

Storytelling of business innovation leaders

Problem: What specific IM problem does the submission focus on?

The role of narratives and storytelling is increasingly recognised as crucial to a better understanding of organisational phenomena (Boje, 2001, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2008). However, narratives of innovation mobilised by business leaders remains under-explored in the literature. This paper hence seeks to explore the nature and role of storytelling by business innovation leaders.

Current understanding: What is known about the problem, who and how it has been tackled before?

Following Boje (2001; 2008), narratives ascribe meaning to experience. The meaning in an organisation is best captured by a multiplicity of narratives (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Narratives provide managers with a form of inter-subjective interaction that reflects belief systems, role expectations and interpersonal norms. These may be self-promotional in ways they aim to convince an audience. Storytelling is critical to managerial behaviour and persuasion. It is through narratives that business leaders lay claim to legitimacy which they need for authority and power (Maclean *et al.*, 2011). While some degree of shared storytelling is seen important for organisations, it is often the case that different individuals and groups will tell quite different stories about the same organisational phenomena.

Storytelling and sensemaking

It is commonly understood that narratives are one of the primary means of sensemaking (Brown *et al.*, 2008). Narratives are fundamental to sensemaking in organisations, since they help individuals to make sense of selves, others and situations within which they find themselves (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Maclean *et al.* (2011) explore storytelling of elite business careers recounted in life-history interviews of business leaders as a means of sensemaking. The argument developed by these researchers is that business leaders present themselves in life-history narratives, using their storytelling as a 'vehicle for self-legitimization', justifying their success to themselves and others.

. Colville *et al.* (2011: 8) are very explicit in making a connection between sensemaking and storytelling:

“While not suggesting that sensemaking and storytelling are synonymous, sensemaking implicates storytelling and storytelling implies sensemaking. Sensemaking from this perspective is essentially an act of cueing a story in the form of a frame that provides a recipe”.

Narrative approaches to sensemaking research encourage the researcher to focus on who tells which stories, to whom they are told and why it matters. Narratives mobilised for the purposes of sensemaking matter in that they shape organisational decisions and hence broader directions of strategic change.

Storytelling and innovation

Prior research suggests that narratives about innovation comprise events and contextual descriptions surrounding their occurrence (Bartel and Garud, 2009). Some narratives are concerned specific events or people, while others take a form of biographies. Narratives are told from the point of view of the narrator or another individual or group. They are frequently considered as being an integral part of organising (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Garud *et al.*, 2011), and the means of connecting past experiences, present and future aspirations. Such work suggests that narratives imply an ability to make sense of past memories, respond to new experiences in the present time and to use what has been learned in ongoing processes that shape future aspirations. Garud *et al.* (2011: 588) clarify that narratives of innovation are the means of connecting past memories, responding to new experiences in the present time and using what has been learned in ongoing processes that shape future aspirations. The argument is that innovation requires the coordinated efforts of individuals and groups who become engaged in different parts of the process. By developing narratives, social actors create understandings, negotiate consensual meanings, and engage in coordinated actions. Through the development of narratives, actors evoke memories of prior ‘unusual’ experiences and how they were dealt with, asserting that this leads to the emergence of new experiences. From this perspective, narrative development processes enable organisational learning from unusual experience.

Garud *et al.* (2013) further argue that narratives of innovation can serve as a ‘boundary object’, facilitating coordination of multiple social group’s activities. Telling others about innovation may enable common meaning and joint actions. Storytelling is hence seen most effective when tellers and listeners interact and share experiences. These authors call for

further research into narratives of innovation mobilised by business leaders, the focus of the current research.

Research question: What is submission's goal?

Two main research questions are posed: How and why are narratives of innovation used by business leaders? To what extent storytelling by business leaders is important in establishing and sustaining self-legitimisation?

Research design: How precisely & in detail was/will the work be executed-describe the methodology/approach

This qualitative exploratory study utilises narrative analysis to understand how managers make sense of innovation within and beyond their organisations. The unit of analysis is an individual manager's narrative of innovation. Across all interviews, the narratives are progressively conflated to provide a broad unit of analysis which focuses on a collective of narratives. Narrative is considered to encompass large sections of talk and interview exchanges over the course of interview. The argument is that narratives in research interviews are rarely clearly bounded. A social constructionist approach was used to analyse constructions of meanings and individual experiences and whether these coalesced into common patterns.

Thirty three semi-structured interviews were conducted with UK construction sector practitioners. The interviewees came from a range of different backgrounds with a diversity of core qualifications. The interviews were one-to-one and were typically held in offices. Indicative questions included the following:

- How are innovations sustained in organisations?
- To what extent do individuals play a role in shaping the context within which innovation can take place?
- Does innovation become important in shaping identities?

The intention was to understand and explain how and why practitioners make sense of who they are and how they act. Particular attention was given to narratives about self-legitimacy which the interviewees had mobilised spontaneously.

Findings: Outcomes and results

The empirical material demonstrate that practitioners cast themselves as successful individuals, emphasising a strong sense of personal achievement. Narratives provide an effective means for establishing and sustaining self-legitimacy. As narratives of innovation may be repeated and recalled, storytelling may be embedded into maintaining legitimacy. This is in keeping with Maclean et al. (2011) and Bartel and Garud (2009). Practitioners continuously re-frame their narratives of their successes, justifying their reputation to themselves, and more importantly for others. The storytelling of business leaders is connected to the dynamics of power. CEOs of the firms are often seen as innovation leaders or champions by practitioners.

The interviewees explain that innovation becomes sustained over time when everybody in a company understands what innovation is, how it works, why it is relevant and what the benefits are. They strongly emphasise that in order to sustain the innovation, there is a need to reward and recognise ‘innovators’. Particularly rewards are seen as not necessary being financial, but could take the form of simple recognition (e.g. a mug, a certificate). The interviewees clarify that rewards and recognition could potentially lead to sustenance of the innovation over time.

Contribution: What will the outcomes and results add to current understanding or theory in the IM community

This paper responds to the call for more research into narratives of innovation mobilised by business leaders (Bartel and Garud, 2009; Garud *et al.*, 2013). If we accept that ‘most organisational realities are based on narration’ (Weick, 1995: 127), then indeed narratives serve as a means by which the interviewees sought to make their experiences meaningful. If this being the case, it can further be suggested that narratives help the interviewees reduce what was often perceived ambiguous events to relatively memorable and plausible accounts. By looking back at past events, the interviewees construct preferred narratives.

Practical implications: Who will practically gain what add in which way from the findings

This paper emphasises the importance for business leader of narratives in their organisational journeys. Storytelling for themselves, and more importantly for others, served

as a means for establishing and sustaining self-legitimation. The empirical material indicate that we cannot separate narratives from the embodied experiences of those who mobilise them and the situational contexts within which they operate. It is important hence to recognise that much sense is not shared, as practising managers author narratives in unique, personalised ways. This enriches our understanding of the way practising managers continuously make sense and re-interpret their past experiences, current practices and future aspirations.

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