

Engaging employees through leadership storytelling at EDS

EDS employs around 118,000 people worldwide, had revenues of more than US\$20 billion in 2004 and is ranked 95th in the *Fortune* 500. The company has gone from strength to strength following the technology boom of the '90s, but to stay ahead it has to ensure it not only embraces change but leads it. Here, head of corporate communication Tom Mattia explains how the company is using the age-old tradition of storytelling to take it to a new level.

Technology solutions company EDS manages more than 50,000 company servers, 350 million-plus customer relationships and over two billion customer interactions annually in 41 languages. As 2004 drew to a close the company faced a number of challenges. EDS had been struggling for the past 18-24 months and with two CEOs in four years it had lost its direction. Employees felt divorced from leadership. The senior management needed a framework to help employees understand organizational strategy and to engage them in the vision they had for the industry and EDS itself.

In late 2004, a UK consultancy called The Storytellers was brought on board. There had been a culture of storytelling previously when ex-presidential candidate Ross Perot ran the company. The belief that storytelling simplifies the cascade of strategic information persisted among senior management, but the culture of storytelling had died away.

Developing a storytelling culture

Until recently, most of EDS' internal communication had been delivered via electronic means, mostly by e-mail. But the organization wanted to create more of a storytelling culture. So the internal communication team led by Jane Bamford in the UK and The Storytellers began the process of developing a culture of storytelling

within the company.

"EDS went through a tough time," says Tom Mattia, vice president of global communications. "There were still company stories from Perot's time, but they were no longer being told in a unified fashion. We started thinking about turning storytelling into an employee engagement process. The EDS culture in the past was one in which we told stories to advance the company."

The process was necessary because

"I see storytelling as the main vehicle both internally and externally for doing business. It's a process that unites and bonds people."

of the quick succession of CEOs: "We had a new CEO swiftly followed by a new management team. We had to keep 118,000 people on board despite those changes," says Mattia.

Storymap plots future path

The first stage in establishing a new storytelling process was to create a company dialogue or journey with senior management. The Storytellers sat down with the senior team in the UK and US to discuss where the IT industry was going, how EDS fitted into that and where its future lay. They created a draft storymap –

similar to storyboards used in the film industry – that became the tool for developing and plotting the company's strategic journey ahead.

This initial process enabled the leadership team to simplify the company vision: "They'd taken our complex business – that has no end product – they took all the pieces and helped us to lay out the story in six chapters," says Mattia. "There was a great interaction between the consultancy and our internal communication team. The thought process was theirs and I was very pleased with the simple construct they created."

Marcus Hayes, strategic story writer at The Storytellers (UK), explains how creating the storymap helps build alignment in the senior team. "It focuses on key messages, cutting out detail that people won't remember. Then it links these messages in a series of chapters that represent where the business is now, the vision for the future, the competitive challenges, the drivers that need to be focused on to help achieve this vision, and how individuals can start to plan their response accordingly."

Each chapter of the storymap was illustrated with inspirational stories from within the business to bring the messages to life and give them meaning. The storymap is designed to act as a framework and key navigational tool for people as they learn about the vision and what their own particular challenges are.

Bringing the story to life

To identify suitable organizational stories, The Storytellers and Bamford's team put out feelers. They used contacts in the US, UK and

Australia. It was important that the initiative was perceived as non-US centric but inclusive of all geographies, something that suited the UK-based consultancy, Bamford and the EDS head office in Plano.

Once the black and white version of the storymap had been approved by CEO Mike Jordan it was used to create alignment among senior management. "The storymap shows the company journey based on senior management's belief in what the future of the industry will be like," says Hayes. "The company's investing in tools and services that will create the backbone of its offering."

According to Mattia, the point was to make employees understand why the company was doing this and drive their enthusiasm: "Our story is that we'll make a \$2billion investment in what we see as our future. We think this vision helps our clients – through new technology and products."

Engaging front-line leaders

The next stage was to engage 1,650 senior leaders and 12,000 front-line managers. Between 200-300 leaders were invited to a presentation day in Plano, where Mattia presented an illustrated version of the storymap to them, explaining its significance and how it worked.

Delegates were seated at circular tables so that they could have breakout discussions following Mattia's explanation of each chapter. "It helps them to become architects and allows co-ownership and co-creation," says The Storytellers' Alison Esse, head of business development. "It allows them to interrogate and explore what's already in place and to come up with their own stories."

By allowing the leaders to have time out to discuss the chapters and tell their own stories, it also gave them ownership of the process. "You have to build a dialogue," says Esse. "It starts with a framework and leaders are encouraged to use it to create their own story. One example was the head of the airline section, with 5,000 employees, who used it to create his own local story. Or you can use the master story but with different or more local stories underneath."

The 12,000 managers worldwide attended presentations in their local area, and another 700 received the presentation over the intranet. In Asia there was a streaming video. Mattia also visited Asia and the UK. All managers and leaders had access to tools on the intranet. These included the Mattia presentation webcast, facilitator's guides, video, resource packs with tools and devices that support the storymap.

The aim was to provide leadership with equipment that can tailor the storymap to their function or region without losing the business journey. "It's a simple way to show people the big picture but still have fluidity and flexibility. The storymap is the one main concept," says Esse.

Before rolling out the storymap process to all staff, the chairman wanted it tested on the front line. Seven focus groups in the US and the UK tested it and while it worked in the main, several small changes were made. "It proved the construct worked," says Mattia. "And we got closer to the truth in a couple of chapters. Feedback was that we needed to invest in people first, followed by training and development, then new technology. It changed the focus of executive communication which in turn was a trust builder. I'd gone in talking about 'we' and 'us'. Our people said you have to talk about 'our people' and show that the business understands them."

Creating an ongoing story

After approximately 15 iterations, Mattia flew to Europe for a final approval of the storymap in May 2005, meeting with European communicators and managers. The storymap is now being rolled out to all employees.

The managers and leaders can present the storymap – with help from the online toolkit – in a variety of ways including staff meetings. Employees are then encouraged to submit stories via dedicated story cards or a URL address. The story cards capture the essence of stories, while the homepage of the intranet has a teasing action to drive people to each story map chapter.

It's early days but the response has

been tremendous so far, says Mattia, who receives around six e-mails daily containing stories. "Our leaders find the sessions give them a connection to their teams that's part of the business but not typical," he says. "It creates a living story where we can share the gems through a variety of means such as poster campaigns, online and film – it brings the EDS story to life."

He adds that the outcomes are threefold: knowledge sharing; motivation; and pride in the company. "People can see the role they can play in the bigger company picture. Our goal is that in a few years everyone will know the EDS stories but will have forgotten that this process took place. Up until now, our 15 second elevator speech has been just a list of statistics. PowerPoint has sucked the intelligence out of corporate America – we need stories."

The future for the organization

In a few months the leaders will meet up and share their feedback. This will include campfire sessions using stories leaders have gathered – what's worked and what hasn't. Mattia sees storytelling as the main vehicle both internally and externally for communicating. "I guess I've become an advocate – it's a process that unites and bonds people. All communication starts inside and moves outside. If you can get all your people to be ambassadors – and most of our people are based in client sites – that's immensely valuable. The point is that we want everyone to understand our story – it's based on how we view the world."

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