

# Storytelling as a Framing Tool in Organizational Communication: A Case Study of Sebastian Coe's Olympic Speeches

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**Abstract:** As the most influential person in organizations, leaders need to present the competence of them and their organizations to gain trust from their audiences. Oration is a common and effective way to achieve the goal. Thus, good frames are vital to leadership communication. Storytelling is a powerful framing tool which contains multiple messages at one time. In this paper, the author analyzed Sebastian Coe's Olympic Speeches to see how he effectively used storytelling to win the bid. Other elements, such as visual supports are also helpful.

## 1. Introduction

Leadership has nothing to do with titles and hierarchy, and it is not necessarily connected with management. According to Forbes, leadership is a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal.[1] Influence is an important aspect of leadership, but the heroic aspect of the leader is not enough.[2] With the definition of goal achievement, there are many functions that define leaders: giving directions, inspiring people, and providing solutions. All those aspects require effective framing. Leaders have to frame the vision they see to their followers and audiences.[3] Thus, a leader's effectiveness can be determined by how he or she applies framing.[4] In addition, language as a medium of interaction is increasingly being studied in organizational research.[5] Framing, as a way of leadership communication, is important in achieving organizational goals. However, context, which "is defined by those elements that shape how people think and what they expect", is influential to leadership communication.[3]

Sebastian Coe, who is the chairman of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, leading the London bid team beat strong rivals and won the right to host Olympics Games of 2012. Coe's bid speech was believed to be the key element of London's winning. Seven years passed, and at the Paralympic Closing Ceremony, Coe delivered his final speech for London 2012. This closing summary was praised by many people in Great Britain. Coe's two speeches focused on different audiences. This paper aims to analyze Coe's two Olympic speeches based on storytelling, the framing tool he applied, and discuss how audience centered leadership communication helps organizations win bids and competitions.

## 2. Leadership and Framing

Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) claimed that leadership consists of building images and managing meanings.[3] A leader's responsibility is not only making decisions, but also making sense of a complex situation for his or her audience. Through effective framing, leaders interpret the situation to the audience, and help them to form a clear image of the organization. Thus, Fairhurst and Sarr developed a category of framing tools with different functions to help framers construct their leadership communication form.

Conger (1991) analogized a leader's message and framing as a gift and its wrappings, and he stated that, "frames are essentially snapshots that leaders take of their organization's purpose". In the article "Inspiring Others: The Language of Leadership," Conger identified several essential components of a meaningful frame. Conger also developed a brief category of framing devices, but

the one from Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) is more detailed and specific.[6]

Effective frames help individuals or organizations win competitions. For example, Richard Nixon's acceptance speech, when he was nominated for president was considered a key element for his win in the 1968 presidential election.[7] Nordvold (1970) claimed that the acceptance address is a pre-established event because the final evening of a convention is a rhetorical situation that demands formalized frames to express the values of a party.[8] In the article "Framing through Temporal Metaphor: The 'Bridges' of Bob Dole and Bill Clinton in Their 1996 Acceptance Addresses," Benoit (2001) stated that voters had to decide which candidate was the best choice through evaluating the importance of the criteria the candidates engaged in, so framing was influential in the audiences' decision making because the image and impression of a subject can be formed through the frame. Thus, as Benoit claimed, Clinton provided an interpretive frame through strategically applying the metaphor "bridge of future" contrasted to Dole's "bridge of past".[9] In addition to political elections, frames can be inserted into many kinds of organizational settings. Through the success of educational act HB3565 in Oregon, Shapiro and Ward (1998) examined that the framing devices developed by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) could be effective in a variety of leadership contexts.[3,10]

In addition to the blueprint, building a house requires materials and tools. In constructing the visions and ideas for their audiences, leaders also need to apply framing tools to vivify the pictures in their minds. Storytelling, as an effective tool, has often been used in managing meaning. Storytelling is one of the five framing tools Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) recommended, and they believed stories can consist of several language forms. Thus, one story can serve multiple meaningful ideas. [3]

In Deetz's (1987) opinion, chairpersons' position requires that they are naturally assigned the identity as accountant and storyteller.[11] Leaders have to describe every step the organization has been taking and will take to the audience, and on the other hand, leaders are considered the messenger between different groups. However, messages are complex; therefore, leaders must have the ability and effective means to interpret and synthesize the information to their audiences. Thus, storytelling as a tool that provides multiple messages at same time is considered powerful. In addition to delivering messages, stories also serve various roles in organizational communication process. However, in a meaning management context, the story's main function is presenting values related to organizations in implicit and explicit ways. Brown (1990) claimed that, "stories function to manage meaning in an organization by implicitly or, at times, explicitly presenting the value associated with organizational activities.[12] In addition, Conger (1991) pointed out that the reason why people prefer face-to-face comments more than statistical summaries is that comments are more vivid.[6] Stories happen to have the function that provides vividness to the audience. Conger applied a story of a president's giving up on hiring an MBA candidate to support his claim. With this story, employees of the organization engaged in the story learned how to deal with unexpected events, and at the time, Conger used this story to examine the effectiveness of storytelling. Conger also highlighted the connection between storytelling and cultural roots by mentioning Steve Jobs' invoking the story of David and Goliath while talking about Apple's relationship with IBM. The image of David and Goliath represented Apple (who is small but has unique techniques) and IBM (who is large and dominant in the information technology market).

Nowadays, the definition of leadership is not limited to one's title and authorized power. The language of leadership has received more and more attention. The ability of framing affects the effectiveness and credibility of a leader and his or her organization. As previously mentioned Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) have developed a category of framing tools. Storytelling is more complex than other framing tools.[3] Leaders' identity as messengers makes storytelling powerful and necessary. Stories have played various roles in organizational communications.

### **3. Organizational Artifacts**

Sebastian Coe, also referred to as Lord Coe, is a former British athlete in 1500 metres. He used to head the London Olympics Bid Committee, and after London succeeded in the bid, he was

nominated to be the chairman of the London Organising Committee of Olympic Games (LOCOG).

At the meeting of the International Olympic Committee in Singapore, July 5, 2005, London beat four strong rivals and won the right to host the 2012 Olympic games. Reporters from the British Broadcasting Cooperation have written an article to analyze the reasons why London succeeded, and the article stated several influential factors including a good public relations offensive, effective government backing, and most importantly, Sebastian Coe's effort in leading people in preparing their bid and his passionate final presentation in Singapore. Keogh & Fraser called Coe's final presentation the "coup de grace".[13] Coe's presentation was considered a key element in London's Olympic bid. An article that is published on the official site of Sky.com claimed that Coe's final speech "secured" the right for London to host the 2012 Olympic Games.[14] Bailey (2012) stated in her article "The Presentation that Won the Olympic Bid" that there are five essential facts including "audience centered" and "powerful stories" that helped the presentation, and this successful presentation could be a model for business presenter to learn.[15] According to Fairhurst and Sarr (2006), defining involved people who is a key element of context is important in leadership framing.[3] Thus, it is no doubt that Coe's concentration on the audience is a powerful weapon to strengthen the speeches. In addition to the final plea in 2012 Olympics bid, Sebastian Coe also gave an inspiring speech in the Paralympics Closing Ceremony. According to an online report from the Metro, a popular newspaper in the United Kingdom, Sebastian Coe and his speech were the highlights of this highly-praised ceremony.[16]

During his presentation in Singapore, 2005, Coe's bid speech presented that the theme and purpose of the London 2012 Olympic Games is to "inspire young people".[17] Seven years later, when the Olympic Games of 2012 were completed, through two stories from volunteers, Coe provided the answer of how the Games inspired young people.

#### **4. Analysis of the Bid Speech**

Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) classified a category of rhetorical tools that leaders can apply in leadership communications to reinforce the power of their persuasion.[3] They are metaphors, jargon, contrast, spin, and stories. Stories usually include some of the other four rhetorical tools. For example, story of the Snow White contains the metaphor apple. Thus, stories are a more complex framing device. According to Boje (2003), there are several storytelling organizational types through which storytelling can be controlled and constructed, and each of them has different characteristic and functions.[18] They are: the bureaucratic, the quest, the chaos, and the postmodern storytelling organizations. Bureaucratic stories are functional and traditional. The quest stories are usually heroic and compelling. "There are three essential segments in a quest narrative: the call, journey, and return". This kind of "spiritually journey" of leaders presents them with an image of excellent ability to the audiences. The chaos stories are the fragmental events that the storytellers experienced in his or her life. Chaos stories have casual sequences. Similar to chaos stories, stories in the postmodern organization are fragmental experiences of the orator. However, in the postmodern organization, the orator consciously gives his or her retrospections meaningful roles in the storytelling process. The conscious act makes storytelling "accomplished collectively", so stories in the postmodern organization can reduce the space between orators and audiences.[18] In addition, as a form of narratives, stories help to illuminate identities and make them meaningful.[19] Identities played an important role in storytelling. Without identities, audience cannot understand a story. Identities also helped orators' rapport building with audiences. Stories used in his two Olympics speeches are different due to the different audiences his two speeches focused on, and his identities also changed when audiences have changed. In this part, Coe's stories in his Olympics speeches will be analyzed.

##### **4.1 Storytelling Organization.**

Boje (2003) believed that the story is a means that is used in information exchange, giving directions and vision construction. However, the individual's position and experience will limit his or her ability to interpret a story. As a result, how a storyteller constructs and controls the

storytelling process to make it understandable to his or her audiences is important. Thus, Boje brought up a notion called the “storytelling organization”.[18] Storytelling organizations highlighted the role of the performance of stories. Coe’s speeches reflect two of the storytelling organizations. They are the quest and the postmodern.

The story Coe told in the bid speech for the Olympic Games of 2012 is a quest narrative. This story about Coe’s lifetime includes the three essential components of quest narratives. First, Coe brought people’s minds back to 1968 to introduce the call of his adventure. Coe began as follows:

When I was 12, about the same age as Amber, I was marched into a large school hall with my classmates. We sat in front of an ancient, black and white TV and watched grainy pictures from the Mexico Olympic Games. Two athletes from our hometown were competing.

John Sherwood won a bronze medal in the 400m hurdles. His wife Sheila just narrowly missed gold in the long jump.

That day a window to a new world opened for me. By the time I was back in my classroom, I know what I wanted to do –and what I wanted to be. [17]

With these sentences, Coe clearly presented when and why he was inspired to participate in Olympic games. This is the “call” of Coe’s adventure. Then, Coe briefly talked about the start of his journey,” Two days later I joined their club. Two years later Sheila gave me my first pair of racing spikes”.[17] Coe did not mention too much of his Olympics life which was full of glories and medals, but as a famous athlete, his career is well-known and unnecessary to repeat. Instead of telling the long story of his career, Coe moved to his return. He stated, “Thirty-five years on, I stand before you with those memories still fresh. Still inspired by this great Movement”.[17] Coe finished his story by bringing out the theme-inspiration of the Olympic movement.

In the Paralympics Closing Ceremony, Coe told two stories, and neither of them were about himself. The stories about two volunteers that Coe met during the 2012 London Olympic Games were the type of narratives that belong to the postmodern organization. The first story was about a doctor who served in London 2012 as a volunteer; he expressed the changes the Olympic Games had brought to him. According to Coe, the doctor expressed his feelings: “I was on duty on 7/7, that awful day. For me, this is closure. I wasn’t sure I should come, or whether I could face it. I’m so glad I did, for I’ve seen the worst of mankind, and now I’ve seen the best of mankind”.[20]

Then, Coe told the story about a volunteer from the Paralympic Games. The volunteer also expressed her feelings about the Olympic Games. She stated, “It has lifted the cloud of limitation”.[20] These stories are from the events that Coe experienced during the 2012 Olympic Games. They are fragments, but Coe’s choice of the two stories assigned meaning to them. Coe did not praise the Olympic organizing work directly, but through the reaction of the two volunteers, he offered his evaluation and appraisal.

Orators engage storytelling organizations with different purposes. In each storytelling organization, orators control and construct the stories in certain ways to achieve their goals. However, Boje (2003) argued that storytelling organizations could have adverse effects. Thus, Boje encourage orators to “interpolate between these different stories”.[18] Coe made adjustments to the storytelling organizations he engaged in. He abandoned the long story of his career in the quest stories, and briefly introduced his shining history with several important moments. In this way, Coe decreased the space between the audiences and him. In the postmodern organization, even though the stories are fragmental, Coe used similarities as a line (volunteers, changes caused by the Olympics, and quotations) to tie them together. This line helped the audience to see what Coe was trying to focus.

#### **4.2 Storytelling as A Rhetorical Device.**

Conger (1991) wrote that people dislike formal narratives because they favor vividness.[6] Stories are an example of vivid narrative form. In fact, stories have more functions in framing. According to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), stories have at least three functions. First, stories build rapports between the orator and the audience. Stories help the orators frame themselves as “I was like you” to their audiences. Second, stories engage people’s emotions. Stories can be compelling,

and stories recall similar memories of the audiences. Third, stories provide examples. Through the stories, audiences will see the consequences of decision-making or the necessity of an assumption.[3] Coe's stories are effective due to all three functions.

Coe's story in the bid speech started from his childhood, and he explained the reason why he decided to participate in the Olympic: the medals Sherwood, an athlete from the Great Britain, won in the Mexico Olympic Games. He continued, "The following week I stood in line for hours at my local track just to catch a glimpse of the medals the Sherwoods had brought home".[17] Then Coe stated the fact that he joined the Sherwoods' club and his career began. By reminding his audiences of his identity as a fan and participator in the Olympic Games, Coe build rapport with the members of International Olympic Committee, who have similar backgrounds as Coe. Fairhurst and Sarr (2006) claimed "If we show genuine regard, people tend to be more favorable disposed toward us".[3] Coe's mentioning of his connection and emotion with the Olympic Games presented his regard of the perspective of members of International Olympic Committee. In addition to building rapport, Coe's stories also provide an example for the new vision the London bid team brought up. The slogan of London in bidding Olympics 2012 was "inspire a generation". They aimed to inspire young people to choose sports, and they believed that the London 2012 Olympics Games could offer role models for young people. Coe's story is an exact example that a child was inspired by Olympic heroes and decided to join a sports club. If the Olympics can "inspire a generation" was an assumption, Coe's story proved that it could be true.

Similarly, in the speech delivered at the Paralympics Closing Ceremony, Coe's stories build rapport with his audience, but his audiences had changed. In the bid speech, his audiences were consisted of the members of the International Olympics Committee. This time, his audiences were made up of the young people that he and his team aimed to inspire. Young people's mental models are different from the members of International Olympics Committee. London 2012 gave the volunteers a special name "Games-Maker".[21] In the stories, two of the main characters are Game-Makers, and Coe called them "the heroes" of London 2012. Then Coe briefly introduced the talk between "the heroes" and him. Coe's stories helped the audiences to identify themselves as "heroes" and "Games-Makers." In this way Coe built the rapport with the audiences and made them believed that everyone participating in London 2012 was important. Coe's stories also engaged emotions. The "Games-Maker" in Coe's first story is a doctor. Coe introduced him this way "His name was Andrew, and he told me he was a doctor as St Mary's Hospital, on his way to helping out at Boxing...he suddenly cut through all the politeness and said: 'I was on duty on 7/7, that awful day'. [20]

The 7/7 London bombings is a sad memory shared by all British people. The bombings took place on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the day after Coe's team won the right to hold 2012 Olympics. Coe brought back the audiences' memories, but then, through the words of the "Games-Maker," the successful London Olympics inspired people who had been through that tragedy. The doctor explained that, "For me, this is closure. I wasn't sure I should come, or whether I could face it. I'm so glad I did, for I've seen the worst of mankind, and now I've seen the best of mankind".[20]

Stories can help the orator's persuasion to be powerful. Coe's stories built rapport between him and the listeners, even though the audiences of his two speeches were different. The story about Coe himself provided an example of the idea he was claiming. The mention of 7/7 engaged the audiences' emotions. The considerable arrangement of stories contributed to the speeches succeed.

### **4.3 Identities in Storytelling.**

Coe applied different stories in his two audience centered speeches. In addition to the considerable choice of stories, Coe's identity shifting also contributes to his storytelling towards different audiences. Holman, Gold, and Thorpe (2003) perceived that identities are important in storytelling, and at the same time, narratives also contribute to identity construction.[19] Identities influence the way an audience interprets and understands a story, because identities play a central role in human behavior and interpersonal interactions. People must be clear about the identities of others and themselves before they can interpret the situations and relationships. On the other hand,

narratives, including stories, construct identities and make them meaningful. “An identity is fluid and dynamic and that we are rarely restricted to just one story, to one reading of the plot.”[19] Thus, identities could change when the audience changes. With the changing of identities, Coe decreased the space between the audiences and him and make the rapport building process easier.

Coe has multiple identities in the 2012 London Olympics Games, and toward different audiences, Coe shifted his identity several times. In the bid speech, Coe shifted his identity from a former athlete to the representative of the London bid team. He claimed following:

My journey here to Singapore started in that school hall and continues today- in wonder and in gratitude.

Gratitude that those flickering images of the Sherwoods, and Wolde, Gammoudi, Doubell and Hines drew me to a life in that most potent celebration of humanity-Olympic sports.

And that gratitude drives me and my team to do whatever we can to inspire young people to choose sport. [17]

This part presented Coe’s identity shifting from a sports fan to an athlete and a representative of London bid team. This identity shifting makes Coe who is bidding for the Olympics Games as a reasonable and confident representative. In the latter speech, Coe shifted his identity from the manager, chairman of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, into an ordinary participant who witnessed the London 2012 Olympic Games as others. He told stories about volunteers he met everyday and delivered the praises in the volunteers’ words. When Coe was describing when and where he met the volunteers, he used sentences and phrases like “I was travelling on the Tube” and “on his way to helping out at Boxing”.[20] These sentences described the daily lives of participants during the 2012 Olympic Games.

An audience cannot interpret a story without knowing the identity of the characters. Storytelling also contributes to identity construction. Identity is dynamic. One can change identities intentionally. Coe’s shifting of identities helped him build rapport with his audiences and made his represent meaningful. Thus, Coe’s identity shifting influenced the effectiveness of his stories.

## 5. Conclusion

Leaders need to present the competence of them and their organizations to gain trust from their audiences, especially in bids and competitions. Context is an influential part in leadership. Thus, knowing the audience is the necessary preparation an orator must complete. The purpose of Coe’s two speeches were actually the same– persuade the audience of the competences of London and Great Britain. At the bid night, Coe needed to convince the members of the International Olympics Committee that London was capable of holding the 2012 Olympic Games and provide legacies to the Olympic Games - inspire young people. Seven years later, at the Paralympic Closing Ceremony, the work of the London Olympics were nearly completed. Coe’s speech as a summary of London 2012 was delivered to prove that London achieved what it had promised-inspire a generation. Coe announced proudly that this passionate Olympic Games 2012 is “Made in London”.[20] London’s winning of the right to host the 2012 Olympic Games in 2005 and the numerous praises on social networks after the closing ceremony are evidence of the speeches’ success.

Coe’s speeches are audience centered. The stories Coe told and the identity shifting contribute to these audience centered presentations. Coe’s stories reflect two storytelling organizations. Two key elements contributed to the effectiveness of stories in Coe’s speeches. The first one is the adjustments of storytelling organizations. These adjustments are the result of considering the audiences. When telling the quest stories, Coe skipped the long glorious history of his career and avoided the story becoming the magical adventure of a hero. In the postmodern organization, even though the stories are Coe’s memories Olympics, Coe assigned them the theme line-Olympics have changed the minds of the participants. In this way Coe decreased the experience space between the audiences and him. The other one is Coe’s identity shifting. Conger (1991) believed that people favor vivid narratives more than statistical summaries.[6] Coe’s identity shifting avoided the speeches sounding like formal indirections or reports. In addition, the identity shifting reduced the influence of hierarchy.

Based on framing devices' category from Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) and storytelling organizations typology from Boje (2003), this paper examined that storytelling as a framing tool make Coe's Olympics speeches effective.[3,18] In addition, identity that played an important role in the storytelling process contributed to the success of Coe's speeches. However, there are several attractive elements of the speeches. For example, when Coe was delivering the bid speech in Singapore, the bid team of London have arranged 30 children to stand behind him to highlight their theme-inspire young people. The Guardians called the children "the secret weapon".[22] Whether the children's attendance reinforced Coe's persuasion is worth of study. In addition to storytelling, Coe has applied other framing tools. The effectiveness of other framing tools in Coe's speeches is also worth examining.

Leadership is a process of managing meaning. Thus, framing can play a significant role in leadership. Framing tools can help orators to construct persuasive narratives. Storytelling as a framing tool has great power in rapport building and engaging emotions. Identity makes stories understandable, and at the same time it is illustrated by stories. Sebastian Coe delivered two extraordinary Olympics speeches. Coe's successful application of storytelling made his extraordinary speeches compelling and persuasive. Coe's identity shifting reinforced his aim of concentrated on audience's concerns.

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