Getting a fairy tale ending – Using story for change
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Introduction

Having first started working with fairy tales by inviting groups of facilitators to use and create fairy tales as a way of chartering their journeys and learnings as facilitators (Rixon and Kneebone 2007) we have also found the fairy tale powerful within organizational contexts.

After describing the genre of fairy tale, its characteristics and reviewing where fairy tale fits into the wider management literature, the article will provide a case study as a practical example of how fairy tale has been used within an organisation. The article concludes with reflections on the fairy tale genre and how the fairy tale can provide a safe, humourous and appreciative frame for inquiry and change.

Figure 1: Illustration from the story of "Esool Gnahn" – A facilitator fairy tale inviting us to consider that no matter the struggle or challenge, people are ‘doing the best they can’.

The Fairy Tale Genre: History and Applications

The fairy tale genre is a specific form of story telling. Many of you might remember how, as a child, you learnt about the world through fairy tales. Or maybe you have forgotten. Either way, we’ve found that as adults we carry a wealth of understanding and intuition about the fairy tale genre. It is this understanding and intuition which makes inviting groups to create fairy tales surprisingly simple (Rixon 2008).
Some of the essential qualities of the fairy tale are:
1. the depiction of magical or marvelous events as a valid part of human experience;
2. the incorporation of fantasy as arguably the most salient formal or stylistic feature of this genre;
3. the confrontation and resolution of a problem, frequently by the embarkment on a quest;
4. a happy ending, which is so fundamental to the genre that it may be regarded as a third defining feature; and
5. the audience is encouraged to identify strongly with the central protagonist, who is presented in an unambiguous way (Jones 2002).

Whilst there has been considerable exploration of the fairy tale through literary and psychological / psychoanalytic lenses (Bettleheim 1976; Luthi 1976; Tatar 1990; Jones 2002), the use of fairy tale is not entirely new to organisational and management literature. Indeed, the phenomenal success of the popular book “The One Minute Manager” by (Blanchard and Johnson 1983) has been attributed to the fairy tale structure within (Monin and Monin 2005).

Several uses of fairy tale have concentrated on the fairy tale genre as a sense-making tool either for the researcher or the individual working within the organisation. Klenke (2002) used the Cinderella story as a “springboard” to link and make sense of women leadership stories and histories. Smith and Simmons (1983) discovered through a dream of a staff member within the organisation, the connection to the Rumpelstiltskin fairy tale. This fairy tale gave the researchers and staff the ability to access and articulate something deeper and meaningful in the organisational culture, which otherwise might have remained covert and inaccessible. Moxnes (2006) discusses how in a management education program he invites students to choose fairy tale characters for each other and to use these to learn and reflect on teamwork and leadership.

Whereas all of the previously cited examples of the use of fairy tale appeal to the use of existing popular culture fairy tales, our work differs significantly in that it follows on from that of Dick and Dalmau (1994), where groups are invited to create their own unique fairy tale incorporating all the elements of story and character that they feel relevant. Using fairy tale in this way provides rich opportunities for managers and team members not only to explore hidden and assumed meaning, but it also provides a safe and often humorous space for exploring potentially conflict-ridden issues. Indeed, working with fairy tale appears to align strongly the Appreciative Inquiry assumption of ‘an organization being a mystery to be embraced’ as opposed to being ‘a problem to be solved’ Hammond (1998).
Using Fairy Tale in Organisations: A Case Study

This case study explores a project which saw us utilising story as a means of collecting and gaining an understanding around the complex issue of staff members’ attitudes and behaviours towards flexible working options.

As we proceeded to run story-based focus groups within the organisation, people would voice the same response “It’s about what’s not said”. And, when asked or invited to share more, group members would be unable to articulate it, saying again “It’s about what’s not said” and sit nodding knowingly with each other.

Reflecting on my experiences using fairy tale with facilitators, I invited a group of senior male managers to spend 45 minutes creating a fairy tale which described the history of flexible working options within the organisation. These fairy tales were then used as a way to debrief and talk about ‘what’s real’ in the organisation. Surprisingly, at the end of the session, the feedback was extremely positive and the group were suggesting ways to make the session even better. I then re-ran the same fairy tale process with another group of managers. It was with this next group of managers that the following fairy tale was elicited.

“Once upon a time in a land far, far away there was a kingdom. And in that kingdom there was a King and Queen (of course). And one day they had two little princesses. They were identical twins and the ironic thing about this is that they were both born at exactly the same time (it was a wide birth canal) And so there was a big dilemma: when the King and Queen were going to die, who was going to take over as Queen? So it was decided that they would both rule together. Now the thing was that there was a magician in the Kingdom as well – he put a spell on the Princesses. One of them was very nice – she was British (of course). The other one was evil. Things went along nicely all along. Whenever the bad princess was doing something, the good princess was always there to counteract it. So everything went along nicely for years and years. Now the magician was a little bit upset about this so he arranged that when the King and Queen went out one day they would get “tomatoed” by a big rock falling off a cliff. And they did! And that meant that the two princesses would get to be Queen of this Kingdom. Now after all this, of course, along comes the good prince. He sees the two princesses and he falls in love. But he only falls in love with the good princess. But of course they are identical. He thinks he knows which is which. Of course he marries the one he thinks is the good one. He is a prince and thinks he can spot the goodness in her. And then the next day, after the wedding, he wakes up and there at the foot of the bed is the magician and he’s
been turned to stone. The prince turns around and looks at his wife and wonders if he’s wondered the good princess or the bad princess. And that’s a fairytale.”

After the group had presented their fairy tale to the other members of the group, I asked the listeners what they had heard in that fairy tale and how it related to the organisation. Surprisingly, they went on to say how the evil princess was one division of the organisation, and the good princess was another. Then, what came out was a very powerful story illustrating the factions that were currently at play at senior levels within the organisation. Amazed, and somewhat curious as to this groups’ interpretation of the fairy tale, I turned back to the original group who had created the fairy tale and asked them to tell what their fairy tale was ‘actually’ about. Their response was that their fairy tale was ‘actually’ about two ladies job sharing. The fairy tale depicted how one lady’s strengths were matching the other’s weaknesses. The magician being turned to stone, and the prince’s dilemma of not knowing which princess he had married (the good or the evil one), illustrated their uncertainty as to how this new job share arrangement would work out.

Of all the stories collected throughout the project, it was the use of the fairy tale genre-inviting groups to create a fairy tale- which illustrated most effectively those areas where the flexible working options within the organisation were being met with challenges and difficulties. The interpretation and meaning making from the fairy tale also provided a vehicle to discuss political tensions and impedances that were lurking in the background.

**Conclusion**

Sometimes, when inviting groups to share their experiences and stories around a particular inquiry, there may be an inability to tell or articulate their story. The reasons may vary from culture and group dynamics to ‘storyability’ and whether the persons’ experience can yet be told as a story. It appears that the humble fairy tale has much to offer in being able to provide the opportunity for individuals to go from fantasy first then to fact (Moxnes 2006). The fairy tale genre appears to be a process which not only provides opportunities for creative coherent story telling in safe and humourous environments, but also enables exploration of meaning and interpretation within groups in often surprising and insightful ways.

Finally, whilst the fairy tale genre is renowned for its ‘and they all lived happily ever after’ ending, it is important to consider the perspective offered from Chris Argyris, Professor Emeritus, at the Harvard Business School, that false positivity quickly shuts down learning and that an emphasis on being positive condescendingly assumes that staff can only function in a cheerful world, even if the cheer is false (Argyris 1994). Focussing on providing opportunities for learning and exploration, it may be that groups engage
with humour in the alternate and maybe slightly quirky fairy tale ending of ‘and they all lived happily never after’.

References