



Columnist

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Leadership Between the Lines: *The Power of Stories*

Why do we love stories? Because everybody has one. But also because as human beings it's how our brains work. Extensive research shows that data-based information activates mainly the language processing regions of our brains. Stories, however, engage multiple brain regions simultaneously, resulting not just in engagement, but an entirely different level of clear cognition and emotional processing. In other words, when you hear a statistic, your brain processes language. When you hear a story, your brain simulates the experience. You don't just understand it; you feel it. In fact, research by Stanford University found that stories are 22 times more memorable than facts presented alone. Stories are powerful!

The Human Connection

This impacts all areas of business. For senior leaders, communication that includes the human narrative of purpose (or why it matters) ensures trust, emotional commitment and behavioural change. Stories are critical to the employer-employee connection required in talent attraction, engagement, performance and retention. They influence organisations beyond the workplace and echo throughout my own world of executive search and leadership advisory.

I recently re-read James Kerr's *Legacy*, his study of the world's most successful sports team, the All Blacks. In it he documents the people, decisions and defining moments that shaped them, relating it to business leadership. Being half Kiwi and therefore lucky (and fickle) enough to almost always support a winning team, now, as a business owner, I read it with different eyes. Kerr talks about stories; he refers to Richie McCaw's notebook of affirmations

and writes that "the language we use embeds itself and becomes action." He references former Harvard Business School professor John Kotter: "We learn best – and change – from hearing stories that strike a chord with us... Those in leadership positions who fail to grasp or use the power of stories risk failure for their companies or for themselves."

Narratology is a research-led executive search firm. But we aren't a data business; we're a people business. We live in an age where AI, ML and BI help us do our jobs so much quicker and slicker than our predecessors. We have search tools, databases and assessments at our disposal, but nothing can compete with a human conversation.

"Be yourself; everyone else is already taken."

To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, the uniqueness individual experiences bring creates authenticity. In executive recruitment, an impressive CV isn't enough – organisations look for real leaders. It's said that leadership is a journey and not a destination. At interview, I look for the career-defining moments that have shaped that journey, leadership challenges, lessons learned, transformational experiences, values, behaviours and motivations – the story behind the CV, the experiences that have made them the person to move our client's company forward.

Where Leadership meets Legacy

We have the privilege of working on the inside of an organisation at an important point in its story. It may be growing, navigating change, planning for succession or moving in a new direction. A deep understanding of the company past, present and future is fundamental to appropriately advising our client

and to ascertaining the leader who will continue the legacy.

Board-level candidates don't apply for jobs – they buy into visions. They're already successful and they're highly selective about the conversations they entertain. Career moves are rational decisions, but what captures their attention is a story, not a job description. Do they believe in the organisation's purpose, can they bring solutions to its challenges, do its opportunities align with their career aspirations and will their own story be richer for the experience?

For me, success isn't about completing a search – that's a given, and it's only the start. It's about understanding an organisation well enough to identify exceptional individuals who are ready to contribute to its enduring success. Recruitment seeks a culture fit; with board-level appointments, we're looking for leaders who'll set the tone and drive the narrative at the top.

Narratology

Next month Narratology will be eight years old and I'm encouraged when people say of my company's name "Narratology – I get it!" Executive search has never been about vacuous recruitment marketing; it's about understanding the story that connects human beings with corporate purpose and ensuring organisations hire impactful leaders – for the long term.

Ruth McDonald is founder of Narratology, an AESC-accredited executive search firm supporting organisations across the island of Ireland with senior leadership appointments, succession planning and leadership advice.