

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235316289>

# Consulting and Change in the Storytelling Organisation

Article in *Journal of Organizational Change Management* · December 1991

DOI: 10.1108/EUM0000000001193

---

CITATIONS

91

---

READS

243

1 author:



[David M Boje](#)

New Mexico State University

200 PUBLICATIONS 6,823 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



There is no 'ground' and no 'theory' in Grounded Theory [View project](#)



Information systems (IS) failures and successes [View project](#)

# Consulting and Change in the Storytelling Organisation

The  
Storytelling  
Organisation

David M. Boje  
*Loyola Marymount University, USA*

7

Once upon a time, Billy Gold founded an office supply firm which came to be known as the Gold Company. As he sold his wares to *Fortune 500* companies, he brought in family members and veteran salesmen like himself. Salesmen and family members ran the branch offices and they ran the printing, speciality ad, and furniture divisions that Billy added to his commercial office supply business. Billy did not like managers or assistants. Salesmen took care of their own accounts, and the only company secretary handled personnel. Billy built his company up and sold it to a conglomerate, which added more branches, hired managers, computerised transactions, but was unsuccessful at installing professional management. It traded Gold with some other holding to an even bigger conglomerate, which brought in its own financial executive, but could not find a CEO who could lead Gold. In less than two years, Gold went through five CEOs. The last CEO offended top salesmen who ran off to join a competitor, taking Gold's top accounts. Gold's CEO retaliated and hired away the competitor's top people — they brought their business with them. Since Gold got the worst of this war, the CEO decided the writing was on his wall and helped himself to a quarter million dollar bonus, and he, too was fired. Gold was by this time a 50 million dollar sales company operating with five branches across three states. Meanwhile, the conglomerate was manoeuvring once again to sell off Gold, along with office supply firms it had recently purchased. It brought in Doug Johnson to be the CEO who would take this company, founded by Billy Gold, a man who did as he pleased, giving bonuses, trips to Hawaii, and promotions to his good old sales boys, and transform Gold into a corporation run by a professional management team under strict financial controls. In his first week at Gold, Doug hired me as the consultant.

The purpose of this article is to tell my consultant story of interventions and changes in what I term "the storytelling organisation" of this office supply firm that wanted to gain more stability and become even more customer-focused. To do my job, I gathered stories from branch managers, corporate executives, sales people, vendors and customers by taping and transcribing every meeting, hallway conversation, and restaurant lunch that I participated in, and writing field notes of conversations when I could not tape. The method and theory side of the story has been told (Boje, 1991). Here, I want to share how I used terse stories, told in conversation, to diagnose changes I was to facilitate.

I would like to thank Charles Vance and Michael Jones for their helpful comments on my article.

I found that stories, in the storytelling organisation, were not just something which people tell to others to entertain, nor just something they do when they communicate. Rather, stories are the blood vessels through which changes pulsate in the heart of organisational life. In what follows I will examine stories: their definition, their performance, their particular role in consulting and change.

### What is a Story?

I came to define story simply as an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted or challenged. More formal and less terse definitions by pioneers, like Wilkins (1984), Martin *et al.* (1983) and Clark (1972), require a full chronology, theme, script or saga for a story to be a story. The new definition allowed me to look at more ubiquitous and subtle forms of story (Boje, 1991, p. 111). I observed that people shared very small chunks and pieces of experience quite frequently, but rarely verbalised a whole story in their everyday, turn-by-turn talk. In fact, just a mere "You know that time?" or a nod of the head was enough to tell those in the know an entire story. Further, rather than story being a thing (i.e. a text), story seemed to be part of a process for recognising, as well as collectively accomplishing and enacting change. Story 1, told to me in informal conversation with one executive, speaks to the issue of how I came to define story.

This is not a story by most definitions yet, between the lines, Sam expects me to fill in his blanks and be able to tell the story to myself [lines 1-3: "you heard the whole story"] and to pick up the point [line 5: "You know?"] he is making about Ted. In gathering stories, I found most of the story being told was left unstated. Further, Sam and others were careful to assess just how much story to reveal to me, their consultant. As I nodded my recognition of this story, Sam did continue to reveal more sensitive nuances to the story: "But he made some deals that maybe he shouldn't have made, you know, with some of the salesmen". I nod to indicate I know "he made some deals", but tell me more. My point is that Sam and I are *co-producing* the story: How much is revealed, what version is told, what point gets made and, most important, the meaning of the story is not in this text. It is not in Sam's head, nor in mine. The meaning of the story is in the unique circumstances of each particular performance (Boje, 1989, 1991).

- 1 Sam: Ted Star picked up Vegas and I
- 2 guess you heard the whole story
- 3 before. That's why we picked up Vegas
- 4 because Ted Star had that with his
- 5 father. You know? [I nod]

## How are Stories Performed in the Storytelling Organisation?

My theory of the storytelling organisation (Boje, 1991) is that people participate in a wide variety of stakeholder groups to process information and manage the collective memory of the organisation through storytelling. I assume that healthier storytelling systems are not only more effective in the marketplace because the organisational intelligence is richer, they are also more meaningful places to work because story characters and plots are more enriching. The process of collective storytelling occurs as a multitude of tellers relate bits of story lines that convey story lines that one person may not know in detail, but in aggregate the full tale is collectively created, told, revised and maintained. Stories are to the storytelling system what precedent cases are to the judicial system. Internal and external stakeholders, as in the judicial system, invoke precedent stories to characterise themselves and other stakeholders in their unfolding dramas. In the courtroom, different versions of the story are told by witnesses and lawyers to get judges and juries to buy into a particular version of reality. In organisations, stories about the past are told from many points of view to highlight particular policies, decisions, and changes. Being a player in the dialogue requires political prowess since seasoned players know which stories hold more currency and are more believable precedents than other stories. In the storytelling organisation, stakeholders and consultants perform stories that make sense of and influence change. Story performance and change are intertwined. Stories are created, old stories are remembered, some are revised, and stories about the future are performed in the collective dialogue among organisational stakeholders as they make sense of and even affect organisational change. Consulting to the storytelling organisation involves four areas: (1) change that comes from group storytelling conversations as precedent stories are told and revised to make sense of, and even decide, unfolding changes; (2) storytelling and story interpretation done by clients to keep themselves and their consultants current on unfolding changes; (3) future stories are shared among clients and with consultants to make sense of unfolding changes; and (4) inviting stories to be told by people whose voices are not being heard in the organisational dialogue about unfolding changes.

## What is the Role of Stories in Change?

*Change Comes from Group Storytelling Conversations as Precedent Stories are Told and Revised to Make Sense of and Even Decide Unfolding Changes*

In the next conversation (Story 2), Doug, the CEO, is trying to persuade his executives that training [lines 8; 22-3] is a key decision criterion for deciding which of three divisions: printing, speciality ads, or furniture, is to be axed so Gold can concentrate its scarce resources on the main business: selling office supplies to commercial accounts. Key to Doug's ability to persuade is his use of precedent stories [lines 1-8].

Doug begins by giving terse reference to two precedent stories [lines 1-8]. The first story, about the printing division performing badly in the past, keys a more detailed story line that does not need to be recited since everyone present knows the plot, characters and outcome. As the story goes, a printing order more than once fell off a delivery truck and was found by a Gold employee on

**Story 2.**  
Stories of the Fate of  
Divisions

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>1 <i>Doug</i>: Historically, in reading a little<br/> 2 bit of the history and maybe Sam<br/> 3 can help us out here. The printing<br/> 4 business that we were writing was<br/> 5 significant at one time and when the<br/> 6 folks left for Epsilon and they took that<br/> 7 business with them and now we're going<br/> 8 through a whole retraining process.<br/> 9 <i>Sam</i>: Well that could be so. I mean<br/> 10 printing again falls with the<br/> 11 salesmen. A lot of the salesmen will<br/> 12 not sell printing because they are<br/> 13 afraid that the printing department,<br/> 14 as in the past has fouled/up.<br/> 15 <i>Jay</i>: Gerrie has been wonderful.<br/> 16 <i>Sam</i>: Yes I think Gerrie<br/> 17 has been wonderful. It is a matter of<br/> 18 competence in whoever it is there.<br/> 19 When Carl Endony was in charge of it<br/> 20 there was no confidence. This goes on<br/> 21 and it changes/<br/> 22 <i>Doug</i>: And/I think training comes in<br/> 23 here<br/> 24 <i>Jay</i>: When I was in sales I sold what I<br/> 25 understood. If I didn't understand it,<br/> 26 I didn't sell it<br/> 27 <i>Doug</i>: /I look at Goldco as a<br/> 28 toy that somebody decided to put in<br/> 29 the company because it was fun and it<br/> 30 also brought in/</p> | <p>31 <i>Sam</i>: Well/I'll tell<br/> 32 you how that came about.<br/> 33 <i>Doug</i>: I thought you would<br/> 34 (lots of laughter from the group)<br/> 35 <i>Sam</i>: Sam Coche worked for Sea Breeze<br/> 36 or something like that, oh you know<br/> 37 the story?<br/> 38 <i>Doug</i>: No, go ahead tell it,<br/> 39 really. It's important.<br/> 40 <i>Sam</i>: He got out of<br/> 41 there and he came over and they formed<br/> 42 Goldco. And Goldco does not mean<br/> 43 Gold Company or anything else, they<br/> 44 took the first four initials from<br/> 45 Billy Gold, which is G O L D and from<br/> 46 Coche and that's how they got Goldco.<br/> 47 <i>Doug</i>: And it was a good living for a<br/> 48 couple of people. It was a nice toy<br/> 49 for Billy, he made a few bucks on the<br/> 50 thing. He had some fun for it. But<br/> 51 then the motivation at that time was a<br/> 52 whole lot different than it is today.<br/> 53 We don't have the luxury of screwing<br/> 54 around with something like that/<br/> 55 (lots of cross talk here)/<br/> 56 <i>Jean</i>: This commit(tee) Pardon the wine<br/> 57 or whatever, but this group has been<br/> 58 talking about dicking around with<br/> 59 Goldco for months</p> |
|---|--|

*Note*: // marks overlapping talk by two or more people.

the highway. The previous printing division manager did not follow up and an important customer got very, very mad. Sam confirms and extends the story theme [lines 11-14; 16-21]. The second story Doug invokes is about the folks who left for Epsilon, a story that has several versions (See Boje, 1991, p. 111, for two versions). As the story goes, six to 12 (depending on the story version you hear) sales people quit Gold to join Epsilon, a fierce competitor, and took millions of dollars of customer business with them. Gold retaliated and recruited several top Epsilon sales people to bring their customers over to Gold. There is general agreement among managers, vendors and customers that Gold lost the war and millions in business volume. This story is often referred to simply as "The Epsilon Wars".

Since Doug has only been at Gold as CEO for less than six weeks, coming after both the Printing Division fiasco and the Epsilon Wars, his persuasive ability depends on his knowledge of these stories and on his ability to use these and other relevant stories to make his points. He appeals skilfully to Sam, an executive who lived the founding story of Gold, to fill in story line gaps [lines 2-3; 33-4;

38-9] he needs in order to persuade his consultant and his executives that he knows what is going on now at Gold. And, as each story is told, the story is interpreted to mean something different to the decision about which division needs to be sacrificed so Gold can focus resources on its main business [Sam in lines 9-14; 16-21; Jay, 24-6; Jean, 56-9]. Doug gives a new slant to a founding story that gives a new slant on the rationale for the impending demise of one of several divisions, by proposing that Billy Gold, the founder of Gold, accumulated divisions the way children accumulate and play with toys [lines 47-54]. The point is that for Doug, as an internal change agent, or for me, as an external agent, to be persuasive we each have to learn the important stories and then skilfully intervene in the storytelling conversations taking place. One observable tactic is to convince others present to change the meaning of past stories to fit the speaker's preferences for change at Gold. It is also an example of facilitating a group to get their story straight about the demise of a division.

This session continued for three hours, and there were two follow-up sessions, many office meetings, and lunches before the Executive Committee and Doug came to agreement on their story of why one division was to be eliminated. Two storytelling processes are going on here. First, the executives and other Gold stakeholders hear, tell and interpret stories as part of their work. Second, the consultant and clients share stories and interpretations as part of the work of doing consulting.

*Key to Consulting Work is the Storytelling and Story Interpretation Done by Clients to Keep Themselves and their Consultants Current on Unfolding Changes*

In observing my consulting with these clients, we spent much of our time telling and interpreting stories in informal turn-by-turn conversations to stay current with critical changes unfolding throughout the organisation. Storytelling, not surveys, was the preferred sense-making currency. Surveys are often used by consultants to surface important data. However, the stories being told and interpreted allowed executives, managers, customers, vendors and other stakeholders to make sense of each new episode of change that happened in the day-by-day life of Gold. I assume that consultants and their clients tell these stories to track dynamic change. In meetings I facilitated, the focus for me was to give participants a time and a place for them to focus and sharpen their story work.

Since I did not work with the company every day, Doug and his executives frequently told me stories to bring me and themselves up to date with the changes [e.g. lines 21-7; 30-8]. I, in turn, told them stories that demonstrated changes I thought were important to be made. In the next example, Story 3, recorded at a restaurant, Doug shares several stories [lines 1-4; 26-7; 39-64; 65-90], in quick succession, to point out changes and reinforce his belief that, because of so much CEO turnover, he has to be "damn autocratic to make sure things he requests do not get put on the back burner till he is replaced by some other CEO." Jay analyses [lines 7-13] the first story about the furniture division which he classifies as a more generic story [line 7: "the old story"]. While consulting with me, Doug and his executives are also telling stories

1 *Doug*: First of all it was not going to be  
2 done. Then, Steven said why don't we  
3 have Marie do it. After I said "horse  
4 shit" he got the message.

5 *Jay*: Marie's going to do it?

6 *Beth*: Yeah right, Marie's doing it/now

7 *Jay*: But/it was the old story  
8 people are too busy, you know  
9 distractions and here's another  
10 project, that probably nobody is going  
11 to look at, that is probably going to  
12 go away like everything else has in  
13 the past.

14 *Sam*: Yeah, if I ignore it long enough,  
15 you'll probably forget I ever asked  
16 you to do it, correct?

17 *Mike*: Correct/

[Note: At this point my colleague, Paul,  
interrupts the story to get current on  
Jason, a branch manager.]

18 *Paul*: We were talking/about Jason and  
19 Dave made a comment about slotting  
20 and I said bad hire. It's unfortunate, but/

21 *Dave*: But he's gone now?

22 *Doug*: No No.

23 *Paul*: He's still with you?

24 *Dave*: Well I thought he was gone

25 *Paul*: I thought he was gone

26 *Doug*: I'll tell you/the story on that if  
27 you are interested

28 *Dave*: Yeah (nodding) I thought he  
29 sold you his customers and/

30 *Doug*: Yup/what I'm doing with Jason.

31 So Yeah, we  
32 got a problem with that and again as I  
33 start rebuilding, ummm we're going to  
34 do a much better job on it. We're off  
35 loading a whole lot of services and  
36 things we can and should to be doing  
37 internally if we have the right  
38 people.

[Note: Doug digresses (Georges, 1981)  
with another story to make a larger point  
about changes he is making by initially  
making do with people who are not right  
for a particular job until he can recruit an  
experienced person to bring about the  
level of professionalism he is seeking. He  
tells this story about the personnel  
director: Tom, a person, who Doug  
believes does not know his job]

39 *Doug*: Ummm we're using a service  
40 right now on a temp to perm right now  
41 paying ridiculous costs. I stopped it  
42 yesterday. We were paying a thousand a  
43 week for a secretary. Yeah. And what  
44 happened was I set up a control where  
45 I set up a control that requires two  
46 signatures for every authorised, for  
47 every expenditure — non-merchandise  
48 expenditure. So all of a sudden, I'm  
49 starting to see things and I see a  
50 temp to perm of a thousand dollars a  
51 week. And I got Tom in there and I  
52 says, "Tom, is this to say you intend  
53 to pay her £50,000 a year? And he  
54 said, "No." And I said, "Well what is  
55 the advantage of temp to perm?" He  
56 says, "well they do all the recruiting  
57 and blah blah blah" And I says, "Well  
58 what do you do?" (pause 1.5) "Ummm",  
59 he says, "Well is that what you want me  
60 to do?" I said, "Well you're the f\*\*\*ing  
61 personnel department, what are you  
62 supposed to do?" (laughter all round)  
63 So anyway we have a full-time  
64 employee now.

[Note: Doug switches back to complete  
the story I had agreed I wanted to hear  
concerning Jason.]

65 *Doug*: Jason, uhhh we got  
66 to D-day I put him in 30 day notice  
67 and I told him specifically what he  
68 had to do. I went in 30 days to the  
69 day. I sat him down to dinner and I  
70 said, "We are at a crossroads my friend  
71 and let me give you exactly where I am  
72 at. Number one, you understand this  
73 business and you can be an asset to  
74 this company. Let me give you the flip  
75 side. Jason the flip side is you are  
76 viewed as a total a\*\*h\*\*\* in this  
77 company and if you want a definition I  
78 can give you that. You're a pain in  
79 the ass and you're a p\*\*\*\* to your  
80 employees. You gotta choice. You have  
81 been bounced out of every major  
82 company in this industry. You got no  
83 place left to go. I am going to go  
84 with you because I think you have got a  
85 lot to offer, but you gotta come half  
86 way. I want you to lighten up on these  
87 people, I want you to and I went boom,  
88 boom, boom. Right now I got the whole  
89 God damn restaurant listening to this  
90 discussion (laughs from several tables).

### Story 3.

Stories to Update the  
Consultant about  
Change

to evaluate employees, point out issues of their own style, and work out who stays and who goes in the changes they must make. The point here is that storytelling is an essential and preferred avenue for clients and consultants to convey what is going to change, and where the change problems are located.

This example is typical of the style of conversation that occurred to let me know, as the consultant, which changes needed to happen sooner than others. Since the organisation's story unfolds minute by minute, a critical activity in my consulting was staying current with what was their story of each key division, branch, competitor, vendor, customer and executive.

*Future Stories are Shared among Clients and with Consultants to Make Sense of Unfolding Changes*

As I met with these people, week after week, for eight months, people would often begin by recounting recent events. Included among those stories, were occasional predictions about the future of Gold. Doug, for example, often told me about the activities of a multi-billion dollar conglomerate, Huge. Story 4 is an unrecorded conversation, recalled by me in field notes taken immediately following our session. During the exchange Doug forecasts "bloodletting" [lines 18-19; 28-9]. Bleeding is Doug's term for firing an employee or a whole division of employees. Huge bought Gold and four other office supply firms in different regions, that together cover most of the United States. Their plan was to fatten up individual holdings and then sell the whole package. Fatten up is what you do to cattle before the slaughter. Gold, despite being a \$50 million company, is so trivial to Huge that the annual report lumps Gold in the category: "other" with other menial holdings at the very back of the report.

If you are an executive or a consultant, at the mercy of a conglomerate who sees your company as one poker chip among many they are about to throw into the pot to make a bigger deal to buy a *Fortune 100* company, then predicting their behaviour was very critical to any changes we were to make at Gold. Blood letting also involves trimming off every ounce of budget excess from each firm and not investing in anything long term in order to make the short term, bottom line as fat as possible. Doug predicts blood letting, but does not think the sale will go through this year. In his story of the future of Gold, Doug's role is clear: he is holding the knife. In the exchange [lines 14-16], Doug is also emphasising just how my role is being changed. My consulting had been aimed at "running the business" [line 13]. Now I was to participate in the financial side. I spent this month putting together financial data to tell a story to Huge-with-numbers that would keep Huge from bleeding Gold dry. The blood metaphor captures our roles, the plot for Gold, and our sense of powerlessness.

Future stories [lines 17-29; 28-9; 31-6] helped us predict what would happen to our interventions and also signalled changes in the consulting role that would result as a conglomerate manoeuvred to sell off Gold in order to make a deal for a *Fortune 100* company. The impact of the sale of Gold is picked up in the next section.



**Story 4.**  
Stories that Tell a  
Bloody Future for Gold

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>1 Doug: Huge (conglomerate) is good at this.<br/>         2 There are eight buyers. Smith is one of<br/>         3 them. Each of 'em wants to go through<br/>         4 everything. If they want commission<br/>         5 reports for the past five years we have<br/>         6 to send them. If they want to see the<br/>         7 figures without printing then we are to<br/>         8 pull out printing and give them what<br/>         9 ever we [they] want. They told me if<br/>         10 we have to shut down to provide it,<br/>         11 then we are to shut down and do it.<br/>         12 They don't care what it takes.<br/>         13 Dave: What about running the business?<br/>         14 Doug: You are not listening to me. I<br/>         15 want those financials and I want<br/>         16 them today!<br/>         [Doug then pulled out a list of some<br/>         20 items he had to have answered by<br/>         the end of the day and it was 1 p.m.<br/>         already. The list had things like<br/>         commission reports for past 5 years,<br/>         costs of leases and what numbers would</p> | <p>look like if we owned the buildings,<br/>         did not own, etc.]<br/>         17 Dave: This is some list!<br/>         18 Doug: There is going to be some more<br/>         19 bloodshed. I hate bloodshed. I know<br/>         20 what the offers are and they are not<br/>         21 even close. They are expecting 12 to<br/>         22 15 times and getting six to eight. I know<br/>         23 Huge they will never take a low bid<br/>         24 like that. They are known for making<br/>         25 good deals. They would rather pull us<br/>         26 off the market for a couple of years,<br/>         27 pull on the bottom line, fatten us,<br/>         28 trim off here and there. Yes, there<br/>         29 will be some blood letting. I've been<br/>         30 through this before and it can get<br/>         31 tough. Huge is selling us to pull in<br/>         32 as much cash as they can. They are<br/>         33 getting ready to make some major<br/>         34 moves. They want to get into the big<br/>         35 leagues with the multi billion dollar<br/>         36 deals.</p> |
|---|--|

*Consultants Can Invite Stories to be Told by People Whose Voices are Not Being Heard in the Organisational Dialogue about Unfolding Chapters*

This intervention can be accomplished by organising and facilitating focus groups with stakeholders whose story needs to get heard. I participated in a series of focus groups with customers and vendors selected by Gold. I saw focus groups as a good way to collect stories from each set of participants and, with permission, retell them to other sectors of the organisation. In this way, I sought to improve the storytelling system of the organisation by: (1) opening up lines of communication between stakeholders without adequate contact; and (2) amplifying the customer and vendor voices that were too silent in the stories being shared within Gold. Instead of survey-feedback, I was using story-feedback. Stories, I believe, are packed with more meaning and provide clearer images of the changes that need to take place than do survey numbers.

These next examples come from a videotape of a focus group with vendors, led by my associate Paul. In these exchanges, the stories of relationships between Gold and the vendors speak to the instability that comes from too much turnover at the top. The level of change is too rapid for the vendors to sustain important relationships. At the end, the vendors disclose [line 68] "the word is on the street". This is a terse, but important reference to a story circulating within Gold, that none of the Gold executives through vendors, and as it turned out key customers, knew about. We pick up the dialogue (Story 5), halfway through the session, as Paul, my associate, raises a question for the group.

The comments and stories shared in this focus group gave me material I needed to get the CEO and his executives in touch with the stories that were "on the street". Executives made the rounds with critical vendors and customers

1 *Paul:* Five things that irritate you most  
2 about doing things with Gold?

3 *Jim:* [Lots of laughter in group, as Jim  
4 points to mirror and gestures to who  
5 ever might be lurking behind it. The  
6 group knows they are being taped.]

7 I'll go first. I think  
8 the one thing that has been the  
9 biggest problem has been the stability  
10 problem over the past few years. You  
11 know I've been sitting here thinking  
12 about all the things we've been  
13 talking about. All the things that  
14 they do right. And I've thought about  
15 the times I've enjoyed working with  
16 them because of all the things that  
17 they've done right. But then when I  
18 look back I'm thinking, well, you know,  
19 even in spite of all that, there's been  
20 a lot of instability in the last few  
21 years, especially in upper management  
22 and that in a lot of ways even though  
23 everyone has been accessible has made  
24 it difficult at times because one time  
25 you've gotten to think you are working  
26 with one person or a particular client  
27 and another time you come in and you  
28 are not sure who is in charge/  
29 Changes in/top management, senior, and  
30 middle management as well/[agreement  
31 from group]/That's been difficult to  
32 kind of understand and to work with.

33 *Abe:* Yeah, my boss will call from. We're  
34 based out of the northwest and he'll  
35 say, well, Abe, who is running the ship  
36 at Gold now? He can see a lot of  
37 the proposals that we've presented and  
38 were accepted six months ago still in  
39 effect because there's been turnover.  
40 When we come in with a new promotion  
41 and start at the top and work down. So  
42 by coming in with a rebate check and  
43 we're going to review sales figures, I

44 call Doug or his predecessors  
45 before him. We made a lot of changes  
46 going back over a year ago which helps  
47 XYZ's position at Gold while other  
48 persons were in that position and then  
49 when they left, you know and the  
50 comments made, it leaves you a little  
51 uncomfortable about what's going to  
52 happen. You know is the next  
53 administration going to come in and  
54 make changes to that? One point that  
55 Jim made earlier that I want to touch  
56 on is our concerns are shared with  
57 salespeople. They definitely  
58 know sometimes that they're kind of a  
59 ship without a rudder right now and I  
60 think it concerns their sales people...

61 *Paul:* Do you think that is true right  
62 now?

63 *Abe:* Well I think until Doug has  
64 been well, maybe, been there for a  
65 while you feel. Well if we can just be  
66 open [several talking over each other  
67 with head nods to go ahead and talk]  
68 the word is on the street that they  
69 are up for sale. OK? So now, you know,  
70 Doug may be the president. They may  
71 want him up there. But somebody'll buy  
72 him next month and then he's going to  
73 be gone because you know, because  
74 you know they're bringing in their own  
75 people. You don't know, I mean. You  
76 don't want that, I mean. Personally, I  
77 think he's going to be a good  
78 administrator, but then he is. But  
79 then somebody buys him and they have  
80 their own people, then maybe he's not  
81 going to be there. So you wonder is  
82 there going to be a stability? And the  
83 salesmen have the same concern and I  
84 heard it from them themselves you  
85 know. What's going to? Where we  
86 going?

to tell a version of their impending sale that stabilise their relationships. They also developed training classes for sales and customer service people based on stories of poor service told in focus groups. Facilitating storytelling in focus groups, and the interpretation of those stories in meetings with people at all levels of the organisation presents a powerful way for consultants to help organisational participants to understand the role of storytelling systems.

## Discussion

I acted as story-consultant to this firm by basing my diagnosis and change recommendations on terse stories people told me. I was also able to observe other use precedent and future stories to introduce change. The more I participated in the storytelling system, as I transcribed conversations, videotaped stories, and catalogued story themes, the more meaning I unpacked from the briefest utterances; which in turn indexed other pieces of the story which I had recorded from other people in other settings. I defined my role as facilitating the telling of relevant tales and helping the executives, managers, vendors and customers reach some consensus on their stories. I introduced people into the dialogue whose stories were not getting told. Storytelling was a natural part of life in this organisation. I believe that in any intervention the consultant hears stories, responds with stories, and is intervening in the storytelling life pulsating within the organisation.

In a healthy storytelling organisation, the story lines told in the halls, board rooms and restaurants, accurately map the environment and direct stakeholders to change in anticipatory and responsive ways. In an unhealthy storytelling organisation, the processing of data into story and the recall of relevant precedent stories is not working to give accurate readings of the environment. This was not a healthy storytelling organisation. Important stakeholders, such as customers and vendors were not being given a prominent voice. Their stories were not being heard. With the number of destabilising changes happening, such as the impending sale of Gold and the high turnover in upper management, it was important that Gold hear the stories of stakeholders disrupted by these changes. The storytelling system was itself being disrupted. Vendors, for example, reported they had to retell their story to each new CEO, to each new sales manager, and to each new sales representative. The storytelling system under Doug's initiative and my consultant intervention was beginning to give richer and more accurate pictures of changes impending in Gold's internal or external environments.

Doug displayed an amazing ability to find, learn, and tell stories to position his change agenda. He was conscious of the stories he told and assembled his audiences with great care. As diligently as I taped, transcribed and catalogued stories, my conversations with Doug revealed he was just as plugged in to the same story lines I was working so hard to unravel. I think his sensitivity to stories circulating, and to telling the right story at the right time, to the right audience, made him a more effective leader. Together, Doug and I sought a story line that enhanced survival and enriched the meaningful participation of customers, vendors, managers and employees. Clearly, we had to get some of these people to tell their stories directly to one another so that their key relationships would be strengthened with customers and vendors. If not, a significant competitive edge would continue to erode. Voicing the unheard stories is a key consultant activity. In my case, I gave more voice to the customer and vendor stories.

In this storytelling organisation, as in all storytelling organisations, the business at hand is to put the facts into stories that make sense, inspire and give political

advantage. My interventions, and those of the CEO with whom I worked closely, changed stories, the plots and behaviours of this firm's storytelling system. They collected and shared stories as part of their daily work. I did it as part of my consulting work.

## References

- Boje, D.M. (1989), "Postlog: Bringing Performance Back in", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 80-93.
- Boje, D.M. (1991), "The Storytelling Organization: A Study of Story Performance in an Office-supply Firm", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 36, pp. 106-26.
- Clark, B.R. (1972), "The Organizational Saga in Higher Education", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 17, pp. 178-84.
- Georges, R. (1981), "Do Narrators Really Digress? A Reconsideration of 'Audience Asides' in Narrating", *Western Folklore*, Vol. 40, pp. 245-52.
- Martin, J., Feldman, M.S., Hath, M.J. and Sitkin, S.B. (1983), "The Uniqueness Paradox in Organizational Stories", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 28, pp. 438-53.
- Wilkins, A. (1984), "The Creation of Company Cultures: The Role of Stories and Human Resource Systems", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 41-60.