

Ethics of Organizational Narrative Work



Storytelling is an oral and written art form. We live in stories. We think and speak in stories. We share stories all the time. We live in layers of stories – whether they are the stories we tell ourselves, those we tell others, or the stories we hear. Stories show us how to live our lives, solve problems, and provide models of good and evil. The storyteller describes characters, conveys events, rouses emotions, engages the imagination, and can set forth a vision.

Because stories are an essential part of what it means to be human, they have a great deal of power. Storytelling, whether oral or written, is an ethical and moral act. As such, when working with stories in organizations, the following guidelines are offered:

1. Everyone has a story to tell and when told in context, every story makes sense. Allow people to tell their story with its context.
2. Realize that all stories when told require an appreciative listener. Listen to the stories told in an open way. Listen carefully and take in the other's story. Seek to listen and understand, instead of to immediately respond with your own story.
3. Many stories can open listener's minds to worldviews and values different from their own. Stories preserve human experiences for both reflection and evaluation. Professionals using stories have the responsibility to be sensitive to the effects of stories and to facilitate, where possible, discussions on the messages/values conveyed in stories.
4. Ensure the conditions/environment in which a story is being told creates a positive experience for both the teller and the listeners.
5. No story is innocent. Stories have effects on the teller, the listener and on organizational systems. We are accountable for those effects, as much as possible. Have awareness and concern for the long-range consequences of telling particular stories.
6. Some experiences of stories are beneficial, and some are harmful. Do no harm. It is unethical to knowingly use stories for the purposes of oppression, or to support hatred, racism, sexism, or oppressive systems of any kind.
7. Strive to not make exaggerated, misleading, or unwarranted statements through the stories being told.
8. Any story that silences or 'stories-over' the people the story is most likely to effect is narratively unethical.
9. Stories can also distort and falsify experience. No one has the full story and no single story can ever capture, or do justice to, the fullness of life. Gather, preserve, and tell as many different stories as possible so the organization can witness the collective truth of the human experience. Look for the stories that are not being told.
10. It is unethical, during times of change (when there is often a story void), not to provide guiding and future stories. People deprived of guiding and future stories during periods of change are adrift with anxiety and uncertainty.

11. Storytelling rights should be given to everyone in the organization, not just to the leaders, human resources, marketers, or public relations groups.
12. Encourage respect. Respect the people in your story, respect the audience, and respect the power of the story.
13. People have the right to tell their own story over someone else telling it for them.
14. It may not be appropriate to tell stories from other culture's or other people's personal stories. Personal, family, and original stories are a person's copy written property.
15. Do not assume you know someone else's story and try to impose your interpretation of their story on them. Receive permission to tell someone else's story. Acknowledge your interpretation of the story. Be able to tell the story in front of the people most affected by it.
16. The public owns folklore and folktales, but a storyteller's specific version, or those found in a collection, is copyrighted property and requires permission to be told.
17. Published literary tales and poetry are copyrighted material and also require permission to be told.
18. When telling a story anywhere, it is common courtesy to credit the source of your story.
19. Because stories have such power, it is unethical to not be well trained in their dynamics and in the art form. When using stories for organizational development, work with professionally trained storytellers and/or organizational development specialists who are also trained storytellers.
20. When working with either an internal or external storyteller, ensure that the storyteller is committed to ongoing learning and perfecting their craft.

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Karen Dietz, PhD is an organizational development professional specializing in stories. She is a business consultant, facilitator, trainer, storyteller, story coach to senior executives, and the former Executive Director of the National Storytelling Network. She has worked with organizations for over 25 years, and clients include Fortune 500 companies, business leaders, and community advocates.