

Crafting Stories that Change the World — a proposition

Mark Binder

What is it that makes one person an effective mover and shaker? Why do so many organizations and communities feel powerless to change their environment, let alone change the world?

The key difference is in the stories that these people tell.

The mover and shaker says, "Money can buy change." He either has the money to start with, or he finds it.

The powerless say, "I don't have enough money to buy change." Or even worse, "I'll never have enough money to buy change."

The first story empowers, the second story cripples. The first story creates opportunity; the second paralyzes an organization.

The sad truth is that most people believe their own crippling stories. They don't understand that these narratives that they tell themselves and others are stories. They believe them to be truth. There is often evidence to "prove" the story. But as soon as the debilitating story becomes truth, it becomes very difficult to create change.

"Voting doesn't matter. My vote will never count." is a story that inhibits democracy.

"We're changing the world, one individual at a time," is a story that allows any nonprofit to function and thrive.

A few more stories, both powerful and paralyzing:

- Rags to Riches
- Born with a silver spoon
- Part of the underclass
- Attention Deficit Disorder
- Homeless and unemployed
- The boss is an idiot
- A real winner
- A real loser

All of those stories can be true. All of them can be reshaped.

- Rags to Riches becomes a stock-market suicide
- Born with a silver spoon becomes "How the mighty have fallen"
- Homeless and unemployed becomes "An American Success Story"

- Management finally listened to what we had to say
- And so on...

What story are you stuck in? What are the stories you tell about the world, your business, your organization, your city, your community, your family, yourself? Are these stories useful, inspiring and productive? Do they get to the heart of what your organization is about and what it means to create?

Notice the existing stories.

Now take a moment and make up a new, alternative story. One you'd like better. Reshape the story. Invent a happier ending. A breakthrough improvement. An incremental, but sustainable change...

Are the optimistic stories any less possible than the pessimistic ones? What is the difference between a community that says, "It's terrible, the violence, the drugs. Kids are out of control." and a community that says, "We are doing whatever it takes to make our streets safe and give our children better futures."

One person complains, "Rhode Island is the armpit of New England. We're rife with corruption." Another person reshapes the future with, "Rhode Island was the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution in America. We will be at the center of the Global Revolution."

The challenge we face in a world swarming with media input is to create and craft powerful narratives that allow us to effect change in our world. External media-based stories can be overwhelming, numbing and pervasive. Crafting and honing stories that stand independent of those sources is a useful beginning.

And one of the stories to start with is that it is possible for an individual to effect powerful change in the world.

- When Thomas Edison proclaimed, "I'll make an inexpensive light bulb," he started a powerful story.
- When John F. Kennedy promised to put a man on the moon within a decade, he started a powerful story.
- When Martin Luther King Junior said, "I have a dream," he told a powerful story.
- When Rosa Parks said, "I'm not moving," she told a powerful story that changed the world.
- When a young child first says, "I can read that myself," he is beginning a powerful story.
- When a fire burned down his factory and Aaron Feuerstein said, 'I will pay my workers and rebuild Malden Mills in Methuen, MA,' he created a powerful story for that region.
- When you say, "I will make that work," you are creating the future.

After any powerful story is told, there is still work to be done. Even the most powerful story may bomb if it isn't framed or presented in the proper context, but without a powerful story the old story will persist a new path is impossible.

We tell stories all the time.

Why not make your storytelling more powerful? You can learn to listen for the powerful (and the disempowering) stories that others tell, to distinguish which stories are useful and which inhibit growth. You can create and craft a more powerful story, learn to deliver and shape your stories more powerfully. You can lay the foundation for colleagues, co-workers, partners and employees to hear to these new stories as they develop. Through stories, people, businesses, and organizations can invent innovative responses, and change both perceptions and actions.

Together we can move rivers, build buildings, reshape communities, improve education, grow our economy, defuse conflict, create wealth, help the less fortunate, and leave the world a better place for our children and grandchildren.

Once upon a time? No. Now is the time to begin.

Copyright Agreement:

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

As the publisher of this work, New Commons has an open access policy which enables anyone to access our content electronically without charge.

We want to encourage the circulation of our work as widely as possible without affecting the ownership of the copyright, which remains with the copyright holder.

Users are welcome to download, save, perform or distribute this work electronically or in any other format, including in foreign language translation without written permission subject to the conditions set out in the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License.

Please read and consider the full license. The following are some of the conditions imposed by the license:

New Commons & Associates and the author(s) are credited;

New Commons & Associates website address (www.newCommons.com) is published together with a copy of this policy statement in a prominent position;

The text is not altered and is used in full (the use of extracts under existing fair usage rights is not affected by this condition);

The work is not resold;