1

Stories in Action

People learn from stories in a different way from the way they learn from generalities. When I'm writing I often start out with abstractions and academic jargon, and purge it. The red pencil goes through page after page, while I try to make sure that the stories and examples remain to carry the kernel of the ideas, and in the process the ideas become more nuanced, less cut and dried.

Mary Catherine Bateson (Personal Communication)

In this chapter we show why story-telling has such a strong influence in organisations, how it works, what different kinds of stories there are, and discuss the various ways of creating stories. We also give an outline of the rest of the book.

The collection of stories known as *The Thousand and One Nights*, or *The Arabian Entertainments,* includes tales from India and Persia as well as from Arabia. The collection is framed by a story of stories that tells of Scheherazade, the daughter of King Shahriyar's vizier.

The king had a horrible habit of marrying a woman, spending one night with her and then having her killed the next morning. Scheherazade managed to escape this fate by telling the king stories, always stopping at a vital point and promising to continue the next night. The king was so keen to learn what happened next that he slept with her night after night. In this way, Scheherazade saved her life each night for 1001 nights. By then, the king was so captivated by her

cleverness and courage that he gave up his wife-killing habits. They lived happily ever after – in Scheherazade's case, as happily as she could as the wife of a brute like King Shahriyar!

The Thousand and One Nights is a fantasy that has gripped the imaginations of generations all over the world. It has inspired many re-tellings, including Rimsky-Korsakov's musical version. Some of the individual tales are well known in themselves, such as that of Sinbad's adventures. Its depiction of a woman's sustained bravery, resourcefulness and creativity is powerful. Also, it has power as a story about stories.

Although, thank goodness, most story-telling is not a matter of life and death, *The Thousand and One Nights* symbolises the role of the story in human affairs. Among family and friends, in entertainment of all kinds, in politics and in many other spheres of society, the story is relevant. This book is about the equally vital role of stories in organisations of all types – business, government and non-governmental.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare showed how the story of a murder, told in a play within the play, could be used to discover a real murderer. Hamlet suspected that his father been killed by Claudius, who by doing so was able to become King of Denmark in Hamlet's father's place. Hamlet arranged for a troupe of players to enact a murder scene. Preparing for the play Hamlet said: 'The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king'. Claudius's emotional reaction to the play convinced Hamlet that his suspicions were right.

Before human beings learned how to read and write, story-telling was the medium of collective memory. The stereotypical scene is of the tribe around the fire, listening to Homeric epics or Norse sagas. The rhythmic poetry, the evocative language, the communal setting and the skills of the venerable teller burn the tale into the minds of the younger listeners. Well, something like that, anyway. No doubt this stereotype is only partly accurate, since in pre-literate societies story-telling probably appeared in many more situations than just the fireside gathering. During routine tasks, mothers would sing and tell stories to their children. Hunting, collecting things in the forest and early agriculture would be taught through stories as well as by example.

Aesop's fables, Christian parables, innumerable rhymes and songs – these are more examples of the power of the tale. Story-telling works because the human brain finds it user-friendly. Young children, who are of course pre-literate humans, learn through stories, whether these are classic fairy-tales or new tales.

Bruno Bettelheim's view of fairy-tales was that they help a child to make coherent sense of his feelings and thoughts about the world, so as to develop the inner resources needed to cope. Examples are *The Three Feathers*, which starts with the king contemplating his death, Hansel and Gretel's dangerous journey, and the many other stories in which challenges are met and problems overcome. Bettelheim suggests that these tales help children to deal well with the difficulties intrinsic to human existence. While Bettelheim's concern was primarily with children's development, many of the themes are applicable to the adult who has the capacity to address the metaphorical and symbolic transmission of wisdom. As Bettelheim writes in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1991, p. 26):

> Some fairy and folk stories evolved out of myths; others were incorporated into them. Both forms embodied the cumulative experience of a society as men wished to recall past wisdom for themselves and transmit it to future generations. These tales are the purveyors of deep insights that have sustained mankind through the long vicissitudes of its existence. . . .

Resistance to Story-Telling

Despite the advantages of story-telling, listed above, there is often resistance to the use of stories, for the following reasons:

- The tradition in organisations is 'the drier the better'. Arguments must appear to be fact-based and objective. Bias must be concealed. Quantification is highly regarded, even for things that are actually pretty hard to quantify, like intellectual capital or emotional intelligence.
- Time is limited and people's energies are mostly absorbed by their day-to-day tasks. So attempts to enhance an organisation's learning capacity often meet with fatigue. 'Please, no more flip-charts', is a frequent response. Story-telling gets lumped in with other, more ponderous approaches, when in fact it is simple, flexible and friendly.
- An organisation that knows how to improve current activities may not also be good at more radical learning. Success in shorter-term learning may inhibit 'thinking out of the box', which is necessary for long term learning.

- Narratives usually engage the emotions, which can make story-telling seem frightening.
- Knowledge is often considered to be one vast database, and once you have the means to access this, your knowledge is complete. We believe this is a very limited way of looking at knowledge. Much of what makes up knowledge is constructed by the interaction between the knower and the world.

Because of resistances like these, conscious attempts to tell stories in organisations may be dismissed as 'the latest managment fad', even by those who themselves love telling gossipy tales in the pub after work. A story-teller may be told she is trying to be clever. Listeners may be told they are naive to spend their time listening to stories.

Our book will provide guidance for using stories to overcome these barriers and to achieve a wider set of goals. Using stories will:

- expand the range of perspectives on an issue, beyond the pseudo-factual perspective usually employed. This produces a richer picture and creates negotiated and shared meaning as part of learning;
- grab people's attention, quickly and economically. Narratives work better than other ways of stimulating learning, because they are a central part of human intelligence;
- work on the imagination, in order to generate creativity in an organisation;
- surface suppressed emotions which are dangerous in organisation life. Story-telling is a safe way to do this;
- tap into powerful areas of cognitive capacity in the brain. Organisations operate in an increasingly complex world. Attempts to make sense of such a world by using fact-based, cause-and-effect logic often fail because of the vast number of interactions and feedback loops that have to be taken into account.

When stories are used confidently and consistently, cynicism dies away. An example we give in Chapter 2 shows how growing confidence in the use of story-telling helped a management team to think constructively about a future that was teeming with opportunities and threats. Another example, given in Chapter 3, shows how a bold and skilful story-teller was able to get a difficult change programme back on track. At IBM, the knowledge management programme became

increasingly dedicated to story-telling, as a team led by Dave Snowden developed a range of story-telling aids and techniques (described in Chapter 9). These techniques are now being widely applied by that company. Box 1.1 gives an example of story-telling in a society that suppresses the flow of information. These examples show that the cynics are wrong – story-telling really is effective.

The aims of this book are to show why stories are so important in organisations, to show individual readers how they can benefit from story-telling as a regular practice, and to help readers develop their own story-telling skills.

BOX 1.1   Radio Trottoir

In the mid-1980s, a group of academics met in London to discuss a phenomenon they had noticed in Francophone Africa: 'Radio Trottoir', or sidewalk radio. Radio Trottoir was something that had become increasingly important in politics and had been created out of two strong features of African society: a highly controlled press and a long tradition of story-telling. Because people could not get accurate news about political developments from the media, gossip took the place of published news. In order to make an item of gossip credible the speaker needed to trace the source of his information, which might be something like, 'My wife's cousin is the driver to the Minister of Finance and he heard that. . .' Sometimes the news on Radio Trottoir was completely accurate; at other times it was rumour stimulated to achieve a particular purpose; at other times it was simply wrong. No one ever knew which was the case. However, equally, no one could afford to ignore the news on Radio Trottoir. The academics even reported that government officials had been known to circulate counter-rumours whenever some item on Radio Trottoir was giving them particular trouble.

How Story-Telling Works its Magic

Although there are several ingredients in the magic spell, first and foremost stories work because they are memorable. Most people find it difficult to remember a list of more than seven items; but tell a

well-made story and your listeners will be able to recount the tale effortlessly, with twenty or more events. Stories are memorable because their structure is like life. In a story, events unfold much as they do when you live through them. We all know how films, plays and books can grip the imagination. They seem real. Human memory seems to treat a story as if it were real life.

Should you doubt the magic effect of stories, think of this. You hear a story at a party. It is such a good story that you ignore the surrounding chatter, you leave your glass of wine untouched and you stop thinking about the attractive stranger standing next to you. The next evening you go to another party and, without premeditation, you launch into the story you heard the night before, creating the same rapt circle of listeners, with the same intent expressions on their faces. Why were you able you perform this feat? Because you were able to remember the story effortlessly and could therefore tell it in an exciting way. And it won't only be you who tells the tale. Before long you will hear the same story told by someone else. Good stories spread quickly. As human beings, we all need to make sense of what is happening around us, helping us to survive in changing conditions, and no doubt we have mental equipment devoted to sensemaking. Sensemaking, or construing, could be seen as telling ourselves stories. Listening to our own stories may be much the same as listening to other people's. Story-telling seems to be part of our mental equipment.

As well as being memorable, stories are economical. Since stories engage the listeners' and readers' minds, not everything has to be spelled out. The hearer works on the story, imagining details of his own as the narrative develops, just as the story-teller adds details of her own during her particular telling of the tale. To use the language of information theory, there is redundancy in stories which helps the receiver fill in a gap in the message. A gap may be due to a lapse in the listener's attention, or it might be that the story-teller inadvertently omits a piece of the story that she had planned to include, or that she had included when she told the story on previous occasions. In any case, there is usually no such thing as a 'complete' story. The sender can therefore change the message slightly, without harming its intelligibility or losing the receiver's attention. In an organisation with plenty of shared language and shared mental models, abbreviation can be extensive. There may be no time for more than a rapid-fire anecdote, but if the organisation has a tradition of story-telling

plus lots of shared concepts, this may be a highly effective communication.

A story, with its more-or-less continuous narrative, actively engages the sensemaking faculties of listeners, making the story memorable and, when necessary, making it more economical than other ways of transmitting information. With a story, sensemaking by the listener is much stronger than when a list of items is simply read out. This active engagement of listeners has further advantages beyond being memorable and economical. By activating listeners' imaginations, their creative faculties become aroused.

Art and Emotions

Most northern European and North American organisations have cultures that severely limit any reference to the emotions of the people involved. The cultural norm is that there is a job to be done and personal feelings only get in the way. Of course, many people do feel strongly about their work, or about some aspects of it, at least. They love or hate various tasks they have to do. They love or hate their bosses, their immediate colleagues, or people in other parts of the organisation. Turf wars, resentment towards people in power, commitment to the goals of a sub-unit at the expense of the goals of the organisation as a whole – all of these are familiar and all have a strong emotional component.

In organisations whose official line is that feelings just hamper objective decision-making, people do have feelings all the same. But they are concealed feelings. So tensions build up, communications are a sham and poor decisions get made. For instance, competent people get fired, damaging the organisation's capabilities, because that seems the only way to deal with endemic, concealed conflict. The victim is the group's scapegoat and, since no real change has occurred, it won't be long before another scapegoat needs to be sacrificed, and so on. So most organisations would benefit from new ways to handle emotion. Greater skill in interpersonal processes helps a lot. And so does a well-established habit of story-telling, a particular interpersonal process in its own right.

The more skilled the teller, the more likely the listener is to absorb the emotional content of a story in a constructive way. That is one reason why a story should be entertaining, why there should be art in

its telling. And finally, listening to stories develops our capacity to listen and learn from stories, making us a more receptive audience, which increases the overall impact of story-telling.

Sensemaking

Story-telling encourages people to think widely. The details that add interest and verisimilitude to a narrative are stimulants for the imagination. An analytical approach directs attention to quantifiable or data-related aspects of a problem. A narrative approach directs attention to simpler matters, to less precise ones, to those that may have been forgotten or repressed. Patterns start to be recognised amidst the surrounding tumult. And generally story-telling is more fun than analysis. Later in this chapter we make the point that stories ought always to be entertaining.

If a group gets stuck when trying to understand a difficult situation, it can try telling stories about various aspects of it. Gradually the situation as a whole becomes clearer. The members of the group start to make sense of what is happening, and become more confident about what they should be doing.

Complexity

Many organisations see that at the start of the twenty-first century they are immersed in complexity, uncertainty and rapid change. There is often little or no time for elaborate studies and, in any case, an analysis of a really complex problem can never be complete because there is too much that will always remain unknown. Nevertheless, action has to be taken, often quickly, and usually with others, which puts a premium on organisational learning. This is learning that must be shared and known to be shared by other organisation members – otherwise it would merely be an aggregation of individual learnings. Such shared learning determines an organisation's culture and helps it to evolve over time. A static culture is a potential disaster, deadening the ability to change, to do new things and to innovate.

In this dynamic situation, a flow of insightful, witty, memorable tales, shared among many organisation members, becomes part of the evolving culture of the organisation. They promote speedy

comprehension, effective dialogue, humane values and good judgement. Stories are not a nice-to-have embellishment; rather, they are a vital resource for getting the right things done. They evolve gracefully over time, as different speakers and audiences use stories, and as the organisation changes. Stories and an organisation's culture co-evolve.

Respect for People

Even in an organisation that has an established culture of story-telling, there will no doubt still be cynics – of two different kinds. The first kind says, 'Yes, stories work, but who do they benefit? Only those at the top of the organisation, who now have yet another way of controlling and manipulating everyone else? Or do they benefit only the skilled tellers of tales, putting the less skilled at a disadvantage?' These are genuine fears. However, the power of the tale is less easy to misuse than other ways of communicating or sharing information. The nature of story-telling pushes the teller to think of the listener or the reader as a fellow human being, since failing to do this makes the story less effective. And although an expert teller of tales should be honoured for this skill, the practice of story-telling is natural to us all, making the emergence of any kind of elite group of tellers unlikely.

The second kind of cynic says, 'Yes, stories work, but should they be used everywhere? Don't analytical techniques and quantitiative methods still have their place? Must everything be done through the 'soft' practice of story-telling?' The answer to this is: of course stories should not be the only tools for appraising situations and for disseminating knowledge. Organisations must go on using the old methods alongside the new ones, picking the ones that are best for the particular task in hand. But the world is getting more complex and more interconnected, which will mean story-telling will be useful in more and more situations.

Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1954) is a play famous for its multiple perspectives on fact and fiction. One of the six characters says: 'But a fact is like a sack. When it's empty it won't stand up. And in order to make it stand up you must first of all pour into it all the reasons and all the feelings that have caused it to exist.' Talking about the reality of personality, the same character says: '. . . each one of us believes himself to be a single person. But it's not true. Each one of us is many persons . . . With some people we are

one person. With others we are somebody quite different. And all the time we are under the illusion of always being one and the same person for everybody . . . But it's not true! It's not true!' And again: '. . . it would be as well if you mistrusted your own reality . . . Because like the reality of yesterday, it is fated to reveal itself as a mere illusion tomorrow' (pp. 24–25, 57).

Story-telling like Pirandello's recognises the complexity of human personality and relationships. It makes us attend to other people, to understand them more profoundly; and frequently to respect them more, since to understand all is to forgive all. Box 1.2 lists the reasons why stories work.

BOX 1.2   Why Stories Work

Stories are: memorable
                    economical
                    entertaining
                    centred on people

and they: encourage creativity
                    help in handling emotion
                    help to make sense of puzzling situations
                    co-evolve with an organisation's culture.

Types of Narrative

The most useful way to classify a group of things depends on how you use those things. No classification is absolutely right or wrong. Not everyone will like the classification of types of narrative we propose below, although we think it is a relevant typology for stories told in organisations. Different dictionaries tell slightly different stories about the word 'story'. The same applies to the word 'tale', which is almost synonomous with 'story', but not quite.

Reality

One way of classifying stories is on the basis of how real they seem to those who hear or read them. The course of a person's life can validly

be called his 'story'. So can a description of a particular incident, for example in a witness statement taken for legal purposes. These two kinds of story are supposed to be factual and will indeed often be judged to be 'real' or 'true'. Then there is the story as 'a narrative of incidents in their sequence' (Chambers Dictionary definition), in which the incidents can be either fact or fiction. Next is the story as fiction, clearly understood as such. Although, by definition, fiction is not real, there can nevertheless be extremely realistic fiction, while some other fiction is the kind no one could take for real. Finally there is the meaning of 'story' as 'lie', as in: 'That's a likely story!'

So we can construct a descriptive scale for different kinds of story, like this:

Real   **Unreal**

Factual account ↔ Legend ↔ Myth ↔ Fiction ↔ Fantasy

Legends are generally accepted as being true, albeit sometimes exaggerated. Myths are stories whose truth is accepted by some people and not by others, and also stories which everyone used to believe, but whose veracity is now questioned. Perhaps 'tales' and 'yarns' tend towards the (unreal) end of this scale of stories, as shown by the phrase 'telling tales', meaning 'telling lies'. However, stories that fall right across the scale can be told in organisations, to good effect.

The real–unreal scale is not the same as true–untrue. First, to say that a story is untrue carries the implication that the teller hoped you would believe it was true, even though it wasn't. Second, a story can be far removed from reality but still have a truth of its own. Bettelheim investigated how children perceived fairy stories, and found that generally they knew perfectly well that magic wands and flying broomsticks did not exist. All the same, certain fairy stories were true for these children, because the stories illustrated psychological truths they recognised or were beginning to understand.

Yiannis Gabriel's valuable study *Storytelling in Organizations* (2000), makes the point that story-telling ought to be truthful either to the 'facts' or to the 'meaning' it has for the listener.

Completeness

We agree with Gabriel when he says that, in an organisational setting, not all narratives are stories. He draws a line between proper stories and short narratives about a situation or a person which cannot be dignified with the name 'story', although they can be useful in helping people make sense of a situation. He calls the latter kind 'opinions' or 'proto-stories'. Gabriel also considers that purely factual narratives might better be called 'accounts' or 'reports', even though in everyday speech they would often be called 'stories'. We could simply call them remarks.

In this book we will be telling a lot of stories, real and unreal. Most of them will be told as sets of stories centred around a common situation, usually around a single organisation, and around a situation that changes over time. We need a term to describe sets of stories like this, and we will use 'history' as the term, without any suggestion that the stories told must be factual ones. On this basis, *The Thousand and One Nights* is a history, since it is a narrative that includes a lot of stories – 1001 of them, in fact.

This leads us to another scale for describing narratives, as follows:

Fragmentary   **Comprehensive**

Remarks ↔ Proto-stories ↔ Stories ↔ Histories

Entertainment

Gabriel claims that a distinguishing feature of stories is that they are entertaining. We would agree, provided that 'entertaining' means other things besides 'amusing' or 'diverting'. Stories can also be absorbing or engaging. They may also do things like provide moral education, advice or a warning, but for Gabriel a narrative is not a story unless it is gripping, funny, tragic or romantic. Thus a story must be capable of being judged as art, and its teller as an artist. Again we agree with this. Stories need not be 'great art' – they usually aren't – but they must be a bit artful.

This does not mean that stories have to be original. Linda Putnam and her co-authors (1996) say that good stories ('good' in the sense of being genuinely entertaining) are often familar ones, such as fairy

stories or legends. They are entertaining because they give the satis-
faction of fulfilled expectation; a sense of belonging over time and in
different places. And there is art in the telling of a familar story.
The tale can be adapted to different audiences, and may be abridged,
extended or highlighted depending on the circumstances in which it
is told. Audiences add to the tale with interruptions and laughter
(p. 385). Box 1.3 explains the typology used in this book to categorise
stories.

BOX 1.3   Dimensions for a Typology

The typology for narratives used in this book has three dimen-
sions:

1. Real/unreal (which is not the same as true/untrue).
2. Fragmentary/comprehensive, which places stories along a scale
   from simple remarks to histories (which is what we call multiple
   stories based around a common situation).
3. Familar/novel (but in all cases a story should be entertaining).

Ways of Creating Stories

The council of a body giving grants for scientific research had a limited
budget, most of which was committed to five projects. To find funds for
new, innovative, work it was decided to reduce the grants to these
projects. The five grant-holders were asked to submit plans for the future
of their projects with reduced funding. Four out of the five responded
that even a small cut would ruin their project. The fifth presented a plan
that showed, although it would be very painful, they could still produce
some good science if their grant was cut in half. At a meeting, most
members of the council seemed ready to halve the grant to Project Five
and leave the other grants unchanged.

   Then one council member told a story. Imagine, he said, that you're
the team leader at one of the first four projects. You argue to your team
that accepting a cut of any size would admit the present level of support
has some fat in it. You say we should tell the council that any cut will be
devastating. Of course, there is a risk that if it's all or nothing, our
whole grant may be withdrawn, but we can be sure that the council
won't have the guts to close us down completely, as we're doing such
good work. Now think about Project Five. That team was open about

the possiblity of a radical cut to their budget. Why should we penalise them for their honesty? The council agreed, and found a fairer way to reduce the grants.

Why did a story alter the views of the council? Most members had themselves been leaders of similar projects so the story rang true. No doubt some of them had, in the past, made similar arguments about the impossibility of accepting a budget cut. The story made them accept that the Project Five team had been unusually honest. This was a story told on the spur of the moment to an audience the teller knew could empathise with it. It worked because it provoked a gut reaction from the listeners.

Following Etienne Wenger's term in his book *Communities of Practice* (1998), we can call this an 'emergent' story. It was a spontaneous tale, generated by the situation. Stories told in organisations are not all like this. Some are carefully thought through and refined. Again following Wenger, we can call these 'designed' stories. And not all tales are created by a single individual. For example, in scenario planning, discussed in Chapter 8, scenario teams work together to construct stories about possible futures. This gives us a typology for story creation. On one axis (Box 1.4) is the distinction between emergent and designed stories, and on the other axis is the distinction between individual and collective story generation. Combining the two axes gives us four ways of creating stories. In thinking about stories, it is useful to be clear about which of these applies in your particular situation. But the four types are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they combine very well.

BOX 1.4   Four Ways of Creating Stories
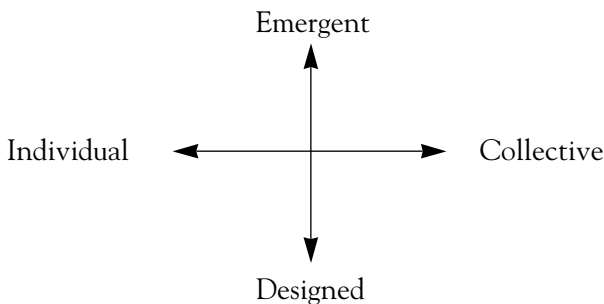
Skills and habits learned through practice in one type of story creation are easily transferable to the others.

Story-Telling Skills

To be more than a simple narrative, a story should be entertaining – in the sense of being gripping, tragic, funny or romantic. The art that goes into inventing and recounting a tale gives it extra power. Of course, creators of tales need not aim to be Charles Dickens or Agatha Christie. But we can all improve our story-creation and story-telling skills. Rambling after-dinner speeches that bore or embarrass their audiences, and unfunny jokes or muffed punchlines are not necessary. They can be avoided with a little care and practice.

Today, many people in organisations receive training in the preparation of reports and in making presentations. For improving your presentation skills you don't need a three-year course at drama school, and you need not aim to become as persuasive as Henry Fonda was in *Twelve Angry Men* or Julia Roberts in *Erin Brokovich*. You can quickly learn how to organise a presentation so that its points are clearly made, its visual aids are simple and legible and your audience can hear you properly. We advocate a similar approach to improving your story-telling skills.

For individual, emergent stories, perhaps the best form of training is to watch how others do it. When you listen to someone whose stories hold your attention, watch how she does it. Watch for variations in pace and tone of voice. Watch for the pauses that both allow the teller to think of a good way of phrasing the next part of the tale and the listeners to absorb the last part. Listen carefully when someone you know is good at cracking jokes says, 'Have you heard this one?' Note how he makes an old chestnut worth listening to once again. Listen for the slight variations in each telling that make the joke particularly relevant to that day's audience. Watch his body language as well as listening to his words.

For individual, designed story-telling, you don't need a course in creative writing, but it is worthwhile paying attention to the various devices that help people remember the story. First, a repetitive structure. For instance, many fairy stories tell of similar feats performed in turn by three suitors (the first two fail, but the last succeeds). Second,

alliteration and rhythmical form, particularly for spoken stories. Third, metaphors and symbols as story-telling elements. When reading the stories we tell throughout this book, it will be worth pausing to look at the structure and language of any story that seems to you to be particularly effective.

Here is a story still told today in the Czech Republic.

In 1940 the Germans were occupying a village in Bohemia. Their commander ordered his men to search all houses to make sure none of the villagers had any hidden arms. Three soldiers forced their way into one house. One searched the ground floor, turning out every cupboard in the kitchen. He found nothing. The second searched the bedroom floor, stripping the beds and turning out the drawers. He found nothing. The third soldier went up to the attic. At once he saw a gun in a corner. He waited a minute, went to the top of the stairs and shouted, 'There's nothing up here'. The soldiers then went away. In 1945, the Germans were retreating from the Russians. The soldier who had searched the attic in 1940 came to the same house, knocked at the door and asked for food and civilian clothes. He got these, dumped his uniform and went away, never to be seen again.

Like two of the suitors for the princess's hand, two of the soldiers behaved similarly, but the third does something different. This modern story has the form of a fairy-tale.

Generally, stories should be simple. When designing an individual story, you can do a triage of the things that you might include, classifying what you must tell, what you can tell when there is enough time and interest to embellish the story and what you should throw out because it is too detailed, too cumbersome or too obscure to be of interest to listeners and readers. Triage can also be used for collective stories (those that are designed by a group of people). Then you can think about what it is in a story that makes the reader keep wanting to turn the page. You can consider what, in an oral story, holds the listeners' interest. It's usually something that a reader or listener does not know. It might be a conflict between two people unresolved until near the end of the tale. It might be a mysterious situation, with a vague threat that could go away or might turn really nasty. A good story leaves something hidden until the very end.

Collective, emergent stories are frequently produced in workshops. Facilitators usually provide a device (like a collection of found objects

or a common question) and ask everyone to use this device to create a story. They can also provide a framework that follows a simple plot line, such as the instructions for the Consequences game, which go like this: A female character meets a male character in such-and-such a place. She says to him . . . He says to her . . . The consequence is . . . These exercises stimulate the imagination, capture the collective creativity of the group and produce stories that pass the results on to others.

For all types of story you will find examples and exercises in every chapter. However, Chapter 10 is where practical exercises are gathered together. Whatever kind of story-telling you'd like to explore, there will be something for you in that chapter. Above all, learn on the job. The more stories you tell, the better you will tell them.

In this book we sometimes use 'story' as a verb. This is ancient usage in English, meaning 'to tell as a story' (Oxford English Dictionary).

Seven Histories

Following this introductory chapter are seven chapters (Chapters 2 to 8) each telling the history of a particular organisation. These chapters deal with story-telling as it relates to an important organisational practice. The seven histories and their practices are summarised in Box 1.5.

The first of the practices is communication, which to be really effective has to be multi-directional and interactive. This history is about a small but growing organisation, called M4 Technology, which uses story-telling for excellent communication.

BOX 1.5	Seven Histories	
Chapter	**Organisation**	**Practice**
2	M4 Technology	Communication
3	AutoCorp	Learning
4	Themis	Professional development
5	National Health Service	Resolving dilemmas
6	AutoCorp	Organisational evolution
7	LIFT	Innovation and collaboration
8	Kenya	Scenarios

The next history is about learning. Many organisations want to become learning organisations, but this is hard to do when an organisation operates with the old princples of command and control. The history in Chapter 3 is of a large organisation, called AutoCorp, that is trying to learn while retaining a strongly hierarchical structure. The history in Chapter 4 is about a group of professionals, called Themis, who use story-telling for the practice of personal and professional development. They develop their professional skills, share learning and pick up new tricks.The group itself is non-hierachical, but its members work almost entirely with hierarchical organisations.

All three of these organisations recognise established systems of control. M4 Technology has a hierarchy, centred round two charismatic founders, but it can learn because of its open style and skilled communication. AutoCorp struggles to learn and change in spite of its hierarchical constraints. Themis provides a space for its members to learn outside hierarchical situations, but they nearly always have to take hierarchies into account.

Chapter 5 describes the practice of dilemma resolution in the context of Britain's National Health Service (NHS). This chapter is a pivot between the earlier histories of learning in and around traditional organisations and the later histories that describe more complex, self-organising situations.

Chapter 6 takes another look at AutoCorp, this time in a history of a part of this large organisation, which is trying hard to evolve towards self-organised learning and change. The next history, Chapter 7, describes the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) and its practice of innovation. Innovation is the holy grail of many organisations today. We also show how stories can be vital in generating creativity and continuing innovation. The history of LIFT shows how stories help with collaboration across organisation boundaries, a practice now recognised as a source of innovation. In Chapter 8, the last of these histories, we show how stories can help in dealing with an uncertain future, through the practice of scenario planning on a national scale – in Kenya.

The Rest of the Book

Chapter 9 The Theory of Stories

In this chapter we describe some theoretical frameworks relevant to story-telling. People can use theory without knowing they are doing so; in fact, theories can be viewed as abstract stories about the world. Stories and theories are both items in the story-telling toolbox for people in organisations.

We describe the work of some of the thinkers who have particularly influenced our views on organisations and story-telling. Among other things we discuss metaphors and striking phrases, like 'the Golden Age' or 'the Red Queen', to show how the vivid language of metaphors creates precision, insight and memorable slogans. For readers who are short of time, this might be the chapter they choose to skip, unless they are keen to understand the intellectual background to the book.

Chapter 10 Tools and Techniques for Story Use

This chapter gathers together the various techniques for stimulating and improving story-telling, adding new ones to those described in previous chapters.

Chapter 11 The Future of Story-Telling in Organisations

This final chapter will summarise the lessons of the book, reviewing the ways in which story-telling can help organisational learning and discussing how to select the best approach for a particular situation. We will tell our own story – how our understanding of story-telling deepened during its writing. Finally, we will speculate about the future – where story-telling may go, and how its future may interact with the future shapes and roles of organisations.

What Readers Will Get from the Book

We hope that by reading this book you will develop your story-telling skills, and that you will learn from our examples of story-telling in a

variety of settings and linked to varied practices. We hope you find useful the exercises and techniques we provide for generating good stories and for encouraging and developing the practice of story-telling in your organisation. We hope that you will gain a deeper understanding of the benefits that good story-telling can deliver, and that reading the book will change your views on organisation learning as a whole.

We hope, too, that you will be entertained by the stories we tell. Stories should be fun. Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is a modern story about stories. Haroun's father is a professional story-teller, with a seemingly never-ending stream of stories. Haroun asks his father where they all come from. 'From the great Story Sea,' he answers. But one day the source of these stories gets plugged. Haroun, with assistance from various characters, is able to remove the plug, leaving the source unblocked, so all the stories, even the oldest ones, now taste as good as new.