovated. It does not help telling the same story over and over again. Likewise, the manager must be able to help stories about the team on the way to illustrate the Professional Learning Community.

Often, there are no "full-fledged" and finished stories, but instead what Boje calls for ante narratives or pre-narratives. An example may be that a teacher has become aware of a student who thrives badly. Thus, attention has been drawn to the challenge. The manager must be able to take this pre-story and, together with the staff and the team, help it on its way and unfold it so that it becomes a story that the team can act upon and experience as meaningful. It may be the recognition that this pre-narrative and its unfolding, which may become what we call a "game-changer", can eventually strengthen the student's learning and well-being and be a story that through knowledge sharing can dissolve innovation, contained in the stories.

Instead of talking about empowerment, as is often used in storytelling, we use the term "power with"<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the manager, together with the employees, creates the story that gives them energy and commitment. And this is also where we can go from top down management on the macro level to talk about *ensemble* leadership<sup>12</sup>, where the manager's role becomes more of a facilitator and where the micro level is also addressed.

You can almost say that the manager must be a scriptwriter and in order to fill that role, the manager should dare to let go of control and authority and experiment with the employees to create the "true" tale that makes sense for the team and as they can act upon. That's the ability to have attention both to one self, the other and the process while at the same time being able to surprise and improvise. These competences are of course also the competences that the manager needs in other contexts where stories are to be created; ie in his/her own development of stories for use in meetings and presentations to parents, employees and politicians. It is a knowledge of the narrative's elements that are crucial here.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://writeconcept.dk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/WRITE-concept-rapport-endelig.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> ISEOR, Socio-Economic Institute of Firms and Organisations, Lyon, France

<sup>11</sup> Inspired by Mary Parker Follett, in a 1924 essay she coined the words "power with" is greater than "power over". Likewise "empowerment" is something you get from an employer, not from yourself.

<sup>12</sup> Rosile, Grace Ann; Boje, David M.; Nez, Carma Claw. (2016). "Ensemble Leadership Theory: Collectivist, Relational, and Heterarchical Roots from Indigenous Contexts." Leadership journal. ABSTRACT.

But in order to maintain the importance of working with a flexible space that enhances creativity, we set principles for stories instead of models and guidelines: These principles are:

1. A situation that evolves. Before, during and after.
2. Some people who develop.
3. A room/space that frames the people and feelings
4. Description and over-description of elements
5. Told as if it is happening here and now (although it is past time) as opposed to a summary.

In this part of the work, where the manager also works as a kind of archaeologist and anthropologist, the manager must also be open to relate to the oppressed tales and have the ability to see them as possible potentials to support implementation and create engagement. Here you can get inspiration as known from the theatre form " Theater of the oppressed"<sup>13</sup>, which exactly address stories, that otherwise creates resistance, and prevent what could be perceived as the true and meaningful narrative.

### **Staging and materiality in the implementation**

We have previously stressed that storytelling is more than words. It is also the manager's physical presence and authenticity that is important for the implementation. As in the choice of narrative, the space or scene you choose to use also has an effect on how the target audience receives it according to Quantum Storytelling and is thus also significant to the implementation.

Hence, there is a correlation between the story, the body and the scenography that will be in play to support the implementation of Professional Learning Communities.

### **Final comment**

In conclusion it is not always enough to have a good case and to be a good communicator. In this context, evidence-based educational efforts are crucial to how to choose to tell your story and to give managers and employees the opportunity to interpret it.

*Draft/100517*

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<sup>13</sup> Theater of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal, Pluto Press, 2000.