

Book Review

Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organization Lives Happily Ever After - Innovating Business Storytelling at Its Finest

Reviewed by Andreea Doria Petre, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania

Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organization Lives Happily Ever After

Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries

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125 pp.

\$19.99

ISBN 978-1-137-56272-2

Kets de Vries brings forth a new and innovative approach in management, organizational change and leadership. As one of the top thinkers in management, he has been a professor at universities such as Harvard, INSEAD and McGill. Having published over 40 books and over 400 scientific articles, Kets de Vries also has a vast practical experience, having worked as a consultant for major global companies such as Goldman Sachs, KPMG, Deutsche Bank, Shell, Heineken and others.

The book illustrates five fairy tales through which Kets de Vries aims to emphasise the importance of mastering the key elements in leadership and management in order to succeed in an organization, and how this can only happen at the same pace as developing the inner-self. This personal growth occurs as a result of overcoming adversities.

The first fairy tale presents the story of a wise and beloved king who lost sight of how to rule the kingdom the right way because of an evil and envious goblin, and had to send off his two sons in a quest to regain the trust of his people, and trust in himself. The author explains how important it is to “know thyself”, and offers examples of leaders who underestimate the personal need for introspection, or lack the process

of making conscious choices instead of spending each day simply reacting to what is happening around them.

The second story illustrates an old, vicious king who was always dissatisfied. He treated his subjects badly and never accepted criticism, so his advisors never dared to tell him how things were getting worse in his kingdom. In an extreme situation, he is cursed to wander off into the land, to live in poverty and see for himself what his ruling has done to the people. Kets de Vries uses this particular fairy tale to discuss the issues that appear in a company when the leader has attributes such as narcissism and vanity, attributes that lead to the destruction of an organisation from within.

Chapter four reveals an alternative “Cinderella” fairy-tale, in which one beautiful and hard-working young girl had to endure the harsh words and behaviour of her ugly, lazy and angry stepmother and stepsister, but manages to accomplish great things and escape from the tyranny back home after helping a kind crone. A particular theme that has flourished from this chapter is that of motivation. Just as the crone did, leaders should be able to encourage, help and support people so that they can become the better versions of themselves. In order to obtain great results, leaders need to make sure that they inspire and encourage people to pursue as many self-development approaches as possible.

The fourth story is about how to build an efficient team, through the illustration of how four talented but different brothers killed a boar. The author approaches the much-debated subject of how to create the right teams in an organisation by discussing themes such as the functional and dysfunctional dynamics between the members, team coaching, matching the right members in the right team, possible problems that may arise from this and so on.

In the fifth fairy tale, Kets de Vries explains how to build an effective organisation through a story about a jungle filled with chaos, with no leader or structure at all. The animals went through many hardships until they managed to make the forest prosperous again, and get rid of the tyranny of the lion king. The author presents real-life situations where he demonstrated how people need a healthy-working environment, how people need to love what they do and where they work, and why the psychological aspect matters so much in any organisation.

After each story, the author explains the highlighted concepts in the fairy tale, and also illustrated them with real-life cases with different organisations or people that he had a chance to work with. The most interesting part is that each chapter contains a test at the end, with the help of which the reader can test his or her own approach regarding different attributes in leadership or management.

The main themes approached by the author include, among others, self-knowledge and development. The idea of knowing yourself is an ancient one, and was first put forth by the ancient Greeks at the Oracle of Delphi. Pilgrims were advised to “know thyself”. This was a recurring theme across time and across cultures for philosophers. Although the idea itself is not new, the approach to it is innovative. In a way, it can be said that it is part of a recent trend of popular science. This means that scientific or philosophical arguments are presented in a way that the general public would find

easy to understand. However, make no mistake about it, this book is the result of thorough and deep analyses, grounded in data.

Self-development requires understanding those factors that would make an organisation ineffective. Among these are hubris, narcissism, discouragement, faulted dynamics between team members and others. This requires a great amount of courage, and openness, from the leaders. They must be ready and willing to face criticisms from their team members, which they must not interpret as personal attacks, instead, as good opportunities for improvement. They need to understand that all the team members want the team to succeed. By accepting these criticisms, leaders can see for themselves their own weakness and grow. Just as the main characters in the fairy tales overcome obstacles and adversity from others, so do leaders must face their own “demons”.

This book can be safely said to be aimed at every single person that wishes to understand the mechanisms behind good leadership and organisational skills, whether they are academics, businessmen or just individuals that have an interest in personal development. It is captivating, entertaining and full of good examples. The overall style of the book makes it a transformative experience for any reader, while also remaining an easy-read.

In conclusion, Kets de Vries manages to surprise and captivate his audience with a fresh style. He explains complex scientific ideas though easily understandable and relatable language and stories, a fact that demonstrates great mastery of the concepts on behalf of the author. I would definitely recommend this book to anyone, but mostly to those who aspire to become leaders in their fields.

Andreea Doria Petre is a young student at the University of Bucharest's Masters Program, "The Administration and Development of Human Resources". A graduate of one of the top universities in the world, King's College London, having studied Political Economy, she has also enrolled in many courses regarding psychology, economics, sociology, and education in order to create innovative courses which combine creativity, public speaking, personal growth and entrepreneurship for the development of aspiring managers.