

**THE STORYTELLING ORGANIZATION: A STUDY OF STORY PERFORMANCE IN AN OFFICE-SUPPLY FIRM** by Boje, David .M.,  
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This paper reports on a participant-observation study in a large office-supply firm of how people perform stories to make sense of events, introduce change, and gain political advantage during their conversations. The story was not found to be a highly agreed-upon text, told from beginning to end, as it has been studied in most prior story research. Rather, the stories were dynamic, varied by context, and were sometimes terse, requiring the hearer to fill in silently major chunks of story line, context, and implication. Stories were frequently challenged, reinterpreted, and revised by the hearers as they unfolded in conversation. The paper supports a theory of organization as a collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sense making and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory.[A]

## INTRODUCTION

### Organizations As Storytelling Systems

In organizations, storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders. People engage in a dynamic process of incremental refinement of their stories of new events as well as on-going reinterpretations of culturally sacred story lines. When a decision is at hand, the old stories are recounted and compared to unfolding story lines to keep the organization from repeating historically bad choices and to invite the repetition of past successes. In a turbulent environment, the organization halls and offices pulsate with a story life of the here and now that is richer and more vibrant than the firm's environments.

Even in stable times, the story is highly variable and sometimes political, in that part of the collective processing involves telling different versions of stories to different audiences. Only the chief executive officer (CEO) and a few executives may be told that the sales manager was fired for drunken indiscretions with a saleswoman on the CEO's couch; vendors only hear that the manager did not get on with the CEO; customers learn that Fred resigned; middle management suspects an affair with Mildred. Each performance is never the completed story; it is an unraveling process of confirming new data and new interpretations as these become part of an unfolding story line.

Stories are to the storytelling system what precedent cases are to the judicial system. Just as in the courtroom, stories are performed among stakeholders to make sense of an equivocal situation. The implication of stories as precedents is that story performances are part of an organization-wide information-processing network. Bits and pieces of organization experience are recounted socially throughout the firm to formulate recognizable, cogent, defensible, and seemingly rational collective accounts that will serve as precedent for individual assumption, decision, and action. This is the institutional memory system of the organization. Although individuals are limited

information processors, each person retains a part of the story line, a bit of interpretation, story performance practices, and some facts that confirm a line of reasoning.

Even when there are eye witnesses, to continue the analogy with courtroom behavior, the interpretation of the exact sequence of events and how those events speak of the motive of the defendant are made or broken in the performance of the story and by the credibility of the teller. What is interesting about storytelling in organizations is that stakeholders also posit alternative stories with alternative motives and implications to the very same underlying historical incident. The story takes on more importance than mere objective facts. In complex organizations, part of the reason for storytelling is the working out of those differences in the interface of individual and collective memory.

The important fact is that most storytelling is done in conversation and involves the listeners in various ways. Some sociolinguists have analyzed how conversations happen and, in a few studies, how stories are told: how people introduce stories, how they extend and interrupt stories, and, in general, how story performances occur within common turn-by-turn talk situations. Harvey Sacks (1972a, 1972b) and his followers (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974; Jefferson, 1973, 1978; Ryave, 1978) have investigated the contexted occurrence of stories in conversations. These are complex aspects of storytelling in organizations that have been ignored in previous approaches to story analysis. We all tell stories, and during better performances we feel the adrenalin pump as word pictures dance in our intellect and we begin to live the episode vicariously or recall similar life events. In just listening to stories, our personal experience mingles with what we hear and then see. As listeners, we are co-producers with the teller of the story performance. It is an embedded and fragmented process in which we fill in the blanks and gaps between the lines with our own experience in response to cues, like "You know the story!" Because of what is not said, and yet shared, the audible story is only a fraction of the connection between people in their co-production performance. We become even more of a co-producer when we begin to prompt the teller with cues, such as head nods, changes in posture, and utterances that direct the inquiry (i.e., "One version I heard . . ."; "Then, what happened?") and respond with our own data. The story can be conceptualized as a joint performance of teller(s) and hearer(s) in which often overlooked, very subtle utterances play an important role in the negotiation of meaning and co-production in a storytelling episode.

### **Stories-As-Texts Research**

Stories in previous laboratory, history, and questionnaire research generally have been wrenched from their natural performance contexts and treated as objectified social facts (Ritzer, 1975), mere texts, with little empirical attention given to the natural linguistic context in which the stories are being performed. Text research does not capture basic aspects of the situated language performance, such as how the story is introduced into the ongoing interaction, how listeners react to the story, and how the story affects subsequent dialogue.

In case history studies, researchers have relied on second and third-hand accounts of a story, rather than examining a storytelling event in process. An example of the text-associational-fact paradigm would be the IBM rule-breaking story analyzed by Martin et al. (1983). The point of their analysis was to answer the question, How is it that markedly similar story texts manifest themselves in different organizations? The story was uncovered by Martin et al. in an earlier autobiographical text by Rogers (1969), not from any direct field observation or any systematic on-site data collection procedures that would tell us the origins and import of the story, if any, to IBM. The story told by Rogers (1969: 153-154) is as follows:

. . . a twenty-two-year-old bride weighing ninety pounds whose husband had been sent overseas and who, in consequence, had been given a job until his return.... The young woman, Lucille Burger, was obliged to make certain that people entering security areas wore the correct clearance identification.

Surrounded by his usual entourage of white-shined men, Watson approached the doorway to an area where she was on guard, wearing an orange badge acceptable elsewhere in the plant, but not a green badge, which alone permitted entrance at her door.

"I was trembling in my uniform, which was far too big," she recalled. "It hid my shakes but not my voice. 'I'm sorry,' I said to him. I knew who he was all right. 'You cannot enter. Your admittance is not recognized.' that's what we were supposed to say."

The men accompanying Watson were stricken; the moment held unpredictable possibilities. "Don't you know who he is?" someone hissed. Watson raised his hand for silence, while one of the party strode off and returned with the appropriate badge.

The story is literature and its plot and characters are indeed interesting, but is it the way IBMers tell stories to one another in real time? Other historical studies of stories, such as Clark's (1972: 179), start with inferred results of storytelling processes to capture areas of organization uniqueness. However, according to Moch and Fields (1985: 112), "since language [in acts or speech or in writing] serves to advance actors' interests, the analyst must make every effort to gather information which will allow for a reliable and valid inference about the intentions of those who generated the data to be analyzed." In stories-as-text research, the object-story is deconstructed and reinterpreted with virtually no attention to gathering performance-context information. Martin and Meyerson (1988), for example, reify stories as mere "its" when they speak of stories as so many cultural artifacts. Although there is reason to question both the method and the validity of the stories-as-text approach, Mumby (1987) nevertheless reinterpreted the IBM rule-breaking story and took quantum leaps from the literary text of the story in order to make ideological and power assumptions about the IBM culture. Valid and insightful as these assumptions may be, can we be assured that this story is really a reflection of the IBM culture?

In the case of lab-study research, performance skills are not a consideration. Rather, one varies the content of the story to look at outcomes such as retention and believability

(Martin and Powers, 1979; Martin, Patterson, and Price, 1979; Martin et al., 1980). Subjects are presented with alternative versions of a story to assess their level of recall and commitment. Martin's (1982: 296) advice to management is "If a manager wants to maximize the impact of a story, she or he should make that story as concrete as possible." While this is a significant effect in the lab, in terms of recall and affect, the transition from the lab to the organization is fraught with difficulties. For example, should stories in organization settings always be told with such concreteness? An important aspect of performance in real organizations may be to strategically omit or include details about characters, contextual cues, and plot elements.

Story-text studies relying on interview methods have also ignored performance behavior. Alvin Gouldner (1954: 80), for example, collected intriguing stories about Doug and his successor, Vincent. Employees "overflowed with stories which highlighted the differences between the two managers." He then analyzed these differences using the "Rebecca Myth" from Daphne DuMaurier's novel about a young woman who married a widower only to be plagued by the memory of his first wife, Rebecca. An astute analysis, but the study does not tell us about the natural behavior context in which these stories were performed by workers and managers as they went about their daily activities.

Finally, in the case of surveys, the textual content, rather than the storytelling event is the focus of study. Survey researchers seek to capture the types of stories being circulated and the subject's recall of particular stories. While these are important considerations, surveys ignore behavioral interactions that constituted the storytelling event. For example, in Wilkins' (1979) study of both low- and high-performing companies, the stories were reconstructed as raters scored story content on a set of response scales. Such an approach does not tell us about how those stories were performed in their natural element. Similarly, Lombardo's (1986), and McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison's (1989) interviews with 86 executives as they recalled significant vignettes is interesting life-history work, but it is not a behavioral analysis of in situ performance. Siehl and Martin's (1982) survey assessing sales trainees' knowledge of four stories measures recall but not performance. Finally, McConkie and Boss (1986) reported that one organization story, the "Firing of Elayne," was mentioned by 85 percent of their interviewees, but once again we do not learn how this story was performed. Each of these survey studies is useful for its own research purposes; however, the method is not useful for assessing storytelling and storytellers in their natural context.

Studying the storytelling episodes themselves offers several advantages. First, because stories are contextually embedded, their meaning unfolds through the storytelling performance event. Folklorists, like Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1975), Hymes (1975), Jones, Moore, and Snyder (1988), and especially Georges (1969, 1980a, 1980b, 1981), call us to the other extreme of the story-as-text paradigm, where "the story" has no existence apart from and is indeed inseparable from the event during which the story is performed (Georges, 1980a: 324). Stories can therefore be correctly interpreted only to the extent that the researcher grasps the story in situ. Second, identifying stories in context will be rewarded by the discovery that there are a multitude of stories that are not discernable at first. A finding in sociolinguistic studies is that stories are brief and fragmented across

extended and interrupted discourse, but this has been ignored in organization studies. Third, researchers can "unpack" very brief enactments in dialogue to discover the reality underlying the linguistic enactments (Boje, 1989). For example, some tellings may initiate change (Boje, Fedor, and Rowland, 1982; Wilkins, 1984; McWhinney and Batista, 1988; Akin and Schultheiss, 1990), others advance a political view, others predict the stability or transience of relationships and agreements, while others are attempts to isolate and make sense of the impact of turbulent events (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1975; Boje and Ulrich, 1985).

### **Stories As Performance and Text**

Because "the story" behind the story as performed is analogous to the text of it, text and performance can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. For example, in everyday conversation, we make discursive reference to stories as texts in such phrases as "You know that part of his story, don't you?"; "That's my story too"; "You need to get the story straight"; "To make a long story short . . ."; or "I won't bore you with the whole story; You know it!" These phrases are part of a language we use to signal the parts of the performance that will be shared, as we co-produce and manage the story performances, the parts of the story that will be filled in by our listeners' imaginations. People are engaged in a dynamic process of incremental refinement to the story lines of even very widely accepted story texts. Performances at times refer to taken-for-granted texts ("You know the story."), and story performance is a process in which people interact to incorporate new tales continuously into the corporate culture while rewriting oral history by revising the old stories that anchor the present to the past. Only in the rare instance in which the storyteller is faced with a researcher or a new applicant is he or she likely to tell the whole story, since much of the detail of the story cannot be safely assumed to be recreatable in the novice's imagination.

### **Predictions**

If storytelling is seen as performance and text, there are several predictions about storytelling in organizations: First, a lot of attention will be given to negotiating the story-line interpretation and processing collectively the numerous sides to a story. Second, the completeness of the storytelling itself will vary from one sector and level of the organization to the next. One story will take a more abbreviated form with those in-the-know, who are expected to know the particulars, but the same story will be told with a lot more detail to newcomers, outsiders, and most likely to researchers. Third, a related issue is what anthropologists refer to as ownership or "entitlement" rights. Part of knowing how to behave in a storytelling organization is knowing who can tell and who can be told a particular story ("I don't know if the corner office would want that story to get around."). Certain people will have entitlement rights to a story. Fourth, being a player in the storytelling organization is being skilled enough to manage the person-to-person interaction to get the story line woven into the ongoing turn-by-turn dialogue using a broad class of behaviors called qualifiers, markers, and the like, that sustain storytelling across extended discourse by means of paralinguistic and kinesic cues such as head nods, postural shifts, and eyebrow raises. Finally, one relevant research finding from

sociolinguistics (Ryave, 1978) is that stories often occur in series across extended discourse ("Oh, I have a story to top that one."). Stories performed in organizations will occur in series across discourse.

The organization as a storytelling system was explored in a participant-observer study of interactions in a firm that, although it is not well known like IBM or some other organizations that story-as-text researchers have studied, provided a wealth of stories complexly and variously performed in everyday conversation.

## METHOD

In keeping with Glaser and Strauss (1967), as a participant observer I iteratively collected and analyzed (Spradley, 1980) the various social scenes that made up the discourse environment of an office-supply firm. These scenes included executive meetings held on- and off-site: in conference rooms, restaurants, sales training sessions, as well as conversations in hallways and automobiles.

**Research site.** Everyday organization conversations were taped to capture spontaneous storytelling episodes among seven executives and twenty-three managers, customers, and vendors of a large office-supply firm. Data were collected in five branch offices as well as the headquarters. The names of the company and its stakeholders have been changed in the transcripts that follow in order to protect their confidentiality. The firm, called here "Gold," is 35 years old with 300 employees and over \$50 million in annual sales. Gold operates in one region of the United States, with six branches in several states. While Gold turns a respectable profit each year, it has been going through some turbulent changes. These changes include five CEOs in the past two years and being acquired by its second conglomerate. The struggle of Gold is that of a family company, founded by a salesman, coming of age as a conglomerate-owned corporation. What was OK in the once family-operated corporation was not OK when ownership switched to a dollars-and-cents driven conglomerate. It was no longer OK, for example, to send the boys to Hawaii or pass along a case of wine to a manager's wife. Customers, vendors, salespeople, and managers report how Doug, the latest CEO, managed the transitions of this office-supply firm and steered it away from further moral failure.

The data set consists of over 100 hours of tape recordings, along with video-recordings of two corporate-sponsored focus groups with key customers and vendors. Where video or tape recording was not feasible, field notes were used as a supplement.

**Procedures.** Tapes were transcribed and converted to line-numbered transcripts. Transcripts were analyzed to find the scantiest occurrences of story performance embedded in conversation. A story performance was operationally defined as an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted, or challenged. A search was made of the entire episode in which the scant performance occurred for more pieces to each story line. In addition, to further verify a story had in fact occurred, the topic was cross-indexed and traced in other segments of dialogue to recover more of the story line or an alternative

story line. The procedure presumes a seemingly insignificant reference to experience could upon cross-checking prove to be highly significant to understanding organization processes. Finally, stories were catalogued according to the type of experience pattern presented in the story line, using the following eight categories:

- P1: Story-line pattern that is still going on.
- P2: Story-line pattern that is expected to repeat.
- P3: Story-line pattern is the same as another pattern.
- P4: Story-line pattern that will no longer repeat.
- P5: Story-line pattern that is changing.
- P6: Story-line pattern that is unfolding.
- P7: Story-line pattern that is being challenged.
- P8: Story-line pattern that was not expected.

The transcripts were thus culled for references to bits of past, unfolding, or anticipated experience that were being enacted through performance throughout the firm. These talk and ethnographic observations were entered into a computer program called "ETHNOGRAPH" (Seidel and Clark, 1984) to isolate and catalogue the occurrence of stories within ongoing conversational discourse. "ETHNOGRAPH" adds line numbers and allows the user to enter codes that can be used to retrieve sections of text, but recoding to combine or split out more specific codes is quite cumbersome. In fact, to properly interconnect bits and pieces of story across settings and actors it was necessary to use manual searches of extended printouts of dialogue before and after each story reference. Finally, to ensure accuracy of intonation, hesitation, and interruption behavior, I personally transcribed the tapes into "ETHNOGRAPH," which took in excess of 400 hours over the eight-month duration of this study. Conventions for transcription adapted by Gronn (1983,1985), in keeping with work by Stubbs (1983) and Schenkein (1978), were used in this study:

- //            Overlapping talk from the first to the last slash.  
              Utterances  
              begin with an upper-case letter and end with a  
              period.
- ...           A pause of one second or less within an utterance.
- (2.0)        A pause of more than one second within an utterance or  
              between turns, the number indicates the length of the  
              pause.
- [\* \* \*]      A deletion.
- [ ]           An explanatory insertion.
- Italics*    A word or part of a word emphasized by a speaker.
- ?            A question, marked by a rise in pitch.
- !            An exclamation, marked by a rise in pitch or intense  
              body language.

## FINDINGS

The findings will be discussed at two levels. On the surface level, it is important to look at the mechanics of the storytelling episode, i.e., how the story occurs within discourse. Although this sounds simple, the storytelling did not appear in concise sequences of storytellers recounting full texts to passive listeners. As will be seen in the sample texts, people told their stories in bits and pieces, with excessive interruptions of story starts, with people talking over each other to share story fragments, and many aborted storytelling attempts. That is what I will refer to as the surface level of the story.

The second level of findings relates to the different ways stories are employed among stakeholders in this office-supply firm. Stories contain story-line patterns, and storytelling is defined operationally as a pattern-finding, pattern-elaboration, or pattern-fitting episode to make sense of wider organization processes and relationships. The various types of story-line patterns found in this study are listed in Table 1. In each storytelling episode there is a story-line pattern adopted by stakeholders to model either a past, unfolding, or anticipated experience. The sense making, change, and politics proceeds by participants collectively performing a story as an analogy pattern onto collective experience, which can only be apprehended in story performance.

The first story was performed by the CEO and his executives in a hotel room where they gathered to strategize which divisions and which branches should be eliminated. The CEO, called here Doug, and the vice presidents, called here Sam, Ruth, Jim, Mike, Harmon, and Kora are at an executive meeting. It is an occasion on which one might expect long-tenured executives to perform a founding story to explain how things came to be the way they are.

On the surface level, this story involves important surface behaviors having to do with moving in and out of turn-by-turn talk to engage in storytelling. For example, there is topic-relevant turn-by-turn talk prior to the story (1154-7 is one turn). In some instances, the teller seeks permission to tell the story (1158-9), receives or is denied permission (1160-1), and receives encouragement or discouragement in completing the story (1165-6).

These utterances also point to the ownership rights that are tied implicitly to the telling of a story. Only certain people are allowed to tell certain tales. Sam, for example, had served longer at Gold than anyone at this meeting and was an eyewitness. Further, the executives relied on him and even expected him to relate relevant story data to them (1160-1). Lines 1163-4 allude to the teller and the hearers being intimately familiar with the text or skeletal script of the story. The performance proceeds as a co-produced and collective activity. For example, someone besides the teller, in this case the CEO, initiates the telling, someone else tells it, and the CEO contributes the moral of the story (1154-7, 1174-82).

Going beyond this surface level, this first episode is an example of using a story of a past event to cast in a new light a division that may be put on the block as a "nice toy," but a

toy they no longer have the luxury of owning. Further, a current decision is being keyed to the performance of a founding story as a precedent and to the latest CEO's new interpretation of that story. Finally, in a hundred hours of taped talk, this was the most complete rendition of an organization story. As will be seen, more frequently, bits and pieces of the organization story were shared and the hearer was left to fill in the blanks, based on his or her knowledge of the story behind the verbalized story.

S1: Goldco Founding Story

Doug: [* * *] I look at Goldco as a toy that	1154
somebody decided to put in the company	1155
because it was fun and it also brought	1156
in/	1157
Sam: Well/ I'll tell you how that came	1158
about	1159
Doug: I thought you would (lots of laughter	1160
from the group)	1161
Sam: Sam Coche worked for Sea Breeze or	1162
something like that, oh you know the	1163
story?	1164
Doug: No go ahead tell it, really it's	1165
important.	1166
Sam: He got out there and he came over and	1167
they formed Goldco and Goldco does	1168
not mean Gold Company or anything	1169
else they took the first four	1170
initials from Billy Gold, which is	1171
G O L D and from Coche and that's how	1172
they got Goldco.	1173
Doug: And it was a good living for a couple	1174
of people. It was a nice toy for	1175
Billy, he made a few bucks on the	1176
thing. He had some fun for it but	1177
then the motivation at that time was a	1178
whole lot different than it is today.	1179
We don't have the luxury of screwing	1180
around with something like that /(lots	1181
of cross talk at this point)/	1182
(Returns to turn-by-turn talk.)	

**Filling in the story blanks.** In this next story, one untold part of the story that certainly all these executives know, and I dug out in subsequent field interviews with them, is that Ed Fox engaged in very questionable behavior and was replaced by yet another and another CEO, until our current CEO. Doug took the job and became the recognized champion for some very serious reforms. Sam references, for example, the CEO's attempts to reform Gold by instituting an executive committee (line 728), which is quite a departure from the practices of earlier CEOs. The executives, for example, know that Raymond, a former CEO, was once a hero figure who added several branch offices and

divisions during the growth phase at Gold but is now being resymbolized as autocratic and lacking in good business skills. There is some melodrama between the lines in this story. Ed Fox was a replacement CEO for Raymond Smith, who walked the line between doing good things for the organization, like adding more branches, and engaging in questionable practices, like nepotism and pocketing funds. Nepotism and seeking to enhance the personal fortunes of one's family are considered OK for a founder but were not OK when a conglomerate acquired Gold and replaced Raymond, the founder's successor, with Ed Fox.

The story is quite abbreviated (727-31), and the full meaning is inaccessible unless one explores Gold extensively to unpack the full meaning of story referents. Although many researchers might challenge if this excerpt is a story at all, the teller, Sam, does identify the telling as a story by interjecting, "I guess you heard this all already" (732) and "I guess you heard the whole story before" (736-7). Even the words "you know" invite the hearer to fill in the blanks. This is an example of a storyteller briefly referencing a full story line, which I observed throughout the stories shared by executives, managers, salespeople, vendors, and customers.

S2: Reno Branch Story

Sam:	I think five years ago there was no	727
	Executive Committee. He just ran	728
	the place the way he wanted as if you	729
	wasn't here. Raymond was [conglomerate's]	730
	man and he did what he pleased.	731
	I guess you heard this all already	732
Dave:	I heard about the high growth (nodding)	733
Sam:	Yes we picked up San Diego	734
Dave:	Reno?	735
Sam:	Ed Fox picked up Reno and I guess	736
	you heard the whole story before.	737
	That's why we picked up Reno because	738
	Ed Fox had that with his father. You	739
	know.	740

**Terse storytelling.** But just how abbreviated can a story be and still be classified as a story? The shortest story form is when one person says to the other, "You know the story!" It can be so brief that the performance is barely distinguishable from other nonperformance utterances. I call this filling-in-the-blanks form terse storytelling. Much of the story that is told is not actually uttered. A terse telling is an abbreviated and succinct simplification of the story in which parts of the plot, some of the characters, and segments of the sequence of events are left to the hearer's imagination. One hypothesis is that the terser the telling, the more shared the understanding of the social context, since insiders know what to leave to the imagination. Police, firemen, and the office-supply firm stakeholders use coded, brief utterances to communicate lots of understanding. Terse telling also prevents the story line from being too well understood by the wrong people.

The terser the telling, the less sharing of understanding of the social context can be detected by outsiders.

In discussing terse telling, I shall make explicit which purpose is being played out. For example, in the S2 transcript, I am Dave and I am a participant but also, at this early stage, an outsider. Sam, I believe, is carefully confirming what I know and that the CEO told me the complete underlying story. In theory, my knowledge of institutional memory is being tested. I, for my part, am nodding in agreement and offering up data to establish that I merit deeper revelations from Sam. In this instance, I assume he is telling tersely because he does not want to give me more understanding than the CEO expects me to have.

In the next transcript, the context is a discussion of why people are so resistant to change. This type of story-line pattern uses story segments to explore how a pattern of resistance has formed within Gold. As Doug, also present, seeks to reform Gold and implement controls such as bonuses based on performance and hiring based on competency, the story line these executives have lived by for ten years is being explored and challenged.

The surface structure of the story is as follows: one vice president, Ruth, begins with an assertion: "I think paranoia ran high in this company" (438-9) and then follows it up with an invitation to Sam to tell a story (440-1). This is followed by a terse storytelling (442-5) using an abbreviated code, since as interviews revealed, everyone present knew the full story line. In this exchange, Sam, while invited to follow up with his own story, remains quiet (441-3). Instead, the group takes off on one of the concluding moral assertions: "People were afraid to hire people that were better than they were" (446-7) and then restates the moral in inverse form (453-5).

S3: Hire No One-Better Story

Ruth: Over and over again in all your 436  
notes and blurbs and all on what 437  
people were saying, I think paranoia 438  
ran high in this company in that last 439  
10 years, especially under Raymond 440  
Smith I'm sure Sam could share 441  
a few examples (laughter). Examples of 442  
when he was out pulling invoices out 443  
in the warehouse while he was the 444  
frigging controller of the company. 445  
People were afraid to hire people 446  
that were better than they were I 447  
mean we have an assistant controller 448  
that can't run Lotus and it's not a 449  
jam, but we do. You see I don't 450  
understand, I have--never have. In 451  
order to have a company that is going 452  
to grow, we actually have to hire and 453  
nurture people that are better than 454  
we are 455

Kora: And unfortunately the frame of mind, 456

the mindset that has been in the	457
company for so long, because of all of	458
the turnover and the turmoil with	459
upper management, is I could lose my	460
job tomorrow	461
 Ruth: But the interesting thing is that	 462
nobody has ever come in and taken	463
their job.	464

**Glossing.** Story performances can involve what Weick (1981) called extended glosses ("Let me tell you that piece of the story!") to sell a particular point of view. In S3, Ruth is obviously using the story of Raymond Smith as a gloss to push her point of view, but so is Kora in her gloss (lines 456-461) on Ruth's story. A story gloss is a brief retelling of a piece of a story so that the referent experience becomes sensible in new ways after having been glossed. The gloss is akin to marginal notes or digression that can exaggerate, simplify, and shift the meaning of the experience. Storytellers might use a gloss as an occasion to accentuate an anomalous experience as an integral aspect of the founding, maturity, reform, or demise of an organization. Additional examples of gloss can be seen even more clearly in the next example.

**The series of stories.** The CEO and several vice presidents participate in a strategic planning session during which Harmon asks a question to which Doug reconstructs a story line (341-3) and then once again invites Sam to gloss one aspect of the story (338-9). Sam's gloss (347-50) is itself a second story. Everyone there knows the terse telling to be the same story that I discovered in cross-indexed transcripts and in interviews of when, for example, printing orders fell out of the back of a delivery truck and were scattered across the highway. Others in the group follow this with more talk, and a third story is initiated (359-60). This third story is a personal-experience narrative and has more credibility than second-hand accounts. The first story, by contrast, does not arise out of personal experience. In fact, Doug did not become CEO of this firm until after the incident in question. He, instead, builds on the acknowledged experience of Sam, who has been at Gold for 12 years. According to follow-up interviews, Doug, unlike former CEOs, had an ability to draw historical precedent into his own performance that made him an effective agent of change at Gold. His reference to "Epsilon" in line 342 is part of a story that was being recounted every time several executives, vendors, or large customers gathered (see S6, S8, S9, S10, and S11 in Table 1, above).

S4: Printing Was Different Story

Harmon: But is that the most effective way	335
to do it? Do they hit the same places?	336
 Doug: Historically, in reading a little	 337
bit of the history and maybe Sam	338
can help us out here. The printing	339
business that we were writing was	340
significant at one time and when the	341
folks left for Epsilon they took that	342
business with them and now we're going	343

	through a whole retraining process	344
Sam:	Well that could be so I mean	345
	printing again falls with the	346
	salesmen. A lot of the salesmen will	347
	not sell printing because they are	348
	afraid that the printing department,	349
	as in the past, has fouled up	350
Kora:	Vickie has been wonderful	351
Sam:	Yes I think Vickie has been	352
	wonderful. It is a matter of	353
	confidence in whoever it is there.	354
	When John Rifler was in charge of it	355
	there was no confidence. This goes on	356
	and it changes	357
Ruth:	And I think training comes in here	358
Jim:	When I was in sales I sold what I	359
	understood. If I didn't understand * * *	360

**Series of stories as an enactment of change.** Storytelling is a way to draw parallels between two patterns. In the following segment, the new CEO glosses, in a storytelling, to reveal how his experience from other companies relates to what one vice president is telling him (1415-26, 1450-9). Follow-up interviews revealed that his story performance is a scenario told to introduce a strategic shift in the focus of this firm. His ability to enact a performance that coaxes his executives to identify with his relevant experiences in analogous situations gives his scenario for change a good deal of credibility. The executives are beginning to buy into the future scenario. To implement this change, several divisions will be put on the block so Gold can focus on its main business (1474-9). There are elements of reform, blood-letting (firings), and death (selling off divisions) as the new pattern becomes envisioned in this story.

#### S5: Industry Stories

Jim:	Wait a minute I gotta put one more	1415
	point into here, since Ben C. isn't	1416
	here. Because sales is not represented	1417
	in this whole group and it's really	1418
	unfortunate. Based on the fact, cause	1419
	I've talked to the people. You've got	1420
	Victor M. who has a sales assistant	1421
	that he shares with somebody. He's	1422
	doing a 150 thousand dollars a month	1423
	in office supplies an some furniture.	1424
	How much more can we expect out of	1425
	him?	1426
Doug:	Looking at acquisitions and mergers	1427
	in our industry, and I've been through	1428
	four or five of em, disaster hits. And	1429
	I'll give you examples Gamma	1430

Corporation. I was with the old 1431  
 Delphi Company and it's nonexistent 1432  
 today. They merged with Alpha. And 1433  
 then they merged with Parrot. All the 1434  
 same ownership and so on. Clearly the 1435  
 sales force was on overload. Couldn't 1436  
 handle it and a lot of things fell 1437  
 through the cracks. I can give you 1438  
 similar examples with Juindon. I 1439  
 can go right down the list. There is a 1440  
 point--where the economies that you 1441  
 pick up trying to consolidate 1442  
 businesses with one sales force uhhh 1443  
 they are far overridden by what you 1444  
 lose in the translation. So there is a 1445  
 point Jim but I don't know where the 1446  
 hell it is/ 1447

Jim: And that's my point/. 1448

Doug: And it's got to be easy because I 1449  
 experienced it as a salesman. What I 1450  
 found was that the more they dumped on 1451  
 me, where there was duplication and 1452  
 there was overlap and so on. It was 1453  
 still writing instruments and you 1454  
 would think that would be an easy 1455  
 deal. You are still selling writing 1456  
 instruments, but you got all this shit 1457  
 and you only got so much time in front 1458  
 of a customer. You got so much 1459  
 communication time you got so much 1460  
 I seriously question whether if you 1461  
 are in the contract business I really 1462  
 question if you can effectively call 1463  
 on other people in the organization to 1464  
 accomplish something. I really 1465  
 question that. And it's a question 1466  
 not a decision and not a 1467  
 determination. But Ad Specialty 1468  
 clearly a different buyer Furniture is 1469  
 clearly a different buyer clearly [\* \* \*] 1470

Ruth: [\* \* \*] the other thing, Doug, is can we 1474  
 be successful? Our main throw is 1475  
 office products. Can we be successful 1476  
 without having these sidelines? 1477

Doug: Absolutely! 1478

Ruth: Are you sure? Screw [Furniture]! Forget 1479  
 Goldco! 1480

Kora: And printing! 1481

Doug: I said it rather flippantly earlier, 1482  
 but I'm very serious we could skim off 1483

30,40 million dollars and no one	1484
would even know we are there. We don't	1485
have to take it away from a	1486
competitor, the market is expanding so	1487
dramatically/	1488

Executives accepted the blood-letting scenario as a necessary evil to save the organization and even the affected managers typically describe Doug as a "savior."

For example, one story that was repeated in many office conversations concerns how, upon Doug's arrival as the new CEO, a non-gone executive tried to implement reserved parking privileges for executives. Doug, in almost his first meeting with the executives, uprooted a "reserved for the CEO" (one was also reserved for each of the VPs) parking sign and threw it on the executive meeting table, demanding to know "who put up this sign? This is not the kind of leadership I will have around here." The offending executive, for this and other good reasons, was fired by week's end. This story made the rounds and reinforced Doug's image as the reformer who would not put up with special privileges for executives. This Doug-as-savior theme resurfaces in stories from vendors and customers. For Gold, this is a relatively new story, since Doug is the latest CEO. A year from now this might be tersely referred to as the parking-sign story.

**Story performance as sense making.** In the following example an analysis of the story is embedded in the telling. The analysis consists of telling the story to make sense of the environment as sense is made of the story performance. While middle management has survived five CEOs in two years by ignoring most change efforts, the salespeople avoid change by not giving upper management access to their customers. It is a power play similar to the one Crozier (1964) described in his classic study of maintenance mechanics making the tobacco factories dependent on them by blocking access to maintenance manuals and making unique modifications to the machines. Since the "wars" with a major competitor, "Epsilon," Gold executives are concerned about access to their top accounts.

In lines 846-54, the story details are so terse that, at first glance, there may not appear to be a story at all. However, in lines 855-6, another executive hooks into the underlying experience to trigger more detail on the story behind the story. In 859-62, the story of a salesperson's reaction to executive attempts to implement computer information-system controls garners a severe group reaction. In line 870, Doug uses a very common reflexive "you know" to reference experience that the other executives are expected to fill in between the lines. He references a story everyone knows all too well. In line 870, the use of an extended pause following the emphasized word "too" is a language tactic that invites hearers to fill in their knowledge of the story behind the performed story. "Tool" references former attempts by the "corner office" to make salesmen's accounts become house accounts. These executives have confided to me that to change the balance of power between themselves and their salespeople, they will need to tread lightly or risk triggering another exodus of their salespeople to their competitor, Epsilon. In the following excerpt, the group has been discussing how difficult it is going to be to put together something as seemingly simple as a customer focus group because of this issue.

S6: Sales Meeting Story

Dave: Why is that? 842

Kora: That organism that mechanism is not 843  
in place. It's just in the very first 844  
throws of it 845

Doug: The insulation that we have from our 846  
customers is mind boggling. I should 847  
be able to pick up the phone and call 848  
10 or 12 close friends that happen to 849  
be customers and get em down here 850  
with no problem. Our salespeople 851  
will not let us near them. I 852  
shouldn't say won't let us/ (several 853  
talk at once)/ 854

Jim: What's been the response to your plea 855  
at the sales meeting? 856

Doug: A couple people that are secure have 857  
come to me and said "let's do this, 858  
this and this." But then I hear 859  
comments from Jim T. who says 'umm, 860  
tell me about our data processing and 861  
our terminal hook up 862

Ruth: Oh boy! 863

Doug: And I says "Why do you ask?" Well I 864  
was thinking, if I put one of those 865  
terminals in you don't need me as 866  
much as uhhh 867

Kora: Oh God! (Lots of expression by everyone) 868

Doug: And I said Jeff it's a tool God Damn 869  
it! (3.0) And you know/ [\* \* \*] 870

Kora: Our customers are gold you know that/ 880  
(much cross-talk) /We want all of our ducks 881  
in line and all of our logistics so that when 882  
they walk in they are treated. The red carpet 883  
is out[\*\*\*] 884

**The turnover story as prediction.** As with the executive committee, the organization stories in the following excerpts from vendor and customer focus-group videotapes extend from the observed pattern of past events (337-44) to a prediction of a probable future pattern (356-64). As Martin (1982: 287) suggested, the script embedded in the story, though unstated, allows people to predict what may happen if a similar incident should recur: "A story contains a blueprint that can be used to predict future organizational behavior." What is interesting is that the vendors leave most of the script unstated in their terse telling of the story.

#### S7: CEO Turnover Story

Dan: Yeah, my boss will call from 337  
We're based out of the Northwest and 338  
he'll say "Well Dan who is running the 339  
ship at Gold now?" He can see a 340  
lot of the proposals that we've 341  
presented and were accepted six months 342  
ago still in effect because there's 343  
been turnover[\*\*\*] 344  
You know is the next administration 356  
going to come in and make changes to 357  
that? One point that Jeff made 358  
earlier that I want to touch on is our 359  
concerns are shared with their 360  
salespeople. They definitely know 361  
sometimes that they're kind of a ship 362  
without a rudder right now and I think 363  
it concerns their salespeople as well 364

Relationships with vendors and contract customers are important interorganizational relationships for Gold. In this next excerpt, from a customer focus group, the turnover in CEOs, as well as new vice presidents, and sales managers, has resulted in problems of stability and access in Gold's relations. Storytelling about the shakeup at Gold helps customers and vendors paint a predictable scenario. In the following excerpt, the story's blueprint is quite terse (347-9,957-66). Pinning this blueprint down takes 22 minutes of the focus group's time.

#### S8: A Customer Story

Frank: And I'm seeing symptoms of the 342  
turnover in senior management they 343  
have had senior management that they 344  
have had in the past 14-15 months 345  
where they have had a change in 346  
philosophy. A certain president has 347  
own stamp of how he is going to operate 348  
and things change. My major concern is 349  
the end result. I don't care how they 350  
resolve their internal politics 351  
I need the product 352  
[\*\*\*] They do listen but with half an 954  
ear maybe because of the change in 955  
management. 956  
Certain management we have had 957  
discussions and we have come to agreements 958  
and the systems have been worked 959  
out. New management comes in a new 960  
president of the company and we have to 961  
reinvent the wheel and we go back and I 962  
mean it's in writing it's documented 963  
these agreements are documented and then 964  
go to the next person 965

**The word on the street story.** During the study, the conglomerate decided to sell Gold, and the news leaked. In this videotaped focus group exchange, I assume line 370 represents a plea from these vendors to be able to tell the story (370), since it is followed by three "you know" references (377,379,388-9) to the fuller story that the vendors know but do not expect outsiders to know. The vendors perform a futuristic scenario that they use to make sense of Gold's behavior. It is reinforced and embellished by glosses by other vendors (not included). The scenario in 381-9 has not happened at Gold, but it is a plot sequence that has occurred with regularity in the vendor's other relationships. Referencing how the story has been leaked by Gold's salespeople (388-9) adds credibility to the performance.

S9: Word on the Street Story

Sid: Well if we can just be open/	370
(simultaneous talking of 4 people) /the	371
word is on the street that they are up	372
for sale OK? So now you know [CEO]	373
may be the president. They may want	374
him up there. But somebody'll buy him	375
next month and then he's going to be	376
gone because you know, because you	377
know they're bringing in their own	378
people. You don't know I mean . . . You	379
don't want that I mean personally I	380
think he's going to be a good	381
administrator, but then he is but	382
then somebody buys him and they have	383
their own people then maybe he's not	384
going to be there so you wonder is	385
there going to be a stability? And	386
the salesmen have the same concern and	387
I heard it from them themselves you	388
know. What's going to where we	389
going?	390

**Alternative glossing.** People perform stories about their struggles for survival, and the story can change depending on the stakeholders performing the story. Throughout this study, in talking to Gold employees, vendors, and customers, stories about the wars with Epsilon were a frequent topic. In the first excerpt, a sales manager, during a lunch at a crowded restaurant, gave me a concise version of the Epsilon War Story that captured most of the plot. Some 9 to 12 salespeople (the count depends on to whom you talk) were recruited by a competitor. In retaliation, Gold recruited some of their salespeople. Customers were traded back and forth, and, in the process, some exorbitant guarantees were given out to salespeople. The sales manager's gloss paints salespeople as the prima donnas who initiated the war. Doug's version (not shown), in contrast, stressed the "tremendous exposure with salespeople leaving and dragging accounts back and forth." This is very much a political use of storytelling, as various factions in and around the organization seek to establish an advantageous interpretation.

S10: Epsilon War Story: Version I

Ralph: The Epsilon Wars . . . bad way to do	2597
it really silly. We just traded sales	2598
people and now we're both stuck with	2599
salespeople with giant guarantees and	2600
it's hurting our bottom line in a major	2601
way 9 of the 11 were prima donnas	2602
pain in the ass egotistical to the	2603
max. Developed by [Raymond] in the	2604
many years of the Gold philosophy	2605
The salesman is king	2606

In the vendor focus group, another version of the story was recounted. In this story performance, the group uses storytelling to ascertain the probability that Gold's sales force is once again at risk of being captured by Epsilon and, along with the sales force, their precious accounts. The vendors attribute the trigger for the next war to the fact that Gold has undergone far too much instability: five CEOs in two years, the company being put up for sale by its conglomerate holding company, and competitors that, sensing what was going on, had exploited the situation to the net disadvantage of Gold.

S11: Epsilon War Story: Version II

Bob: They have lost a lot of accounts/	448
Ron: What do/ you attribute that to?	449
Sid: That is specific to sometime in 1988	450
They lost several of their many of	451
their key reps to another distributor	452
/(Group goes back and forth) /Didn't	453
they drop 10- 12 or something like	454
that?	455
Ron: Is there a word on the street as to	456
why these people left?	457
Ted: I think the instability of the	458
company and they probably lured them	459
over action/(Several talk at once)/	460
Oscar: I think their competitor used the	461
instability factor to put doubts in	462
the minds of those people and it was	463
an opportune time. They have been	464
battled several times. This is an	465
opportune time to steal some people if	466
you will and hopefully their major	467
accounts with them and they took	468
advantage of the situation. That is	469
one of the tough things in business	470

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

By focusing on in situ everyday performance behavior, this study showed how storytelling goes on more frequently and differently than might have been suspected in

previous storytelling studies. As critics will be quick to point out, however, just being able to isolate and identify terse storytelling and glossing in various story performance forms in use among organization stakeholders is insufficient justification to call for an integration of the story-as-texts and stories-as-performance approaches to story research. But there are several observations that strengthen this position. First, it is not the fact that the story is terse and abbreviated that counts; it is the fact that the teller picks one aspect to abbreviate ("You know the rest of the story.") and another to accentuate ("It's the same old story, except this time we found them together."). This, along with gloss, is an essential surface mechanism by which stories are performed. Second, part of storytelling involves managing the telling of a story by being able to weave it into on-going conversation. Both teller and listener are sending cues to manage how much of the story is told, how much is left to the imagination, and what interpretation is applied. This also is management of sense making. Third, terse telling can be a power strategy of purposeful mystification (Fisher, 1984) or tactical ambiguity. The CEO, Doug, used his storytelling to draw in the other executives to accept his reform strategies as their own. As Eisenberg (1984: 236) observed, "It is often preferable to omit purposefully contextual cues and to allow for multiple interpretations on the part of receivers."

These stakeholders tune into stories as real-time data and tell stories to predict, empower, and even fashion change. Customers, vendors, salespeople, and executives in this office-supply distribution company performed stories not only to make sense of their setting but to negotiate alternative interpretations and to accommodate new precedents for decision and action. They tell stories about the past, present, and future to make sense of and manage their struggles with their environment.

This study raises a number of important questions. Does story performance occur more frequently in some types of organizations more than in others? Was storytelling performance in this organization, for example, biased by the turbulence of a rapid succession of CEOs, the need to eliminate divisions, the war with a dominant competitor, and being traded between conglomerates? Peters and Austin (1985: 330) hypothesized that storytelling is more frequent in turbulent settings, where stories and interpretations are shared with great frequency to understand the unfolding dynamics. Familiarity with those dynamics, however, should result in a familiarized way of recounting terser stories, with glosses only used to highlight deviations. Once a story pattern is seen again and again, for example, in law enforcement, emergency work, and wartime situation rooms, one might expect typical scenarios to become reduced to terse response codes. Similarly, one might expect to see fuller story texts performed in newer organizations, in which there is less shared experience. There are implicit rules in storytelling (who can tell it, to whom, and where). Further research can examine what happens, if anything, when these rules are broken, when the telling is done inappropriately.

There is a broader implication of management education evident in the storytelling-performance paradigm. People who are more skilled as storytellers and story interpreters seem to be more effective communicators than those who are less skilled (Boje, 1989, 1991). Yet, until recently, teaching storytelling skills, outside of the folklore discipline, has been limited to the teaching of children (Zemke, 1990; Boje, 1991). As organizational

boundaries become more permeable and the organization structure flatter, requiring more networking and communication skills, storytelling can be a useful tool for managers trying to cope with rapid change. Training managers to be storytellers may thus result in training them to be more effective in organizations.

The most important implication for organization study that was born out of the present study is that story researchers can benefit by entering organizations to observe first-hand how people perform storytelling. The focus in traditional organization story research has been on texts taken from a range of isolated, often anomalous stories plucked out of their natural setting. These studies ignore performance and streamline the stories or treat them as so many variables that can give empirical explanations of the organization. The storytelling organization theory posits story text and performance as two sides of the same coin and gives us insight into the complex and varied ways organization members use storytelling in their work world.

Table 1  
Varieties of Story-line Patterns

Story Title	Source	Story-line pattern	Tellers
1. Goldco Founding	Past event	Pattern is no longer financially sound.	Execs
2. Reno Branch	Past event	Pattern is no longer ethical.	Execs
3. Hire No One Better	Past event	Pattern is still going on.	Execs
4. Printing Was Different	Past event	Pattern has improved for them.	Execs
5. Industry	Past event	Pattern is same in that part of the industry.	Execs
6. Sales Meeting	Current event	Pattern that got evoked is not one we wanted.	Execs
7. CEO Turnover	Past event	Pattern will repeat itself and then where are we?	Vendors
8. Customer	Current event	Pattern unacceptable to us customers.	Customers
9. Word on the Street	Current event	Pattern is likely to repeat.	Vendors
10. Epsilon Version I	Past event	Pattern is likely to repeat.	Salespeople
11. Epsilon Version II	Past event	Pattern is likely to repeat.	Vendors

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