



By Joe Byerly

Our lives revolve around stories. How much so? In his book, [*The 7 Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*](#), Christopher Booker argues that narratives are primarily how we think, communicate, and receive information. Stories are the most natural way we know to describe almost everything that happens in our daily lives.

Even our worldview is a story that plays on a loop inside our heads. And it affects every choice we make; from our lifestyle to how we approach opportunities or challenges.

Over the last 16 years in the military, I've realized that units have narratives too. Every organization has a story that underpins its culture. In Edgar Schein's seminal work,

Organizational Culture and Leadership, he argues that stories reinforce culture and teaches new members assumptions that drive thought and action. In other words, the stories matter.

Organizations with strong, positive cultures have great stories that are told time and time again by its members. For instance, these organizations will repeat stories that help keep bad behavior in check while reinforcing those actions that are beneficial to individuals and the group as a whole.

Likewise, organizations with toxic cultures typically repeat the negative stories and reinforce the weak climate set by leadership and acted out by its members. These stories typically justify individuals' poor attitudes; negatively affect morale; and are the lens through which every leadership decision is viewed. For instance, members who share these stories will oft repeat phrases like "leaders don't care," "we're never going to get a break," and "nothing we do matters."

Fortunately, these organizational stories are not fixed - they can be rewritten, but it takes deliberate effort. Below are four components that make stories "sticky" and help them spread throughout organizations.

A 'Why'. If an organization's purpose or mission speaks to a higher calling or has a significant impact, it is easier for its members to develop a sense of belonging, and buy into the culture. Why? In his book, *Start With Why*, author Simon Sinek points out that when leaders articulate the purpose or the WHY to the organization, they reach the part of the brain that controls behaviors, feelings, and stimulates trust and loyalty.

A Good Origins Story. History can give any act weight and meaning, and it plays an important role in organizations. It helps members feel like they a part of a thread that has stood the test of time. Knowing that others faced similar (if not harder) challenges and persevered can motivate those serving today.

Many of the best organizations connect their present to their past, highlighting their founding ([Tun Tavern](#) - Marine Corps), the courageous acts of previous members ([Audie Murphy](#) -NCO Corps and 3rd Infantry Division), or milestones ([Abrams Charter](#)-Ranger Regiment or [Battle of Mogadishu](#) -JSOC).

Identity. [On his blog](#), popular author Seth Godin wrote, “For most of us, from the first day we are able to remember until the last day we breathe, our actions are primarily driven by one question, ‘Do people like me do things like this?’” Organizations are no different. Identity matters. How do you know if your story is positively influencing the culture? When its members start asking the question, “Do people like us do things like this?”

Behavior. Every great story describes a standard that its members can measure themselves against. The standard must relate to the purpose or the mission and is internalized by the organization. I once served in an organization where professionalism and mutual respect were the standard for how we interacted with each other. We all knew that professionalism underpinned everything we did. It was our currency and credibility. Those words became part of our internal monologue as we worked together on various missions.

In my experience, organizations with strong cultures have the above components in their stories, reinforcing the culture, a sense of belonging, and the satisfaction that comes with serving in a great unit.

But, before a story can be retold, it has to be told, and that begins with leadership. Leaders set the tone for the culture and communicate through words and actions the narrative they want the organization to adopt.

Good stories typically outlast the people who tell them. Members of the unit will change out and move on before the story does. If we want to leave a lasting impact on our organizations, then we should focus on the story.

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