March 27, 2012

Reframe Truths as Assumptions
by Ken Embley, CPPA

Every day we make sense out of reality by connecting facts together and interpreting those facts to create stories. Suppose I describe what happened on a particular morning as follows: “At 5:00 a.m. I got up. Then I exercised, ate a bowl of cereal and cleaned-up. I left for work at 6:20 a.m. and arrived at 7:00 a.m.” This straightforward recital of facts involves little interpretation and thus little meaning. Compare it with the following account of the same morning: “At 5:00 a.m. I arose still tired from too little sleep because I had stupidly stayed up too late watching the Jazz lose a late game on the West Coast. Because of that, I only had time to run two instead of the five miles I planned to run. Hurrying to catch my bus, I forgot to bring the Moneyball DVD I promised a colleague.”

To create a story about my morning, I chose some facts and left out others and provided some interpretation of the facts I chose. The result is an account that has meaning; it suggests that my morning was frustrating, disappointing, exhausting, and embarrassing, qualities that do not come through in a simple rendering of the facts. I made sense of the facts I chose to include, not necessarily how others might choose which facts to include or how to make sense of those same facts. For example, I might think, “Boy, I ran only two miles.” But a colleague listening to my account might think, “Wow, only two miles! A two mile run would kill me.”

In stories you tell about the challenges facing your organization, or about a change initiative you want to lead, the same process of making meaning unfolds. “Because you choose which facts to highlight and include in your story and what those facts mean to you, your story is just one possible “truth” about reality. Other people will construct different stories by selecting the same facts as you by interpreting them differently.”¹ The result is a large number of different “truths.”

“Treating stories as truths blinds us to the possibility of alternative versions of reality. That in turn prevents us from connecting with other people where they are, and generating the widest set of options for action.”² In my opinion, it is important to “practice viewing stories about reality as just that, stories, and treating them as assumptions, not truths.”³

Truth, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder. Managers frequently see their role as the provider of organization “truths.” Sometimes there are policies, procedures, or other “truths” to dispense. However, much of the time, “truths” are subject to interpretation. To me, it is important to test “truths” by reframing them as assumptions and then revising the story if findings suggest that they are not quite on target.


³ Ibid, page 254.