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Assessing Stories Managers Tell

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Seven assessment criteria are developed from applied logic and supported by relevant literature: relevancy, application, factual/lifelike, social construction, effectiveness, has a point, and goodness. These assessment criteria can be used in narrative inquiry by scholars, storytellers, and listeners to assess how well stories meet these criteria and promote the transference of experiential knowledge to practice. To illustrate how these assessment criteria can be used in thematic narrative inquiry, a convenience sample of three city managers was selected, qualitative interviews consisting of previously structured questions were conducted, and stories were elicited. The city managers’ stories were selected and assessed to determine the level of specificity with which the story met the criterion. Based on these assessments, the authors identified the best storyteller from the perspective of the listener, highlighting characteristics of good storytellers. Public management heuristics developed from themes or points from the stories are discussed.

Public administration is learned through experience. “One of the most basic ways of learning about something is to talk with someone who has knowledge about it” (Luton, 2010, p. 21). Thus, storytelling is “key in the transformation of experience into useful knowledge” (Stone-Mediatore, 2003 cited in Luton, 2010, p. 61). “People use stories to draw knowledge explicitly from their lived experience” (Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005, p. 292). As such, stories in public administration are often based on themes or lessons learned, heuristics, morals, advice, inspiration, values dissemination, or heroism. Because storytelling is strongly related to praxis, the process through which the listener attempts to put theory or knowledge into action, storytelling provides listeners—both scholars and practitioners—with opportunities to learn from the experiences of others by developing heuristics.

To connect theory with practice, scholars often have to be willing to penetrate organizations. “Story researchers can benefit by entering organizations to observe first-hand how people perform storytelling” (Boje, 1991, p. 125). This benefit is particularly relevant within the context of public administration. Public administration scholars “build theory and develop knowledge to advance their field while addressing substantive problems in practice” (Dodge et al., 2005, p. 289). Storytelling and narrative inquiry provide scholars with opportunities to engage in practice-driven pragmatism by inviting administrators to be “coresearchers—to do research with us, as opposed to thinking of them as subjects on whom the research is focused” and placing “practical knowledge at center stage” in theory development (p. 288). Rigorous and relevant theories can be developed from “in-depth conversations with managers [that] show...
how they are capable of defining reality, judging what kind of knowledge is useful to them, and developing validity standards relevant to their world” (Hummel, 1991, p. 32).

Stories also play a unique role within organizations by moving up, down, and across organizational structures, facilitating leadership development, organizational change and learning, institutional stature, and cultural understanding, promoting administrative values such as efficiency, ethical decision-making, and transparency, and upholding the public trust. Stories “humanize the impersonal spaces of bureaucratic organizations, to mark them as human territory” (Gabriel, 1991, p. 873). Stories can be used for sense-making because “they reflect the context in which the action took place” (Dodge et al., 2005, p. 290). Stories that are convincing promote organizational buy-in, which is important to organizational success because “commitment to implementing the decision can be as important as the specific decision in bringing about success” (Feldman & Sköldberg, 2002, p. 287). Leaders and managers therefore often use stories to back directives. Stories provide entertainment, information, empowerment, and opportunities for socializing and imaging (Spradley, 2011). In addition, storytelling also has “other purposes, including transferring knowledge, nurturing community, stimulating innovation, and crafting communications, in education and training, and in preserving values” (Brown, Denning, Groh, & Laurence, 2005, p. 11). Although scholars often have the advantage of hearing stories in a learning context, employees who work in an organization may neglect this context.

Good storytelling can produce many benefits; however, many public administrators are not good storytellers. Bad storytelling may not produce any significant benefits. Even when bad storytelling produces benefits, these benefits may be outweighed by the costs, including wasted time, workplace disruption resulting from mental, emotional, or physical distractions, and angst toward the storyteller because his or her stories are often perceived as irrelevant and routinely fail to contribute to productivity or provide an entertaining account. “Managers are advised to enlarge their storytelling repertoire in order to increase the likelihood that they will be able to tell a story that connects with the uniqueness of the situation to guide and shape employee behavior” (Barge, 2004, p. 106).

Arendt (1998) claims that “it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story” (cited in Santos, 2012, p. 115). Managers can therefore benefit from the development of criteria to assess stories by using these criteria to guide them in making stories. Listeners can also benefit from the development of criteria to assess stories by using these criteria as a framework to gauge the meaningfulness of stories. Thus, assessment criteria will improve storytelling and story listening.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Story assessment helps storytellers think critically about their own stories and improve their storytelling abilities, helps listeners better appraise the intentions and discourse of the storytellers, and, when listeners are scholars, helps them derive experiential knowledge that can form the basis of theory building. As such, stories must be assessed not only by storytellers but also, and more importantly, by the story’s listeners, who have their “own criteria for determining whose story is most coherent and reliable as a guide to belief and action” (Fisher, 1984, p. 13). Postmodernists have not sufficiently engaged in story assessment, which therefore deserves examination. In the following discussion, seven assessment criteria that can be relied
upon by storytellers and listeners are developed based on “rational standards taken essentially from informal or formal logic” (p. 2) and supported by the literature.

Relevancy

Stories must be relevant. As Hummel (1991) indicated, “Relevance standards are epistemological standards of the first order, because they ask the question: ‘Does this ring true?’” (p. 38). Relevance is related to applicability to situations or circumstances: “Relevance refers to the potential … to enable practitioners ‘to make informed choices about important practical problems and to implement solutions to them effectively’ ” (Dodge et al., 2005, p. 288). Stories can be relevant in whole or in part; for instance, longer stories can oscillate between being relevant and irrelevant to the situation at hand. “Instead of being generalizable to a larger population, narrative knowledge may be transferable from one circumstance to another” (Luton, 2010, p. 62). Story relevance is often predicated on transference, which is difficult to assess (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001). The epistemology that governs relevance is theory.

Application

Stories must have application. Application refers to whether something is “of practical use” and can “help practitioners to develop new insights, act differently, and even feel a new sense of power” (Dodge et al., 2005, p. 296). Systematic storytelling “should enable managerial action” (Barge, 2004, p. 117). The story must be meaningful and understandable to the listener and create a visual that the listener can comprehend and apply. Goldberg (1982) writes,

“Neither ‘the facts’ nor our ‘experience’ come to us in discrete and disconnected packets which simply await the appropriate moral principle to be applied. Rather, they stand in need of some narrative which can bind the facts of our experience together into a coherent pattern and it is thus in virtue of that narrative that our abstracted rules, principles, and notions gain their full intelligibility” (cited in Fisher, 1984, p. 3).

Listeners must also be able to place themselves within the story to gain complete understanding. The ultimate application is the internalization of the story (Swap et al., 2001). “Our concern is not with whether the argument is right or wrong or whether the events in question actually happened but, rather, with the understanding that the storyteller is expressing through the story” (Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004, p. 152). Stories should be “meaningful for persons in particular and in general, across communities as well as cultures, across time and place. Narratives enable us to understand the actions of others” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). Only through understanding can meaningful application occur.

Factual/Lifelike

The phrase “just the facts,” made popular by Joe Friday in the Dragnet series (Webb, 1967–1970), is important but difficult to establish in storytelling. “The term storytelling … connote[s] a certain slippage from the realities of the episodes it supposedly portrays, if not a wholesale bending of the
facts to create a ‘good story’—in other words, storytelling implies that the facts may be embellished (McGregor & Holmes, 1999, p. 403). Factual standards are second to relevance standards (Hummel, 1991). As such, storytelling “may be viewed as more or less aesthetic and useful, not as objective definitive truths” (Barge, 2004, p.112). Stories “aim for constituted believability or verisimilitude—the experientially based recognition that ‘that could happen’” (McGregor & Holmes, 1999, p. 404). The listener is not supposed to challenge the facts but instead to determine the meaning of the facts. Indeed, verifying that a story is factual is not entirely possible, considering that while external criteria can be subject to validation, internal criteria, such as “how one felt or what one intended,” cannot (Bruner, 2004, p. 693). Nevertheless, the authors prefer to consider stories as being believable. “People engage in a dynamic process of incremental refinement of their stories, of new events as well as on-going reinterpretations of culturally sacred story lines” (Boje, 1991, p. 106). These refinements may be innocent changes or drastic or distorted changes to make the story more interesting. Despite this dynamic aspect of storytelling, “We suggest that artificially constructed stories ultimately will be less effective than true ones” (Swap et al., 2001, p. 110).

Indeed, lifelikeness is important in storytelling. Good stories have a lifelikeness to them that is convincing, authentic, and credible:

In positivist research, “validity” refers to the goal of getting as close as possible to the essence of reality. But as narrative inquirers, we make no claim to capturing or reflecting the exact record of what has taken place, only a person’s or community’s understanding of (their) reality. Rather than testing the validity of a particular construct or set of relationships against an objective reality, we assess their authenticity—to the individual or to the community involved, as well as to the readers… Validity is thus replaced with credibility as a test of the plausibility of argumentation. (Dodge et al., 2005, p. 295)

In discussing the presuppositions of the narrative paradigm, Fisher (1984) highlights the importance of lifelikeness in stating that “rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of narrative probability, which constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing narrative fidelity, whether stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives” (p. 8). If the story as told did not take place, it becomes a lie, and the reliability of the story comes into question as the story is retold. For this reason, storytellers should take great care to ensure that both the external criteria of their stories, which can be verified, and the internal criteria of their stories, which “are just as demanding, even if they are not subject to verification” (Bruner, 2004, p. 693), should be lifelike and consistent.

Social Construction

Words have a limited ability to reconstruct objective reality. At best, the social construction that combines selected verbal and visual reality information (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 43) and incorporates divergent thinking and self-reflection should take place. Jehenson (1979) identifies the main challenge of social construction as “establishing channels through which… knowledge can travel from ‘sender’ to the necessary ‘receivers’ ” (p. 111). This channel allows for shared relevance between storytellers and audiences (Schutz, 1946). A good storyteller realizes that “meaning does not reside in the mind or words of any single participant but rather emerges in the interfaces between stories, people, and contexts” (Harter, 2009, p. 142) and, therefore,
will seek acknowledgment from the listener by “ask[ing] questions and offer[ing] reflections during conversation that contribute to collective story making among organizational members” (Barge, 2004, p. 121). For example, a storyteller might discuss motivational techniques and speculate and query how they would be applied with the listener’s subordinates. “Stories used in training, teaching, or the sharing of a vision should call people to action” (Kowalski, 2015, p. 250).

Narratives and stories “represent equipment for living—sense making resources that allow individuals to size up circumstances and craft livable truths” (Harter, 2009, p. 141). Acknowledgements force sense making on the part of the listener. Sense making requires the listener to stay engaged in the story, exercise imagination, and provide input. Indeed, “managers and other actors often ‘leave out’ things, making the story even more compelling for the audience, which is set to work to fill in the underlying, missing parts” (Feldman & Sköldberg, 2002, p. 289).

“A constructivist ontology implies that social scientist [a story listener] should make sense of practices by appealing to activity and the beliefs that inform that activity” (Bevir, 2011, p. 190). According to Boje (1991), a major “part of storytelling involves managing the telling of the story by being able to weave it into ongoing conversation” (p. 24). Barge (2004) echoes this sentiment, stating that “storytelling as a collective activity means other organizational members also have a story to tell and managers need to weave their own and other stories together by following the utterances of others as well as performing utterances that allow others to follow them” (p. 109). With social construction, there is greater learning that can occur for both listeners and storytellers because co-creating stories draws additional attention to and fills in gaps created by narrative silences.

Effectiveness

The main criterion for assessing a story may be effectiveness (Taylor, Fisher, & Dufresne, 2002, p. 314). Evaluating effectiveness takes into account the intent of the storyteller and the impact he or she hopes to achieve. According to Martin (1982), “If a manager wants to maximize the impact of a story, she or he should make that story as concrete as possible” (p. 296). Furthermore, for a story to be effective, certain premises must often be implicit. Feldman and Sköldberg (2002) contend, “For a story to be effective, the audience must both supply and accept these statements” (p. 287). Not all stories are equally effective, and because stories are “dependent and sensitive to place, time, and even participation in the telling” (Dodge et al., 2005, p. 25), “certain stories will be more useful than others in making sense of situation and connecting meaningfully to the emergent situation” (Barge, 2004, p. 113). Fortunately, systematic “storytelling facilitates exploring the specific connections between the pattern of communication in the episode and the surrounding context” (p. 117). Storytellers will be more effective when they “enter the grammar of the people they are working with and coordinate their action with others,” which they are better able to do “if they create systematic stories that reflect the detailed complexity and uniqueness of a situation” (p. 112).

Has a Point

Every story should have a point. Russian formalists articulated that every story should have three aspects: fabula (theme or point), sjuzet (discourse), and forma (genre). “The timeless fabula is the mythic, the transcendent plight that the story is about,” and should be incorporated
by the sequenced *sjuzet* “not only in the form of a plot but also in an unwinding net of language” (Bruner, 2004, p. 696). In a scene from Hughes’s (1987) motion picture *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, Steve Martin chastises John Candy for his poor storytelling, stating, “You know your stories would be better if they had a point—it makes it so much more interesting for the listener.” Stories that have a point “establish a meaningful life-world [and relate] a ‘truth’ about the human condition” (Fisher, 1984, p. 6).

**Goodness**

Differentiating between good and bad stories has “implications for every aspect of management practice” (Taylor et al., 2002, p. 317). Fisher (1984) states, “Obviously … some stories are better than others, more coherent, more ‘true’ to the way people and the world are—in fact and in value. In other words, some stories are better in satisfying the criteria of the logic of good reasons, which is attentive to reason and values” (p. 10). Good stories are attentive to formal features/narrative probability, or “whether a narrative satisfied the demands of a coherence theory of truth,” and substantive features/narrative fidelity, or “how people come to adhere to particular stories [and whether there is] a matter of truth according to the doctrine of correspondence” (p. 16). Good stories encourage an “imaginative, active, receptive, aesthetic experience of donating the self toward the meaning-making of the other” (Charon, 2005, p. 263). With good stories, “the most striking discoveries are made not in what is written [or said] but in how the text [or verbal story] is configured” (Charon, 2007, p. 1266). A good story may “entertain, explain, inspire, educate, and convince” (Gabriel, 2000, p. 1). Bad stories may frustrate, insult, or embarrass the listener. Furthermore, a story’s influence on later judgment depends in part on story quality and in part on storytelling perspective (McGregor & Holmes, 1999). “Not all stories are good stories, nor are all individuals effective storytellers” (Gabriel, 2000, p. 5). Assessment of stories must include distinguishing between good and bad.

As listeners and tellers of stories, scholars and managers can benefit from the development of criteria to assess stories. These criteria will help advance theories of storytelling in public administration. They will also improve storytelling and story listening. In the following sections, these assessment criteria are applied to the stories of three city managers.

**METHODS AND STORY SELECTION**

The authors used a form of qualitative interviewing, thematic narrative inquiry, which focuses on “the content of stories based on themes the researcher is interested in” (Luton, 2010, p. 67)—in this case, the assessment criteria—and enables researchers to deliberately construct “interviews to obtain narratives or stories because of the special way that stories have of displaying the meanings of actions and events” (p. 54). A qualitative research design was selected because qualitative research in public administration “helps us in our search for knowledge [and] helps us engage personally and meaningfully with practitioners” (p. 9).

Three city managers were selected to be interviewed using convenience sampling—they were selected due to their proximity to the study site and the authors’ previous acquaintanceship with each city manager. A set of questions was designed and asked of each city manager to
tap into their primary experience and knowledge about public management. These questions elicited stories or telling about times the city managers were involved with or aware of a bad hiring decision, introduced a cost-saving innovation, had their leadership challenged, confronted an ethical dilemma, and changed the culture of the city. These questions were to solicit thick description to bring the listener into “the context being described” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 33). As part of the pre-interview briefing, the interview questions, a consent form verifying their voluntary participation, and a permission form granting interviewers the right to record the interviews were e-mailed to the city managers in advance. Face-to-face interviews were also scheduled during the pre-interview briefing through e-mail correspondence.

The interviews were conducted by one of the authors and/or a graduate assistant in the offices of the city managers. Because “transcriptions are crucial for creating reliable and accessible records of qualitative interviews” (p. 40), each recorded interview was transcribed and authenticated by the interviewer. It is impossible for a transcript of a story to capture all five languages of storytelling: gesture, sound, attitude, feedback, and words (see Davis, 1993, pp. 77–83). Thus, although the interviewers’ categorization, assessment, and selection of story excerpts for inclusion were based on all five languages of storytelling, only the transcription or words are included in the findings and assessment discussion. Furthermore, the selection of stories was determined by their ability to support the assessment criteria, which was based on the interviewers’ recollection of and reaction to each story.

The predetermined interview questions were asked to help catalogue the stories into types and frame the stories. Relying on a subjective measure of how the story was perceived by the listener, the interviewers determined the level of story specificity—minimal, somewhat, or strong—for each assessment criterion. Story excerpts were selected for inclusion based on how well they illustrated the level of specificity of one of the assessment criteria. The researchers examined the transcript for each city manager to select stories, keeping in mind that their selections were also influenced by their subjective perceptions of face-to-face contact, hand and facial gestures, tone of the teller’s voice, and other contextual factors in addition to their subjective measurement of specificity level. Stories offered in response to any question could be used to demonstrate, and be applied against, an assessment criterion. The titles given to the stories are signifiers of the story to help the reader recall the story throughout the article.

FINDINGS AND ASSESSMENT

Table 1 reports the authors’ assessments of the selected stories with respect to relevancy, application, factual/lifelike, social construction, effectiveness, has a point, and goodness. A part of a story that strongly meets the criterion received three check marks, a part of a story that somewhat meets the criterion received two check marks, and a part of a story that minimally meets the criterion received one check mark. If a cell in Table 1 is blank, the story was not assessable or a story could not be identified to match the assessment criteria. In the following discussion, each assessment criterion is applied to the selected stories to demonstrate how these criteria can be applied in narrative inquiry to categorize and assess stories.
To meet the epistemological standards for relevance, a story must be perceived as believable. Three city managers (A, B, and C) shared experiences concerning employees they supervise that were assessed to determine how relevant they are to listeners.

(A) “Ego.” I was going to tell one about my ego and my thinking that I can change somebody, and we needed to hire a planning director … . There was just one problem, every position she held she would get fired because of a lack of interpersonal skills. She tended to tell people what she thought and if they offended her. And so my ego said, you know, I can change her attitude, I can teach her to be gentle.

(B) “Affair.” We had a long-term employee that was in the police department. And he was asked to resign. Because we were given information that he was having an affair with another employee. Well that’s two grown adults … the problem being one of them was married and one was not.

(C) “Showing Favoritism.” Just because I go out and have a friendly conversation with a police officer doesn’t mean that I’m getting information and the chief is being put out of the equation. Or if I go have coffee with a firefighter in the morning, doesn’t mean I’m overstepping the chief. I constantly have to walk that line of sending the wrong message to others … . Are there favored departments, leaders or supervisors? Yes. But it’s a really hard one, and I’m not sure if that’s ethical as much as it is a leadership dilemma.

Level of Specificity. “Ego” and “Affair” are believable because they discuss personnel issues that the city managers actually confronted in hiring and dismissing employees; therefore, these stories strongly meet the relevancy criterion (see Table 1). The authors determined that “Showing Favoritism” was not accessible because it provides several discussions of hypothetical employees and situations and is highly self-contradictory because the city manager simultaneously conveys to the listener that he promotes a strict, professional chain-of-command structure and that there are favored departments, leaders, and supervisors. Therefore, “Showing Favoritism” does not seem to be a relevant story. These weaknesses made it difficult for the interviewer to understand the story, creating confusion.

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Application

To successfully apply a story, the listener must perceive the story as meaningful and understandable, a task made easier by providing a visual. Visuals help the listener apply the story. Three city managers (A, B, and C) told stories that the listener can apply in varying degrees.

(A) “A Handshake.” You know the way that I was raised I mean right was right, wrong was wrong. Um, your word is your bond, a handshake is a contract, but then you find out real quick that there are a lot of people that don’t adhere to that.

(B) “Hiring Committee.” Every department in the city now has a hiring committee, interview committee, whether it is for police, utility, or administration staff, and we bring people back for two to three interviews.

(C) “Unmovable Wall.” My analysis of the program [to increase efficiency] created a conflict, which ultimately led to challenging a lot of my authority and integrity on a lot of other issues. I was running up against an unmovable wall.

Level of Specificity. All three of the selected stories met the application criterion with varying levels of specificity (see Table 1). “A Handshake” provides the listener with applicable advice as to the evils of the workplace. “Hiring Committee” offers advice concerning the hiring process and how it can be improved that the listener could actually apply if ever in the position of hiring. Because both of these stories provided recommendations, opinions, or advice directed to the listener and reinforced by visuals (a handshake and the committee, respectively), these stories strongly met the application criterion. “Unmovable Wall,” unlike the other stories, fails to direct the recommendation, opinion, or advice to the listener because the city manager refers only to himself; therefore, even though “Unmovable Wall” provides a visual (the unmovable wall), the story minimally meets the application criterion because listeners cannot insert themselves into the story.

Factual/Lifelike

Factual or lifelike stories must be told in a way that the listener does not challenge the facts and their accuracy but concentrates on the story’s purpose. When assessing stories based on whether they are factual or lifelike, interesting and detailed facts play an important role because they help the listener remember and recall the story. Three city managers (A, B, and C) told stories about cost-saving initiatives that are, to varying degrees, factual or lifelike.

(A) “Nonprofit.” So one of the things that we did on our insurance is realize the insurance companies are profit motivated and so why can’t we be a benefactor of those profits; instead of letting them have those profits, [self-insurance was used] which reduces costs.

(B) “Going Four.” So by going to a 4-day work week, with utility cost and gas and diesel and the hidden cost of employee sick time and stuff like that, it adds up to close to about $20,000 a year. That’s some significant money.

(C) “Meter Beater.” We changed out every single regular water meter to a radio communication meter. So at this point, rather than having one person walk to meter to meter, open the lid, read the numbers, write it down, walk to the next one, we can read just about every meter in town in just about one day driving through town with the computer open.
**Level of Specificity.** In these interviews, the factual criterion was essentially one of the easiest met (see Table 1). The facts of each story were believable and lifelike, and the interviewer did not perceive the facts as overly embellished to create a more exciting story. With all three of these stories, the listener does not find himself challenging the facts but instead interpreting the meaning of the facts and how they apply to cost-saving innovations. “Nonprofit” is filled with facts about a cost-saving innovation but fails to engage the listener with the facts; therefore, this story somewhat meets the factual/lifelike criterion. “Going Four” includes interesting and detailed facts (e.g., the dollar amount of savings), which not only makes the story more believable but also makes it more intriguing to the listener because it enables the listener to measure the story and envision it as reality, giving the story lifeliness. For these reasons, “Going Four” strongly meets the factual/lifelike criterion. “Meter Beater” also provides a detailed story but is similar to “Nonprofit” in its lack of interesting and detailed facts that the listener could retain based on significance. Thus, “Meter Beater” somewhat meets the factual/lifelike criterion.

**Social Construction**

Social construction is vital in storytelling because it brings the reality of the story to the listener. In social construction, the listener uses sense making; thus, there is greater learning. For these reasons, social construction is arguably one of the most important criteria in story assessment. Two city managers (A and C) told stories that engage in social construction. One city manager (B) failed to use social construction techniques when telling stories by failing to involve and interact with the interviewer during the interview.

(A) “Prison.” Let’s go back here and talk about the prison issue. Were you around? Are you a criminal justice person? Do you have an opinion? ... We did a poor job about educating the public about the prison.

(C) “One Size.” You’re right. One size does not fit all in the profession. The sooner you can learn that, the better you are!

**Level of Specificity.** “Prison” involves the listener by directly asking for input and acknowledging the listener’s input, and, therefore, strongly meets the social construction criterion. “One Size” acknowledges the listener and his or her input but does not specifically ask for listener involvement in the story; instead, this city manager’s approach was rather sententious. For this reason, “One Size” minimally meets the social construction criterion (see Table 1).

**Effectiveness**

An effective story concentrates on the intent of the storyteller. The effectiveness of the story is another crucial criterion in assessing stories because, like social construction, it engages the listener and requires sense making. Two city managers (A and C) told stories with the intent of educating the listener about the city manager profession. One city manager (B) failed to use effective storytelling techniques because he failed to involve the listener or warrant acknowledgment or input to his answers.

(A) “Failures.” Yes, I enjoy telling people about my failures. I think that that’s how we learn, so hopefully when you are whatever it is that you are you won’t make that same mistake. But you probably will.
If you’re going to end up in this profession, you’re going to have your credibility and integrity challenged and a number of other things, because you run up against some “sacred cows.” For whatever reason, there is some protection there. You have to learn in this profession why they are protected and coveted.

Level of Specificity. “Failures” indicates strong intent to indoctrinate the listener because the city manager directs his advice about the profession to the listener, influencing the listener to accept the advice. Because the interviewer accepted the city manager’s advice, “Failures” strongly meets the effectiveness criterion. “Sacred Cows” actively involves the listener but does not specifically direct acceptable advice to the listener; therefore, “Sacred Cows” somewhat meets the effectiveness criterion (see Table 1).

Has a Point

It is well known and generally agreed that every good story, regardless of the setting, must have a point. Listening to a story that does not present a point is pointless. Though it may seem easy enough, getting to the point is difficult for many storytellers. Three city managers (A, B, and C) told stories that demonstrated adherence to this indisputable, significant criterion of storytelling (see Table 1).

(A) “Remodel and Reduce.” So, can we do some minor remodeling and then utilize personnel in such a way that we can actually reduce the work force?

(B) “First Impressions.” You know, when you roll up on a scene to help someone, if you get out of the car with a bad attitude, the word of mouth from that person is that “I needed some help and that police officer was the rudest person I have ever met.” We’ll never get that back. So I’m a real big person on first impressions.

(C) “The Book.” If you go by the book, you’re going to get hit by the book!

Level of Specificity. The point of “Remodel and Reduce”—reducing the workforce using innovative techniques—is clear, interesting, and was well received. The point of “First Impressions”—first impressions are very important in professions that make new contacts on a daily basis—is also clear and was also well received by the interviewer. Therefore, both of these stories strongly meet the criterion of having a point. “The Book” somewhat meets the criterion of having a point because, although the city manager did get straight to the point that there is not always one best way to manage, sometimes the listener needs to hear a bit more discourse to understand the point accurately.

Goodness

Whether and to what extent a story is good or bad is a simple measure of its quality. Categorizing and distinguishing stories as good or bad is subjective because the listener innately makes this determination based on many factors, including the assessment criteria. There is not one indicator of a good story; every story is good or bad for its own reasons. Three city managers (A, B, and C) told stories that the interviewers assessed as demonstrating different degrees of overall goodness (see Table 1).

(A) “Hiring Process.” Because your past behavior tends to dictate what your future behavior will be. And so I ask hypothetical questions over a period of time; I’ve concluded it’s not very
helpful. I need to ask what you did in a given situation so we have something that is verifiable and we can call someone up and say, “Hey, Rick said that he did ‘this’ six years ago, can you tell me about that?” You find out real quick rather [sic] or not they are being truthful or if they produced what they said they did.

(B) “City Ordinances.” There may be times that this city is going to have to go out for a bond election for something because of, again, infrastructure. The bond election may be for a sewer plant or street. Well, if the perception in your city is “Well, they ain’t taking care of what they are doing and every time I go in city hall they are rude,” well, that bond issue is not going to pass.

(C) “Handyman.” I had an employee one time offer his handyman work from his sons. I was building a fence at my house, preparing a fence, pouring concrete and setting posts, and his sons did a lot of that work around town. He offered to come over, and I said no. Even paying them for their service, someone is going to think it looks wrong.

Level of Specificity. “Hiring Process” resonated with the interviewers as strongly meeting the goodness criterion because it includes a lesson the city manager learned, which was told in a way that showed that the city manager knew his story was beneficial to the listeners. “City Ordinances” was assessed as failing to meet the goodness criterion, indicating it was a bad story. Implausibility is a major flaw in this story. The city manager was unable to inform the interviewer of the importance or factuality of the city’s perception, and the listener has a hard time believing that a bond election would not be passed simply because someone in the city hall was rude. “Handyman” somewhat meets the goodness criterion because, although the story is not exceptionally good, it is not entirely bad either. The listener understands this story and appreciates the importance of the city manager’s perception, but his example of the handyman does not represent his point well. The listener finds it hard to believe that the work done on the city manager’s house would have caused issues within the city he managed. A common theme the interviewers relied on when distinguishing whether a story was good or bad is whether the city manager used a good example to prove his point.

THE BEST STORYTELLER

An analysis of how well each city manager met the seven assessment criteria is essential in determining the best storyteller. All three city managers met some or all of the assessment criteria. Overall, however, City Manager A is a more effective storyteller than City Manager B and City Manager C (see Table 1) and, at times, teaches the listener through the transference of experiential knowledge that could be used in practice. City Manager A is set apart from City Managers B and C primarily due to his ability to invite and involve the listener into his dialogue, thus facilitating social construction and requiring the listener to engage in sense making. Remembering and later recalling the stories’ relevance, application, factuality or lifelikeness, and point and assessing its overall quality (goodness or badness) are more likely to occur when the listener is effectively involved in the story and proactively engaging in social construction. Based on these findings, one could strongly argue that social construction and effectiveness are more important in story assessment because of the impression that strongly meeting these criteria leaves upon the listener. Listener participation and involvement in the storytelling process result in the creation of shared meaning between the subordinate and manager. Boyce (1995)
described this type of relationship as a fundamental key to organizational actions and meaning. Stories such as the ones provided by the city managers give meaning to the organization that becomes reality through participation, involvement, and sense-making.

HEURISTICS

The role of storytelling in knowledge transference is based on the assumption “that storytelling promotes the creation of summary representations that can subsequently be used as the basis for heuristic judgments” (McGregor & Holmes, 1999, p. 406). When engaging in the storytelling process, both storytellers and listeners develop heuristics, self-education techniques, that later affect judgment and decisions. From the listener’s perspective, good stories are able to transfer valuable lessons based on the storyteller’s recollection of primary experience, but learning does not just happen as a result of the stories being told; the listener must also learn what to take from the story and how to apply it (e.g., “The Book”). Although stories told within the organization should not always be taken at face value, parts that can be used effectively should be recognized (e.g., “One Size”). The development of heuristics also provides a basis for building theory. Four categories of public management heuristics were developed from the content of the remaining seventeen of nineteen stories (two are mentioned above) and can be generalized to other contexts: personnel, communication, the politics–administration dichotomy, and fiscal efficiency.

Personnel

“Ego,” “Affair,” “Hiring Process,” “Hiring Committee,” and “Remodel and Reduce” all provide advice on how to handle personnel decisions based on the city managers’ previous experiences. Based on these stories, the listener may develop public management heuristics, such as:

- Egos can influence personnel decisions.
- Terminations can result from off-work behavior.
- The types of interview questions used in the hiring process have important implications.
- A hiring committee can control individuals’ egos.
- At times, managers may need to consider remodeling by finding ways to reduce the number of employees.

Communication

“A Handshake,” “Showing Favoritism,” “Handyman,” “First Impressions,” and “Failures” have a communication component. Public management heuristics that the listener may develop based on these stories are that

- A handshake on an agreement may require other forms of follow-up communication to ensure complete trust;
- Contradictory messages should be avoided;
• Communication in public administration often involves perceptions, which are strong communicators;
• We can learn from public management successes and failures and must be able to manage from our mistakes.

Politics–Administration Dichotomy

The politics–administration dichotomy is prevalent in public administration teaching, theory, and practice. “Unmovable Wall,” “Prison,” and “Sacred Cows” signal the influence of politics on the practice of public administration and provide the listener with specific experiences for the development of public management heuristics. These heuristics might include:

• Rational technical grounds for decisions need to consider political feasibility.
• Basing a decision on economic and jobs-creation grounds may be countered by public outcry if the public is excluded from the process.
• Having an astute understanding of the politics–administration dichotomy is necessary so as not to attack an idea, project, program, or department that is held in high, untouchable political esteem.

Fiscal Efficiency

“Nonprofit,” “Going Four,” “Meter Beater,” and “City Ordinances” offer a variety of lessons on fiscal efficiency that the listener can use to develop public management heuristics. Two such heuristics are:

• One must often spend money to make money, because most innovations involve a cost analysis or an initial cost regardless of whether they will produce savings.
• The perception of good financial management is important in maintaining the public trust.

CONCLUSION

Storytelling provides an avenue through which experiential knowledge can be transferred from the storyteller to the listener, can be studied, and can inform public administration practice and theory. “We could do worse than study and give full credence to the knowledge of those who manage and work to maintain, not so much public administration, but public service” (Hummel, 1991, p. 40). When adhered to or applied, the seven storytelling assessment criteria identified and discussed by the authors—relevancy, application, factual/lifelike, social construction, effectiveness, has a point, and goodness—can improve storytelling with the goal of promoting the successful transference of experiential knowledge by aiding storytellers in improving their stories and aiding listeners in assessing, remembering, and utilizing stories. These assessment criteria can also be applied by scholars engaging in narrative inquiry to help promote the development of theory grounded in practice. By applying these criteria, the authors identified several characteristics of successful storytellers—most notably their encouragement of listener participation and involvement in the
storytelling process. The ultimate value of storytelling may be in the development of heuristics that allow stories and lessons learned to be applied to multiple public administration contexts.

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REFERENCES


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