

## How Watching More TV Could Make you a Better Change Leader

By Anthony Madigan (MD of Write the Talk)



Who knew that watching that Box Set could make you better at your job? According to Anthony Madigan TV dramas such as Peaky Blinders and Bridgerton can teach us how to engage any audience and take them on a journey with us through the power of narrative.

This article, based on Anthony's brilliant talk at the latest BA Manager Forum, is packed with useful takeaways for business analysts, service designers and change managers.

## How Watching More TV Could Make you a Better Change Leader

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We live in a narrative-driven world, and we already know that storytelling is a powerful tool for selling change to any audience. But how can we engage an audience over a long period of time with an influential story, keeping their attention and involving them for months – and even years – ahead? You could find the answer if you switch on your TV and tune into an episode of Peaky Blinders or Downton Abbey.

## Change Projects and Narrative – a Match Made in Heaven

Experts in story and narrative, the writers of these long running TV shows are already engaging audiences for long periods of time. If the narrative is powerful and convincing, the audience can't help but respond.

The same techniques of story and narrative can help organisations get things done. Leadership teams can use narrative to gain long term traction to deliver whatever they want to deliver. It's about telling a better story, to compete with the beliefs and narratives running in people's minds.

### **Stories Make Sense of Experience**

*"When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else."* – Margaret Atwood

If we have a period of turmoil in our lives, we often only make sense of it afterwards by sharing our experiences with other people, as a narrative. Stories happen *after* the experience.

It's the same with change projects. In the middle of them there are people who may be experiencing fear, resistance, uncertainty and confusion.

But with a different perspective people can have a different experience. For example, imagine people being thrown down rapids in boats. They know what's coming because they signed up for the river rapids experience, and they have chosen to be part of it. They know roughly how long it will take and what they'll feel like when it's over. Instead of a near-death experience over which they have no choice, this is a thrill ride. That makes all the difference in the world. What if a voice was narrating to them as it went on, talking them through it? Then it's not just a thrill ride it is a life-enhancing and energising experience.

This may be the direction you need in your team, making them part of the narrative and taking them on a journey. To bring your team along with you at every stage of the journey, the narrative has to run alongside the change itself, evolving and developing and responding to the change.

### **The Structure of the Story**

A story is not 'and then, and then'. Forward facing stories have a structure. Every (change) story starts with a character, a setting, an inciting incident. There is a goal, because motivation is recognised by the audience. Then there is a struggle, conflicts, problems, risks or danger. There will be a dark moment – is everything lost? Then there is a crisis, agency or rescue and a resolution.

*"This is where we are... but something's changed... so this is what we need to do... so this can happen."*

The most important words in stories are 'but' and 'therefore'. The 'but' is the move away from the norm, it is the 'why' behind the change. The 'therefore' or 'so' are the consequence, the things you choose to do so that other things can be done.

The end benefit is crucial. It must answer the questions: "Why should I care? Why should I bother?"

Taking a Narrative Approach in an Agile Environment

TV drama, if long running, is made up of sections adding into bigger groups – with nested arcs of story.

- A scene is a bit of story, a sequence is scenes linked together.
- An episode has its own a story shape.
- The second half of a season can respond to the first half of the season.

You can apply the structure and approach to any stretch of change that you want. A story can be expanded or contracted to cover one simple agile step or a collection. The more sequences in your narrative that add up to something that makes sense, the more traction you will get.

### **Find the 'Why'**

Stories that try to talk to everyone tend to be anodyne. You have to tune in to your audience and accept that you can't take them all along at the same time. You have to choose what's most important, what the 'why' is, the greatest need. Then you can draw people in. You can tell a story in different ways to attract different people.

### **The World of Your Story – Your Organisational Culture**

Just like the roots of a tree you are stuck with what lies beneath, the world of your organisation and your team and their belief systems. You need to create new root systems that are as strong as those already there, which means that you have to go deep. New research says that culture is the sum of the narratives we have been immersed in. What we think is true is just what we have absorbed from what is around us.

If there is a deep-seated belief in an organisation that change is not possible, you need to break down that belief by changing those underlying thoughts. You can do this by talking to people and getting to know your audience as best you can. What are their objectives and objections, where are they coming from?

### **Organisations as Dramas**

If your organisation was a drama, what would it be and why? What do people believe, what do they want and what is getting in the way?

Your organisation might be like the drama 'Heartbeat'. A nice company, everybody is diplomatic and do not want to tread on toes. It's like a village community, and newcomers are expected to go along with the existing narrative, even if the methods are old fashioned.

In a case like this, you need gradual change, but then projects can take too long. In such an organisation people might ask 'why change?' You need influential people to understand the value of the new thing. Perhaps a new character comes in and cures the farmer's pig, then word gets around and everyone embraces the new cure or way of working.

Or perhaps your organisation is like 'Lord of the Rings'. It could be a University where the academics are like Hobbits who don't want to leave the Shire. They are comfortable and are not interested in transformation services, yet the processes and systems they are putting up with are terrible.

The Lord of the Rings is a quest story, which is powerful for encouraging change because it is motivating. The reason the Hobbits join the Fellowship is so that they can protect their way of life and what they value. The more you connect the quest with what they desire the more you can engage them. If they want to protect what they love they have to endure the 'pain' of transformation but the end result will be worthwhile.

## Engaging through Narrative

You have to find those in your organisation who are most resistant to change and talk to them. If you offer them a rich enough narrative, you can keep them involved for months on end.

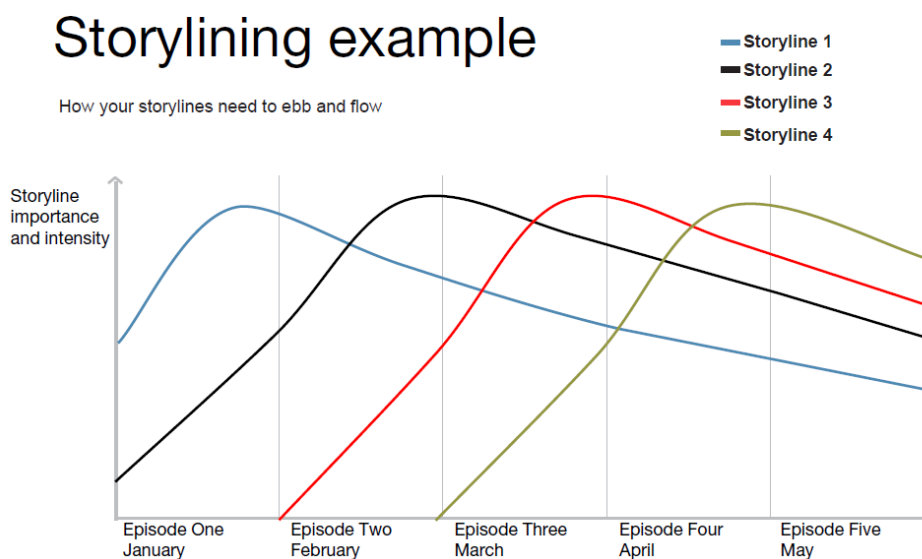
- What do people need to hear and believe?
- What's going to break down the barriers?
- What else is your change story about?
- Remember you can't 'tell', you have to 'show'.
- Don't have a 'one size fits all' story. You need to develop a story where people can see themselves in different parts of the story. The narrative has to draw together the separate threads.

### Driving a Digital Transformation Project using Story

Drama involves plot and pace, that is what keeps a story going for a long time. That's how *Peaky Blinders* and *Mad Men* and *Greys Anatomy* kept going for so many seasons. They left space for things to work.

Perhaps you have a narrative with four storylines. They evolve at different times, so there is always one that is coming to its peak. People can process many ongoing storylines, but they don't like everything being dumped on them at once.

Here's an example of using four storylines to drive a digital transformation project.



- The first storyline could be “We can do much better, we can help more people by going through this process.” This is getting people interested, giving them motivation.
- The second storyline could be “We are getting better, look at us getting better. Look at the benefits of regular change.” This is building understanding.
- The third storyline could be finding opportunities to show examples of collaboration and its benefits. Show, don't tell. Find evidence to support the storyline. This is drawing them in.
- The fourth story could be educating people about what digital means and what it could do for them. It's more than just something their kids are interested in. Digital can make painful processes miles better. Switch them to “I want one of them!”

You have a story, you need to get to grips with sub-plots. Don't organise your thinking in blocks, get them running over time and practise keeping them going, just like you see stories developing in your favourite TV shows. Watch more TV drama, it's good for your personal development!