

Communicating Values in Today's Corporate Legal Culture: The Role of Storytelling

Law students are trained to use narrative in their work, and most lawyers hone their storytelling skills over time as persuasive tools. However, storytelling about the values and ethical challenges of the field itself usually stops at the front door of the law firm or corporate legal office. Within the walls of the private bar, pressures to increase billable hours and the commoditization of the field still rule the day-to-day agendas of law professionals. There is little time for conversations that connect values to the workplace and the lives of the lawyers who work there.

To help lawyers learn about how leaders can use narrative to transform corporate legal culture, the Center for Law and Renewal invited author Stephen Denning to lead Minneapolis lawyers in a day-long, hands-on workshop in February 2007 at Dorsey & Whitney law firm. Author of *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative*, Denning offered his experience at the World Bank and in the field of knowledge management as ways to communicate ethics and values in the field of law.

Learning New Skills of Storytelling:

The meeting opened with three stories from participants that exemplified the conflicts lawyers face today. These stories involved the compromise of truth-telling among firm partners or between lawyers and clients in contract negotiations. They also involved struggling with divergent and urgent demands of work and family.

These leadership stories took complex issues and explained problems and solutions in clear and simple narratives. Through the stories, lawyers shared knowledge, understanding, and values.

Denning used these stories as teachable moments for the group: How did the three lawyers deliver their stories? How did they make decisions about the conflict they experienced? What were the values they grappled with? How did their solutions affect their work and their careers? How did their solutions affect their law firms?

Stories To Gain Attention, Elicit Desire for Change, and Reinforce with Reason:

Storytelling connects and engages people around issues of change. As Denning said, "It brings the networking from the corridors of law firms into the conference room. It is a tool to get people to work together, to collaborate, to converge on common goals."

Minnesota has a "professionalism aspirations" code of ethics that was issued by the state's Supreme Court. It sets standards throughout the legal system: between lawyers and clients, lawyers and other lawyers, and lawyers and judges. During the seminar, three influential Minneapolis lawyers commented on the application of Denning's presentation to the code of ethics. Participants discussed how these values could become the foundation for change within their legal institutions and how their leadership stories could move this code from the generic to the practical and specific.

During the course of the day, Denning walked participants through the experience of developing a “springboard story,” a narrative designed to communicate a complex idea involving values and to spark action for change. Denning asked participants to answer a series of questions as they prepared their stories: What’s wrong in my firm now? What would it look like if it were fixed? As a leader, am I promoting a goal that can be viewed as worthwhile? Is it relevant for my law firm and for the field as a whole?

In breakout sessions, participants explored stories that brought ethics and values to life. They practiced stories that would get people’s attention, elicit a desire for change, and lead directly to action. They listened and watched as their fellow participants offered their stories. They discussed the role of emotion in storytelling. They saw how one person can make a difference in a large law firm.

Themes of the Day:

The message of the workshop was an upbeat one: Despite the contentious world of stress and conflict in the legal arena, stories help lawyers survive in difficult times. Well-crafted stories are tools to transmit values and create a healthier workplace. Stories are more effective than charts and an overflow of data. They are more persuasive than abstract arguments and can reach more people more effectively than one-on-one dialogue. Stories help corporate lawyers articulate a new vision for their field.

Lawyers in Minneapolis are stepping up to speak out about change. They are telling stories of courage and bravery in their firms. Not only can these stories help create a shift in the culture of individual law firms, but they can also lead to a transformation in the field itself.

To one participant who spoke at the end of the workshop, this discussion was about a new form of lawyering. This new form – described by various terms - holds promise for the careers and lives of lawyers and for their clients. Another lawyer said: “We can reclaim the historic role of attorney as counselor and advisor and find ways to give value to that.” Then another added: “We have a tremendous opportunity to help our clients see the big picture. And this means doing things because it’s the right thing to do, as well as the legal thing. Lawyers can be ethical guardians and do what’s right, but we have to be willing to recapture that.”

With comments like these, the field of corporate law in Minneapolis is already beginning to change.