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O’Gorman, Kevin D. and Gillespie, Cailein H. (2008) *Leadership and storytelling: perspectives from senior hospitality management*. In: EuroCHRIE 2008 Congress, 2008-10-11 - 2008-10-14, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

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LEADERSHIP AND STORYTELLING: PERSPECTIVES FROM SENIOR HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents initial findings on how twenty leaders, at the highest level in the international hospitality industry, use stories to create, disseminate and sustain corporate culture within their organisations. The paper focuses on a method for the application of hermeneutics and demonstrates, through analysing phenomenological interviews with leaders, that storytelling is an important strategic method of communication. Not only does the paper present insights on how storytelling is fundamental to leadership in the contemporary commercial hospitality industry it also reveals, through empirical research, how stories can be used as a data source.

KEY WORDS

Leadership; Hermeneutics; Storytelling; Hospitality Management; Organisational Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Within hospitality management literature, storytelling seems to have been ignored both as management tool and a form of data collection. No doubt this is partly due to what Brown et al (2004:1) observe: “to some people - people in business, people in management, people running public sector organizations - storytelling might seem like an odd subject to be talking about at all. The thought that narrative and storytelling might be important ideas in organizational thinking in the coming century might seem even odder.” Conversely, and in sharp contrast, anthropologists like Bochner (2001) and Goodall (2005) describe man as *homo narrans*, the storytelling creature; arguing that humans are naturally, profoundly, and often captivatingly oriented toward storytelling. This research attempts to bridge the divide between these two viewpoints and explores how leaders in the hospitality industry use storytelling to create and disseminate corporate culture.

METHODOLOGY

An outline, in two tables, is now presented for the application of hermeneutics and demonstrates, through analysing phenomenological interviews with leaders, that storytelling is an important strategic method of communication. A purposeful criterion based sample design was selected; Creswell (2007: 125) notes that this type of sample allows the selection of interviewees that can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study”. In total 20 interviews took place with international hospitality industry leaders at the highest levels including Founders, Chairmen, Chief Executive Officers and General Managers in order to explore the means they use to create a corporate culture. Before the interviews, a period of sensitization to each organization was also undertaken and formal and informal meetings were conducted with members of the executive team in the various organisations. This sensitisation enabled the interviewer to have a greater understanding of the organisational culture and obtain a more in-depth perspective of the leaders in question. The interviews were phenomenological in style, ranging in duration from ninety minutes to two hours; these interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Kvale (1983) argues that the types of data generated by phenomenological interviews are particularly well suited to hermeneutic analysis.

Hermeneutics, originally concerned with interpreting sacred texts, has developed over time into a scientific methodology. After the data has been collected the researcher then enters into a dialogue with the text using the understanding gathered and drawing on their pre-understanding to interpret the phenomena under investigation in the hope of revealing something that is hidden. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2004) called this stage alethic hermeneutics from the Greek *aletheia* (uncoveredness). The method of data analysis used on the transcribed interviews is the hermeneutic circle of interpretation; this is a development of the method used by Morrison and O’Gorman (2008). Various authors, including Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2004); Denzin (1989); Hayllar and Griffin (2005); O’Gorman (2007) suggest and adopted four epistemological practices and Van Manen (1990) proposes two methodological principles for hermeneutical interpretation. O’Gorman (2008) adapted and developed both the epistemological practices and the methodological principles in hermeneutical research and presented them in a table; that table has been modified for this research (Table 1). The first column gives the name of the epistemological practices or methodological principle whereas the second column gives a generic description of how these could be applied to any research project. The third column details how these practices and principles are applied to this research and what the particular results are.

The hermeneutic circle of interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2004); is now to reflect upon, discuss and analyse the transcribed interviews. This is done by making three consciously distinct revolutions of the hermeneutical circle; this process and a summary of the results obtained are shown in Table 2 (Review of the Hermeneutical Process). In Table 2 the first column shows the level of analysis, the second column describes how that analysis took place, finally the third column shows a summary of the results obtained from each stage of analysis.

The process began with an initial thematic analysis to explore for the common devices used by the leaders. Then a first reflective analysis identified how the leaders used of storytelling and finally a second reflective analysis allowed for the collation of examples of storytelling.

These three revolutions of the circle also form the structure for the discussion and findings section, thus helping to bring into focus a sometimes-fuzzy picture.

Epistemological Practices		
Practice	Generic Description of Practice	Application to this research
Bracketing of previous experience and turning toward lived experience	Presuppositions, biases, and any knowledge of the phenomenon obtained from personal and scholarly sources must be set aside. After data collection the researcher then enters into a dialogue with the text using the understanding gathered and drawing on their pre-understanding to interpret the phenomena.	Before the interviews, whenever possible the researcher moved into the hotel and conducted meetings with members of the executive team allowing the interviewer to focus <i>a priori</i> on organizational culture and allowing them to bracket their <i>a posteriori</i> pre-conceptions.
Investigating the Phenomenon	It is important to clearly define the phenomenon under investigation in order for the data collection to remain focused.	The interviews, despite being phenomenological in style, always had a sharp focus on exploring the means the interviewees used to create a corporate culture within their organisation.
Reflecting on essential themes	Moving from data collection to data interpretation involves a process of phenomenological reflection. The first step in reflection is to conduct thematic analysis, which helps give a degree of order and control to the task.	During the initial stages of the data interpretation various themes emerged, including: stages, signs, symbols, rights, ceremonies and during these initial reflection it became evident that storytelling was used by all the leaders
Writing and rewriting	During the analysis the procedure of asking questions to the text, and listening to it, in a dialogic form is central in the writing and rewriting phase. Reflection and writing task can be false dichotomies as they tend to be symbiotic tasks.	The data was reviewed on several more occasions to reveal all aspects of the use of story telling, this took place during the writing and the rewriting stages. The very act of writing aided considerably the process of reflection.
Methodological Principles		
Principle	Generic Description of Principle	Application to this research
Maintain a strong and oriented relation	Writing and interpretations must remain oriented to the phenomenon under investigation, thus superficialities and falsities will be avoided	In order to keep a tight focus on the phenomenon, ideas emanating from the data were constantly shared with academic colleagues and other leaders in the hospitality industry in order to gain co-validation of thinking
Considering parts and whole	The overall interpretation is consistent with the various parts of the analysis, step back and look at the total, and how each of the parts needs to contribute towards it.	When formulating the findings great care was taken to re-read the original transcribed interviews to assure that the themes highlighted in the table were a true and constant reflection of the data.

Table 1: Applied Hermeneutical Interpretation

The methodology applied in this paper also emphasises that great care is needed when engaging leaders at the highest level in the industry. There was a need for familiarisation and sensitisation process with the leaders' organisations before the interviews. This, combined with phenomenological interviews, shows how the careful use of qualitative research methods discovered the use of storytelling. In keeping with qualitative practice the level of textual engagement required in this research and analysis needed to be fluid rather than applying fixed method of classification based on quasi-quantification of qualitative data; meaning transcends word count.

Level of Analysis	Description of the analysis	Summary of the results obtained from the analyses
Thematic	To look for common themes used by all the 20 leaders interviewed to create corporate culture within their organisation	Variety of devices developing and sharing a core values statement signs, symbols, rights, ceremonies. All leaders seemed to place emphases on the importance and centrality of telling stories.
1 st Reflective	The initial inductive analysis showed that storytelling is used by all the leaders – the interviews were re-read and reflected upon for aspects of story telling used by the leaders	From reflecting on the interviews it became clear that seven principle categories of storytelling were identified – these were used by all or the vast majority of the leaders. This was verified by working closely with other academics in order to ensure that the emergent presentation of results honestly reflected the data. There was a considerable amount of writing and rewriting at this stage, the vast majority of which did not end up in the final draft.
2 nd Reflective	A second reflective reading of the interviews undertaken in order to explore the interviews for sub-categories showing storytelling usage.	Taxonomy of the uses of storytelling by leaders in the hospitality industry was developed. However, at this stage, the warnings and concerns that the leaders expressed about storytelling were also recorded to give a holistic picture. The final table of results (Not included in this working paper) was shown to some interviewees and other industry leaders as a further means of verification and reflection.

Table 2: Review of the hermeneutical process

INITIAL FINDINGS

When discussing storytelling, the leaders argued that stories could bring fresh energy throughout the company: it improves productivity, teamwork, understanding and it can help to enhance productivity and produce discernible bottom line results. They also employ storytelling

to restyle or alter organisational culture, and to augment and reanimate existing company norms and values. Hospitality industry leaders are changing organisational culture, by using stories and anecdotes to strengthen and revitalise current norms and values, in tandem, assisting their personnel concentrate on aspects most essential to the overall prosperity of the organisation.

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