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Book Review by Gail Fann Thomas of
Storytelling in Business: The Authentic and
Fluent Organization by J. Forman

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Book Review

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Forman, J. (2013). *Storytelling in business: The authentic and fluent organization*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Business Books. 287 pp.

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We live in a VUCA world, one that is increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.¹ Janis Forman’s latest book, *Storytelling in Business: The Authentic and Fluent Organization*, shows us how storytelling can be used to cope and even thrive in the VUCA world. “Stories,” she claims, “have sensemaking capabilities.” I would argue that they are also *sensegiving* accounts. Through stories, corporate storytellers make sense of rapid, ongoing streams of data and information. The storytellers then become sensegivers as they take those bits of information and build coherent, succinct, compelling, and memorable narratives. Those who study sensemaking and sensegiving would argue that these narratives are at the core of organizing (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

To demonstrate how organizational stories serve as sensemaking and sensegiving vehicles, Forman takes us on four best-practice journeys inside Schering-Plough, Chevron, FedEx, and Philips. At Schering-Plough, a global health care company, newly hired CEO Fred Hassan faced quality problems, compliance issues, litigation, low morale, and depressed stock prices. At the center of his turnaround strategy was an “Action Agenda”—a five-chapter authentic and fluent story that helped a myriad of stakeholders envision and enact a new future for Schering-Plough. This best practice illustrates how one story served as an anchor, strategic asset, and, ultimately, a legacy for Schering-Plough.

At Chevron, Forman details the rich relationship between authentic and fluent stories and the corporate brand. Chevron’s best practice illustrates how stories make the brand concrete and credible while also appealing to people’s emotions. Ultimately, the brand serves as a frame and filter for giving meaning to organizational stories.

At FedEx, corporate storytellers use video clips, blogs, and social network media to convey the company’s character, value, and integrity. In this way, they are able to create a shared global experience for their employees. A powerful example at FedEx is their “I am FedEx” program that celebrates their employees and gives them a voice as the face of the company.

Finally, at Philip's, storytelling workshops are used to educate employees about the company's shift in strategic direction from "lumen"—a technologically centric organization to "human"—a more people-centric one. In 2008, Philips rolled out workshops that helped employees understand and implement change, and ultimately to serve as the company's goodwill ambassadors to others inside and outside the company.

What makes Forman's book more interesting than most is the acknowledgement that all organizational stakeholders—investors, customers, clients, employees—have stories. In today's world, everyone wants to be heard and has the digital access to tell their stories to the world. Forman stresses the importance of crafting stories that incorporate the voices of these stakeholders. Additionally, she suggests that we develop learning organizations by *listening* to others' stories. This brings a complexity to the book that sets it apart.

While there are several storytelling books on the market, none appear to show the painstaking background research offered in this work. Forman spent 4 years reading the story-related humanities and management literature and interviewing more than 140 storytelling experts including corporate communication directors, CEOs of small companies, business communication faculty, and filmmakers. Based on this research, she employs an inductive approach to develop a four-component framework of organizational storytelling: authenticity, fluency, trust, and a focus on business objectives. This framework then serves as an organizing device to analyze each of the corporate best-practice cases.

Armed with a doctorate in comparative literature, and as founder and director of the Management Communication Program at UCLA's Anderson School of Management, Forman brings a unique expertise in the humanities and management disciplines. Her years of experience advising MBA students on strategy projects that require storytelling and consulting with executives give her a unique advantage as an author.

This book should appeal to business professionals who want to learn how the power of storytelling can move an organization through a large-scale change, inculcate a cultural change, or execute strategy. Consultants will appreciate the in-depth case studies, diagnostic checklists for crafting stories, and connections to management concepts.

What business educators should find particularly interesting is a description of examples of storytelling that are currently being used in communication programs, such as MIT's Sloan School where students explore ethical positions in their "Giving Voice to Values" curriculum. Or, the University of Virginia's Darden School where students tell and analyze stories from several angles and explore narrative logic in management presentations. Forman also describes her own program at UCLA, where students in her communication elective craft a "signature" story that defines them as a person, a professional, and an aspiring leader. Students in this class also develop capstone strategy projects where they create data-based stories about an organization's future.

Note

1. VUCA was coined by the U.S. Army after the Cold War to describe an increasingly dynamic world that would require adaptive and agile responses.

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