

The Human Strategist: The Stories We Tell Ourselves

Elaine Baran

Elaine Baran is President of Baraness Ventures in Santa Monica, CA. She consults in business and internet strategy to a broad range of clients.

Don't play too small— that's the name of one of my stories. I've told it countless times, have it culled down to a fairly brief tale, but can expand and elaborate if necessary. The bare facts are short and to the point. Early in my career, I made a mistake in my job as president of a small company— forgot to process some piece of paperwork— and found myself feeling pretty bad about it. When I wrote it up to the people I reported to, I gave them all the facts and accepted full responsibility for the error (a possible \$3,000 mistake). Their response: "oh, a boo-boo". It makes me laugh now, but it was an eye-opening experience at the time. I had thought that I had made major error, would negate our entire quarter profits by this action and had come down pretty hard on myself. What I realized, after seeing the absurdity of it, was that if you want to have a large business, you need to be able to make large decisions. If I was too afraid of making a \$3,000 mistake, how could I ever hope to make a \$3,000,000 mistake. Not that I dream of making \$3M mistakes, but I realized that it's the level of risk that defines the playing field. And bigger risks allow for bigger visions.

I've learned and grown over the years. I've had numerous life-changing experiences, both large and small. Many of these experiences were translated into my "stories" — those shorthand versions of lessons learned, values formed, and character developed.

Just as individuals do, I think that often organizations evolve out of the "stories we tell ourselves". These stories create the reality for both the organization and the people who work there. New people are attracted to the 'story'; others are repelled. We've often seen how new hires either 'get it' or don't, often leaving within a short period of time in an organization that has a strong culture. If the company, with its values, mores and culture fits with your personal system, all will go well and you will likely have a lengthy and productive engagement. If, on the other hand, there is no 'fit', then even the most talented of hires will likely not last.

Recently I've been working on a great project— helping a small company redesign their business model to deal with the new realities of their industry (travel) and still grow and prosper. In working through all the parts of the project that one might assume would be present (financial model, marketing strategy, competitive analysis, etc.) I was serendipitously privileged to learn some great new skills that fit into my overall model of how I see organizations functioning as they relate to internal and external story telling.

This organization's restructure created an environment in which new hiring was necessary. As a result, I got the privilege of working with a professional HR consultant who had spent years in the business. I usually find their gatekeeper function extremely frustrating, so it was quite an experience working with someone who not only understood business, but had an amazing grasp of human dynamics and could quickly and easily identify operating styles and cut right to the point of what was needed.

What was needed in this small organization was 'behavioral-based' interviewing, because what this type of

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interviewing does is ferret out the 'stories' of your interviewee so that you can check for their unstated values, goals, dreams, fears and issues. A good match does not rely only on skill sets, but on the ability to work within the organization as it is, as well as help to shape the organization that will emerge.

Almost everyone thinks they know how to hire— you post a job listing, get a few resumes, call in the best ones, ask them a bunch of questions about their last few jobs, throw in some gut feelings and make a decision. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't. *Que sera sera*. Does this sound like how your organization does hiring and, perhaps, how you've felt your hiring process has gone in the past?

Imagine a scenario where the type of feedback you get all during the interview process is "you ask really good questions" and "oh, that's a hard question" immediately followed by a thoughtful and complete response. This was the type of interaction that we found when we based our questions not on a hypothetical exploration of what they wanted, to see if it matched our ideal ('where do you want to be in five years?'), but on an in-depth exploration of what their stories were and what they told us about the candidate.

A few concrete examples are in order.

One of the mainstays of this type of interview is the "Tell me about a time..." question. It's a great way to address your concerns about a person's resume without asking them directly. Since this was a small company with many virtual employees and few people located in their office, we used the question "Tell me about a time when you worked in a small office— what did you like about it; what didn't you like about it." The answers ranged, as one might expect. The messages though, were clear— a person who didn't like small offices and preferred the vast camaraderie and structure of a large organization struggled to come up with the 'like about it' section. Another who preferred small companies, breezed through this question, offering a clear assessment of her personal preference and comparing it with her negative experience in larger offices. The details of their stories enabled us to make the contextual shifts necessary to determine if we thought they would be able to handle our specific situation.

Our telephone pre-screening questions enabled us to eliminate over half the resumes we liked, including some that under the old method we might have had in for an interview. Our initial phone screens only took 5-10 minutes, but we knew within that time whether it made any sense to conduct a full interview. Compare that with how many times you've pulled in a candidate for a face-to-face and knew in the first 5 minutes that it wasn't going to work... Our screening questions were simple— what caught your attention about this job? What caught your attention about our company? What do you do well? What don't you do very well? For a key management position, we found that the 'don't do well' question provided great insight. An ability to clearly understand the limits of your own skills, especially as a manager, is a key indicator of management maturity. We usually knew the person wasn't ready to manage a staff (despite their stated history), if they couldn't confidently speak to what they knew they would need to delegate to more qualified

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staff.

“Tell me about a great coworker/boss, and one that was not so great.” Talk about being put on the spot. Yet this is a question that *everyone* should be able to answer. We’ve all worked with great people— what was it that made them great? And we’ve all worked with some that weren’t so great— what was it that made them not so great? Our new manager wanted to ask directly about on-time performance and absenteeism. I dissuaded her from doing that, telling her that for people for whom this is important, it almost always shows up in the behavioral questions. Sure enough— our best candidates often cited ‘worst’ co-workers as those who were late, absent, didn’t meet obligations, etc. It was clear that this was important to them and we didn’t have to ask them to self-report. This oblique method also seems more reliable— everyone says they’re punctual.

The candidate’s stories about those times when they stepped into the fray (Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a crisis?), took on extra work (Tell me about a time when you had an operational difficulty?), successfully dealt with a difficult co-worker (Tell me about a time when you had a difficult personal interaction at work – how did you deal with it and what did you learn?) and managed a project through to completion lay bare whether their personal stories would fit in with the stories of the hiring organization.

The Organization’s Stories

In order to make a good hiring decision, though, it is necessary to do more than elicit the stories of your candidates. It’s just as important to really understand the organization’s stories. These fall into several broad categories such as history and founding, how we operate (in the trenches), war stories, great successes and great failures.

Some stories are well-documented, some are passed on only verbally, some just seem to be suspended in the air and some are lost as people and personnel change. The better these stories are understood, the better they can be matched up with potential candidates. For instance, companies that basically make decisions ‘by the seat of their pants’ will not likely find that a candidate who describes one of her best accomplishments as spending 6 - months creating a plan, aligning resources and bringing various areas together into consensus is a good match. One of the hardest things for an organization to do is to recognize those aspects of itself that are “concrete”, that are part of the very fabric of the organization, and those that are changeable and adaptable.

I have a close friend who once took a job as marketing director at a small, specialty manufacturing company which offered a large number of highly technical consumer products (over 200 versions of the same product). While the company espoused the *need* for marketing, and thought that they actually wanted good marketing (hence, the decision to hire a marketing director), in fact, their entire culture was antithetical to

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making good marketing decisions. The president didn't really "believe in all the marketing mumbo-jumbo" and decisions on which products to promote were not based on marginal return, customer response or market share. They were based on what caught the engineers attention and what their direct (and very much hated) competitor was offering. As with many niche markets, there was an incestuous back-and-forth among employees at the two or three main companies in the market, and significant animosity had build up over the years. Many important business decisions were made based on this festering hostility, thereby making it very difficult for a new marketing director to influence or change the prevailing culture (the stories they told themselves) and to be successful. The stories this company told themselves reinforced the idea that they were victims of the competitor, that nothing they could do would change that, that standard business practices wouldn't work in their environment and that "they were special".

In fact, the myth that "our company is different" is one of the key points that consultants look for in working with companies. Yes – all companies are different. And no – it's highly unlikely that your company is SO different that its problems haven't been encountered before. The key to defining the company's differences is to be able to recognize the stories you tell yourself about them. If you use your stories to create a distraction from the real issues, to build a case for never changing, to justify continuing bad practices, then you will be perpetuating a culture of failure. If, on the other hand, you can use your success stories to encourage and motivate your employees to continually improve, to contribute, to assist their colleagues and to build the business to an ever-greater level of excellence, then you have stories that are working for you.

Our Own Stories

So while the purpose of this commentary is not to help you revamp your hiring practices directly (although it might be a serendipitous result), it is to make you think about both your stories and your company's.

What are the stories you tell about your work life? Do you have a short list? I have a list Nine Story/Lessons that I tell. I tell mine to people I meet, new friends, new co-workers, family and (probably too many times) old friends. They are the stories that shape our business life. Each of these could have a title. Mine sum up over 20 years of work experience:

- 1) Follow the leader – most of the time people will behave as they see the leadership doing, whether good or bad
- 2) Don't play too small – you need to take bigger risks to play a bigger game
- 3) It's OK to Play the Chain – sometimes it makes the most sense to follow the chain of command and not try to end-run

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- 4) The Pocket Theory – there are good pockets of people/workgroups in bad companies and vice-versa
- 5) Act as you mean to go on – from the very first day, know your boundaries and act accordingly (don't promise more than you're willing to deliver every day over the long-haul)
- 6) Know when it's time to go – or, leave before you're really bored and irritable
- 7) Grow where you're planted – learn something in everything you do
- 8) The Road Less Traveled – take the harder job, it may lead to more interesting opportunities
- 9) If an email doesn't do through, thank God and re-write it – sometimes there's a reason for the little errors that plague us, the unconscious knows

And finally – what are the stories from your company? Many organizations have formalized these, others take a more informal approach. When working with strategy, especially when trying to move an organization in a new strategic direction or effect cultural change, it is imperative that the strategist work with an understanding of the current culture.

So take some time to revel in your own stories. Explore what they mean. Explore the patterns. Get to know yourself again. Compare them to your company's. Compare them to your clients. Compare them to your dreams. Being a Human Strategist calls for being aware of our human love of the story and how it ennobles our lives.