

Edited by Regina Fazio Maruca



# What Managers Say

# What Employees Hear



Connecting with Your Front Line  
(So They'll Connect with Customers)

## Once upon a Time at San Juan Regional Medical Center

*Gary Adamson, B. Joseph Pine II,  
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Once upon a time. When strung together, these four words are among the most powerful in the English language. Their very mention starts a vivid movie in our minds full of colorful places, wild animals, vile villains, and courageous heroines all wrapped around an important life-changing lesson and served in bed with warm cookies and milk. And even though most of us have a hard time these days remembering what we had yesterday for breakfast, we can recall every detail about these stories some three, four, or even five decades later. We also remember the people from whence such stories came—Hans Christian Andersen, Lewis Carroll, Mother Goose. Just the names are enough to give a warm feeling inside. In fact, even though Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were famous professors at the renowned Berlin Academy and spent more than 40 years of their lives compiling the German Dictionary, that's not what they're known for. They did one other thing, almost a hobby really. They collected and rewrote folk tales—stories that had been handed down over generations. They compiled them into a book called. . . . Oh, you know about *Grimm's Fairy Tales*? Out of all the many things the Brothers Grimm did, what you remember are their stories. Interesting.

What do stories and their uncanny ability to stay vividly in our memories have to do with corporate strategy, company transformation, and employee engagement? Everything! Let us explain. In our work we help senior management of companies, large and small, make the fundamental changes necessary to succeed in the experience economy.<sup>1</sup> And because experiences require a different set of management capabilities, as well as a different view of what the company actually produces, delivers, or

sells, we are not dealing with incremental change. The business transformations we guide involve conceiving and “themeing” a whole new set of economic offerings, mass customizing these offerings for each of our client’s customers, developing the partnerships and technology to extend these experiences beyond the usual points of customer contact, redesigning the physical space that the company inhabits to more effectively stage these experiences, re-conceiving the way employees are recruited (we use the term audition) to perform their new experience roles, and building a comprehensive corporate university that teaches in the new way to every employee and business partner the company has. Then the hard work starts!

No matter how well conceived and funded our plan, no matter how committed our leaders, no matter how pressing the market forces, this experience economy transformation is doomed if we can’t vibrantly engage all the people in the company that will be needed to carry it out. And that’s everyone. They need a new concept of the company and their place in it. They need a new context for how the company will compete effectively in this new economy. And most important, they need to know that this is not another “flavor-of-the-month” change program that leaves almost as quickly as it arrives. The employees need meaning, emotion, and belief. In short, they need a good story.

### WHY NOT A MEMO?

Conventional wisdom says that when confronted with a major organizational change—one that shakes the very foundations of how the company does business—top executives need to leave their offices and venture out “among the people” to make sure that everyone understands. Memos are written, speechwriters summoned, PowerPoint slides prepared, and communications plans developed all to get everyone “on the same page,” “rowing in the same direction,” “eating the same dog food,” or “singing off the same song sheet.” (Hopefully not, however, “drinking the same Kool-Aid.”) E-mails are sent, meetings called, retreats planned, annual reports prepared, and newsletter articles published, all to ensure that “at the end of the day our new value proposition and business model have been ingrained in the culture,” or something like that. Then leaders pack up their stuff, go back to their offices, and wait to see their seeds of change take root and blossom. And they wait. And they wait. And they wait. Usually, not much happens and that leaves managers scratching their heads, ordering books like the one you are holding in your hands, and lamenting to each other about how much people hate to change. In other words, there’s a whole lot more talking about change, identifying what needs to change, meeting about how to change things, and writing about the coming changes than there is actual

changing going on. And each failed attempt just makes it more difficult to succeed the next time.

Why doesn’t this approach work? And why, after so many failed attempts, do leaders still use it? Let’s examine the underlying assumptions upon which the “Just Tell ‘Em” approach is based. First, it assumes that the front-line employees have the needed context and background information required to understand major changes in strategic direction. (They don’t. Often times even the managers, who have much more information, confess that they don’t even understand what it all means.) Second, it assumes that employees totally accept the decisions of their top executives. (They don’t. Especially after so many “major” change efforts have come and gone.) Third, “Just Tell ‘Em” assumes that employees don’t have valid ideas of their own about where the company should be going. (They do. And while they may be forced to accept the conclusions of management, they will still draw their own conclusions and act accordingly.) Fourth, this approach assumes that change is basically an information issue and that if they just knew the reasons why it would be good to change, they’d change. (They won’t. Ask any smoker or overweight person about the accuracy of this assumption. Change is as much about relationships, emotions, and gut feel as it is about facts.) And, last, this approach assumes that no “fluff” or entertainment value is needed; because the subject matter is so important and the people presenting it so noteworthy, employees will pay attention even if it’s boring. (They won’t. This flies in the face of that old saying that “Great teaching is one-fourth preparation and three-fourths theater.”) Zero for Five: that’s a bad night in any sport, especially the sport of strategic change.

So if it doesn’t work, why do so many leaders keep doing it? It may be as simple as: it’s all we know. When you received your management training—both in school and on the job—we’ll bet there wasn’t any on the power of memorable, engaging experiences, or on the whys and hows of storytelling. It’s hard for even the most courageous leader to bet the future of the company on something he or she doesn’t know how to do. Let’s see if we can’t fix that.

### A GOOD STORY

There are many genres of stories and many different styles used by their tellers, but a good story always combines conflict, drama, suspense, plot twists, symbols, characters, triumph over odds, and sometimes even humor—all to do two things: capture your imagination and make you feel.

A great story draws you in, places you at its center, connects to the emotional core of your being, and doesn’t let go until its meaning has become a permanent part of you. (Why else do you think it was possible

it began calling itself the Galileo Group, for its goal was to discover a new and more personally meaningful center of the healthcare universe. In the midst of their work the members made a radical decision: they would focus first not on the patient experience but rather on the *employee* experience. "We can't consistently provide the most personal patient experience until we can consistently provide the most personal, healing professional experience. If you expect to be successful in individualizing the patient experience you'd better get good at individualizing to the employee," Altmiller told us. "Our entire patient experience redesign will start with an exclusive focus on the employee experience. We're going to try to personalize everything from recruitment to retirement because we think it will do more than anything else to help our employees understand what we want for patients. And in these times of staff shortages and heavy competition for the best people, it would be a good strategy even if we weren't planning to do it for patients. As it is, we've come to believe that individualizing the experience will ensure our future success. You've got to be able to do it not just when times are good but when times are hard. We're not just following a trend—we're putting it in everything we do."

So a new mission, vision, and philosophy were developed, a new personalized benefit program put in place, and a completely new healing environment designed into the facility expansion project. Many other initiatives were being readied while the rollout of the first phase of changes was begun. And then something quite unexpected happened. All the hard work, all the careful planning, all the innovative design—all of it resulted in *confusion*, not cohesion. "I realized pretty quickly," Altmiller relates, "that while we had done a good job of defining 'the what,' we were doing a bad job of communicating 'the why.' If we were ever going to connect the dots, it wasn't going to be with another PowerPoint presentation. Instead we needed a 'what's the point' experience."

## RAIDERS OF THE LOST ART

And so began the work on something that would change everything—the work on a story. It became known as "The Raiders of the Lost Art." As the name implies, through this adventure story we were looking for something that had been lost, namely the art of personalized healthcare. The story took place in three distinct lands: the land of Medicus (medical professionals), the land of Communia (regional community), and the land of Patiem (patients). In each land, operational statistics, industry trends, competitive issues, and organizational initiatives relating specifically to the subject of that area were presented.

To get a quick sampling of the lessons presented in each land, let's take a quick journey. In the land of Medicus, employees learned how the baby-boom generation affects not only the patient population they treat,

to accurately transmit all of human history, before there were printing presses, through oral stories?) And therein lies why stories must become an integral part of corporate strategy: they are the experience that lets strategy be understood at a visceral level. To be effective, strategy must not just inform, it must inspire. And people are *never* inspired by reason alone. "The heart always holds hands with the head." That's why the "Just Tell 'Em" approach fails. It totally overlooks the role emotion and meaning play in any life-altering action. And if strategy isn't about altering the life of your company, why do it?

Stories are better for sharing knowledge and ideas than PowerPoint presentations and dry memos. They develop relationships by helping everyone realize we all have issues in common. Stories can crystallize common values and beliefs. They can build stronger teams and a stronger sense of community. Stories invite people to bring the "whole person" to work (heart and head), and therefore elicit much more thorough perspectives and meaningful commitments. They can create a platform for more aspirational work and can make each employee feel more valued. In short, stories have the potential to revitalize the way we do business.

By this point you may be thinking, "This all sounds great but is there any proof that it works?" Indeed there is. As Stephen Denning, former program director at The World Bank said in the introduction to his book, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*, "Time after time, when faced with the task of persuading a group of managers or front-line staff in a large organization to get enthusiastic about a major change, I found that storytelling was the only thing that worked."<sup>2</sup> Now let us tell you a story. It may have happened once upon a time, but it also happens to be true.

## FOCUSING ON EMPLOYEES

"It was a real trying period," says Steve Altmiller President and CEO of San Juan Regional Medical Center, reflecting back on his early years at the 175-bed, sole-community provider in Farmington, New Mexico. "There I was, a new CEO at a historically strong community hospital and suddenly everything was out of sync. We were taking lots of financial hits; our earnings were down, our hospital-sponsored health plan was going bankrupt, unions were trying to organize our nurses, and we were making many operational and management changes that introduced lots of anxiety. It seemed like everything we talked about was negative, one problem after another. My board said we had to find a way to focus on something positive."

Steve decided to engage a top group of his leaders, directors, board members, and physicians in developing a comprehensive experience strategy that would change everything. Shortly into its two-year project,

but also the peers with whom they work on a daily basis. In the land of Communia, employees took an in-depth look at the hospital's community satisfaction results and discussed how they could change processes and/or work styles to improve these results in the future. In the land of Patiem, employees learned of the exciting new plans built into the facility expansion project, which would provide a unique healing environment for employees as well as all patients and their families.

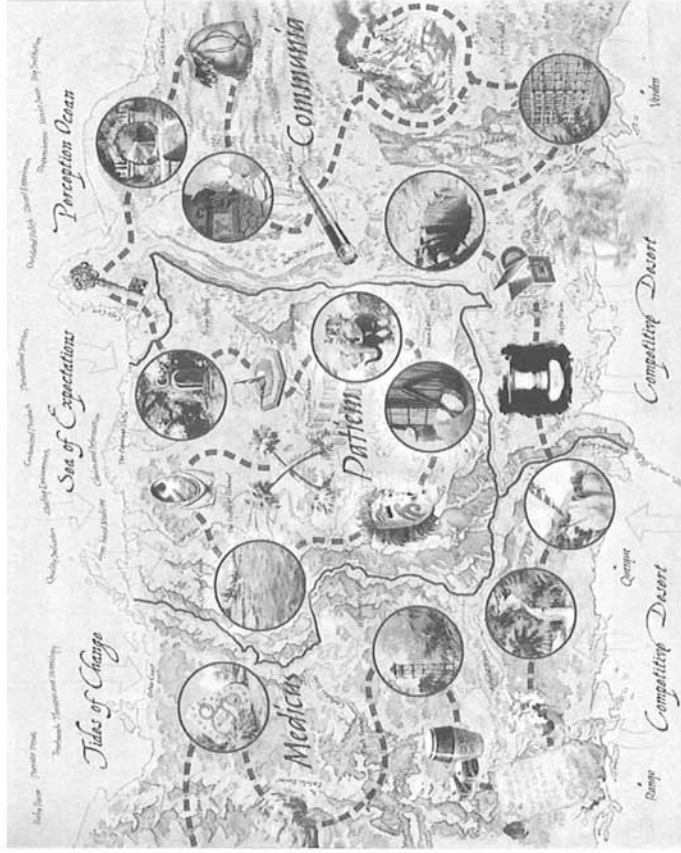
These encounters were enlivened by an environment filled with props, via an Indiana Jones-like facilitator (and assistance from manager guides) and through map icons (landslides, volcanoes, rope bridges, mirages, a treasure chest, hidden caves, a bottomless pit, deserts, oceans, secret passageways, and lush gardens—to name just a few).

But the Raiders of the Lost Art story was not only told; more important it was *asked*. At each map icon, when some new challenge or initiative was presented, a series of small group discussions were held that involved every employee in the session in a deeper examination.

Questions like, "Does this surprise you?", "How do you think this will affect us?", "Are we doing enough?", and "What else would you do?" engaged employees in strategy work as never before. And as the word of the exciting work spread throughout the hospital, more and more employees wanted to be involved. In the end, nearly 70 percent of San Juan Regional's 1,300 employees attended the voluntary daylong sessions. Almost 900 distinct process, program, and facility suggestions were captured and then analyzed, with approximately half of them acted on.

And all of a sudden, the connection between management and employee changed. Skepticism, fear, and apathy departed. Understanding, excitement, and a sense of partnership ensued. How do we know? There are both soft and hard measures. Morale improved, turnover plummeted, and employee satisfaction scores climbed dramatically. New initiatives were understood and embraced; for example, more than 80 percent of the employees have signed up for the customized benefits program that is more personally relevant *and* less expensive to the provider. Further, San Juan Regional opened a Child Discovery Center, with almost 70 percent of its capacity filled by employees' kids.

There was one other thing. (And while it wasn't the primary focus of the story, it was a significant factor in the future of the medical center.) You might remember that San Juan Regional had developed plans for a major facility expansion and renovation to help fulfill its new mission, vision, and philosophy and to create a state-of-the-art healing environment. Many of the suggestions that came out of the Raider's story, in fact, were focused on this new facility. Unfortunately, the hospital could raise only about half the money required to complete the project. San Juan Regional could go to its community for financial support through bond issues or tax initiatives. But the last three times it had



## RAIDERS OF THE LOST ART

San Juan Regional Medical Center • MMIII

This reproduction of the Raiders of the Lost Art story map highlights the adventure San Juan Regional Medical Center's employees embarked on during the day-long session. The journey began in the upper left corner, in the land of Medicus, continued through Communia, and finally ended at the crossed palm trees in the land of Patiem. Each icon on the dotted trail included various learning and discussion points about which the employees shared their input and suggestions for making change.

done so—all for much less money than was needed this time—it had been turned down.

The Raiders of the Lost Art story sessions were completed about four months before the gross receipts tax election. Then something amazing happened. Largely without any help from management, employees began to talk to each other, to their families, and to their friends. And their tone was enthusiastic; they talked about what the project was and, more important, what it meant. They talked about why it was important to patients, families, healthcare professionals, local businesses, even the

entire community. In other words, they talked about everything they had learned in—and contributed to—the story.

When Election Day finally arrived, the air was filled with great anticipation, but also great anxiety. What would happen if the voters said no again? How would the hospital ever fulfill its aspirations? And with new hospitals being built in surrounding communities, could it ever compete successfully should a no vote occur?

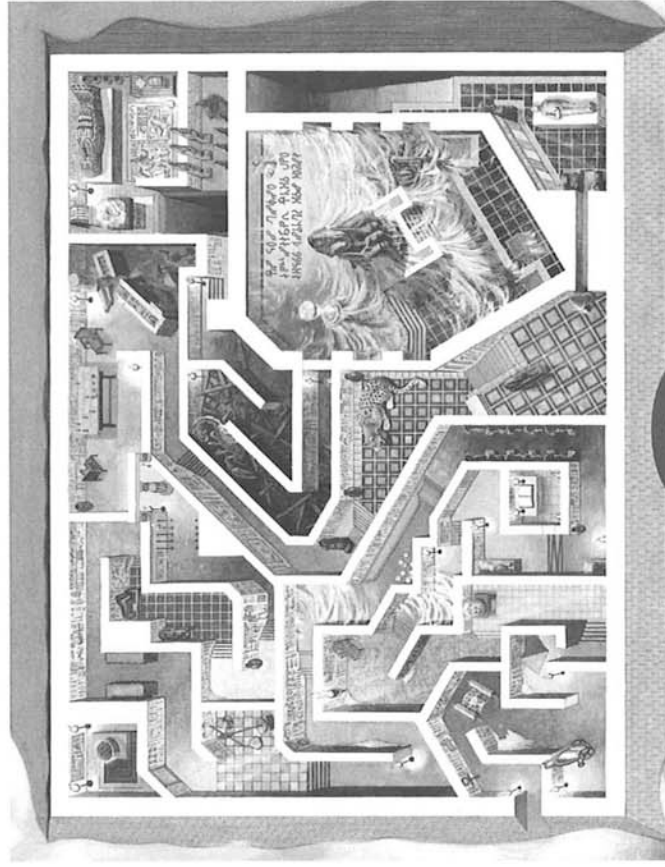
As the votes were counted, it was obvious something major had changed. When the counting was done, San Juan Regional's tax initiative had received 84 percent of the vote! That's right, more than four of five voters supported a tax initiative for more money than the combined total of the initiatives they had voted down every time in the past.

Construction has now begun on a new facility—a new stage really—that will let San Juan Regional provide a much more compelling health-care experience. An experience that lives up to its new mission, vision, and philosophy. One that will let it recapture the Lost Art of Personalized Healthcare. In other words, a very happy ending indeed. Except for one thing—it's not the end. Now, as Paul Harvey would say, let us tell you "the rest of the story."

## RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

With so much success, it would be easy to rest on one's laurels. After all, since all employees now understand—but wait a minute, they don't understand, at least not totally. For since the day of the last Raiders' session things have changed dramatically and will continue to do so. Therefore there is a need for another story, and down the road another one after that, and one after that. Steve Altmiller looks at it this way, "When we decided to do the Raiders story, I looked at it as R&D. At worst, we would learn something, and what we had done up to that point wasn't working anyway. At best, we would build a whole new capacity that would enable us to do new things better, faster, and, ultimately, less expensively. So it seemed it was worth the risk. When Raiders was such a big success, I wanted to use that success as a building block. I didn't want anyone to see it as a one-time thing done primarily to pass the gross receipts tax. That would have missed the whole point of what we learned. We learned a whole new way for management and employees to work together to make dramatic new things happen. So we have committed to this type of storytelling and feedback to be done every 18 months. It's just the way we're going to do things from now on."

And so a second story was prepared and told, this one entitled "The Riddle of the Sphinx." Through solving various riddles and an anagram posed by an ancient Egyptian Sphinx, San Juan Regional employees solved the many confusions that plague an industry as complicated as

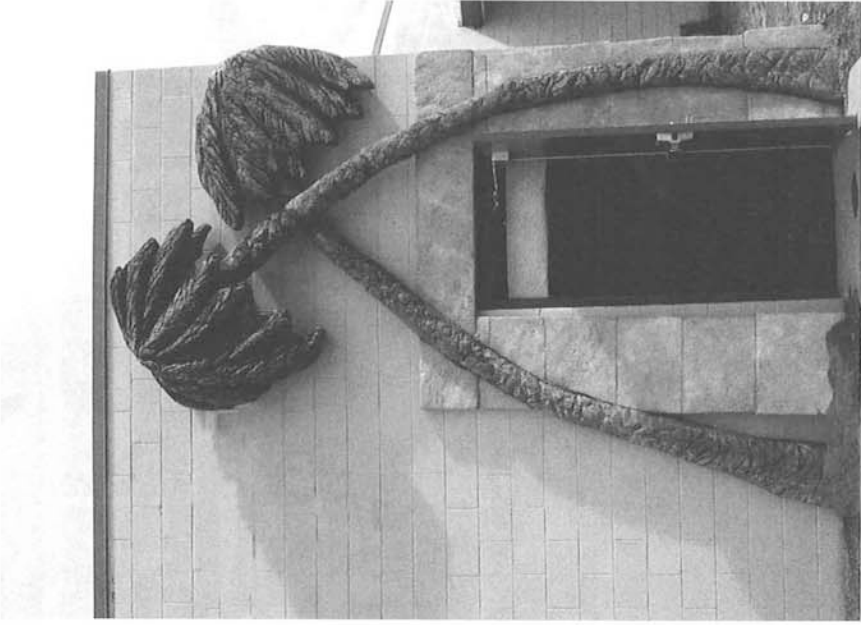


## RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

The second employee storytelling journey included another table-sized map, entitled the Riddle of the Sphinx. The pyramid entrance in the lower left corner led employees along a winding, sometimes treacherous excursion through the serpentine hallways. Various hieroglyphics and riddles were solved along the way, to open secret passageways and reveal hidden staircases—creating yet another engaging and memorable experiential learning lab.

healthcare. Communications confusions, staffing confusions, process confusions, patient-expectation confusions, and technology confusions were all addressed through the story.

For example, the employees' first riddle revolved around various communications confusions such as an in-depth look at the most recent employee satisfaction survey (wherein communications between employees and their managers ranked 4 percent below the national norm). The next riddle comprised all of the confusions related to staffing. Here, employees learned about the newest work/life balance programs recently put into place by the hospital. Riddle three considered an assortment of



"X" marks the spot. This is the main entrance to The Riddle of the Sphinx journey. Attendees enter beneath the crossed palms into an Egyptian pyramid.



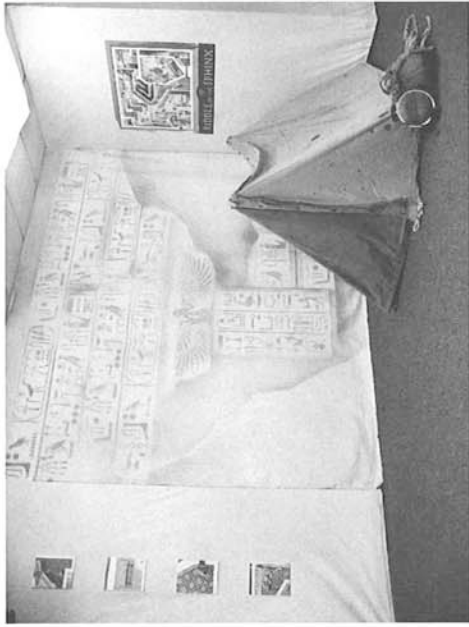
Once inside the pyramid, attendees immediately become immersed in the experience, as they recognize authentic hieroglyphics surrounding them on every wall.

process confusions. During this stage, employees brainstormed ideas to more effectively treat patients despite ever-increasing industry regulations. The next riddle addressed numerous patient-expectation confusions. In one example, employees were asked for ideas in creating strategies to decrease the number of patients who seek treatment elsewhere because they were unaware that San Juan Regional offered those specific treatments. The final riddle asked employees to uncover technology confusions by conceiving new ways to more effectively train staff members on increasingly complicated technologies throughout the system. Best of all, as these riddles and confusions were addressed and

discussed, employee ideas were meticulously recorded so they can be used in future initiatives.

From an environment and employee engagement point of view, Riddle of the Sphinx was an even bigger production than Raiders. "We wanted to capture the same element of surprise and amazement we had in Raiders, and we knew that would require an even more elaborate experience, since Raiders had raised everybody's expectations so high," said Altmiller.

And so it was. The Sphinx story took over a recently closed elementary school and transformed it into ancient Egypt. The Raiders story ended under crossed palm trees ("X" marked the spot), so that's where the



Through the use of dimensional props such as the period-specific tent, canteen, and knapsack shown here, attendees can suspend reality and become part of the story. The journey is coming alive!



Participants are guided through the learning process by a trained table guide and a video flipchart. Fabric walls, again covered in hieroglyphics, separate the learning tables not only to provide privacy but also to develop team camaraderie. The groups were separated by Crews: Tet, Menkaure, Ramses, Khafre, Khufu, Cheops, and Anubis, each named after famous Egyptian pharaohs. As a memento of the journey, each participant was given a "Crew" bandana.



A preshow video sets of tone of the journey, playing simultaneously on five screens located around the room. To further pique attendees' interest, the video features some of the same props that surround them, along with "actors" who are actually San Juan Regional employees. A customized music track keeps the adrenaline pumping, while final scenes show a Sphinxlike creature who poses the opening riddle, along with a challenge to solve that riddle or accept defeat!



What would a pyramid be without its own sarcophagus? To further immerse participants in the experience, they were encouraged to explore the artistic details of this 8-foot long, life-sized prop. See the final picture and caption for a true understanding of the sarcophagus' importance and ultimate discovery of the story.

Sphinx story started. A Disney-esque preshow and postshow video was produced to engage employees in the storyline before the work began and to summarize the story's key moral once it was over.

To get an idea of the power of the immersive environment in capturing the employee's imagination and making them feel—the key requirements of any story—just look at the photos in this chapter. It's a long way from the PowerPoint presentation in the conference room off the cafeteria, isn't it? Much of the reaction to the Riddle of the Sphinx echoed what Diana Candelaria, VP Professional and Personal Development, told us: "People are saying they're amazed; that it's even better than Raiders—and they didn't think that was possible."

Steve Altmiller summarizes his experience with storytelling this way, "Before we started our storytelling work, the reaction to most of the things in our experience strategy plan was 'You can't do that in Farmington.' After Raiders and Sphinx, we are doing all of the things in the plan. That's a big difference."

So what's the moral of this story on stories?

Don't just spend countless hours, valuable brain cells, and barrels full of money doing the research, analysis, goal-setting, and implementation planning necessary to come up with an industry-altering strategy. If you want the strategy to actually take hold—if you want it to change your world—then weave it into a compelling and memorable story. It's something all that hard work needs and deserves. Because when more leaders immerse their employees in compelling and inspirational strategy stories, more companies will live happily ever after.

## NOTES

1. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is*



Throughout the day's learnings, attendees are posed six different riddles, the answers to which (the letter "e," few, stars, wind, fire, and time) are later unscrambled and used to solve a floor-to-ceiling anagram.

