The Story-Driven Organization

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The old metaphors for business—war, science, the machine—are distancing and constrain an organization's ability to envision possibilities for action. Understanding motivation and behavior in terms of story—character, objective, and conflict—enables leaders to better engage both the minds and *hearts of employees and manage change. The authors explain the elements of story and present six guidelines for tapping its power. Applications include connecting employees to the organization's mission; understanding and managing the cultural implications of system and process change; and marshalling the tension inherent in conflicting objectives, such as product performance and environmental stewardship, as a source of energy and innovation.* © 2007 *Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

Futurist Rolf Jensen, writing a decade ago, foresaw a paradigm shift with significant implications for organizations:

> We are in the twilight of a society based on data. As information and intelligence become the domain of computers, society will place more value on the one human ability that cannot be automated: emotion. Imagination, myth, ritual—the language of emotion—will affect everything from our purchasing decisions to how we work with others. [Organizations] will thrive on the basis of their stories and their myths.[1]

Story is increasingly the language of the twenty-first century across so many domains in our lives. Stories are central to how we perceive the world, how we communicate our world to others, and how we situate ourselves collectively in the world. Inside organizations, however, storytelling is often viewed as the proverbial icing on the cake, a more "user-friendly" way to engage employees in the company's mission. Certainly we tell a lot of stories inside organizations, but rarely do we think in terms of story.

Stories, like brands, often have their roots inside the marketing department of organizations, where they are viewed as externalized objects, commodities to be packaged and presented. While important, this view fails to account for the critical role of the internal experience and the social construction of meaning in understanding the power and purpose of stories in organizations—the key, perhaps, to addressing the fact that 71 percent of employees are not engaged or are actively disengaged with their jobs (according to the Gallup Management Journal's semi-annual Employee Engagement Index).[2]

We see the notion of a brand as a useful way to think about the *story* of an organization as it is experienced and shaped by employees. In looking at brands as an internalized process, we recognize that the first questions an employee asks of his or her company's brand is, "What does this brand mean to me? What's in this brand for me?" From a narrative perspective, we can see these questions as, "What *story* am I a part of? What is my place in that story?"

This article will explore what it means to use *story* as a root metaphor to more deeply engage employees. We will look at the common principles that underlie story as a system of thought, and then dis-

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cuss how these principles can be applied to common organizational issues such as mission, meaning, and motivation. Cases from our respective client and research base will be used to illustrate six strategies for working within a narrative frame to create a story-driven organization in which employees are authentically engaged.

Metaphors We Live By

Through the use of metaphor in communication, we turn what we mean into what we say. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."[3] One reason that metaphors are so powerful is that they are sensed as felt, sometimes primal, experiences. The word "metaphor" has the same root as "amphora," a container used to store precious oils and spices and to carry them from one place to another. Metaphors are literally a vessel for carrying meaning, and they make language much more potent and transferable.

At the same time, it is important to remember that metaphors are very contextually dependent and susceptible to misinterpretation if not used consciously and managed well. Dominant metaphors are also a reflection of the power dynamics in an organization, and power often accrues to those who shape the organization's internal discourse—the informal versus formal versions of stories being just one example of this power struggle. Leaders can learn a lot through an examination of the metaphors at play within and about their organization.

As such, using a metaphorical frame on organizational life gives leaders the opportunity to make explicit both the tacit knowledge and the unofficial perspectives often hidden from view. This is important because recent research on conversations shows that we use an average of four metaphors per minute, a statistic that tends to surprise people because we are not aware of the vast majority of metaphors we use. Metaphor is so fundamental to the way we think and speak that only the more obvious ones register in our awareness.

But metaphors aren't perfect. Every metaphor is by nature an inexact fit for what we are attempting to describe, and where the metaphor *does not* apply can be just as important as where it does. Like a lens, every metaphor brings some things into sharp focus, while obscuring others. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz distinguished between "thin" descriptions, interpretations of events based on a person's unexamined and socially influenced misconceptions, and "thick" descriptions, which embody the meaning of those events to the persons actually involved in them.[4] We can see this in many organizational change initiatives where progress is assessed and described from a leadership perspective—in ways that may or may not reflect the experiences of the employees who are living them every day. Therefore, it is important for leaders to understand what is contained in the metaphorical frames they use most often to reinforce the organizational story, and just as importantly, what has been left out from those frames.

Groups of people who spend a lot of time together talking about the same thing tend to adopt common metaphors and ways of speaking that get used so much they eventually come to be seen as "reality"—the way the world is, rather than as a communication tool. This is especially true for employees in the workplace. Tracking the dominant metaphors used in and by an organization is one way to get a sense for the story, the brand, as seen by those who work there.

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Let's look at four root metaphors found in most organizations as the basis for the language they use to position themselves in the world and to their employees: war, science, the machine, and the family. These metaphors have been studied at length by organizational scholars such as Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, Gareth Morgan, and Charles Handy.[5]

The War Metaphor

Have you ever noticed how much of our language inside organizations comes from war or its proxy, sports? When we talk about consumer targets, competitive strategy, and winning market share, we are talking about business as if it were war. When we use terms like team player, out of bounds, and crunch time, we are talking about business as if it were a sport. We have a tendency to elevate a subject's significance by speaking of it in terms of war, and business is no exception: In the marketplace we have cola wars, software wars, and cellular wars, to name just a few.

Now we all know that business isn't really war. No one gets killed—usually. But sometimes it seems that way, and sometimes it can be helpful to think of business as war. It is our best way to quickly convey the concepts and language necessary to operate effectively in a competitive environment.

But companies frozen in the war metaphor pay a cost in terms of their ability to create relationships. War language objectifies people: Employees are merely foot soldiers in the great battle, and customers are abstracted into market share as a way of keeping score. Your company may have heartfelt goals about valuing people and serving customers, but if most of your daily conversations are infused with war-based language, the range of possibilities that language implies will shape your thinking.

The Science Metaphor

Another root metaphor found in most organizations is science. It contains concepts and language that can help reduce large volumes of information to metrics that can be analyzed and controlled. When we talk about testing concepts, measuring results, and segmenting consumers, we are saying that business is like science—everything is knowable, predictable, and controllable.

And the "science" at the base of this metaphor tends to be Newtonian science, the science of things rather than the science of living systems. As such, it diminishes the difference between things and people.

In organizations frozen in the science metaphor, test scores become more real than what happens in the marketplace. Business is seen as an equation, and the organization only pays attention to that which can be quantified and measured. This creates a fractured reality for the people in the organization because people know that many of the activities important to performing their job successfully fall outside the range of what is formally measured. As such, they straddle two worlds in getting their job done and often feel that their humanity is marginalized in their decision making. Yet we know that the essence of metaphor and story is that which engages the whole person—including the realms of emotion and spirit.

The Machine Metaphor

Language based in the machine metaphor tends to treat the organization as an inanimate object, a collection of parts that can be reassembled as needed. When we talk about ROI, reorganization, and outsourcing we are talking about the organization as if it were a machine. It is common now to even think

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of people in these terms, as "human capital." In part this is useful in recognizing the need for ongoing investment in this area, but it poses some interesting questions at the level of metaphor. A common focus within this frame is fine-tuning the machine to be more efficient and profitable. Again, this is an appropriate aspiration for an organization, but unabated, this view leads to commoditization because it views everything—and everyone—as merely a cog in the machine.

The war, science, and machine metaphors all serve a purpose or we would not be using them. They facilitate an understanding of the large-scale activities that make global corporations possible. But they are also vestiges of a mass-market era that objectified consumers and employees as means to an end. As such they leave us conceptually ill equipped to deal with markets and people as we find them today.

All three of these metaphors are "distancing" metaphors that make it difficult for organizations to create the relationships that are their lifeblood, because the relational and social language of connection is not present in any of these metaphors. So we need to infuse our vocabulary in organizations with new metaphors, particularly those that facilitate a deeper understanding of emotions, aesthetics, and connection. Some organizations have attempted to build an internal and external brand around the family metaphor in response to the shortcomings of the other three common options. Perhaps as more women and nationalities move into leadership positions, this metaphor will be embodied in organizations more fully and authentically.

We believe that the language of story, the oldest form of human connection, has a lot more to offer as a new root metaphor for organizations in the twenty-first century.

The Story Metaphor

In order to examine story as a metaphor inside organizations, let's first get clear on what the word means. Story is one of those "fat" words that can stand in for many things but consequently has gotten a bit mushy from overuse. To a storyteller, *story is the description of a series of events that conveys meaning*.

You have not told a story unless you have created meaning for your audience. Meaning is created when the intellect and the emotions are simultaneously engaged. We come to an understanding of the story in our mind *and* in our heart. Good stories do this by creating a relationship between the audience and the characters in the story. It is through our connection to the characters in a story that we experience its meaning.

Making meaning through story is something that comes naturally to people. Story is one of the first metaphors we learn as children, and on a personal level it is often how we try to make sense out of life's events. Narrative therapists Jill Freedman and Gene Combs point out that "the narrative metaphor guides us in asking questions that invite amplification of answers so that the experience generated has a past and a future, characters, a context, and meaning—in other words, so that it's a story."[6] As such, it helps us see organizations as a set of individual and collective stories sustained (or not) over time and space.

Cognitive scientists such as Roger Schank have helped us see that we define ourselves based on the interpretations of our experiences that we maintain through repetition.[7] We invent our "story" to piece together these interpretations into a coherent whole.

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The results in our life and work are largely a function of the stories we tell ourselves.

A key role of leaders, particularly in the management of change initiatives, is to help their organization *shift* the stories it tells about itself. As part of this process, it is important to understand the critical role of objective in defining and understanding a person's—or an organization's—motivation and ambition.

The Importance of Objective

In his Story seminars, screenwriting guru Robert McKee talks about what shapes and drives a story:

> The ritual container of story is shaped by an inciting incident that happens in the early part of the story.… The inciting incident is an event that upsets the balances of forces in the primary character's life … it can be either positive or negative.… The character conceives of what will put life back into balance if they achieve it. This pursuit of this object of desire becomes the spine of the story. At bottom, all stories take the form of a quest.[8]

We identify with a character in a story when we can empathize with what he or she wants. In story language, this is *objective*, and it is all about desire. What does the protagonist most want? This desire sets the spine of the story and determines what it is about. But we need to really *feel* what the character wants, and it has to be something worthwhile, a human value worth pursuing. No one wants to watch a character pursue an objective that is too easy or without meaning.

Naming the primary objective for a character can be as difficult as finding the mission at the heart of a company. People as well as organizations seem to want many things. How to discern what is really central? McKee suggests that one way to get at the objective is to ask what the character so desires that if you gave it to him it would stop the story.[9] The answer to that is the character's true objective.

What does your organization so desire that if it got it, its story would be over? Get clear on what you are relentlessly pursuing and you will know the true nature of your brand and authentic mission as an organization. One of the unintended consequences of the focus on task, project, and deadline in most organizations is that many employees lose sight of what they were working toward in the first place. Notable exceptions can be found in companies such as Toyota, which has found ways to successfully integrate its philosophy and practices around teamwork and continuous improvement into its American manufacturing plants.[10] As we shall see, part of what makes this possible is viewing challenges as tensions to creatively engage, rather than as battles to fight or machines to repair. Every good story needs a conflict, the tension between two opposing forces through which the protagonist struggles before emerging.

The Law of Conflict

Which brings us to a key concept of storytelling: the law of conflict. Conflict as a story tool describes the sources of struggle, difficulty, and hardship that characters face. Conflict is the medium of a story. Nothing moves forward in a story without conflict. Through conflict we get to see the character make choices where true character is revealed.

Any character needs a struggle—something to overcome—otherwise he or she will be static and unchanging, offering nothing to involve us, no hook

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to compel us to watch the story through to a resolution. The most compelling characters are those who struggle, whose actions revolve around conflict.

The Three Basic Conflict Types

There are three basic types of conflict that generate stories: the character against other characters, the character against the world, and the character against himself or herself. The first two types of conflict are external to the character, and the third makes up the character's internal or interior struggle. These struggles allow for the emergence of the central themes and values at stake in the story.

The character against other characters. Our character has wants, needs, or ideas that cause him or her to struggle against other characters. Many times these represent aspects of their unconscious drives projected onto and/or embodied in other characters. (Think Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* movie series.)

The character against the world. Our character must struggle against some element of the physical world or relationship to the environment in order to succeed or survive. Many times these represent archetypal and universal forces the person or organization must face in order to reach the objective. (Think Tom Hanks in the movie *Cast Away*.)

The character against himself or herself. Our character has some unresolved internal struggle that shapes his or her perspective and actions. This is the most complex of the sources of conflict. It is essentially a description of internal compulsions, concepts, or frames of reference the character carries within that can stand in opposition to achieving his or her objectives. A simple example of this would be a character whose goal is to cross a rope bridge but who is afraid of heights. (Think Indiana Jones confronting his fear of snakes.)

Often a character can consciously desire one thing while having an unconscious desire that is in conflict with it. For example, in his narrative coaching work, David (coauthor of this article) often sees clients ostensibly driving toward a promotion but whose stories actually form around tensions rooted in a stronger unconscious drive—for example, for greater attention to their inner world. Part of his work is to help them make choices around which desire to follow so they can do so with clear intention.

Six Principles for the Story-Driven Organization

For those in them, organizations feel like open-ended stories where the primary challenge is to keep the narrative consistent while allowing for continuous change and evolution. So how do the dynamics of objective and conflict from the world of story apply to the world of organizations? Here are six lessons we have learned from studying and working with story-driven organizations, with examples, including several drawn from David's narrative coaching work with clients.

1. Know your story.

How do you start to look at your company in story terms? The research from The Gallup Organization and others has shown that employees are most engaged and productive when they are able to have strong relationships and clear communication with their manager and others; a clear path to be at their best; and a strong sense of commitment. These requirements reflect the fundamental questions an audience asks of every character in a story:

- Who are you?
- Where do you come from?

> Healthy organizations are clear on their story and align how they tell it externally and how they live it internally.

- What do you do?
- What do you want? What do you care about?
- Where do you fit in the world?

These are the same questions employees frequently ask themselves and others.

Healthy organizations are clear on their story and align how they tell it externally and how they live it internally. What story does your organization live out now, and is that the one you want? How could you engage your employees in creating clear and compelling answers to the five questions above?

When Nike introduced an enterprise software system for its global supply chain, it asked David to provide training in narrative skills to sixty change champions to increase their capacity to lead their teams through this major transition. A story-based approach enabled the project leaders to better understand the true nature of this change and to support their peers in finding new answers to the five questions above. A critical step was to recognize the ways in which the new software system would challenge Nike's long-held norms and practices reflective of the company's "just do it" brand.

Taking a narrative approach—i.e., examining the situation from within the frame of character, objective, and conflict—helped the project leaders to do the following:

1. Make explicit the deep roots of the "just do it" brand in their culture.
2. Identify actions reflective of that brand that were no longer possible or desirable.
3. Identify ways to maintain brand legacy and coherence in the face of the requirements of the new system.
4. Integrate new stories about who they were in order to be successful in the new reality.

The sessions prepared these leaders to address the cultural and organizational issues that would accompany the system's implementation, such as:

- Moving from a casual and consensual decision-making culture to a more standardized system, schedule, and language
- Leveling the playing field, on the one hand, and redistributing the power based on relevant expertise, on the other
- Attending to the upstream and downstream implications of actions as well as to the social and cultural implications of the new software

In the end, Nike was successful in supporting its global supply chain staff to create and know a new story.

2. Lead with desire.

Story-driven organizations articulate their core mission in human terms. They have an objective that transcends the organization itself and connects to a larger human purpose.

This larger objective is the ground where employees can connect their self-story to the organization story. Story-driven organizations do not ignore the need for profit (e.g., the money story); they just realize that every company needs to make money and, therefore, it is not unique in terms of their story. What does your company care about beyond its money story? What abiding values does it serve? What does your company so desire that it would stop your story if you ever got it?

As an example, a large U.S. organization had chronic difficulties retaining new management staff, most all of them young women in their first career. Its managers had studied this problem quite

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extensively from within scientific and machine metaphors hoping to find solutions to “fix” the problem. David invited them instead to reframe the problem from a story perspective: What does this conflict between efficient use and retention of talent say about the true story of the organization’s mission in the world? What they came to realize was that while many of these new leaders were indeed leaving for better paying jobs, this could actually become a brand rather than a liability. Rather than fight it, why not embrace it and change the organization’s story?

The organization went on to build an extensive leadership development and mentoring system for these young leaders; sought out additional funding to support it; and became known as the region’s premiere launch point for young leaders in this profession. The organization attracted many of the best and brightest to join and contribute in return for the opportunity to launch their career in strong fashion. The new talent the organization developed went on to enrich the broader community, and enough of them remained to competently fill the organization’s ongoing roles.

3. Connect to a larger narrative.

Organizational life is increasingly influenced by the tensions between the networks and the hierarchies in and across which people work. Within these increasingly connected environments, people want to believe that they are contributing to something that is greater than themselves. Many of these aspirations are based on ancient archetypal drives. As Willa Cather observed, “There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.” A key role for leaders in this regard is to tie the organizational objectives to some broader contribution in line with the organizational values, and to create paths for people to see their role in making that vision come true. As a colleague once shared, “We can only go as far as our stories will take us.”

As an example, the employees in the IT Department of a large health services company were having difficulty effectively collaborating with the various lines of business they supported throughout the organization. One of the core issues that surfaced for them was that the company had grown so large and complex that they seldom got to see the results of their work—unless, of course, someone called to complain because it was not working. David shared a story with managers about the value provided by the various electronic monitors attached to his father-in-law while he lay in a coma dying; the information displayed on the monitors—colored lines and changing numbers and occasional soft beeps generated by the equipment and its software—presented the only indications of life and a welcome gift to a family coming to terms with its grief. Taking inspiration from this story, the management team reinstituted a practice of regularly exposing the technical staff to the fruits of their labors for patients and other employees so they could connect the story of their work, often done in isolation, with the larger narrative of serving people.

4. Keep conflict alive.

Remember that conflict and struggle are the medium of story, and that internal conflict is what makes a character human and compelling. A company without conflict tends to be a company without energy. Embracing conflict and a bit of struggle in your story will give permission for conflicting energies to coexist in your brand and in your culture. Honor your conflicts; they are where your unique story lies. Often your conflict lies in those topics you don’t want to talk about, the ones that everyone

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seems to avoid. Follow that aversion to its source and you will find the makings of your story. In the creative tensions inherent in conflict is a source of energy that great companies harness for innovation and success.

A story is over when its central conflict is resolved. Therefore, story-driven organizations work to keep conflict *alive* in their story instead of trying to resolve it. They actively embrace the tensions, seeking a *third space* in which creativity can flourish.[11] Think about the dominant brands in our culture; most work with conflict by managing to hold two opposing energies in dynamic tension—Southwest Airlines, for instance, combines a fun-loving free spirit with the discipline of low costs. These organizations frame the conflict as between two *good* things, rather than a good thing and a "bad" thing. Freedom and efficiency are both virtues in their own right. Southwest does not try to "solve" this conflict but, instead, celebrates it as an integral part of its company story and continually plays with both energies without a need for one side to triumph over the other. This approach provides it both a source of energy for the brand and a barrier to competition.

5. Protect your stories.

True character is revealed through the choices a protagonist makes under pressure. Pressure in a story is created by life *not* proceeding as the character expects. "The stuff of storytelling," says Robert McKee, "is the gap between what we think will happen when we take an action, and what actually happens."[12] Using a narrative frame can help here, particularly during times of change or growth when an organization has little to guide it but its shared sense of identity, what Peg Neuhauser calls the organization's "sacred bundle" of stories.[13] What is your organization's sacred bundle? If you could only take five stories with you to start the organization all over again, what would you take?

As an example, an organization in the western United States had routinely won regional and even national awards for its performance. However, when the direction of its business shifted as a result of new federal legislation, it fell way behind many of its peers in the industry. Working within the typical metaphorical frames, it was having minimal success improving its results. In working with them from a narrative perspective, David turned the focus from the external brand in the marketplace and its performance to the internal experience of that brand among employees.

In doing so, it became apparent that many of them had not sufficiently relinquished or grieved the old story of their past successes. The disconnect between who they saw themselves to be at that point (a failure) versus who they once were (leaders in their industry) was great. A daylong organizational wake was organized to help employees celebrate and be honored for the many years of great success so they could move beyond their collective past and apply those same strengths to the new situation. Within the year, they were back near the top.

6. Give your story away.

Paradoxically, the primary goal of a storyteller is to "give" his or her story to the audience. Story techniques are there to invite the audience into the story so that they can make it their own. Story-driven organizations set an inspiring objective for the business and then invite employees and suppliers to play with it and make it their own. They focus on engagement rather than control. The rise of social networking and blogging technologies, for example, are tools organizations can use to engage employees

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and stakeholders in the organization's unfolding story. A significant benefit of such efforts is they engage people in wrestling with the tensions inherent in running an organization.

California-based Patagonia, a leading manufacturer of high-end outdoor apparel and equipment, is a good example. Patagonia's mission statement is "Build the best product, do no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis." In story terms, this last part is a desire that transcends the organization and one that connects employees to a larger human purpose. It is a meaning-based objective.

Patagonia's products have to work superbly to fulfill the first part of the mission statement, but they also have to be good for the planet. This conflict between product performance and environmental stewardship—two good things—is what defines the Patagonia culture and powers its brand. The company is quite transparent in discussing its struggle, stating in one product catalogue, "Everything we do pollutes." Managers were surprised when customers responded by saying "Keep doing this, keep trying; thanks for being honest."[14] Having a worthy objective and sharing its struggle made the company *more* engaging rather than less.

Patagonia also makes a space for employees to engage personally in the company mission. Aside from actively encouraging employees to make time for the outdoors—the company posts a daily surf report at its Ventura, California, headquarters—Patagonia also pays employees to work for up to two months with an environmental group of their choosing. When the company decided to switch to organic cotton in 1994, it organized tours of cotton farms for 350 employees—a third of the workforce—so they could experience for themselves the difference between conventional cotton farming and organic farming. By allowing employees to see for themselves what was at stake, the company engendered the commitment to overcome the challenges such a change would entail. As a result, Patagonia is now credited with creating the first large-scale market for organic cotton in the United States, enabling later adoption by larger corporations such as Nike.

What is remarkable about Patagonia is how its influence as a brand and a company is so much larger than its size. By leading with desire and embracing its struggle, the company has enlisted the best energy of employees, suppliers, retailers, and consumers. As one Patagonia manager put it, "We honestly want to give our lives' purpose to this company; this is an opportunity to do that—you don't get that very often."[15]

Conclusion

We live in a time when business and society are confronted with issues on a planetary scale, such as global warming and sustainability. In such a context, it is imperative that organizations find ways to relate their mission and challenges on a human scale in order to engage and energize their employees. Towards this end, story is a powerful medium for touching both mind and heart. Business leaders who develop narrative competencies will better understand the metaphors upon which their organization is based and through which it tells its story to employees and customers. Leaders will also be better able to manage change by helping their organization reshape its reality through new stories.

Story-driven organizations use the narrative metaphor to engage their employees and other stakeholders in creating a compelling and

excelling environment for work. In doing so, they have shifted away from a dependence on outdated, limiting metaphors. Images of war as sources of victory are reframed to include conflict and creative tension as sources of innovation. Images of science as sources of measurement are reframed to include objectives as sources of meaning. Images of the machine as sources of efficiency are reframed to include plots as sources of coherence and purpose. Images of the family as sources of allegiance are reframed to include characters as sources of identity.

Rather than focusing heavily on problem solving as a way to make something they do not like go away, story-driven organizations engage employees in making what they truly care about exist.[16] Connecting employees to sources of meaning, identity, and purpose makes it possible for them—as Southwest Airlines tells its employees—to "feel free to actually enjoy what you do."

Notes

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