



Let Me Tell You a Story...

Stories are the single most powerful tool in a leader's toolkit. ~ Howard Gardner, Harvard psychologist

Do you know people who can masterfully tell the right story at the right time?

Quite often, the best storytellers become our managers and leaders.

Even if you have no designs on becoming a CEO or leading a division, you undoubtedly crave more control over your work, ideas, sphere of influence and others' perceptions.

Effective storytelling can help you gain more control, while also building employee morale, strengthening teamwork and defining how problems can be solved. You'll find it much easier to develop original and effective solutions to everyday challenges.

It's in Our Genes

In 1995, two respected economists estimated that 28 percent of the U.S. gross national product (GNP) was involved in commercial persuasion (to include law, public relations, psychology, consulting, education and marketing).

For anyone involved in persuading others (i.e., everyone), survival depends on cutting through the noise and clutter to make the sale or persuade others to adopt our point of view.

Storytelling sells and persuades because it's an innate skill that has evolved over centuries—something we all know how to do.

In fact, a storytelling gene (FOXP2), discovered in 2001, gives us the physical and neurological skills needed to speak words rapidly and precisely. We use these language abilities to form complex sentences in the proper storytelling sequence.

Yet, some of us are better storytellers than others. Fortunately, practice can help us hone our skills.

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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Stirring Souls

Cold, hard facts don't inspire people to change. Straightforward analysis doesn't excite anyone about a goal. Storytelling is key to building executive presence.

Leaders like General Electric's Jack Welch and Apple's Steve Jobs excelled at storytelling, motivating people by engaging their emotions. Their stories fired up people's imaginations and stirred souls.

Stories create an optimal learning environment: We quickly process information when it's delivered in the form of a story, and we personalize the tale so we can relate it to our own experiences.

Daphne A. Jameson, a professor of management communication at Cornell University, has researched how language is used in business meetings. She has found that storytelling is an important way to resolve conflicts. Managers can effectively use narratives when direct action is difficult or impossible, stimulating people to solve problems among themselves.

What's in a Story?

Stories are how we think. They are how we make meaning of life. Call them schemas, scripts, cognitive maps, mental models, metaphors or narratives. Stories are how we explain how things work, how we make decisions, how we justify our decisions, how we persuade others, how we understand our place in the world, create our identities, and define and teach social values. ~ Dr. Pamela Rutledge, Director, Media Psychology Research Center, Fielding Graduate University

A story is "a fact, wrapped in an emotion, that compels us to take an action that transforms our world," write TV writer/producer Richard Maxwell and executive coach Robert Dickman in *The Elements of Persuasion: Use Storytelling to Pitch Better, Sell Faster & Win More Business* (HarperBusiness, 2007).

Infants organize their world in stories, even before they acquire language, according to Jerome Bruner, a research professor of psychology at New York University. While stories consist of the content of our thoughts, they also represent how we think.

Bruner estimates that adults are 20 times more likely to remember a fact when it's part of a story.

Research tells us:

1. Stories don't have to be long.

2. Stories don't have to be verbal (think of brand logos).

3. The right story, at the right time, helps us shape and control our world.

Crafting a memorable, inspirational and transformational story begins with a good outline, note Maxwell and Dickman. A successful story must have five basic elements:

- **Passion** (the enthusiasm and energy with which you tell the story).
- **A relatable hero** who gives your story a point of view and allows your audience to enter into the story in their own minds.
- **An obstacle or an antagonist** who presents problems that must be faced. This struggle involves strong emotions that engage the audience.
- **A moment of awareness** when everything changes for the hero (the problem is solved, and there is an emotional release). The audience learns from the story as it plays out in their minds.
- **A transformation** that occurs within the hero, which improves his situation or allows him to make new discoveries.

Make Your Story Come Alive

There are some important caveats about these five elements.

First, your hero should be relatable—someone who's similar to members of your audience. He cannot be Superman or a rock star, nor should you use yourself as the hero (unless you want to appear arrogant)..

Second, emotions should be the highlight of your story. Facts without emotions are dry, lifeless and forgettable. Don't be afraid to expose life's inherently raw emotions. Why does the hero care? Why does this story matter?

Third, make your story realistic to achieve authenticity. While embellishment is sometimes necessary to a good story, provide realistic details to make it vivid.

Finally, stories don't necessarily have happy endings. People often pay greater attention to bad news. Close with the lessons to be learned from your story. Minds may wander, or your audience may reach an unexpected conclusion, so be sure to emphasize the points you want to make.

Heighten Interest

Use plain, simple and direct language when telling a story so its moral can shine through. You don't want to clutter the story with lots of descriptive words or too much detail. Let audience members use their imaginations.

Incorporate five key elements to add interest to your story:

- **Surprise:** Why is this story unusual?
- **Mystery:** What piques our curiosity?
- **Conflict:** A main character should face a challenging situation to which the audience can relate.
- **Brevity:** Use enough words to make the story come alive – but no more.
- **Repetition:** Used appropriately, a catchphrase can drive your message home.

Explore the 18-minute presentations on TED.com to see some excellent examples of great storytelling. Most TED Talks contain all five of these stylistic elements.

Where to Find Stories

Potential stories are everywhere, but you may not notice them until you practice storytelling for a while. It's fine to start with borrowed stories from other speakers, books and the Internet, but be sure to credit them appropriately.

You can reap an endless supply of great stories by paying attention to the anecdotes other share. Start a story notebook or computer file so you can access them for the appropriate occasion.

Anything that captures your attention can be turned into a story. Often, life's little details contain big lessons, so begin to develop your sense of "story radar." After an interesting conversation or encounter, ask yourself if you can use the incident to illustrate a leadership principle.

Most of us don't recognize a story when we're in the middle of it. It only becomes a story when you tell someone what happened. As with anything, you sharpen your skills through practice. Make a commitment to yourself to start practicing this week. Pick three stories to tell, and play with the details to figure out how to accentuate key points.

Alternatively, pick a challenge or lesson you want to

teach through story. Then, match the story to the objective.

Leadership Challenges

Make a list of your most important leadership issues, such as:

1. Envisioning the future
2. Strategic purpose and goals
3. Team alignment
4. Values and corporate culture
5. Customer service and focus

How can you teach leadership principles through stories of real people in your particular industry? Look for stories about people who implement their core values in day-to-day tasks. Values tend to be vague until you integrate them into stories about actual experiences.

Business books can be excellent resources for stories. One highly recommended title is Paul Smith's *Lead with a Story: A Guide to Crafting Business Narratives that Captivate, Convince and Inspire* (AMACOM, 2012). Smith, the director of consumer and communications research for Procter & Gamble, includes numerous life lessons from companies like Kellogg's, Merrill-Lynch, National Car Rental, Wal-Mart and Pizza Hut.

Inspire with Emotions

Magic happens when you narrate otherwise soulless data into emotional nodes that render an experience to an audience—and a single listener is an audience—that makes the information inside the story memorable, resonant and actionable. ~ Peter Guber, Chairman and CEO, Mandalay Entertainment

Leaders who successfully use storytelling know it's key to establish an emotional connection and stimulate a desire for a different future. Without this connection, nothing happens. Decisions are made emotionally, without activation of the brain's logic center, so appealing to your audience's aspirations is critical.

The leadership challenge requires you to help participants see new possibilities and come to their own conclusions, based on the evidence presented in your stories. Encourage people to view a situation through their own lens, but in a new way. This will help them make progress in implementing organizational goals.

Leadership Through Storytelling

The idea of using stories certainly isn't new. Those that are the most effective for leaders aren't big and dramatic tales relayed through a bullhorn. Change usually hinges on simple, unpretentious and authentic stories.

Practice telling positive, minimalist stories that reveal how successful changes have occurred. This approach connects you and your audience on an emotional level, leading to action and a willingness to imagine a new future.



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