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Storytelling Leaders' Self-Reflection and Learning From Failures: Diversity as an Issue

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Bios

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Abstract

Storytelling in leadership research is usually approached positively and seen as a non-problematic resource or even a "tool" for leadership purposes. However, using stories and narratives involves challenges for leaders. Storytelling may result in intended outcomes, but it also carries a risk for undesirable leadership consequences. In the storytelling approach, there is a hidden assumption that listeners are homogeneous and that they are not critical or active. Empirical studies rarely approach failed storytelling experienced by leaders: the feelings of failure, reasons, and consequences. In this chapter, we focus on the risky nature of leadership storytelling, as well as the element of learning to be a better leader inherent in it. Based on empirical qualitative data, we apply thematic and content analysis on interviews from 13 leaders. Based on the findings, we present five special dimensions/themes of failure, illustrating the risks involved in leadership storytelling: (a) diversity of the audience, (b) situation/context, (c) loss of authority, (d) storytelling skills, and (e) audience misinterpretation. We interpret the findings in the context of the leaders' personal experiences, their meaning for the leaders' self-reflection, and the leaders' leadership learning for the future. Moreover, we discuss these dimensions from the perspective of diversity and the hidden assumption in the storytelling approach that the listeners are a homogeneous group.

Keywords: leadership, storytelling, failure, risk, diversity, narrative

Storytelling Leaders' Self-Reflection and Learning From Failures: Diversity as an Issue

Leadership is at the heart of organization, and storytelling is a prominent and powerful, but at the same time, still a theoretically recent approach to leadership (e.g., Denning, 2000, 2005; Taylor et al., 2002; Parry & Hansen, 2007; Auvinen et al., 2013a). It is natural for people to interact through stories because leaders among other people are "Homo narrans", which means that communication is based on narrating (Boje, 1991a,b). Storytelling in the workplace can be highly effective on a personal level in leadership (Marek, 2011), and a leadership style involving storytelling may increase the intimacy between people instead of emphasizing hierarchical and formal relations (Weick & Browning, 1986). Stories work on a "person-to-person" level and may empower subordinates because they lead to a position where both the leader and the subordinate are able to interact and communicate informally by constructing mutual meanings. Managers can show their vulnerability to subordinates through personal stories, which creates a collective atmosphere and even trust (Auvinen et al., 2013a). Stories may thus enable establishing social cohesion which might otherwise be unattainable (Gray, 2007).

The focus in leadership storytelling studies, however, is usually on successful stories. Storytelling outcomes are presented in a positive light and seen as an unproblematic resource or even as a tool for leadership work (see e.g., Parkin, 2004; Denning, 2004). However, some research views are critical of the nature of storytelling being presented as so unproblematic (e.g., Denning, 2005; Gabriel, 2008). Denning (2005) argued that the object of the story and what it deals with should be considered, and Boje (2006) emphasized the possible misinterpretations in communication when using stories. Stories may create unintended interpretations within the organization, and sometimes, the leader's empowering story may turn out to be disempowering instead (Boje, 1999). Recently, the awareness and sensitivity resulting from movements and campaigns such as #metoo and the recent policies that encourage employees to report

organizational misuse or harassment (EU, 2019) have brought leaders' communication under the microscope. Thus, the risks and failures in storytelling leadership are eventually also a risk for the entire organization and have a strong impact on organizational wellbeing as well as its external image.

As argued, leadership storytelling needs empirical studies in general (e.g., Boje & Rhodes, 2006; Auvinen et al., 2013b). In this study, we use authentic empirical data and focus on the failures and risks of storytelling from the point of view of leaders and regard it as an open space for self-reflection, learning, and development.

The Purpose of the Study

In this study, our aim is to show the relationship between storytelling and leadership learning. We investigated the experiences of failure in storytelling from the leaders' point of view, especially the aspects of self-reflection and learning from failures, and their meaning in developing leadership skills. Furthermore, we looked at what makes the leaders consider a story a successful or an unsuccessful one.

To fulfill the aim of our study, we looked at the following research questions:

- What does it mean to fail in storytelling leadership, that is, what makes the story fail?
- What is the difference between a successful and a failed leadership story from the leader's point of view?
- How did the managers discover that their storytelling had failed and what was the lesson they learned?
- What kinds of outcomes are realized due to storytelling experiences?

In particular, we concentrated on the reflection and learning aspects of storytelling from the perspective of diversity, in order to provide further insights to the scholars and practitioners of leadership.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Leadership Storytelling as a Tool—A Critical Point of View

Storytelling may be seen as a tool for leadership (Gray, 2007), a skill (Boje, 1991b), a special leadership philosophy (see e.g., Denning, 2004; Boje & Rhodes, 2005), a paradigm (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994), or even a particular school among discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2011). As Marek (2011) stated: "you want to control your own story and the story of your organization … there is a story out there. Whether you are the one telling it or not." Peters (1991) argued that the best leaders in organizations and societies have always also been the best storytellers. Leaders can use stories in order to create a relaxing and supportive atmosphere and to increase job satisfaction (Auvinen et al., 2013a). Stories are linked to power, knowledge, identity, sensemaking, and communication, and they are replete with meaning, emotions, and moral judgements (Brown et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2005). However, storytelling is not a cure-all for every leadership problem, even though storytelling has the potential to provide insight into "good" and influential leadership (e.g., Denning, 2000).

There are some doubts about the risks in leadership storytelling. First, not all leadership stories are empowering—a leader's story can also turn out to be disempowering (Boje, 1999a,b; Gabriel & Griffiths, 2004). Second, as many of the well-known leaders in history are those telling the most inclusive stories (Peters, 1991), the worst leaders are probably those who excluded large numbers of people from their stories (Ciulla, 2005). In terms of failed storytelling, the reasons behind failure might relate to a lack in the story's meaning (Heikkinen et al., 1999) and the story might fail in that it does not touch everyone sharing the storytelling situation. In leadership praxis, sometimes the leaders themselves become enthusiastic about the "fashionable storytelling tool for leadership" without actual storytelling skills, and eager but unskilled storytelling may thus lead to catastrophic consequences (Denning, 2005; Gabriel & Griffiths, 2004). Furthermore, the risks of

storytelling may also relate to the seductiveness of stories from an ethical point of view, as well as to their stability without the power of change (Sole & Wilson, 2002). The focus of our study are the leaders' own experiences concerning the aspects of learning and the negative consequences of storytelling.

Storytelling and Organizational Sensemaking—What Makes a Good Story?

Storytelling is argued to be a significant dimension of sensemaking in organizations (e.g., Boje, 1991a,b; Weick, 2001). Weick (2001) introduced a method of sensemaking which is constructed through (retrospective) organizational narration. A classical organizational narrative has been described by Boje (2001, 2008) as the Aristotelian BME (beginning, middle, and end) retrospective narrative. A good retrospective narrative is very important to an organization; it informs the organizational members of the organization's mission and early days. It contains information about the organizational heroes, such as the founding mothers and fathers whose ideas still guide the organization today, or villains such as mean supervisors or fierce global competition (Marek, 2011; Gabriel, 2000; Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994). In terms of prospective (i.e., future-oriented) sensemaking, Boje (2001, 2008) suggests the concept of antenarrative. An antenarrative is a non-linear, non-coherent, speculative, and fragmented form of storytelling; a speculation about what will happen. It is a form of pre-being before retrospective narrative coherence fossilizes the past (Boje, 2001). In ongoing, "real-time" sensemaking, countless possible interpretations of "what is going on right now" emerge. The antenarrative is an approach to understand how both the leader and their followers are making sense of emerging organizational reality as it happens. Powerful stories can therefore build up the organizational past and future.

A story or tale is also a way of "testing the waters", to see whether others feel like the storyteller, in order to make sense of whether the situations "match". A storyteller may try to control the risks in social interaction by reading the same meaning into storytelling events. As

expressed, the teller of an anecdote or another humorous story can fall back on the defense of "it was only a joke/story!" (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2004, p. 114).

According to Marek (2011), using examples told through stories, it is essential to get the story "right" in terms of the actual situation. Humor is not the only risk. Marek (2011) has warned us to be wary of heart-warming stories that turn out to be not quite true. For example, Al Gore was accused of doing this in the 2000 presidential campaign, and his story backfired when retold, resulting in counter-narratives (Denning, 2004). Furthermore, telling a good story poorly is another risk. The message can become destructive to the storyteller and credibility is lost. Successful storytelling often builds connections through listening to others' stories properly, which creates trust and the feeling of community (Marek, 2011).

From the perspective of interaction, a good story has something familiar and something new on the part of the storytelling. A story that is both worthy of telling (Denning, 2005) and not too strange. The narrative horizons need to be linked (or matched), and there needs to be cognizance, but the story should not be too familiar. If a story is too obvious, it is not interesting because it does not reveal anything new or unique for either the narrator or listener. If a story is too strange, interactional affordance does not begin. Furthermore, if the story does not link to the preceding discourse, such as a cultural story reserve, the individual's biography, or the organization's culture, it will not reach the listener's reality. A story may also be too peculiar and not understood. Because of these reasons, the process of sensemaking may not be able to begin (Heikkinen et al., 1999). If this is the case, the listener (interpreter) will remain an outsider. It may even block the interactional storytelling process and dilute communication, which are the core principles of storytelling leadership.

A particular facet of stories is that they are both symbolically and emotionally charged and not only about facts and information. They serve to enrich and infuse facts with meaning (Gabriel,

2000). However, stories are not innocent but include both political and social meaning. Leaders are not good storytellers without self-understanding and self-insight, argued Gray (2007), and they should be aware of this wider meaning.

In our study, we consider that the eventual definer of a good story is the one who tells the story. In a leader's mind, some storytelling situations appear more successful, while some seem to have failed. This experience and analyzing that experience can support the leader's further development as a storytelling leader.

Storytelling Skills—The Ability to Tell a Good Story Varies

In storytelling, a variety of emotional experiences can be touched upon. Acceptable in storytelling are fear, humor, envy, and ambition (Phillips, 1995, p. 629). Narrative fiction provides a set of techniques for dealing with these affective aspects. These emotional aspects might be positively colored, but they could also be negative. Leadership that aims to encourage narrative fiction may turn followers' interpretations into discouraging experiences, driving anxious and apprehensive organizational behavior. What if instead of a humorous, supportive, and frank leader in an organizational storytelling situation, a calculative, manipulative leader appears? Storytelling is a risky and complex resource requiring particular leadership skills (Boje, 1999; Denning, 2000).

In terms of "good" storytelling, as Edwards and Sienkewicz (1990) have said, good talkers belong to two distinct types, that is, sweet talkers and broad talkers. The former uses formal rhetoric to emphasize decorum, embody the moral authority, good organizational behavior, and often performs on family and community occasions. The latter uses jokes, which focus on the behavior of people who seriously contravene community ideals, and they usually operate in contexts outside of family issues. While both kinds of good talkers draw on the same range of linguistic resources, the sweet talker veers towards the formal and respectable and the broad talker towards the informal and limit states of this. Both kinds of speakers help to maintain an accepted social order in their

own way, but their methods differ (Edwards & Sienkewicz, 1990, pp. 16–17). From the diversity point of view, this might create conflicting feelings among the audience because, while some parts of it may feel positive, others might be negative.

Not every member of an oral culture is an equally important performer, and some people may even live in narrative silence (Boje, 2001). Good talkers have particular expertise, but on the other hand, some people (e.g., managers) may be entitled to narration. According to Boje (1999), "some people in organizations tell stories, some with all the rhythms and charisma of oral storytellers, others whose anecdotes are bureaucratic refrains, but all become part of the collective and storied memory that is organizations". The ability to use storytelling as communication varies as well. Training is possible, but the importance of innate talent is underscored. Some people can narrate coherently and completely, while others are confused narrators, only able to communicate the essence of the content of the story. "Most people in the Western industrial world are functionally literate, but few succeed in writing books …. In the same way, only a small proportion of good talkers win public acclaim for their skills", Edwards and Sienkewicz (1990, p. 17) have stated. Storytelling is a powerful tool for exploring and understanding one's own values, ideas, and norms (Gold & Holman, 2001). It might be that storytelling is partly an innate and inherited ability, but in the same way as people are not born as good leaders, they can also develop into good storytellers who can utilize their own style.

Methodology

Data and Collection

Our data consists of interviews with 13 Finnish leaders, who are well-known for their use of stories in their leadership work. Indications of using stories were received from their subordinates, and the interviewees were selected via purposeful sampling (Coyne, 1997; Flick, 2007) with a view to selecting information-rich cases in order to learn about issues central to the

purpose of the study. In our interview introduction, we invited leaders to recall their successful and unsuccessful uses of stories (according to their own evaluation). Among their storytelling experiences were stories that included failure experiences, and these stories are the ones we put aside for further investigation. We found that 11 out of 13 leaders had experiences of failure and risk. Furthermore, we study the reasons for these failure experiences by looking at what is at the core of those storytelling situations. Success and failure are defined in terms of outcomes from a specific perspective or viewpoint. Therefore, success and failure are contextual in nature. We do not analyze the objective nature of failures and risks but the subjective meaning the leaders' personal failures and risks hold for them. We also look at the effects of the leaders' self-reflection and learning when they talk about their storytelling experiences.

In the final analysis section (in the excerpts), the six strategic managers belonging to the executive group are codified as S 1…6 and the five operations managers are codified as O 1…5. The interviewed leaders' backgrounds were diverse. Four of the interviewees were female and seven were male, while their ages varied from under 30 to nearly 70. The interviewees work in different lines of business including banking, high technology/research, and the forestry industry. The interviews were audio-recorded, containing around 10 hours of speech, and subsequently transcribed, resulting in 120 pages of single-spaced text.

The interviews were thematic (Eskola & Suoranta, 1999; Steinar, 2007). The exact themes were (a) the leader's career background; (b) self-image and self-understanding as a leader, and leadership experiences with their followers and colleagues; (c) views on influencing people through narratives and storytelling; and (d) the risks related to storytelling (e.g., the anticipated or experienced risks from telling stories). During the interviews, we invited the leaders to retell stories they had already narrated within their organizations. For further investigation, we sought to gather as many of the stories the managers had told their subordinates as possible. However, our focus in

analysis is not on the actual stories but on the storytelling situation and the context of leadership work.

The Analysis and Findings of the Selected Data

In the data, we sought out cases where managers related a storytelling event to failure and risk. Our analysis process consisted of three phases. First, we identified all stories related to the risks of storytelling or failed narration experiences in the interviews. Some of the managers had several experiences and some of them had fewer. Second, we used thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008; Eskola & Suoranta, 1999; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) with a view towards categorizing different failed experiences. As a result, we identified five different themes/categories in failed leadership storytelling: (a) diversity issues; (b) wrong audience; (c) loss of authority and "bullshitting"; (d) personality, openness, and narration technology (e.g., storytelling skills); and (d) misinterpretation (i.e., an unsuitable comparison/illustration). Third, we applied content analysis to the managers' speeches, adding an interpretation to each of the cases. The narration situation and story content were important parts of the interpretation.

Data Analysis: Risks and Failures in Leadership Storytelling

Next, we present the five themes that relate to failure and risk. At the beginning of each theme, we first illustrate the reflections of the leaders themselves. We then provide an example of the storytelling, containing a story, anecdote, or a joke, using descriptive, shortened, information-rich excerpts. We then provide a brief interpretation of the scripts in the frame of successful/unsuccessful storytelling and sustaining risks.

Theme 1: Diversity Issues Taken Into Account—Language, Culture, and Individual Differences

Stories that dealt with feelings of failure in storytelling often pointed out the heterogeneity of the audience and the requirement of not hurting anyone. Either there were cultural differences

between nations in communication, some special group requirements, or individual diversity. These stories revealed the necessity of ethical considerations and self-reflection in order to avoid failing. Thus, within this theme, the leaders have learned to be aware of the risks related to diversity issues, as the following leaders reflect:

> I have always avoided grimacing people… It can lead to mugging at the workplace like in factories. Comic art that is based on situations often is based on someone's deviation… It is especially important not to hurt other people's ethical values. To gypsies you should never tell gypsy jokes for instance. (O1)

> I must say this is very bond to cultural context. Storytelling is special in North America, where all the textbooks have a special structure form the beginning to the end. In Finland and in Germany it is more problem-centered… in Africa they come back and forth with the writing. Also storytelling differs in different countries. In USA more show-like, in Germany more engineering formal way is believed… My way to tell stories fits well at least the North American culture. (O4)

> One can make a fool on oneself easily by telling stories, loose one's authority if you hurt other people… insult their identity. (O3)

One story indicates the lack of cultural awareness, narrated by a business development manager (S6) of a high-tech organization (hereafter TECH Ltd.). It was the manager's first presentation in a strategy meeting with the new subordinates. The cultural issue in this case related to the fact that this leader was from a growth business industry organization, where the organizational culture favored risk taking and uncertainty and short-term work contracts were part of the job. However, TECH Ltd. is a government-owned public research organization with stability and even lifelong employment relationships. S6 described his speech in the following manner:

I stood up in front of the audience, and it was a strategy meeting, I have to add. My first words were that I have done my job well and we have succeeded in the framework of the strategy if fifty per cent of you who are in this room now, are no longer working for this organization after five years [laughing]... After this a hush descended over the audience. People looked down and looked at their toes and wondered what the hell was that guy trying to say. That was the beginning of the story. In two weeks I heard, that in another office they even had "playful" exercise, that what will you do, when you get a notice of dismissal. That was not my intention, quite the opposite! (S6)

According to S6, his intentions were to communicate his vision about strategy and also inspire the audience and commit them to implementing it. In his former organization, it was typical to encourage the staff to be creative and find new ways of working, which was also needed at TECH Ltd. due to the organization's desire to promote individual innovation and commercialization—for example, through setting up subsidiary firms. It was TECH Ltd.'s declared policy that nobody was going to be fired, but the awakening story, as S6 called it, failed because it was against the cultural conventions and spawned confusion and even fear.

In this case, the leader without cultural awareness learned retroactively that the influence of the speech he had believed to be inspirational was the opposite of the desired effect. Even if they had meant the speech to be humorous to some extent, there was no laughter and the reaction among the subordinates was cynical or outright hostile. People felt threatened and probably hurt, and the leader was perceived not as a visionary and an inspiration but as cold or as a strong-arm. Thus, the story did not promote trust among the subordinates, nor did it create a feeling of togetherness. It also focused attention on the leader himself instead of the subordinates, highlighting their different positions in the organization (juxtaposition), instead of the participative style that is usually associated with storytelling leadership.

Indeed, the cultural risks inherent in the story are evident and they were realized. A story, once told, may backfire for one reason or another either immediately or later, and the latter may be even more harmful.

Our interpretation is that the fundamental element of being a storytelling leader is to be sensitive towards listeners' diversity and cultural backgrounds, in terms of both the individual and organizational level. Different organizational cultures create different expectations, and the role of the leader is different compared to the subordinates, as the leader is in a position of power.

Theme 2: Failed Stories due to an Unsuitable Audience or Situation

Theme 2 is a continuation of Theme 1. Theme 1 involved the background of the audience, whereas Theme 2 highlights the situation itself. The stories that belong to this theme deal with the necessity of being conscious about the social situation where the stories are told in order to avoid failing. Leaders seem to understand that people differ in their acceptance of stories due to their mood, although sometimes leaders also feel there is no use in telling stories in a particular social situation. However, when possible, stories enable "easy" communication and may create trust, as the following leaders state:

> If someone is nervous you should not tell stories. Sometimes morning meetings are especially difficult even if they would have needed some icebreaking…there is present the factory management who does not have a sense-of humour. (O1)

> First you have to probe which kind of stories you can tell… If customers have problems I try to create some trusting atmosphere and tell stories about my own kids or something, they first think that what in hell those bureaucrats know about these things, gaining trust is important… I do not tell if I do not trust people. (O2)

> You must be sensible what kind of stories to tell and which kind of audience, it really matters. (O5)

> I have found out that telling the stories to some people is not useful, some people are so grave that a sterile negotiation is the only possibility. (S5)

Often, however, the storyteller may only learn that the story has failed afterwards, as stated by the following leader:

> Sometimes you hear after three years that your story hurt someone. It is a risk that you tell the wrong story to wrong audience, in a wrong time… (O2)

An example of storytelling for the wrong audience at the wrong time comes from an industrial organization. The story itself is actually an anecdote, an old religious joke, told by a colleague of our interviewee (S1). The context of the incident was an official, organizational dinner with the management and workers. Some of the workers were religious and were used to saying grace before a meal. The manager, while starting the dinner, was hesitating about whether he should say grace or not and instead ended up joking. S1 recalls the situation in the following way:

> I was so afraid, he started so indiscreet, the people stared at him… he said, Little-George was asked in Sunday school, if they pray to God in their home before every meal. Little-George replied proudly, that we don't need to. Our mum is such a good chef. And then deadly silence fell on the room… There are certain risks with culture and religion, people are different… (S1)

Thus, the manager did not sense the situation (cf. Theme 1), and thus the context for such a humorous anecdote was completely wrong and ended up failing. It is easy to insult the participants of an occasion, and without suitable awareness and sensitivity, the leader may not receive feedback immediately.

Our interpretation is that storytelling needs sensitivity and consideration of when and where to use it. Trust between the storyteller and the listener is necessary, and otherwise it is a delicate undertaking, and an unfamiliar audience is a risky audience. Moreover, leaders seem to have learned of the risks inherent in their storytelling situation only in retrospect.

Theme 3: The Loss of Authority is a Risk—Avoiding Meaningless Storytelling

The third theme deals with the nature and content of storytelling. Successful stories usually relate to some concrete, often organizational, circumstances or facts, as otherwise they may lead to empty non-communication. Failing this can do much harm to the leadership's image. The leaders themselves reflect on the risk of losing authority and meaningless storytelling in general in the following manner:

If the audience is patient in listening[to] the story, it can be better than a command. Sometimes stories are told because there are no facts, this does not go well. Then it comes comments like give me the facts instead of stories… The story gives frame and context to facts… (O4)

One can lose authority in the eyes of the audience. You have to be strict in keeping at the issues of work. Joking boss can easily loose authority and get the label of 'clown'. (O1)

You should avoid getting a label of a showman, the story should be part of communication and not meant to get people laugh, raise up yourself… (S1)

An example of leadership manifesting a meaningless story (confusion) and losing authority comes from a CEO (S5) of a large Finnish food industry company (hereafter Carrot Ltd.), which also operates in Sweden and other European countries. The CEO had an idea for the Christmas market involving a gift box containing selected company products and a package compliant with the official Carrot Ltd. brand. However, as he demonstrated the gift box named the Carrot Gift for the marketing department of their Swedish affiliate, things did not go as expected, as S5 recalls:

…we went to Sweden with my female colleague, and with great enthusiasm we represented our idea and idea for Christmas season. And the audience was like what the hell is going on. And they were amused and we tried to speak Swedish, trying to figure out what's going on. And after our presentation, they got serious saying "menar du värkligen en giftbox eller nonting annat" [do you

really mean poison box or something else – gift means poison in Swedish]? I think we did really have not much credibility left. That sometimes the stories are, that it often happens, you confuse language. (S5)

Interpreting the situation of failing, leaders are seen as credible storytellers when they succeed in relating the stories to something concrete, but not if they just wish to make themselves "good guys". Moreover, the message should be coherent and the audience needs to be able to understand it. Otherwise, the audience may misinterpret the message or be in conflict with it and the leader risks losing their authority. What the leader learned was the misuse of language and the importance of relying on factual information and avoiding the role of a "clown" and showperson.

Theme 4: Personality Strengths, Openness, and Narration Technology (e.g., Storytelling Skills) Supporting Successful Storytelling

The transcripts included within this theme all deal with the individual way the leaders use storytelling and how to play to their strengths, based on their experiences.

If one tells the same story again and again, the repetition is a risk, people say that always you keep up chewing the same… If you are very much the style of keeping-in-facts and a controlled person, you should not tell stories just because it is fashionable, because they do not fit your personality and style. Also body language should fit to the style… (S2)

I always have the principle that I do not embarrass anyone, but can make a fool on myself only. (O4)

I have found out that, it is my strength to create trust on people and their own strengths by telling stories. Some people think that I am foolish, but they may do so if they like. (S6)

I think it needs some charisma to tell stories. (S6)

People like to hear how you felt when you either succeeded or not, took the risk, and learnt something… they listen and build up their role at the same time, especially young women have been released by stories like this. (S3)

An example of failed narration technology also came from Carrot Ltd (cf. Theme 3). The CEO (S5) mentioned a story about his subordinate (marketing manager) who gave a presentation to Carrot Ltd.'s sales staff in their organizational meeting:

That time we still used these traditional overhead transparencies, and he started his presentation with a comic joke. However, while he had prepared his presentation, they were got electrified the transparencies, and when he turned the power to the projector, the overhead transparency jumped to his cheek. Well, he tried to move the transparency back to the projector, but it again and again did not stay there as it was electrified but stick to his hand. You can imagine, what was the result, people laughed at the vibration and nobody ever was not able to remember anything else but the incident of the poor marketing manager. (S5)

As it clearly failed, the intended humorous presentation was undoubtedly considered very amusing. However, due to poor preparation and the technological challenges, the presentation did not go the way it was intended. Instead of a comical joke, the presentation and the manager himself turned out to be the subjects of laughter.

Another example comes from a leader who sometimes recounts a long and personal story about his son, who died of cancer in the 1980s. "I tell these stories about my personal life, in order to lighten up some issue, but I am especially cautious. Many people feel it really a difficult issue to face and I must consider this" (O5). This transcript shows sensitivity and that managers have the capacity to learn from storytelling.

Our interpretation is that the leader has to learn a storytelling style that matches the listeners' personality and other features (such as gender), as well as applies to their self-image. The skills include body language and other issues of communication. Moreover, technology should be

mastered to minimize the risks of a failed storytelling act. However, contemporary technology can be a trap many ways. It requires preparation and usually electronic devices, as well as technical and IT skills. Good digital skills can even support successful storytelling, whereas poor practices may ruin otherwise good storytelling.

Theme 5: Morality of the Story—An Unsuitable Comparison/Illustration

The scripts that correspond with this theme often deal with speeches to large audiences or digital communication. The manager may fail in creating a good connection with the audience. A speech can be perceived as remote and cold or the story does not make sense in terms of common-sense morality or the norms of today.

> Once I gave a radio interview in Kuopio telling that the daily money for a serviceman is the same as the price of a cigarette carton. So next day I was blamed to give an incorrect example because you should not motivate people to smoking… it was just a chat but I was told that my authority should have been recognized. (S4: Commander-in-chief of the armed forces)

It is not always possible to be aware of all interpretations of a story. In this case, the first-hand narration took place in a radio interview. Later, the radio journalist contacted S4 and explained that they had received feedback from displeased listeners. "Why do a general in the armed forces encourage to smoke cigarettes?!". In fact, S4 was trying to illustrate the daily allowance of a serviceman, but his message was misinterpreted because of an inconsiderate example that draws collective condemnation in contemporary society (cigarettes).

We can interpret the stories in this theme with the understanding that the leader must have a thorough knowledge of the situation, the organization, and its narrative heritage in order to be able to use stories constructively. Failing this may lead to alienation from subordinates in the moral sense.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of our study show that from the leader's point of view, there are many risks in storytelling. In addition, not only leaders but also organizations may be hurt by "bad" storytelling and suffer detrimental consequences. The leaders may also end up suffering personal failures in their careers. The risks of leadership storytelling in this study relate primarily to situations that can lead to misinterpretations of the storytelling leader's message, such as the diversity of the audience and the cultural context, or to the difficulty a leader may face in finding their own way to use storytelling. Often managers anticipate the risks by refraining from storytelling altogether. However, there is a risk that this may also alienate the manager and subordinate from each other. In cases of misinterpretation, the manager often faces negative reactions immediately after telling the story. Sometimes the failure of the story can emerge later through negative and unintended organizational behavior, such as resistance. The leaders in this study showed competence in self-reflection and adaptation. Storytelling usually takes place in everyday communication, and a leader is afforded much space to learn to become a better storyteller. In some cases, the leaders have learned of the risks retroactively. Sometimes, even after several years of the story failing, the consequences of the story backfiring can still appear. Those consequences, as part of the risk storytelling leaders take, can harm the leader's leadership intentions.

From the organization's point of view, failures seem to relate to negative outcomes; the leader becomes alienated and loses trust instead of creating intimacy and a more participative atmosphere through empowerment. The leaders may not always be able to reflect and change their working style as was the case in this study, and everyone would benefit from mentoring and having feedback from subordinates in order to be able to make changes in their storytelling style if required. This is in line with Cunliffe (2002), who argued for the need for reflexive dialogical practices and for a "critical pedagogy" in management education.

The managers were stressed due to failed storytelling which Theme 3 with retrospective perceptions. In general, many of the managers aspired to show tolerance and understanding of diversity, but later interpretations, after the story had disengaged from its original context, sometimes seemed to make this impossible. Due to the uncontrollable and open process of ongoing interpretations and resonance in the organization, in principle, any story may turn against its teller. Knowledge about the nature of risks in storytelling leadership can be used in leadership education, but it does not provide a guaranteed toolkit for managers to avoid misinterpretations completely.

As seen especially with Theme 5, shared norms and understanding of what proper stories are and which norms the leader should consider when telling a story reach further out in the organizational context. For example, more tolerance towards sexist stories existed in earlier decades, but the leadership generation of today is more conscious of gender and equality. Rapid changes in attitudes and cultural norms are possible, and the leader must remain aware and stay in touch with the environment as well as cultural changes. Social media and new communication tools are part of this new environment.

How can managers avoid the risks of storytelling? The risk in storytelling involves the opinion that there are factors that may affect the outcome of the story and lead to failure between the story and its impact. Stories may, roughly, have two origins. One is situated knowledge, having social context that inspires the leader to use a story—in other words, moral imagination which stems from the situation at hand. The other is to use stories consciously, as a way for the leader to reach for a certain goal. The leader must know the moral meanings beyond the story because there is no story without a moral "lesson"; stories are rooted in values and morality. That kind of morality can stem from the community itself, its history, or it can be an abstract story without any local morality. In the literature, there are handbooks (e.g., Margaret Parkin) that advice managers to use ancient stories, such as H. C. Andersen's fairy tales. Schedlitzki et al. (2014) and Bell (2008), as

well as Aaltio (2017), emphasize the means of fantasy and collective stories like films in increasing leadership capacity. This has to deal with the possibility of failing as well; an abstract story with a moral lesson is different to a locally based story with a familiar morality and should be used in leadership education differently.

We count on leaders' own perceptions of failure, which might relate to the current context, subsequent perceptions, or even some more distant future perceptions of storytelling. Leadership skills vary because some people are more socially intelligent and use stories with morality in local contexts. In regards to intra- and interpersonal social skills, some leaders count on more abstract stories. The leaders themselves can become motivated and inspired through their stories. Moreover, as our findings show, the leaders have learned to adapt their narration according to the context. Aside from the stories in the interview data, the interviewed leaders narrated the situations in relation to their absent subordinates. Thus, as Collin et al. (2012) addressed, while subordinates adapt their behavior according to their leader even when the leader is not present, it seems the leaders, too, are influenced by their subordinates when they are not present.

Finally, the role of subordinates could also be further considered, such as with an explorative study of leaders' experiences and perceptions about how the negative influence of storytelling necessarily neglects the subordinate's perspective.

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