



## Building Trust Several Stories High

*“Our distrust is very expensive.”*  
*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

**ABSTRACT:** This article explores how current interpretations of rational decision-making may systematically erode trust between individuals working in/with organizations. Trust-building is an economically “irrational act” if the goal is to maximize utility via objective reasoning. Evidence from experimental economics bears this out with proof that decisions are often made outside the range of rational logic of objective decision making. Seven subjective interpretations of fairness are presented to begin to chart the subjective logic of real decision making and storytelling is presented as an excellent tool for blending imprecise, technically irrational (multi-rational) yet vitally relevant perceptions of fairness back into rational decision making without abandoning the ideals of rationality or floating into never-ending relativism. Storytelling is presented as a method for incorporating the paradoxical qualities of human subjectivity into the hyper-rationalized frameworks of traditional organizational and managerial behaviors.

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In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001) and his research team identify a paradoxical combination of humility and will that separates great leaders from the merely good. Intentional doubt in one’s subjective judgments is a good definition of humility-in-action. In the same way, I propose that a paradoxical combination of rational and irrational (multi-rational) input to decisions will produce great decisions rather than merely good ones (at least in terms of enthusiastic implementation). But how can we efficiently integrate subjective interpretations of fairness into a decision making processes without losing the value of quantified reasoning?

### Stories are subjective

Experiences drive subjective reasoning in the same way facts and proof drive objective reasoning. Personal experiences (subjective points of view, past personal impact, interpretations, emotions) cannot be proven but they *can* be related through a story. Shared stories report those experiences in a way that describes their importance, assumptions about cause/effect, and interpreted meaning. If relevant stories about past interpretations of fairness and unfairness are introduced into decision making process we can invite diverse interpretations that retain ambiguity and paradox (quality vs. quantity, safety vs. cost, humility vs. will etc) of human experiences.

In the following, I will investigate factors of trust and fairness as perceived values and motivating forces in organizational settings; and I will show some practical methods

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of incorporating storytelling and story-listening as tools for working with and building these subjective values without sacrificing the objective values of rationality and measurement.

### **What is trust?**

A sociologist might assert that trust is one person's assumption that another person is benevolent or good – the fuel of social capital. A lawyer may point out that trust means a fiduciary duty to act on behalf of someone other than oneself. Wander into mathematics and trust explodes with complexity:

Trust (or, symmetrically, distrust) is a particular level of the subjective probability with which an agent assesses that another agent or group of agents will perform a particular action, both before he can monitor such action (or independently of his capacity ever to be able to monitor it) and in a context in which it affects his own action. (Gambetta, 2000)

The most valuable word in all these definitions for a practitioner looking for tools rather than definitions is the word: subjective. Trust is a subjective opinion that guides human decisions when there is a risk of wasting time, effort or money if one plays by “the rules” and “gives” after which another person/organization, outside one's control, breaks the rules and exploits one's contribution (paraphrasing from above). Organizations that depend on individuals to go the extra mile, give their all, or contribute 110%. Individuals depend on trust that the organization will play by the rules and reward and protect contributors in a reciprocal manner.

### **Are you trusted?**

Most decision makers if they ask, “Do you think my decisions are fair?” will hear a mumbled, “Sure.” Such is the nature of organizations. However, when I ask groups to anonymously write on an index card the level of trust and honesty within their group, using a 0-100% scale as a metaphorical quotient, the numbers generally range from 90% down to 0%, with an average usually below 65%. If that remotely represents the true (though in fact unquantifiable) level of trust among participants, 65% is a sad result.

Trust is low in many organizations. Some might say this represents default levels – that humans are basically out for themselves and trust levels represent this fact. Symptoms like CEO salaries and corporate malfeasance may have resulted from standardized decision criteria and decision making processes that systemically abdicate responsibility for trustworthiness from decision makers. Decisions are measured against profit, not trustworthiness. The very idea of applying diverse interpretations as to what makes a decision trustworthy is time consuming, imprecise and offers no deliverable. Therefore in our current business models it doesn't get done. And trust continues to erode between decision makers and decision implementers. As trust erodes, so does collaboration, cooperation and contribution.

### **What is fair?**

Expectations of reciprocity, i.e. trust, fuel contributions to organizational goals. I expect my paycheck at the end of the month so I give you a month of my time, energy, creativity and effort with the trust that you will come through with my check. I trust that you will treat me fairly so I work hard. Unless... I brought in a huge account last month that made the company three million dollars--in which case I expect more than my usual paycheck, because “that's only fair.” And if I am not treated fairly (by my definition), I

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will be taking a lot of sick days this month, I won't work so hard and I might just "forget" to finish that report you wanted. Once an employee, a company or a boss is considered unfair, willing contributions significantly decrease, cease, or in worst cases deteriorate into sabotage often without any notification that trust is broken (Simmons, 1997, 1998).

The subjective nature of what is and isn't fair is a core issue of trust because it frames the criteria individuals use to evaluate trustworthiness. The concept of reciprocity - getting in return for giving - is now rated as highly as utility by economists who test real people in experiments that simulate real life. Experimental economics (more below.) show that rather than operating by rational models, individuals (and thus entire economies, not to mention organizations) often make technically irrational decisions, utility-wise, in that they will forego profit to establish "trust" for future mutual benefit, and if disappointed pay money to punish free riders (McCabe, 2003) .

Organizations currently attempt to make fair decisions by using consistent, shared and metrically verifiable definitions of "fair," i.e. pay grades, compensation plans, and rational decision making models. Explicitly stated guidelines supposedly mean that everyone knows the rules and agrees to play by them. Participants who don't like the rules are expected to conform or leave.

For a long time that worked just fine - until organizations went global. Today, the idea of "one best way" to make decisions that are fair – fair enough to sustain business - disintegrates as cultural interpretations flood across international boundaries (Trompenaar, 1998). The subjective interpretations of what is, and is not, fair exceed the capacity of decision making models to deliver decisions that are rational and *also* are interpreted as fair by all parties involved. There are too many interpretations operating to define fairness (and thus determine contributions) via a one-size-fits-all approach.

#### **Fair from Seven Subjective Points of View**

What seems fair to one person can simultaneously be interpreted as unfair via at least six other mathematically defensible interpretations. Every decision to give time, energy, money or attention to a person, cause or organization includes a complex (largely subconscious) evaluation of past experiences and future impact on status, family situation, monetary impact, peer behavior and more. Organizational success depends on a critical mass of individuals who trust that they will get a fair return for their efforts. How do they interpret a fair return? For argument's sake, let me posit seven potential interpretations of a fair return.

- Fairness means we all share equally:  
"Six people and three computers mean each computer will be shared by two people, equally. All for one and one for all."
- Fairness means whoever worked hardest gets the most:  
"Hey now, I come in at 6:00 a.m. and leave after 7:00 p.m. at night and Miss Sassy wanders in at 9 and leaves at 4:00 p.m., it's only fair to give me a computer to myself and let her wait until we get some more."
- Fairness means whoever contributed the most gets the most:  
"Whoa, there, Mr. Brown Cardigan. You may spend eleven hours a day here, but I'm the rain maker. I brought in the Wal-mart account so I get as many computers as I need since my contributions pay for them."
- Fairness means those who have been here the longest get the most:

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“Sorry Miss Golden Girl, you may have had a good year last year but I’ve been here for twenty years. I am also the union representative with seniority so I will be getting the first new computer that walks in that door.”

- Fairness means whoever needs it the most gets the most:

“No one here is in any position to make demands. All three computers are going down to our New Orleans office. They lost everything and they need them more than we do.”

- Fairness means whoever got here first gets the most:

“Look, Sister Teresa, possession is nine tenths of the law. The computer in question happens to be at my house, installed and up and running. You guys are too late.”

- Fairness means whoever is clever enough to win the game of business deserves what they can win:

“Actually, my agent negotiated in my contract that both I and my assistant get new computers every two years, so you guys can argue over this remaining one, but two of those computers belong to me.”

Simply reading this list destabilizes one’s confidence that fair has a definition.

The imprecision of these interpretations is not in question. Because fairness *is* impossible to define, it has been dismissed as impossible to accommodate in rational decision making (except via the one-size-fits-all method).

#### **Getting around the impossibility of fairness**

In the 1950’s, Dr. Kenneth J. Arrow proved that equality, in the sense of perfectly fair access to opportunities and fair distribution of risks, is a mathematical impossibility. Arrow began with a model of equality that included four mathematical equations. Roughly translated into layman’s terms they would consist of four principles:

1. I get as much choice as you do.
2. I don’t suffer for your gain.
3. This is not a dictatorship, and,
4. Resources are limited.

He set out to find a formula so all four equations would be true at the same time. In short order he was able to prove that equality is impossible. They *can’t* all be true at the same time. That conclusion, that fairness and equality of economic opportunity are rationally impossible, has prevailed in economic thinking for about fifty years--end of story. Until Amartya Sen came along.

Amartya Sen won a Nobel Prize in 1998 for contributions to welfare economics. Specifically, he proved that while collective decisions can never achieve mathematical equality, collective decision making can come much, much closer than current levels of inequality (i.e. majority rules, parliamentary procedure, rational decision models) if we can find a way to aggregate individual comparisons of value into collective decision making (Sen, 2004). Sen suggests including “imprecise” interpersonal comparisons of utility that represent perceptions of equality beyond the reach of mathematical measures – where life, in all its uncertainty and ambiguity, is actually lived. For instance, a papaya is useless to a person who dislikes them while simultaneously valuable to the person who enjoys them – even if the mathematical measure of both papayas is demonstrably equal. If the papaya-hater trades her papaya for two of the papaya-lover’s oranges this mutual

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mixing of subjective valuations can create a mutual experience of equality, if not a mathematically defensible one.

Technology has so dramatically increased the potential for metrics in rational decision making that participants in collective decision making, overwhelmed with “hard” data, have very little time or patience for “soft” subjective data like stakeholder perceptions of fairness. Comments like, “they will just have to understand” or “they don’t have to *like* it, they just have to do it” represent the feelings of futility when faced with the frustrations of balancing the objectively right decision with one that people subjectively like.

Mathematically derived decisions only appease those who like what is measured. In theory, clearer direction and better focus would improve compliance. Yet clarity in direction can still fail to deliver compliance. Employees continue to falter, not because the goal, “double sales in one year,” is not clear, but because the motivations behind it or the distribution of work/rewards seems unfair when viewed through subjective lenses.

### **Experiments vs. Models**

The fact that the delicate final balance of justice will forever elude us does not give us a free pass to shelve justice in favor of utility or rational decision making. Injustice is cited as a primary cause of famine, political instability, poverty, and disease. In his 1998 Nobel Prize winning speech Amartya Sen describes published research about equality-seeking decision models as a “series of obituary notices.” But Sen revives the debate to plot a path that could end poverty, famine, and incidentally demonstrates a way to decrease counterproductive resentments and eroding trust within organizations.

While equality is mathematically impossible, the *experience* of equality can and does happen every day. Snuggled right next to what is impossible is a long continuum of theoretical possibilities – what Sen calls an “embarrassment of riches.” Rational decisions stop at the point where costs are minimized and benefit maximized, a long way down the continuum from perceived fairness by a diverse group. The implicit assumption that more rational decisions inspire better cooperation is not supported by experimental economics. What *is* supported is that more trust building decisions deliver better cooperation. The conceit of “objective decision making” hides a blend of bad assumptions that experimental economics reveals as false.

One recent school of thought originating in France chose to describe themselves as “post-autistic economists.” (See their journal at [www.paecon.net](http://www.paecon.net)) These economists embrace the analogy that “like sufferers of autism, the field of economics was intelligent but obsessive, narrowly focused, and cut off from the outside world” (Campbell, 2004). As a fan of Temple Grandin (a genuinely autistic writer) I think they do the term autism a disservice. Autism at least produces decisions based on sensory input filed in chronological – if not rational - order. Autistic picture thinking (sensory thinking) is closer to human decision making frameworks than most rational models.

### **Subjective Reasoning**

In economist’s experiments, memories and emotions (including trust or a grudge) override rational evaluations of utility. In a rational frame, more is always better and something is better than nothing. Yet subjects forgo utility in order to make parlays for reciprocity. The experiments –dictator, ultimatum, public good, and trust games - simulate real life situations where collaboration pays off, freeloading is possible, most

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people are strangers and no one has complete information. Irrationally, players will reject an “insulting” offer even though, rationally, the offer is “better than nothing.” Players share more when choices are public record. Players punish free riders who withhold contributions to the public good, even if it costs them personally. Reciprocity, trust and social order seem to be at least as important, if not more important than utility. The investment game (Berg, Dickhaut and McCabe, 1995) is a good simulation (assuming the demographics are representative) of real life choices impacted by feelings of trust and betrayal:

The “one-shot investment game” provides player 1 and 2, strangers who do not meet, with two consecutive choices, one each. Player 1 is given \$10 and told that whatever he shares with Player 2 will be tripled. Player 2 can choose to share some, all, or none of the tripled money with Player 1. *Most* offer a 50/50 split and get the same 50/50 split back. This is an irrational act. They do not choose to maximize profit. They choose instead to build trust and future reciprocity. Even Player 2, who faces *no* consequences for keeping the tripled pot, irrationally matches the share from Player 1. That is *most* do, some share less and some keep it all.

Other experiments applying public good games indicate that “free riders” make up about 25% of the normal population (Fischbacher and Gächter, 2004). How do players respond to “rationally” greedy free riders who keep more than their fair share? Put subjects inside MRI machines in different cities, let them play for ten rounds and watch closely.

When experimental economics and neuroscience collaborate we get to see emotions happen in real time at the physical level. At the first indication of reciprocity or betrayal, blood rushes to the cingulate cortex, which processes both emotions and abstract thinking (King-Casas, et al. 2005). Emotions govern economic choices when trust and reciprocity are involved. This allows us to make “irrational” choices that turn out well. When players give more than required they are likewise rewarded by complete strangers in responsive sharing. Positive changes in investment relate to positive changes in repayment. Reciprocity would not, and *could not* occur if all decisions were “rational.”

We have traveled through classical economics, institutional economics, experimental economics, post autistic economics and now neuroeconomics. Each of these fields builds a story about economic decision making simultaneously framed and illuminated by subjective points of view. All are beginning to show how trust and reciprocity often override utility maximization in economic decision making.

### **Trust is a risk you don't want to reduce**

To the extent that organizations can dispense with risk, they do. Contracts, performance reviews, and systems to monitor and document compliance attempt to replace trust with “accountability.” But as Albert Einstein is reported to have said, “Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted, counts.” Measures and rational decision making (dependent on measures or facsimiles of measurement) have past the point of diminishing return and now operate to erode subjective experiences of trust.

Human behavior is no less “economic” in organizations, and yet management protocols continue to use rational decision making models to maximize the objectivity of groups struggling with difficult decisions. Quantitative analysis formulas crunch

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numbers at exponentially increasing levels of complexity to “improve” the objectivity of decisions with a blind disregard for subjective factors like fairness, trust and reciprocity. “Rational” decisions erode subjective perceptions of fairness and trust. When a person or a company maximizes utility in all economic or social exchanges, they successfully exploit to the fullest extent every available opportunity. In casual parlance we call that person or company a “user” or worse. They are certainly not considered trustworthy.

Ambiguities are filtered out when “criteria” and “outcomes” are clarified. Once “maximize stockholder value” is chosen above other possible interpretations of right action – the decision is doomed to betray the sense of fairness (trust) for anyone with a different interpretation. Agreeing to a decision ill-suited to ones value system is hypocritical. Hypocritical agreement produces hypocritical implementation. Public agreement is no guarantee of genuine implementation of a decision. Attributions of unfair treatment allow workers to employ strategies like invisible walls, strategic non-compliance, information manipulation, etc. (Simmons, 1997), in their view to justifiably withhold resources and cooperation. It is their story and they stick to it, in spite of efforts to spin or reframe. This leads us back to the eminently practical uses of story in organizational settings, as a tool for folding subjective realities into the decision-making process.

#### **When to use story?**

Interest in storytelling in business settings has been focused on two primary leverage points, designed to sell rather than make decisions: one, get there first with your preferred story or frame so you can create desired conclusions, or, two, re-frame interpretations through a preferred story to alter conclusions so they flow in the “right” direction. These two strategies are not only rather coercive but hide decisions that might be fatally judged “unfair” by significant contributors. Machiavellian wannabes may try to use storytelling to spin “trustworthy” interpretations onto a decision that initially feels unfair but this is still swimming against the tide of human behavior. Why not bring stories into the process earlier so that decisions become more discernibly fair to a broader constituency in the first place? If trust building is left until after decisions are made, “right answers” face an uphill battle. It takes a major investment in spin for unpopular decisions to be implemented whole-heartedly by people who feel betrayed or belittled by the decision.

#### **Intentionally subjective (ir-rational)**

The term irrational carries far more negative baggage than it deserves. Technically it only refers to dynamics that are impossible to represent as a quotient of integers – like trust. Trust is nonlinear. A small thing (two peers rolling their eyes behind your back) doesn’t necessarily deliver a small impact. Fairness too, is impossible to represent via ratios. Even if you tried, it would be a nightmare of a model and still a finger-in-the-wind guess. We need subjective tools for such a subjective dynamic.

Measurements would sum up an experience of say, launching a new product that was both wonderful (+50) and terrifying (-50) as zero, while story expresses a roller coaster ride of passion. Stories about fairness-in-action or trust-in-action prevent the dumbing down of emotional content that measurements create. Three stories of fairness illustrate the complexity and meta-rationality of subjective experiences:

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“Last Christmas I was shopping at the last minute (I know, I know) with my nine year old daughter. We were in a long line piled up with purchases, everyone piled high, when about four customers up from us, I see this little kid maybe ten years old. He was buying a toaster. You could tell he was using his own money. He counted the dollars first - all ones. Then the quarters, the dimes, the nickels and finally the pennies. This was a very slow process. At first everyone in line was just impatient, but then we saw him digging in his pockets. You could feel the anxiety start to build. Whether they were using the corner of the eye method or looking straight on, everyone in the line was holding their breath thinking, “will he have enough?” The tension rose. My daughter urgently yanked on my sleeve and said, “Mommy give him some money!” I told her, “hang on honey, just hang on” A whole minute passed, front left pocket inside out, front right pocked inside out, back left dig, right left dig, it was a last ditch dig in his right back pocket that revealed the dime he needed to complete the purchase. The entire line breathed a sigh of relief. I kneeled down to whisper to my daughter, “It’s disrespectful to help someone before they actually need it. Don’t you think he is much more proud of himself to have paid for that toaster by himself than if I’d given him money?”

“When I was nine years old I was a scrawny little boy and I was poor in academics. I did okay in math but I couldn’t spell. I had the worst teacher ever. Ms. Rita Curry\* - she writes books about education now. Let’s say I really dislike her. She would humiliate me and the other kids. When she was mad at me, she’d put me under her desk and kick me every now and then. It didn’t work. Then she built a little cage with two bookcases and two desks and told me not to move. I made her mad again and she grabbed my thumb and ripped it back. Damn it hurt. But it taught me. I am not going to give in when I am right. I will take it and take it and still keep going because I will not give in.”

“I got roped into coaching a soccer team last year.... of five and six year olds. This is not high level coaching but it takes it out of you. One of the little guys stole my heart. His name was Peter† and he hated soccer, just hated it. He was really bad at it too. He was always at the back of the line. His mom made him wear all this protective gear. He wore sport goggles. The kid was a geek. But I told him he was my “secret weapon” and I played him even when it wasn’t going to help us win. So the test came one Saturday when we had a tournament game. His parents were there. They didn’t always come. I knew I had to play Peter. I put him in and his feet didn’t touch the ball once. We lost. I got a lot of flak about it. But a year later his mom called me. She wanted to thank me. His behavior at school had improved and she said his self esteem had improved dramatically. He had told her he was “Mr. Bonner’s secret weapon” and she thought that had made the difference.”

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These stories set out personal comparisons that can only be accommodated in an idiosyncratic manner. Subjective reasoning, by definition, results in idiosyncratic solutions. The “right” answer from a rational point of view can still be interpreted or even massaged in a way that ensure Mr. Bonner has the right to help those who need help, that our Christmas shopping mom can create opportunities for reach goals and the nine year old boy inside the fifty year old man will not be backed into a corner. But the group can’t know these tweaks to the decision are important until they know the stories of those impacted or implementing the decision. Once the decision is made the window of opportunity is usually gone – it is much easier to change a blueprint than a constructed house.

The most profitable leverage point to organically improve implementation occurs before decision making. Most decision models and processes come with a pre-selected interpretation of fairness designed more for clarity than diversity. Amending these models to gather and retain multiple interpretations of fairness before decision making delivers the potential to produce more creative solutions and loosen participant certainties of clear distinctions between what is, and is not, fair.

### **Trust depends more on the stories they tell, not the ones you tell**

Current levels of trust (mistrust) within the complex network of individuals and communities necessary for success matter more than desired levels. Pursuit of trust using outcome-based process focuses so powerfully on desired levels that truth about current levels is sublimated. Trust outcomes are privately ridiculed rather than anchored in collectively experienced stories. A more highly leveraged goal than telling a story of desired levels of trust is to listen to stories that reveal the criteria against which decisions will be judged and massage the decision or the criteria away from untrustworthy perceptions (if that is revealed) to trustworthy perceptions. The easiest way to do this is to share stories about fairness and trust before a final decision is made between decision makers and implementers.

The benefits of sharing these stories are many. Stories establish a baseline of trust against which the group will naturally seek to improve. In my consulting experience the worse the gap between stories of ideal trust and real levels of trust the more passionate participants feel about improving (a useful paradox).<sup>‡</sup> Explicitly sharing private stories tests interpretations against the community’s memory and can reveal unwarranted mistrust for group correction. The sharing of stories also builds familiarity – a prerequisite of trust and sometimes sufficient by itself. Because each related story taps into participant experiences the stories are inherently relevant. These are the stories that matter because these are the people who matter.

### **After Storytelling: a Decision that is “Fair Enough”**

How do groups naturally process imprecise yet important information? A matrix? Weighted regression? No, most humans process complexity by telling and listening to stories of direct experiences of the complexity in question. Complex and important events like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina stimulated a rush to find and tell the stories. We told and listened intently to any stories remotely connected to the city, people who live(d)

<sup>‡</sup> Unless there is a powerful exploiter in the group - a free rider with power will inherently keep trust low.

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there, Islam, hurricanes, and most telling, where you were when you heard about the disaster. Your story of where you were when you heard represents how your brain links up to the rest of the stories (perceptual association based on sense memories).

Numbers don't deliver visceral immediacy. Stories are more personal than charts; reveal nonlinear (emotional) factors, and simultaneously process facts and feelings without destroying ambiguity. Decision making preceded by a storytelling session where participants process unscripted stories and listen more closely to their own stories is a decision making model that incorporates the kind of imprecise interpersonal comparisons called for by Dr. Sen.

Impasse can even disappear when story reveals new interpretations that rewire perceptions of impasse. For instance, a medium sized law firm stuck in an impasse over compensation structure broke free after a day of storytelling. I always start storytelling with "who are you/why are you here" stories. (Process outlined below) The partners' stories revealed dramatic differences in their interpretations of "success." Older partners with memories of the depression showed love for their families by working as hard as possible. Younger partners whose parents were never there (one with a famous litigating Dad) decided that work could kill a family. Self discipline was redefined when the most stern of the group told a story of being forced into boarding school at eight – a story he meant to demonstrate self sufficiency but which also opened floodgates of compassion and a deeper understanding of why he worked so hard. Finally, the story of one of the younger lawyers revealed that as a boy he had no chance of an education – mowing lawns was as much as he could hope for. Until a neighbor lady called him in, told him she had been sent to school by someone who asked her only to return the favor. She wanted it to be him. She only asked that he do the same when he could. He promised. No one in the firm (and this is always my experience) had a clue that they worked alongside heroes every day.

#### **Never looked at it that way**

Stories widen participant interpretations before conclusions about fairness are made and it is too late. Stories can travel back to a "time" before interpretations of unfair action hardened into interpretations of betrayal. Storytelling blurs clear distinctions that separate us and them. It unpacks parliamentary procedure's prepackaged options and makes them messy again. It reveals how abstractions (numbers, categories, matrices, spreadsheets) oversimplify real life and real people. It reduces interpretations of decisions to the one common denominator we all share – being human.

Storytelling won't make decision-making "fair," since fair is mathematically impossible. However, storytelling as a part of the decision making process can integrate broader interpretations of "fair" earlier and widen diversity of thought so decisions feel "more fair" to more of the people concerned.

Consulting recently with an intelligence agency I watched 25 high ranking executives discuss the upcoming mother of all mergers – 15 distinct agencies asked to report to one man. It is like asking 15 siblings to decide among themselves what to do now that there is only enough oxygen for ten. When asked to share stories, participants first shared stories that placed blame or defended against blame. This revealed vital interpretations of fairness. But the stories didn't stop there. Soon their stories included more ambiguity less defensive reasoning and more personal connections. People were

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allowed to contradict themselves (paradox) without losing credibility, and deep listening changed the atmosphere from self-defense to self-examination. Most participants emerged from this storytelling session much less convinced they had a clear and reliable definition of fair and personally awestruck by the complexity of the decisions necessary to integrate all 15 agencies. Originally pre-disposed to interpret any decision as political empire building, they left ready to cut decision makers some slack and sacrifice personally for the good of the whole.

Every decision can't be preceded by a pow-wow to investigate "What is fair?" The best idea is to do this once and then do again as needed. The group will self regulate. Those impatient with this kind of "touchy feely crap" will find implementation gets easier. Those who disappear into relativism will probably need time limits. You need a structure but remember that impatience and a low tolerance for uncertainty can lead to rigid rules about what kind of stories to share, what makes a story "relevant" etc. While a highly specific process for sharing stories may soothe control needs, most people don't need more constraints and are quite adept at finding an example of injustice or justice and narrating the event. You don't need a new degree, or a consultant to use storytelling in decision making – just a basic understanding of subjective interpretation, diversity as a core value, and perhaps a stopwatch to minimize hot air. With that said, here is a recipe:

### **Story Lasagna**

I offer this recipe as I would offer a recipe for lasagna. Please check to see what you have in your refrigerator and who is coming for dinner, then adjust accordingly.

1. Set-up: Stories beget stories so the facilitator must begin by telling stories. Tell at least three of your own stories. Then give story legitimacy as a tool by explaining the subjective and objective aspects of organizational decisions and build a case for this process.

2. Finding stories: People often freeze up when asked to tell a personal story. Your job is keep them relaxed and focused so they are successful before they have a chance to decide they can't find one. Here is a handout that helps find stories. Reproduce with plenty of room to write answers.

3. Do the writing part first. Introduce each source of story with your own examples. Give them five minutes to write.

4. Give partners 3 minutes each to "test tell" their story. Explain that brevity is a gift and the goal is a story that can be told in three minutes.

5. Invite everyone to tell their story to the group. Facilitate with an iron hand when it comes to feedback. No one is allowed to invalidate someone's personal experience or the conclusions they came to. Ask for appreciations only (Lipman, 1995).

6. Let the stories integrate into the groups implicit interpretations. Don't try to make this explicit with criteria or "new ground rules" – leave it loose.

This process tests your trust in process and in trust. Thank goodness there seems to be a human instinct for cooperation and for trust (Axelrod, 1981; McCabe and Smith, 2001). But you have to test it yourself – there is no proof – only experience. Building trust increases risk and on occasion increases costs but the reciprocity potential usually makes the risk worthwhile. (Except for when it doesn't. If free riders sabotage the process say 25% of the time that should give you a 75% success rate – probably as good as it gets with collective subjective reasoning).

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Sen proved that imprecise representations of interpersonal comparisons are better than nothing. Close to fair is better than miles away. Succeeding about three fourths of the time is better than not trying. And holding several definitions of “fair” is better than mandating one definition and spending all your resources forcing a diverse population to believe the way you believe.

### **Developing “Who I Am /Why I’m here” Stories:**

Step One: What personal qualities make you a trustworthy person? What earns you the right to influence these people? (i.e. are you compassionate, smart, diplomatic, honest, etc?)

Step Two: Because you have these qualities you will find evidence of them in your past experience or your memories. Below are four wells to dip your bucket and find a story.

- A time in your life when this quality was tested
- A person/event in your life that taught you the importance of this quality
- A time when you failed your own standards and decided to never let it happen again
- A movie/story/event that exemplifies this quality for you.

Choose one and begin to write your story “stream of consciousness.” DO NOT edit for telling. Simply “upload” the memory in the order it occurs to you, documenting as much sensory data as possible: smells, tastes, touch, sounds, scene detail, and dialogue. Write for five minutes:

Step Three: Tell your story to a partner. Notice how long three minutes can be. Turn your internal editor off and just tell the story as it happened.

Step Four: Tell your story to the group. Ask for appreciative feedback:

:

- “What I like about your story is....,”
- “What this story tells me about you is....”
- “This story helps me see a new point of view (describe)...”

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