

## **The dynamics of story construction: What kinds of stories are generated to serve different purposes?**

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the dynamics of storytelling in organisations. The following three interrelated questions guided the enquiry: What is the role of stories in organisational settings? What kinds of stories are available and why some are activated and others are not? How stories function as collective representations? The study is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty chief executive officers (CEOs) of UK-based infrastructure, construction and engineering organisations and participation in a number of industry events and workshops. The article's theoretical contribution is twofold: first, it demonstrates that there is the dynamics of story construction in organisational settings between verbal and non-verbal stories, personalised anecdotal as well as performative, business-oriented stories; second, it is the performative, business-oriented stories that function as collective representations, whilst personalised anecdotal are unique and function as entertainment and engagement with people.

*Keywords:* chief executive officers, storytelling, stories

### **Introduction**

Storytelling has a long history within the study of organisations, and continues to attract an interest amongst academics and practitioners (Boje, 1991, 2001; Gabriel, 2000; Maclean et al., 2011). The contribution of 'storytelling organization' (Boje, 2008) is in the understanding of sense-making that takes place in pragmatic ways between storytellers and their audiences. Stories involve an element of sense-making through which people seek to interpret the past in light of the present and imagined future. Stories help us throughout time; storytelling is a dynamic process that is continuously (re)created through the elaboration, contestation and exchange of different kinds of stories. Storytelling can be expressed through words, images and texts. The importance of stories and storytelling has long been recognised as a means of disseminating messages and vision by leaders and educators (Gabriel and Cornell, 2010; Shamir and Eilam, 2005). There are various educational programs teaching storytelling skills to executives. Verbal and visual forms of storytelling help to explain certain points, attract attention from the audience and to inspire. Storytelling is hence an essential part of personal and organisational life.

It is the top executives who connect stories to the 'bigger picture' – creating a vision and culture of organisations. Executive storytelling may be useful in setting a vision, persuading clients and stakeholders, and socially constructing organisational culture and values (Denning, 2006; Mills et al., 2001). But in addition to these performative aspects, storytelling is also useful in explaining who storytellers are and what their beliefs. Personalised stories have essential emotional, 'authentic' and humanistic elements. Storytelling in organisations can hence be understood as a dynamics and moderation between work-related and personalised life stories; new and old stories; consistent persuasive and engaging and anecdotal; boring and interesting. Storytelling by elite actors remains under-explored in the organisation and management studies (Maclean et al., 2011). We currently lack an understanding of the underlying mechanisms and ways business elite socially construct different kinds of stories for different purposes.

This article focuses on the dynamics of storytelling in organisations. The argument is grounded in the assertion that different kinds of stories in organisations are generated to serve different purposes. Storytelling organisation is about the balance and moderation between work-related consistent performative stories and more personalised, contextual and anecdotal stories. Empirical

evidence was gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty CEOs of UK-based infrastructure, construction and engineering organisations and participation in a number of industry events and workshops. The article reports how different kinds of stories are constructed and why some are activated and others are not. The empirical analysis also explores the moderation of construction of different kinds of stories in organisational settings. Existing theories of storytelling in organisations would benefit from incorporating the dynamics of story construction. Doing so allows development of specific theoretical means to see how stories function as individual and collective representations. In the next section, the theoretical background is presented followed by the methods of collecting and analysing data and empirical findings. The results are then discussed, and the article concludes with final remarks and suggestions for further research in the field of storytelling in organisations.

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Personalised reflective contextual stories*

Stories are more than just stories. They are the means by which people ascribe meanings to their experiences and life events (Boje, 1991, 2001, 2008; Gabriel, 2000, 2004). People tell different kinds of stories about themselves, others and situations in a meaningful way (Browning, 1991). Since ancient times, stories were the primary means of communications between people. Stories provide a listener with an opportunity to understand the life world of the storyteller. By listening to stories we learn about how the world works and draw conclusions. Stories help to achieve shared understandings between people. Personalised stories are often interesting, emotional and memorable in nature. They often describe impressions about something or someone. Stories help to immerse people in the real context, reflecting back on the past and imagined future.

Researchers from various disciplines described stories and storytelling as primary ways in which meanings are ascribed to individual and collective experiences, and life events. A story is “an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience” (Boje, 1991: 111). Experience is understood as beliefs, norms, meanings, interpretations, intentions and actions (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). Stories give attention to the speculative, ambiguous and guessed as to what is happening in the flow of experience:

“A good story always combines conflict, drama, suspense, plot twists, symbols, characters, triumph over odds, and usually a generous amount of humor – all to do two things: capture your imagination and make you feel.” (Adamson et al., 2006, p.37).

The above quotation emphasises that stories have an emotional aspect and a sense of humour. We generate personalised stories by renewing specific moments from that time in our history. Through stories our eyes are opened in different ways of seeing things (Colville et al., 2011). Stories are often characterised by being explanatory myths, qualitative simplifications, conceptual constructions, and perceptual themes that interpret and frame organisations and characters.

It is increasingly recognised that through storytelling individuals acquire greater self-knowledge, accessing to a more ‘authentic’ inner self. Self-storytelling has the capacity to change self-perceptions, allowing individuals to try out individual, social and professional identities (Gabriel, 1995). Stories and storytelling play an essential role in social construction of identity (Brown et al., 2008). It is commonly understood that individuals construct identity stories about who one can be and how one should act (Brown and Phua, 2011; Thomas and Davies, 2005). People socially construct identity stories on the basis of their memories, present experiences and future

expectations (Somers and Gibson, 1993). Experience is constituted through individual stories about 'self', others, social situations and events. To formulate identity story about 'self' or others, people draw from past experiences, present circumstances and future imaginings. Stories often link the past with present and future. People are telling different identity stories in different contexts at different times (Clarke et al., 2009; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Currie and Brown (2003) explore how practising managers in UK NHS hospitals made sense of the introduction of a series of improvement interventions. Their study shows that senior and middle managers shared their different stories in order to make sense of their identities. Individual identities are understood to be constituted by life stories that actors construct during their lives. Of particular note is the observation that these identity stories can be shared. While identity stories may share common meaning, these stories are not necessary consistent; they are often contested and may be conflicting.

Stories are primary sense-making devices helping individuals to make sense of change: locating the self in time, space and context. This involves making meaning from interactions with a fluctuating reality, and incorporating change into a unified self in a continuous process of becoming:

“A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, possibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking.” (Weick, 1995: 61)

Stories and storytelling have important implications for actions.

#### *Consistent business-related leadership stories*

A large part of what leaders actually do is telling stories (Denning, 2006; Ready, 2002). Storytelling is a critical aspect of managerial behaviour (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Storytelling can be seen as a managerial function. Telling and interpreting stories is a powerful way to communicate organisational vision. Stories that emerge from the history of organisations become powerful means for the present and future. Leaders can learn when and how to use stories to communicate organisational values (Bourne and Jenkins, 2013). Listening stories provides important information about the people in organisations. It also provides leaders clues about how to communicate with people and craft appropriate stories and metaphors when communicating vision (Fleming, 2001). Leaders and their audience must be committed to the corporate story as a means of communicating an organisational vision. The ability to communicate a vision and inspire others to action is commonly recognised as one of the key qualities that distinguishes transformational leaders from other types. If storytelling is powerful in verbal form, its effect can be enhanced through the use of multimedia such as pictures, art-based and recorded clips (Swap et al., 2001). Denning (2006) further demonstrates the relevance of storytelling to the exercises of leadership. They found that leaders who tell stories develop more effective relationships with their followers. Storytelling can convey knowledge, information and emotions, both explicit and the tacit and are an influential way to represent and communicate complex thoughts. It enhances organisational lessons learned, communicate common vision and support a system to capture and share tacit knowledge. Storytelling is seen as expressions of and exercises in leadership and power (Boje, 2011). Storytelling has the capacity to change perceptions of others. Harris and Barnes (2006) found that leaders who tell stories develop more effective relationships with their followers. Maclean et al. (2011) reinforce that storytelling of business elite is a vehicle for self-legitimation: re-framing accounts of success and justifying positions to themselves and others.

Storytelling is often seen as a means of making sense of shared experiences, and sharing stories is an essential part of organisations (Gabriel, 2000, 2008). Experience is pursued into

memory; stories may be memorable and immediate, creating powerful visual pictures in the minds of listeners. Since stories are ways of knowing and remembering personal meaning (Ricoeur, 2004), storytelling is a way of transforming knowledge and experiences over time (Dailey and Browning, 2014). Storytelling involves two parties: the storyteller and story-listener (the audience). Storytelling is a co-construction between storytellers and the audience. Storytellers hence think how their stories are perceived by an audience (Boje, 1991, 2008).

Boyce (1995) also argued that stories and storytelling are symbolic forms by which organisational members construct shared meanings. The everyday formal and informal conversations are necessary ingredients in the construction of shared meanings. Boyce (1995) reinforced that storytelling clearly expresses organisational culture and can be seen as effective tool for organisational renewal and workforce participation. Gabriel (2004) further argues that storytelling opens valuable windows into the emotional, political and symbolic lives of organisations. Through storytelling we gain access to deeper organisational realities, closely related to their members' experiences. Organisational stories are currently studied in different ways, for example, as organisational symbolism and culture, organisational communication and learning, as expressions of political domination and opposition.

According to Swap et al. (2001), storytelling can convey knowledge, information and emotions, both explicit and the tacit and are an influential way to represent and communicate complex thoughts. It enhances organisational lessons learned, communication of common vision and supports a system to capture and share tacit knowledge. If storytelling is powerful in verbal form, its effect can be enhanced through the use of multimedia such as pictures, art-based and recorded clips. Fleming (2001) further argues that storytelling encourages organisational reflection – where we are now? – and momentum – where are we heading? Stories can help to achieve common values and beliefs. They create contexts for work aspirations and make employees more valued (Adamson et al., 2006). Denning (2006) reinforces that storytelling is far too powerful to be relegated to the realm of bedtime fables. It is humans who make sense of the world - storytelling can change organisations. Telling a story in a certain way will elicit a second story in people's head. Storytelling has important implications in carrying people forward into actions.

Stories are told every day in organisations. Stories are a fundamental form in which people express values and reasons, and subsequently make actions. Organisational members express understanding and commitment to the organisation in their use of stories and act accordingly. The stories told in organisations offer practitioners a point of understanding the culture and values (Boyce, 1995). Storytelling hence expresses organisational memory and culture. There are different perspectives and themes through which one can better understand storytelling. As Duffield and Whitty (2016: 430) argue:

“with an increasing prominence on storytelling, little is known about the kinds of stories and narratives that need to be told, how those stories should be encouraged and captured, or the ways in which people need to be guided to enable knowledge sharing to occur”.

Overall, the literature suggests that there is need to explore the nature and the role of stories in organisations: who tell which stories and for what purposes. But what remains especially lacking is any reference to the dynamics of story construction. It is this gap in the existing knowledge that the current article aims to contribute.

*The dynamics of storytelling*

Danbridge et al. (1980) proposed that organisational life is represented through three types of symbols: verbal (anecdotes, stories, jokes, myths and legends), action (ceremonial and ritualised events, repeating/nonrepeating acts, parties) and material (company products, logo, awards, badges). All of these types of stories can play an important role in the process of organisational changes (Taylor et al., 2002). Boje (1991) demonstrated that skilled storytellers and story interpreters as organisational communicators are key to understanding the organisational culture and history. A 'storytelling organisation' is defined as "collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sense-making and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory" (Boje, 1991: 106; 1995: 1000). Storytelling organisations exist to tell their collective stories, to live out their collective stories, to be in constant struggle over getting the stories of insiders and outsiders. Boje's (1995) study of Disney storytelling demonstrates the mix of official, hegemonic stories about organisational culture and authoritarian practices as well as unofficial humanistic stories. A 'good' story is the one that we have either heard before (repeated) or that resonates with one we have heard before:

"At one extreme, the storytelling organization can oppress by subordinating everyone and collapsing everything to one "grand narrative" or "grand story". At the other extreme, the storytelling organization can be pluralistic construction of a multiplicity of stories, storytellers, and story performance events..." (Boje, 2008: 280)

People do not just tell stories: they tell stories to "enact" an account of themselves and their community (Browning, 1991). Social processes of negotiation and networking (together with the general efforts of socialisation and the specific and often pervasive influence of leaders) often result in many shared storylines and themes within an organisation. Stories can assist in shaping the course and meaning of human organisation. The discursive dynamics of the collective storytelling are also revealed in the level of contestation among stories (Boje, 1995). For example, while some degree of shared storytelling about an organisation's identity is a prerequisite for organised activity, it is often the case that different people and groups within a larger collective will tell quite different stories about themselves and the institution within which they are embedded (e.g. Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Organisations are characterised by a plurality of stories and story interpretations often in struggle with one another (Boje, 2008; Maclean et al., 2012).

Storytelling can be understood in light of time. From this perspective, storytelling is a dynamic process that is continuously created and re-created through the elaboration, contestation and exchange of stories. Old stories lose their hold and new stories keep with the time emerging. The story of the time is the speed with which cues become frames. Storytelling is hence connected with processes of sense-making and organising (Colville et al., 2011). Clark (2002, p. 723) reviews the work of Boje (2001) referring to storytelling as:

"Multi-stranded 'flowing soup' in which intentions and meanings modify and mutate over tellings. Analysis of stories should therefore be a process of sensemaking that privileges the many possible understandings by focusing on storytelling as a living free-flowing entity."

Sims (2003) considers the special pressures on managers to tell stories about their organisations to themselves, their superiors and subordinates. Managers are expected to give a coherent story of organisational performance for their staff. But they also continuously and spontaneously construct stories of what is happening in their lives, as well as revising them and imagining the future. For Sims storytelling is a complicated balance between the boring and incredible stories; the excessively confessional and the over-distant, broadly inoffensive and the embarrassing. It is through personalised stories and storytelling that business leaders acquire

greater knowledge about ‘authentic’ inner self and others. Building upon the existing literature on stories and storytelling, the current study contributes to the theoretical and empirical understanding of the dynamics of different types of stories articulated by CEOs for different purposes. Marshall and Adamic (2010) further argue that employees want to feel that their work lives are part of ‘bigger story’ in which they play an important role. For this to happen, they must understand the company’s history, its values, present challenges and where it will be in the future.

## Methods

In consistence with previous interpretive studies on storytelling (Boyce, 1995; Maclean et al., 2011), the in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to explore the CEO’s perspectives on the role of storytelling. Twenty semi-structured interviews have been conducted with CEOs from large UK infrastructure, engineering and construction enterprises. Eighteen of the interviewees were male and two were female. Table 1 presents general background information about the CEOs interviewed and organisations they lead. The sample represents highly publicized corporations appearing in the social media, hence, the more specific details are kept confidential and anonymous. In order to ensure anonymity, CEOs in this paper are given pseudonyms. One can always question whether representations in interviews do reflect on how stories are constructed in organisational settings. Therefore, additionally, the researcher has attended a number of industry events and workshops which provided a valuable opportunity to actually observe and make notes of what really happens in organ assertions in terms of how stories get created.

The CEO is the highest-ranking person in an organisation ultimately responsible for taking managerial decisions, developing and implementing of high-level policies, managing all the operations and resources of the company, as well as act as a link between the board of directors and corporate management. Typically, the CEO is portrayed as someone who is responsible for setting organisational vision and culture, and making key organisational decisions and actions (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). This image has given rise to the characterisation of the CEO as one whose roles involve influencing the context within which implementation of strategies take place. CEOs need to make sure that everyone understands and follows common language in organisations. Developing strategies involves storytelling, making ideas explicit and engaging audiences. Typically, symbols, symbolic actions and stories are used to communicate interpretive schemes (Haley and Boje, 2014). The CEOs have opportunity to articulate and advocate their vision or preferred interpretive scheme for other organisational members through stories and storytelling.

Table 1 The CEOs interviewed background information

Pseudonyms	Background	Number of years of experience	Nature of the organisation	Number of employees in the company
Malcolm	Physics	30	Construction management organization	500
Sophia	Business and management	33	Multinational construction and engineering corporation	15000
Alexander	Engineering Production and Management	44	Public-private company responsible for the maintenance, renewal and upgrade of the infrastructure	3500
Edmond	Operations and project	36	Public company with	3500

	management; chartered civil engineering		responsibility for managing the core road network	
George	Civil engineering	35	Rail infrastructure corporation	10000
Harry	Law, Chartered engineering	25	Multinational construction and development company	57000
Daniel	Civil engineering	25	Water infrastructure corporation	500
Christian	Aerospace and engineering	27	Rail infrastructure corporation	800
Benjamin	Organisational business	11	Infrastructure group providing innovative and efficient infrastructure	50000
Oliver	Infrastructure	17	Global engineering company that provides consulting, design, construction, and operations services	26000
Warren	Civil engineering	24	Construction management consultancy	100
Trevor	Business and management	25	Contractor offering dry lining, ceilings and specialist internal fit- out to main contractors, owner clients and architects	1000
Matt	Organisational business	11	Infrastructure group providing innovative and efficient infrastructure	50000
Chris	Civil engineering	25	Consultancy, maintenance and construction	4500
Ben	Chartered building	33	Consultancy, maintenance and construction	8000
Henry	Infrastructure	17	Global engineering company that provides consulting, design, construction, and operations services	26000
Katherine	Law	11	Construction management organisation	500
Andrew	Chartered engineering	30	Construction management consultancy	10000
Peter	Civil engineering	23	Regional building and civil engineering contractor	350
Louis	Architecture	27	Providing architecture, planning and management services to the infrastructure sector	150
John	Surveying and Chartered Building	44	Construction management consultancy	1000

The research questions were carefully crafted for in-depth interviews to understand how top executives perceive storytelling. Examples of interview questions include: “To what extent storytelling is important in your organisation?”, “What kind of stories are available and what is their purpose?”, “How stories become collective representations”? These questions intended to encourage the interviewees to talk about the nature and the role of storytelling in their

organisations and in relation to their roles and actions. The interview situation is viewed as a social interaction between the interviewee and interviewer. When interviewing CEOs about storytelling, depending on the questions, we can expect them to construct different kind of stories etc. The interview talk does not objectively reflect the reality beyond the interview situation. The interviewer of course influence which stories are mobilised (cf. Quasthoff, 2013). The interview talk may even reflect impression management as integral to the operations of executives, implicated in how they and their organisations are perceived by others (Brown et al., 2008; Maclean et al., 2011).

The interviews were audio-recorded and then fully transcribed by the researcher. The analysis commenced with a detailed reading of the transcripts several times over with a focus on the nature and the role of storytelling. The analytical process involved identifying different kinds of stories through searching for natural linguistic expressions, texts and words used by the interviewees. Personalised stories were constructed around individual experiences, circumstances in life histories and reflections of past, present and future. Stories were about CEOs' identities and roles, specific life events and general reflections. Such stories were identified in the interview transcripts by searching for introductory phrases such as 'My role is', 'I do', 'I have been for some time', 'I think I am one', 'Every Friday', 'I can tell you a story', 'I can find myself'. 'When I have been in'. More coherent plotted stories were also evident as outcomes of dominant structures, political actions, script-following, performance, organisational and industry identity works (Alvesson, 2003). The analysis required better understanding of the context within which interviewees operated. This involves reading industry and company reports, brochures, strategies. The analysis involved a continuous moving back and forward between the entire dataset (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). The analysis of the interview transcripts involved coding the textual material, identifying one or more passages of text that, in some sense, exemplify the same theoretical idea. The codes cut across interviews and thus represent recurring themes. The identified themes were cross-referenced across the interviews. The analysis of the interview transcripts involved coding the textual material, identifying one or more passages of text that, in some sense, exemplify the same theoretical idea. Table 2 presents identified themes, sub-themes, codes and examples of illustrative quotations in the data.

Table 2 Identified themes, sub-themes, codes and example quotations in the interview data

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Quotations
<i>Understanding of storytelling</i>	Making-sense of storytelling	Concept, a process, relevance, a logic, explaining, recently, relatively new, means of explaining and meaning making, logic for actions, understanding	"I only came across this concept of storytelling recently. You have to make it relevant. That would probably fit with storytelling example. It is explaining what matters and why what I want to achieve. I worked very heavily explaining why I want something. I will build a logic for a course of action." (Edmond)
	Explaining what storytelling means		
	Relevance in time		"That is something that I have learned over the years. I think it is very powerful when leaders use stories to help people understand. You have to use them in moderation. You have to select your stories carefully and you have to be sincere about it. It is not to tell story for the sake of telling a story. But the right story at the right time told in a right way can really illustrate the point very effectively. It is a bit like making something visual help people to understand and appreciate if they can see it. Certainly, in construction people respond very well to pictures and images. I think it helps to create a
	The concept of storytelling		
	Learning about storytelling through experience		
	Selection of stories		
	Using stories in moderation		



			<p>picture or an image. I use stories a lot when I am talking about all aspects of the business actually. I use them a lot around a group to help spread knowledge. I use them a lot with clients. The advantage of stories is that they back up facts. You can use them to illustrate things. It creates more substance. It can help. I found them helpful.” (Harry)</p>
<p><i>Importance of storytelling</i></p>	<p>Understanding Knowledge transformation Sharing experiences Organisational memory Individual and group learning Illustrations Backing up facts Mindful about old stories Selecting stories carefully</p>	<p>Passing experience, actions, facilitate innovation, success, lessons learnt from failures, recognition, culture of a company, creative and innovative ways, storytelling is more important today</p>	<p>“I think storytelling is really important. But storytelling is more important today because we do not have data and systems. So the only way of passing experience and knowledge is through storytelling. And only some people are good at storytelling, not everyone is. If you are good at recording the information in a consistent way everyone gets access to it because you came across a good storyteller and they helped you learn. So, I think storytelling is one of the things that have helped because the other system has not been there to allow information-in-use to be transferred between people.” (Sophia)</p> <p>“What I would like to do is to engage the client with what is the problem they have got. Let’s tell that client a few stories about some things we have done that are similar to his situation in a quite creative, innovative way. I encourage people to listen what the client is telling in terms of the problem and then try and tell some stories. They facilitate innovation. Storytelling is really important for us. It is also really important around the culture of a company.” (Oliver)</p> <p>“I think the extent to which storytelling is important depends on the circumstances. Every style of leadership has a space. Great leaders know when to apply the right style. There is no one style. It is knowing what should work when.” (Christian)</p> <p>“Sometimes. I have a phrase I use which actually works against storytelling that can get very boring. I often think of the question leaders have to ask themselves. Particular grow through experience is when you start bring old solutions to new problems. That is disadvantage. Storytelling will be about me telling old stories. I am always mindful of that. I like telling stories, but I also very conscious of the audience.” (Alexander)</p>
<p><i>The purpose of storytelling</i></p>	<p>Characteristics of stories Successful and unsuccessful stories</p>	<p>Remember, interesting, engaging, dramatic, exciting, good storytellers, balance the stories, personality,</p>	<p>“Part of my monthly diary is to go and visit people, visit sites. One had to be able to tell stories. Sometimes, there are stories that lead to success, demonstrable recognition. Sometimes, there are stories that do not go so well. I think it is important to balance the stories because that</p>

	<p>Audience</p> <p>Speaker and listener</p> <p>Time</p> <p>Context</p> <p>Personality</p> <p>Ongoing storytelling</p>	<p>personalized, telling right stories at the right time, telling relevant stories</p>	<p>really makes you a person, a personality. The stories are not always about work. But they provide a context. I think if you can bring the vision and mission to life with context - that is important." (George)</p> <p>"Storytelling should be interesting to make people remember. If it is really interesting and dramatic people will remember. If not they will remember because they heard it 10 times. So, something that is quite mundane you have got to repeat. But something that is exciting you know people will remember because it was interesting story to listen to." (Sophia)</p> <p>"Stories are the best ways to tell what you are doing and how it affects people. I always try to make it very personal. It is important to have a process and structures to be mindful of, but actually helping people to see the right journey." (Warren)</p>
<p><i>Storytelling and leadership</i></p>	<p>Persuasion</p> <p>Consistency</p> <p>Conflicting stories</p> <p>Re-constructing stories to make them relevant or new</p> <p>Styles of leadership</p> <p>Organisational discourses</p> <p>Belief</p> <p>Culture</p> <p>Support arguments</p>	<p>Vocabulary, language, everybody to understand, convincing people, consistency, value, culture, strategy</p>	<p>"A good leader tends to have in a team what they do not have. I am not a charismatic leader who can speak publicly really well. I am not that sort of leader. But I have colleagues who are good at that. I like communicate ideas person to person, or in a small group. Some people are great leaders because they can influence a big group and others can influence a small group, and come of their teams can influence a big group. It is complementary skills. You do not have to have it yourself." (Sophia)</p> <p>"I am convinced that we do well when we see each other and we tell each other stories. There is some biology and evolution in this. It is also about your behaviours. Do you need to be a charismatic leader to lead? I think I am one. Is it necessary? No. I do not think you need to be a <i>show man</i>. It suits my style. But what is way more important is how you behave, and being constantly challenging. Am I behaving in a way that describes the culture that I said I want to create? Because if I am not, people will not believe me." (Daniel)</p> <p>"How do you set the vision? How do you do it with passion that engages people? Answer is you have to be storytelling. Storytelling is a classic leadership skill. And by the way I am not necessarily great at it. One of the reasons I use slides is that I find it easy to keep the story on track. I can tell a good story using slides. It is absolutely crucial." (Malcolm)</p>

It is important to acknowledge that interviewing four CEOs may make the study look very limited. However, the interview material was formed of fascinating accounts of authentic constructions of executive storytelling. The small number of interviews allowed space for in-depth analysis of nuances and attention. A number of previous interpretive leadership studies rely on very small sample providing rich analysis and interpretations (cf. Maclean et al., 2011; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2013; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). The set of interviews presented in this paper offers rich and interesting case for analytically in-depth examinations of different kinds of stories generated to serve different purposes.

### *Understanding of storytelling by CEOs*

There was a consensus among all CEOs interviewed that storytelling is important in organisations and their roles. Storytelling provides a means of ascribing meanings to individual and shared experiences, life events and situations (Boje, 1991; 2008). It is a sense-making process of constructing meanings and common understandings. Stories provide an organisational memory enabling and facilitating learning from past experiences to inform and shape the future. As argued by interviewees, the critical questions are who tell which stories and for what purposes. The content of stories and the audience of whom they are told is seen crucial. Interviewees emphasised that stories should be interesting and engaging to make people to remember them. Storytelling in organisations is considered as a dynamic process that is continuously re-created through the elaboration, contestation and exchange of stories (Gabriel, 2004; Haley and Boje, 2014).

The interviewees demonstrated their self-awareness of the concept of 'storytelling' in organisations. For Edmond storytelling is a relatively new concept. He sought to define and make sense of what storytelling means by giving specific examples:

"I only came across this concept of storytelling recently. You have to make it relevant. That would probably fit with storytelling example. It is explaining what matters and why what I want to achieve. I worked very heavily explaining why I want something. I will build a logic for a course of action." (Edmond)

In the above quotation storytelling is understood as a process of explaining what Edmond wants to achieve and why to other organisational members. It is seen as a logical and convincing explanation for intention and future actions. For Harry, in contrast, storytelling was considered as 'something' that he has learned over the years. He pointed towards multiple functions of storytelling:

"That is something that I have learned over the years. I think it is very powerful when leaders use stories to help people understand. You have to use them in moderation. You have to select your stories carefully and you have to be sincere about it. It is not to tell story for the sake of telling a story. But the right story at the right time told in a right way can really illustrate the point very effectively. It is a bit like making something visual help people to understand and appreciate if they can see it. Certainly, in construction people respond very well to pictures and images. I think it helps to create a picture or an image. I use stories a lot when I am talking about all aspects of the business actually. I use them a lot around a group to help spread knowledge. I use them a lot with clients. The advantage of stories is that they back up facts. You can use them to illustrate things. It creates more substance. It can help. I found them helpful." (Harry)

Harry uses stories to promote key messages around a group, to connect with clients and persuade them to lead new projects, and other aspects of the business. For Harry stories also help achieve

shared understanding between people and illustrate points. Of further note, Harry was conscious about selecting and using stories. He used the word '*moderation*' pointing towards potential differences and types of stories. 'The notion of 'the right story at the right time told in a right way' is really about specific purpose and effectiveness. These stories are performative and business-oriented. At the same time Harry talked about being sincere which is about genuine feelings and authenticity. These are humanistic and contextual stories. Of further note, Harry talked about the construction industry context where people respond very well to pictures and images. This points towards the importance of visual storytelling as an alternative way to verbal storytelling in illustrating points.

Warren argues that stories are the best ways of telling about what he is doing. He always tries to make them very personal. But he is also mindful of structures and business processes:

"Stories are the best ways to tell what you are doing and how it affects people. I always try to make it very personal. It is important to have a process and structures to be mindful of, but actually helping people to see the right journey." (Warren)

Warren is authentic in recognising the value of personalised stories which help people to understand their journeys.

#### *Importance of storytelling for CEOs*

Storytelling was commonly recognised as important by the CEOs interviewed. For example, Sophia strongly emphasised the important role of storytelling at present time as a way of knowledge transformation across individuals, projects and organisations:

"I think storytelling is really important. But storytelling is more important today because we do not have data and systems. So the only way of passing experience and knowledge is through storytelling. And only some people are good at storytelling, not everyone is. If you are good at recording the information in a consistent way everyone gets access to it because you came across a good storyteller and they helped you learn. So, I think storytelling is one of the things that have helped because the other system has not been there to allow information-in-use to be transferred between people." (Sophia)

The above quotation illustrates a way storytelling helps to connect between the past, present and future. Interestingly, Sophia talked about 'good storytellers' as those who records and transfers information in a consistent way to make other people learn. Consistent stories are seen very important for CEOs interviewed. In particular, common labels help organisational members to achieve consistency and shared understandings. An example provided by Sophia was about five businesses working on one project. If one looks at the management codes, sometimes they call projects by street names, sometimes they call them by the client, sometimes by the type of the asset. Retrieving the whole data is very difficult if people call things differently.

Oliver also emphasised the importance of storytelling in the organisation. Stories about real examples of past projects are seen helpful to engage the client. Oliver encourages all organisational members to listen to clients' stories and to tell relevant stories. Storytelling is also important around the culture of a company.

"What I would like to do is to engage the client with what is the problem they have got. Let's tell that client a few stories about some things we have done that are

similar to his situation in a quite creative, innovative way. I encourage people to listen what the client is telling in terms of the problem and then try and tell some stories. They facilitate innovation. Storytelling is really important for us. It is also really important around the culture of a company.” (Oliver)

Similarly, Benjamin talked about a natural tendency to go and look for stories that support organisational discourses which are the currencies of the day. In the construction industry, these include innovation, continuous improvement, efficiency, collaboration, integration etc.

Christian argues that the extent to which storytelling is important depends on the circumstances. He also talked about ‘great leaders’ who know when to apply the ‘right’ leadership style. Alexander used a phrase which works against storytelling. He is concerned of storytelling getting very boring when leaders use old solutions to solve new problems. Similar to Harry being careful in using stories in moderation, Alexander is mindful of the audience. He likes telling stories but stories should be interesting and engaging:

“Sometimes. I have a phrase I use which actually works against storytelling that can get very boring. I often think of the question leaders have to ask themselves. Particular grow through experience is when you start bring old solutions to new problems. That is disadvantage. Storytelling will be about me telling old stories. I am always mindful of that. I like telling stories, but I also very conscious of the audience.” (Alexander)

Alexander has the highest number of years of experience of all CEOs interviewed. He acknowledged that it maybe through experience when leaders start bringing old solutions to new problems. Leaders hence question themselves how their stories would be received by the audience. They want their stories to be interesting and engaging.

### *The dynamics of story construction*

Telling stories was seen as an important means of contextualising the organisational life. The informal role of CEOs includes interactions with people inside and outside their organisations. The ability of telling stories is seen as an essential part of their roles. George argues that stories are essentially contextual and personalised in that they can be about personal experience, life situations, work and other people. Some stories are seen as interesting and engaging, other stores are not going very well:

“Part of my monthly diary is to go and visit people, visit sites. One had to be able to tell stories. Sometimes, there are stories that lead to success, demonstrable recognition. Sometimes, there are stories that do not go so well. I think it is important to balance the stories because that really makes you a person, a personality. The stories are not always about work. But they provide a context. I think if you can bring the vision and mission to life with context that is important.”(George)

George also talked about the *balance* between personalised and contextual stories and work-related stories. Leaders need performative stories which are about setting vision and mission. But it is the personalised, contextual stories which bring to life business-related more strategic stories. Personalised stories reflect on remembered past, present situations and imagined future. Sense-making stories are about constructing meanings and interpretations. CEOs interviewed seem to value these types of stories.

Sophia also distinguished between repeated stories about organisational vision and mission and more exciting interesting stories about personal experiences:

“Storytelling should be interesting to make people to remember. If it is really interesting and dramatic people will remember. If not they will remember because they heard it 10 times. So, something that is quite mundane you have got to repeat. But something that is exciting you know people will remember because it was interesting story to listen to.” (Sophia)

The content of stories is seen essential by most interviewees. Stories should be interesting and engaging to make people remembering them. How well the story is told, the content of the story itself and shaping it to resonate with the target audience are all central in the organisational processes. Storytelling is recognised as powerful means to use stories to help people understand the points. Telling stories should not be for the same of it, but ‘the right story should be told at the right time in a right way’ to illustrate the key points. Senior managers found stories very helpful to spread messages and back up facts. But they clearly demonstrated consciousness of the audience, whom stories are told; and telling ‘old’ stories to brand new problems.

### *Storytelling and leader identities*

Leadership was often considered as a process of influencing the behaviour of others. While leaders recognised the importance of persuading followers, there were differences in the ways they are doing it. Some leaders have a self-ascribed role of ‘*walk and talk*’ who influence and lead changes in the sector; others prefer communicate their thoughts person to person or in a small group. Leadership here is positioned as complementary skills between a leader and a team:

“A good leader tends to have in a team what they do not have. I am not a charismatic leader who can speak publicly really well. I am not that sort of leader. But I have colleagues who are good at that. I like communicate ideas person to person, or in a small group. Some people are great leaders because they can influence a big group and others can influence a small group, and come of their teams can influence a big group. It is complementary skills. You do not have to have it yourself.” (Sophia)

The ascribed role of Sophia can be described as a ‘thoughtful leader’ or ‘*empathy leader*’ who tries to understand self, others and demonstrates a sense of wisdom.

For Edmond, communication with the team was seen essential in building trust and empathy in organisations. A deep commitment to the business and personal touch valuing other people’ views and opinions can be demonstrated in Edmond’s identity story:

“My technique which I think works here is about building trust and a bit of empathy. I only do things which I really believe in, which I think is a bit altruistic. I just cannot engage with them otherwise. I am really proud the road that I run and the service we give. I can really get into it. I think that genuine commitment to the business come across in all the communication I have with people. Making it personal, as they realise that I am dealing with exactly the same things as they are.” (Edmond)

The nature and the content of stories that are used to make people remember them are critical in executive storytelling. Stories are reflections on remembered past, present situations and imagined future. Daniel has acknowledged the important cultural role of stories for millennium. He sees

himself as a charismatic leader, 'show man' who is good at telling stories. But he also believes in consistency in creating coherent storylines aligned with his personal behaviour:

"I am convinced that as species we do well when we see each other and we tell each other stories. The more you want to create a culture or change the culture – the more you can deliver your thoughts and provide examples of how we should behave or what 'good' looks like. Receiving that message in a form of stories, in a form of analogies is a format that is readily receivable for people because culturally that is how we have done it for millennium. There is some biology and evolution in this. It is also about your behaviours. Do you need to be a charismatic leader to lead? I think I am one. Is it necessary? No. I do not think you need to be a *show man* – no, it suits my style. But what is way more important is how you behave, and being constantly on your guard, constantly challenging. Am I behaving in a way that describes the culture that I said I want to create? Because if I am not, I am wasting my breath. If I am not people will not believe me." (Daniel)

Executives want their stories to be believable to the listeners. They are expected to deliver coherent speeches about organisational performance for their staff and external audiences. But they also provide examples and stories which are personal in nature about their experiences and life events.

## Discussion

The empirical findings demonstrate the self-awareness of CEOs interviewed about the concept of storytelling. The interviewees tried to explain what storytelling means and give some specific examples. For some CEOs storytelling is about explaining what matters and why it matters what they want to achieve in the future. Storytelling is often seen in light of time as a prerequisite for building a logic for actions. For a number of CEOs storytelling is something (e.g. skill) they have learned over the years. Storytelling was often recognised as a helpful way of transferring experience and knowledge among internal and external stakeholders. Overall, there was an agreement among CEOs interviewed about the importance of storytelling in organisations. Senior managers are often 'good' at telling stories. They use stories a lot to talk about all aspects of organisational life.

Telling personalised stories by leaders may seem to be unusual, given the senior position they hold. Part of the formal job is telling official, performative, business-related speeches. But they do not under-estimate the role of personalised stories. It is these types of stories which engage people in real context, reflecting back on past experiences and events and imagined future. Anecdotal stories bring human, personal aspects to organisational life. They are used when CEOs visit construction sites to engage with lower level employees. Stories are not always about work, they can be about anything. Stories provide context. Unique, dramatic, interesting stories make people remember them. The empirical data demonstrate that CEOs interviewed were concerned about telling 'old' and boring stories to solve new problems. They always think about how audience would perceive their stories. Some stories are spontaneous, but some should be carefully selected to engage the audience. 'The right story at the right time told in a right way' (Harry) emphasises aspects of stories such as relevance, timeframe and intonations of storytellers. This observation is consistent with researchers who recognise that listeners are active participants in storytelling (cf. Boje, 1995, 2008). Because stories are unique, it is hence probably more appropriate to privilege the processes of storytelling rather than the stories themselves. I believe that the more we know, the more experienced we become – the better we become at telling stories.

CEOs emphasised the role of repetitive and coherent stories, but also valued spontaneous personalised stories. Anecdotal stories are seen powerful to bring to live more coherent dominant

discourses. In fact, personalised stories may be even more powerful in making people to follow storytellers. Personalised stories are unique and more interesting than repetitive strategic messages. But organisation is of course formed through official strategic 'grant stories' as well as unofficial anecdotal stories, myths and metaphors. This is consistent with authors such as Danbridge et al. (1980), Boje (1991, 1995, 2008), Gabriel (2000, 2004) and Sims (2003) who view organisational life as a multitude of verbal and written, official and unofficial stories. Hence, storytelling in organisations can be best understood through the dynamics between different kinds of stories which get created and activated in meaningful ways.

## **Conclusion**

In these article different kinds of stories and storytelling are carefully examined. The critical questions are who tell which stories and for what purposes. While leaders recognise and emphasise the role of storytelling, they are conscious about the content and relevance of stories. Personalised stories are seen as powerful means of communicating with people about experiences and events. These types of stories are often interesting and engaging and make people to remember them. They are important means of understanding, meaning making and explaining. In contrast, managerial stories are performative, expected to be consistent and coherent. These business-related types stories are often boring but necessary to sustain managerial positions. The findings demonstrate the oscillation between the performative, business-oriented stories that function as collective representations, and personalised anecdotal stories that are unique and function as entertainment and engagement with people. The theoretical contribution of this article lays in the dynamics of story construction in organisational settings between verbal and non-verbal stories, personalised anecdotal as well as performative, business-oriented stories.

This paper demonstrates that executives need performative strategic storytelling as part of their formal role, they value and emphasise more personalised, emotional and inspiring stories. It is these types of stories which form your identity and personality. By sharing personalised stories, business elite may enhance their recognition among peers. Storytelling has important implications for practice. Storytelling is a means of communication and meaning making, and reflections on remembered past, present and imagined future. Storytelling has important implications for practice; storytelling carries forward into actions. Storytelling is seen as an important means of understanding personal and organisational experiences. Top executives tend to immerse their employees in inspiring and compelling strategic stories. These stories often function as collective representations. Whilst storytelling is often refers to verbal telling stories, it can also be expressed through symbolic representations such as visual pictures and images. For example, architects place visual images in their offices as a way of telling stories about past innovative projects. There is a sense of emergence of digital storytelling. Storytelling is applicable in presentations, teaching, mentoring, employee motivation and building business communications. Leading companies use storytelling techniques to communicate their corporate vision to new clients and colleagues. Business schools include storytelling in the teaching and coaching programs. According to CEOs in the construction sector people respond very well to visual pictures and images. In this context stories are used to persuade clients to give jobs to perform. They are used to illustrate past successful projects and key points. This is more likely to be the case in architectural, engineering and infrastructure contexts. It may also be the case in marketing for promoting brands and attracting customers.

There are a number of potential avenues for further work. Future work may also examine storytelling from the perspectives of middle and junior managers, and potential tensions between managerial levels in how stories are elaborated and contested in organisations. Future longitudinal studies will supplement the findings by shedding light on how the use of stories and storytelling will change over time. Although the current research addresses self-identities of leader and their own



personal experiences of using stories and storytelling, further empirical research may specifically focus on storytelling and individual and organisational identities. Another research direction is studying executive storytelling through public appearances and how audiences perceive it. Although current research addresses visual storytelling, further research may specifically focus on non-verbal forms of storytelling. Further processual research would be useful to get deeper insights into what really happens in organ assertions in terms of how stories get created, selected and function. This could shed light into the transformational processes of storytelling into actions.

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