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Narrative Thinking: The Five Habits of a Storyteller

We're all storytellers now. At least, we should be. "In an age when nothing is constant, strategy should be defined by narrative—plots, subplots, and characters—rather than by maps, graphs, and numbers." That's from *Harvard Business Review's* first issue of 2010.

The point: business thinking is now *narrative* thinking. "People understand words better than value curves." Story provides context, connection and purpose. With narrative thinking, we can create focus in the midst of information overload, and sense in the midst of complexity. Story connects employees to something bigger than themselves, and directs their work within that context.

Are you ready to become a storytelling leader?

The Five Habits of a Storyteller

Storytelling is a discipline like any other—it comes naturally to some, but can be learned and improved with practice. After years of studying superior storytelling leaders, we've identified these five shared habits:

1. **A storyteller connects.** Effective storytelling begins with the curious mind of a leader. The best storytellers are regular readers, thoughtful networkers, and active listeners. They ask more than they tell.

Observation and curiosity lead to associations, which is why many of the best business stories begin with, "It's like..." Storytelling leaders are able to connect what they learn to what they and their teams are facing. "It's like Walmart turning its reputation around..." or "It's like my grandpa used to say..."

2. **A storyteller simplifies.** The world is filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Our teams are inundated with information and but paralyzed by complexity. Story cuts through the clutter and strips things down to what matters most. Story says, "look *here*... focus on this."

As Chip and Dan Heath put it in *Made to Stick*, storytelling leaders must be "masters of exclusion," relentlessly prioritizing information for their teams.

3. **A storyteller invites.** Direction without connection is a corporate policy statement. Direction that *follows* connection is a story.

The goal is to create a *shared story*, and so storytelling leaders invite listeners into the narrative. They do this by painting a picture of the ending, and the conflict, and the hero's role that each employee must play. And they don't just tell, they ask: *How do you think the story will end? How do you imagine your role in the story?*

4. **A storyteller repeats.** This is rule one of advertisers and politicians. Frequency works. As leaders, we *always* tire of our own message before our teams tire of hearing it. (Sometimes even before they *have* heard it.)

Perhaps an even more important point: a storyteller repeats the message with her actions as well as her words. What we say is only important if it is the same as what we do. We've seen some tragic recent examples of storytelling figures whose lives didn't match their words. You can only hide that for so long.

5. **A storyteller prepares.** If five habits is too many, begin here. The most "natural" storytelling leaders are the ones who spend the most time in preparation. The story goes that Peyton Manning showed up to host *Saturday Night Live* with a three-ring binder filled with script notes and "ad lib" ideas. Most hosts phone it in, which is why some professional comedians aren't as funny as an NFL MVP. As Manning says, "Our rewards are directly proportional to the effort we make."

This is all about the intentionality of a leader. Have you considered your audience? Do you know the story they've already accepted? What do they know now, and what do you want them to know? What do you want them to do? How is what you're facing like something they may find familiar? Is there some way you might invite them into solving the problem, engage them in the outcome?

Storytellers ask these questions and more, no matter how comfortable they might be winging it. Storytellers prepare.

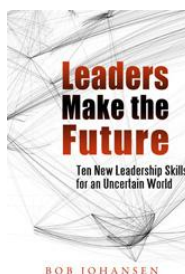
Getting Started

Here's a great way to get your mind around the concept of narrative thinking, and to begin the habits of a storyteller: Engage a small team of leaders in an exercise to write the story of your business this year.

- *What is the theme or purpose?*
- *What is the setting—including current market conditions?*
- *What simple conflict is at the heart of your story's tension?*
- *Who are the key characters, and what roles do they need to play?*
- *How will the story of this year end?*

Our Take On It: Commentary and opinion on the books that shape our thinking

THE BOOK: *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World*



The world is now defined by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, and so the way we lead must change. That's the simple, compelling premise of Bob Johansen's new book, *Leaders Make the Future*—and it is hard to argue.

Johansen is the former CEO and chair of the Institute for the Future, a Palo Alto think tank that helps organizations make informed decisions about the future. The central idea of IFTF's most recent 10-year forecast is that we've moved into a state of permanent unpredictability. Situations are more complex, market trends less clear, possibilities more limitless, stability less likely.

Which presents the question: How do we respond? Johansen believes leaders must evolve to meet the times and, while certain skills remain constant, "leaders also need an emerging set of skills uniquely suited to dealing with the challenges of the threshold decade we are entering."

In the next decade, leaders will not just see the future—they will make it. But they will not be able to do it alone. Johansen reminds us of the opportunity: In a day when we are more connected than ever before in history, we must fully realize the benefits of that connectivity.

The new leadership skills:

1. **Maker's Instinct.** The belief that you can make the future. Approaching leadership with the commitment of a job and the energy of a passionate hobby.
2. **Clarity.** Being crystal clear about your intent, but flexible about how teams get there.
3. **Dilemma Flipping.** Finding opportunities in the midst of our greatest challenges. Johansen makes a strong distinction between *problems*, which are black and white and can be solved with a clear answer, and *dilemmas* which are more complex and multi-dimensional.
4. **Immersive Learning.** The ability to adapt quickly to new environments, learning through deep immersion.
5. **Bio-empathy.** This one's interesting...it points to learning from nature's patterns to build smarter business systems.
6. **Constructive Depolarization.** Stepping calmly into the mess of polarized relationships and divergent points of view. Bringing people together in constructive engagement.
7. **Quiet Transparency.** Being open and real about what you are trying to achieve, what matters to you, and what you value—without being a self-promotional jerk.
8. **Rapid Prototyping.** Innovate and pilot quickly. Learn from failure.
9. **Smart Mob Organizing.** Mastering network creation and engagement through social and other media.
10. **Commons Creating.** Engaging teams in a shared purpose and story. This leads to both alignment *and* healthier competition.

The idea of *organizational story* runs through nearly all of Johansen's 10 new leadership skills—creating clarity around what the business is facing and where it's heading, and aligning teams to navigate changing market realities.

Recommended for:

- Any business leader who believes that the world has become more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous