Storytelling and Ethical Leadership - Developing Narrative Skills to Manage Change

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Governance (market/employer disruption, communication within and outside the profession, mergers)

The twentieth century philosopher Hannah Arendt once said “storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.” As someone who experienced and survived the worst of totalitarian regimes, also coining the phrase “the banality of evil”, she theorised that ethics can only be taught by telling stories. She also demonstrated how totalitarian leaders deliberately manipulate language and distort truth, in one sense a preview of ‘fake news’. In Australia and around the world, public confidence in organisations continues to fall, helped along by revelations from royal commissions into institutional abuse of children and the banking sector, and by media coverage of events such as the Opal Tower crisis in Sydney. All of this is happening as the effects of climate change become more obvious, with the majority of scientists arguing an unprecedented global response is required.

Engineering leaders interested in building ethical organisations capable of leading change, may do well to consider how and why they tell stories. It is no secret that storytelling is central to human experience and culture. Authentic storytelling is, for most people, a learned skill, all the more so as available communication channels increase in number and in speed. If Engineers want to lead change, they must develop and practice mature narrative skill-sets. They must understand how stories are passed on within an organisation, and appreciate the effective practice of empathy (as being integral to the development of authentic narratives). This paper considers the central role of storytelling during the process of change, and presents a framework for the development of narrative skill-sets.