

# Leading change through storytelling

**When Steve Wynn, founder and CEO of Wynn Resorts, said ‘storytelling has changed my life and changed my business,’ it became clear that storytelling as a leadership capability has become one of the foundations of the culture at Wynn Las Vegas. Alison Esse, Director at The Storytellers, explains how the power of narrative and storytelling can help leaders to spearhead and activate change in business.**

Wynn Las Vegas is one of the most luxurious and high profile hotels on the super-competitive Las Vegas strip. A guest was checking into the resort when she realised that she'd left behind a vanity case containing some essential insulin for her husband's diabetic condition. The bellboy who'd taken her luggage talked her out of returning home. Instead he called his brother who lived not far from the guests' home, arranged for him to collect the case from the guests' housekeeper, then left his shift and drove 150 miles through the night to collect the medicine himself and deliver it to the guests' room so that it could be administered at exactly 7 am.

Asked why he had taken it upon himself to do this, the bellboy said that both he and his line manager could see how his actions would contribute to the resort's 'Story' – a simple and clear narrative co-created with the Executive team articulating the ambition of the business to provide the ultimate guest experience 'so they never want to leave.' Permission granted. Job done.

Wind the clock back a few weeks and envisage several hundred Wynn leaders being introduced to the Wynn Las Vegas Story. Inspired by the narrative and trained to personalise the Story and engage their teams in it, they rose to the challenge, each and every one encouraging dialogue and discussion amongst their teams to discover new, better ways of working and turn them into action. The exemplary behaviours of employees – chefs, chambermaids, casino dealers, receptionists, florists, waiters, concierges – were celebrated through a robust internal communications campaign, supported by a daily display of back-of-house posters depicting these 'heroes' and their stories. And a specially-branded social networking tool, StoryWeb, was deployed to capture and share the efforts, ideas and stories of success that visibly linked back to the strategy and vision of the business. The Story is kept alive today through the sharing of these stories – motivating, inspiring and reinforcing the culture of collaboration and involvement that now characterises the Wynn culture.

The bellboy story is testament to the sense of empowerment and line-of-sight felt by one of the most junior members of staff in the 9,000 employee resort. And this sense of empowerment is down to the



leaders of that business. 'Wynn's leaders understand and believe the journey the business is on,' says Esse. 'They are effective at engaging and communicating with their teams, armed with the tools, skills and confidence to bring the Story to life in a personal and authentic way, and involve their teams in ongoing, action-oriented conversations about how they can make a difference.'

'The effective leadership of change is critical to the performance of an organisation,' Esse continues. 'Technology has revolutionised the way in which companies are evolving and so too has consumer behaviour and demand, against a backdrop of globalisation which has intensified the competitive landscape. Savvy consumers have far more access to new, cheaper and better products than ever before - now in a saturated marketplace - requiring a shift from simply selling products to providing exceptional customer focus and service. Companies will differentiate themselves not by what they do but how they do it, and employees will need to think and work in different ways accordingly.'

So what impact does this have on leadership? People naturally resist change, preferring to stay within their comfort zones and sticking to often entrenched behaviours. To break through these resistance barriers and bring people with them, leaders need to foster a culture of collaboration, involvement, dialogue and consultation internally to build loyalty, trust and teamwork and retain talent. They need to identify and own the changes they need to make within their teams, not just react to a top-down mandate. This means that 'being good at their job' will not necessarily make a good leader; great leaders need to be leaders of people, not just excellent in their technical skills - able to communicate, engage and motivate their teams, as well as develop talent and groom future leaders. And they need to create a constant line of sight for their teams to build that critical sense of purpose and significance.

But to do this they need a good Story to tell; a Story of the business journey that everyone can understand and believe in, and a process through which they can personalise the Story and deliver it in an authentic, meaningful way for their teams. They need a framework within which they can challenge existing processes with their teams, and look for opportunities as pioneers of new ways of working. They need to be role-models of the brand promise and internal company values – to walk the talk. They are the message, not simply the people who deliver it.

The leaders at Wynn Las Vegas went through some intensive storytelling training to bring them up to speed, and it's paid off.

It's not a silver bullet, and takes constant time and effort and focus in terms of recruitment, talent management and training and development. But with the right mechanisms in place, the support of senior management who are committed to culture change and with a compelling Story to tell, leaders can really start to lead the change.

For further information on The Storytellers' programme, contact Alison Esse, Director at The Storytellers.