

David Boje

By Charlotte Tallman

Photography by Bill Faulkner

We could all learn a few things from Dr. David Boje, including the results from years of research that taught David how to take a narrative which is negative, distorted or unfair and find a more truthful and affirmative alternative. What David discovered has impacted businesses, entrepreneurs, students and public administration in an increasingly positive way.

“As a university leader, I am provocative, and try to stand up for the underdog,” says David, who holds an Endowed Bank of America Professorship within the College of Business at New Mexico State University (NMSU). “I do what is called critical storytelling, where I seek to balance the official narratives of power with the living stories of the little people – often left out of history.”

David’s research and work is vast, creative and utilized around the world and his reputation in academia and industry is widely known throughout the United States and internationally. As an international scholar in the areas of narrative, storytelling, postmodern theory and critical ethics of answerability, David has published nearly 100 articles in journals, including *Management Science*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review* and the international *Journal of Organization Studies*. David has also been awarded prestigious titles, including an Arthur Owens Professorship in Business Administration in the Management Department at NMSU, University and College Teacher of the Year four times at Loyola Marymount and a Creative Scholar Award at NMSU in 2008.

“My greatest honor is riding my horse, Silverado, and staying in the saddle,” David says. While he is not riding, he is researching, learning and teaching with the same wit and humor that motivates his students and colleagues.

David created an ‘antenarrative’, or a bet on what is shaping the future before it becomes one more fossilized narrative.

“An ante is a bet and it’s a before,” David explains. “My focus is storytelling, how it shapes the past and future in business, public administration and arts entrepreneurship.”

David got involved in his profession when he noticed in his quantitative research there was a need for stories to make sense of the data, and to make an interesting write-up.

“As I started treating storytelling as a methodology of inquiry I discovered it is really applicable to qualitative and quantitative. You need storytelling to put facts and metaphors, or models, together into a theory.”

David's recent book, *Storytelling Organizations*, explores the stories people tell themselves and others at work. Instead of focusing on understanding stories about what happened "once upon a time, a long time ago" within an organization, David takes a different approach by seeing what people are telling themselves about the future. His interest focuses on how stories interplay with needs to stay within ethical and emotional comfort zones, and how multiple narratives emerge and evolve in rapidly changing situations.

"At age 61, I notice I spend more time helping other faculty and students around the world develop their storytelling methods, theory and research projects," David says. "My biggest influence was to look at how storytelling is a telling between the lines, where the reader is expected to fill in the blanks. Instead of once upon a time telling, looking at the complex collective dynamics of many storytellers has been my main contribution."

To David, a company's motto, architecture of corporate headquarters and even the business strategy all become part of the organizational story. Studying the story then becomes a new and fertile way into understanding strategy. Once a story is understood, David looks at 'restorying' or a way to take a narrative which is negative, distorted or unfair and find a more truthful and affirmative alternative. This simple but effective technique can be used by businesses and organizations to change the future of their story.

David is actively involved in the Talking Stick, a project three years in the works that shows collective storytelling processes are being used to improve the creative economy of the arts and culture organizations in Southern New Mexico. David is also actively working on a What's Art? Exploring the Creative Economy of Southern New Mexico Conference to be held October 2nd and 3rd, 2009 at Alma de Arte Charter School and the Pioneer Women's Park in Las Cruces.

David, who met Professor Grace Ann Rosile at a conference, applied to NMSU so the two could pursue their careers and raise their Arabian horses. Currently, David is working on a new book, *Storytelling the Future of Organization: Antenarrative Handbook*.

"It's an amazing challenge to theorize and study storytelling the future. Most narrative work has been about the past, and using that to extrapolate what the future might be. But such linear projections are not very accurate. We are looking at some alternative ways to story tell the future," David says.