

Why Storytelling Is the Most Underused Tool in Change Management

Category: Change Leadership

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- Inspired by insights from Kotter Inc.
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[Source: The Heart of Advocacy: Harnessing the Power of Storytelling to Drive Change](#)

We examine how storytelling, which has long been cherished in African culture and is now supported by behavioral science, has become a vital leadership tool for promoting organizational change in this StreSERT Integrated Insight. We look at how executives in Nigeria and throughout Africa can turn data into direction and strategies into a common goal,

taking inspiration from Kotter Inc.'s advocacy and storytelling work.

Change Leadership's Missing Component

Executives in boardrooms in Lagos, Nairobi, and Johannesburg talk about transformation using well-known terms like strategy, structure, and systems. However, a lack of narrative is the reason why many change initiatives fail, not faulty reasoning. Workers are aware of the “what,” but they hardly ever relate to the “why.”

Kotter Inc. asserts that storytelling is a strategic tool rather than a soft skill. They contend in “The Heart of Advocacy: Harnessing the Power of Storytelling to Drive Change” that behavior is rarely changed by facts alone. When people believe they are a part of something bigger than themselves, they move. Urgency may be defined by data, but it is maintained by narrative.



The Science Behind the Story

Kotter's argument is supported by cognitive science. People remember stories 22 times better than facts alone, according to Stanford University and Harvard Business Review studies. Neurologically, stories stimulate the sensory, emotional, and motor parts of the brain, fostering motivation and empathy.

Leaders connect emotion and purpose when they present a

compelling story of change. Instead of being a corporate directive, the story becomes a shared identity. In the diverse business environments of Africa, where transformation initiatives frequently cut across socioeconomic realities, languages, and cultures, this is essential.

Why Stories Work While Facts Fail

Frameworks for change management, such as ADKAR or Kotter's 8-Step Process, place a strong emphasis on communication, urgency, and vision. Nonetheless, a lot of leaders undervalue the human element of "communication." Memos, not meaning, are what they issue. Instead of having a purpose, they distribute PowerPoints.

According to Kotter's research, advocacy based on narrative achieves three goals that data cannot:

1. Encourages personal responsibility. Workers recognize themselves in the narrative and realize the significance of their work.
2. Fosters alignment and trust. Shared values and organizational goals are connected by a clear narrative.
3. Maintains momentum. People continue to believe in the mission because of the story, even when results take time.

In Africa, where oral tradition has long been a fundamental component of leadership, this is especially pertinent. Stories have served as a conduit for influence and continuity in everything from local councils to national movements. Only the stakes and the audience have changed in the contemporary boardroom.

The African Context: From Tradition to Transformation

Employees in many African corporations are skeptical of change initiatives because they have witnessed strategies change over time. A compelling narrative breaks through cynicism. It

changes the focus from “management is changing things again” to “we are building something together.”

Take the 2000s banking reforms in Nigeria. Beyond legal frameworks, leaders like Charles Soludo were successful in part because they conveyed a sense of pride, modernization, and global relevance. The reforms evolved from mere compliance into a vision of a new era.

Similar to this, storytelling in organizations turns strategy from a vague concept into a common goal. When a CEO tells the story of the company’s beginnings, challenges, and next steps, they are inviting employees to be authors rather than observers.

Storytelling as a Leadership Competency

The question of how to institutionalize storytelling without turning it into marketing jargon is one that executives frequently pose. Authentic advocacy, a central idea in Kotter’s framework, holds the key to the solution.

Using human experience to reveal truth is the goal of storytelling in leadership, not making up stories. Vulnerability is necessary for naming shared values, celebrating progress, and admitting difficulties.

According to Kotter Inc., story-based advocates need to strike a balance between three factors:

- Message clarity: What change are we requesting, and why at this time
- Emotional resonance: How does this shift relate to people’s values?
- Delivery consistency: How do leaders illustrate the narrative through deeds rather than platitudes?

This triad has the potential to revolutionize African leadership. The culture changes from one of compliance to one

of commitment when workers witness leaders living the story and walking the walk.



Bridging Strategy and Emotion

Executives face a conundrum during disruptive times, such as periods of economic volatility, technological advancement, or regulatory reform. Emotion determines whether or not people will follow the path that rational analysis has identified. Storytelling unites people.

Leaders can humanize data by using a clear narrative, turning market entries into journeys, mergers into partnerships, and efficiency drives into mutually beneficial successes. Leaders transform abstract change into lived experience by converting strategic intent into emotional connection.

Kotter's observation highlights how advocacy through storytelling increases impact by utilizing group energy. It turns change from a management procedure into an internal organizational social movement.

Why a Lot of Leaders Continue to Miss the Point

Many African leaders continue to view storytelling as a communications afterthought rather than a strategic necessity in spite of the evidence. Some people worry that it sounds "soft" or intangible. However, the cost of inaction is quantifiable: McKinsey reports that 70% of large-scale

transformation initiatives fail, frequently as a result of low leadership engagement and employee buy-in.

Storytelling transforms data into meaning rather than replacing it. Leaders who disregard narrative run the risk of developing change initiatives that are technically sound but emotionally hollow; these initiatives may result in compliance but never commitment.

An Appeal for Story-Based Leadership

Stories continue to be our oldest and most powerful organizing tool in a world full of information. The challenge for African executives leading change, whether in the banking, telecom, or energy sectors, is not just to create change, but also to tell its story.

Kotter's viewpoint serves as a reminder that storytelling and advocacy are the foundation of strategy, not just its adornment. Understanding this gives leaders a competitive edge because it allows them to mobilize belief in addition to behavior.

In order to effectively lead change in Africa today, executives need to take on the role of chief storytellers for their companies, converting data into direction and direction into a common future.



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