
TELLING STORIES: HOW LEADERS CAN INFLUENCE, TEACH, AND INSPIRE



DISCUSSION BRIEF

Part of the work of a leader is to influence—to teach, convince, and inspire those around them. That includes their staffs, their stakeholders, and their organization’s customers. Leaders have many forums where they can assert their influence, from casual encounters to “management by walking around,” from presentations at meetings to mentoring and coaching, and even within formal learning programs. Whatever the mechanism by which it’s delivered, however, influence doesn’t come about just through conveying information or reciting facts and figures listed on a PowerPoint slide. Leaders influence when they reach people in ways that help them to understand, enable them to remember, and inspire them to act. Influence is about changing ideas AND changing behaviors. It’s what leads learning to be sustainable. It’s also where storytelling comes in.

When it comes to influencing, if all your leaders are doing is passing on information, they’re not fully getting through to their audience, and they’re not effecting lasting change. Because we’re hardwired to receive and translate information in story form, good stories do both. As Daniel Taylor wrote in *The Healing Power of Stories*:

A story does what facts and statistics never can: it inspires and motivates. Expert storytellers translate complex ideas into practical examples laced with strong emotional connections. The audience tunes in because they see themselves woven into the story.

Everyone knows a good story not only keeps their attention; it’s also easy to recall and begs to be repeated. But it doesn’t stop there. When a good story is being told, listeners are not only engaged, they’re also involved—both in head and heart.

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To make this kind of impact on their audience, your leaders don't need to become expert storytellers. They just need to learn to be good and honest ones. And good storytelling can be best achieved if your leaders develop an understanding of what makes storytelling so powerful.

What Makes Storytelling So Powerful?

Storytelling works because it parallels the ways in which we receive, analyze, organize, and archive any information that comes into our brains. Facts enter as data points; stories connect the dots. When we hear a new story, we value it and attach emotions to it. We integrate it with our own inner “treasure trove” of previously heard or directly experienced moments, adjusting, updating, and replacing old stories that are no longer relevant or accurate. Through new and updated stories, we absorb incoming facts, make connections, and interpret meaning. And changes to neural pathways actually happen. As a result, we're able to work from a larger story, one that offers greater perspective, enabling more options and more opportunities to try on new ideas or behaviors without external risk. And in that moment, sustainable learning occurs.

As entrepreneur, writer, and storyteller Leo Widrich wrote in “The Science of Storytelling: Why Telling a Story Is the Most Powerful Way to Activate Our Brains,” the science translates quite readily into something we can all understand:

We think in narratives all day long, no matter if it is about buying groceries, whether we think about work or our spouse at home. We make up (short) stories in our heads for every action and conversation ... Now, whenever we hear a story, we want to relate it to one of our existing experiences. That's why metaphors work so well with us. We link up metaphors and literal happenings automatically. Everything in our brain is looking for the cause and effect relationship of something we've previously experienced.

Brain activation aside, it's the fact that we think in terms of stories that makes storytelling such a compelling form of communication in the work world. Storytelling is so effective because stories create connections between people, and between people and ideas. And they appeal to all types of learners, who will respond to the story in their own ways,

from their individual perspectives. Stories are easy to recall and retell. And when leaders talk openly and candidly about their own challenges and problems, they become more relatable—and allow learners to have a vicarious, risk-free experience, learning from the mistakes of others.

What Can Stories Do for Your Learners?



- ✓ Create connection
- ✓ Build engagement
- ✓ Align with purpose
- ✓ Enable retrieval
- ✓ Provide risk-free experimentation
- ✓ Promote growth and exchange of ideas

Telling Stories throughout the Learning Process

To add storytelling to your leaders' “influence arsenal,” you need to do two things: Create a storytelling culture so that learning is happening all the time (whether people realize it or not), and explicitly incorporate storytelling into your formal learning programs.

Many people in business think of stories purely as a branding device or marketing tool. They understand that stories grab the attention of their readers and help forge an emotional connection to a product or service. But organizations that rely on storytelling simply to market their wares are missing out on what stories can do within their organizations. Stories can serve many purposes, from the purely transactional to the transcendent. In both formal and informal settings, stories can be used to:

- **Establish leadership presence:** Even in large distributed organizations, stories told through virtual meetings or videos help the workforce get to know those in charge. This leads to more trusted and authentic connections.
- **Build culture:** Stories that provide examples of culture in action translate the words from the mission statement into something tangible.

- **Capture and share knowledge:** What really happened along the way to closing the “big deal” that doesn’t appear in your CRM?
- **Manage change:** The implications of organizational change are difficult to grasp in the abstract. Stories make the abstract concrete and provide risk-free avenues to process and integrate change.
- **Develop staff and mentor individuals:** We all can learn from hearing about the challenges our leaders have faced and the mistakes they made along the way to overcoming them.
- **Build teams:** Honest storytelling helps team members get to know and understand each other better. This fosters an environment of sharing, mutuality, and trust.
- **Sell an idea:** What better way to sell an idea than to describe a road map for action, from idea to implementation?

These applications (and others) take place throughout the learning process, in both formal and informal settings.

The Power of Storytelling to Influence, Teach, and Inspire

All your leaders have stories to tell. The best way to get them to tell theirs, and to enhance their abilities to influence, teach, and inspire, is to build a storytelling culture. Make sure that storytelling holds a central place in your learning programs.

WHAT SORTS OF STORIES DO LEADERS TELL?

The story will depend on the message and the intent. For example, if the intent is leadership presence, then the story may be about the leadership journey that led them to their work. Overall, good stories to tell (and hear) include:

- Anecdotes about successes and failures leaders had in their careers—and what they’ve learned from both
- Stories that connect what leaders do with the company’s strategic initiatives

Tips for Making an Organization of Storytellers

BUILD A STORYTELLING CULTURE

While some storytellers may be more gifted than others, building an organizational culture that encourages everyone to be listening for, thinking in, and telling stories will yield many benefits. An easy way to begin is to make sure that all levels of the organization listen for and capture story learning moments to use:

- Have leaders role model by sharing their stories
- Make sure mentors and coaches share their experiences through their stories, as well as encourage stories from those they are guiding
- Ask those with client relationships to draw out the stories of their clients, connecting them to their own experiences and to internal knowledge
- Encourage employees to capture their work and report their progress and learning in story
- Place listening to stories and sharing great stories at the center of each leader’s agenda

PUT STORYTELLING INTO PRACTICE

These easy-to-follow tips will help you quickly and effectively put storytelling into practice in your organization:

- Create a story bank so that examples of mission in action and vision for the future can be disseminated to all employees through memorable and inspiring stories
- Record stories to create powerful and engaging communications such as internal or external social media posts
- Create forums (large: team- or companywide gatherings in which groups share stories, and small: assign a video selfie as part of a learning program) in which everyone practices telling a story about the company strategy and how it relates to their personal mission
- Simplify PowerPoint slides by using fewer words and less data, and keep bullets to key points that move the story forward
- Include senior leaders’ prerecorded or live-sharing stories as part of formal learning programs

- Incorporate video stories into self-paced learning tools
- Use stories, such as case studies, to inspire great discussions and let people learn from the many different interpretations that may emerge in group settings

Storytelling in Practice

Judy Whitcomb is the senior vice president of human resources and organizational development at Vi, a company that develops and operates continuing care retirement communities. She recently had an encounter with the daughter of a resident of Vi at Silverstone. After their conversation, this is what Judy told us:



“I could hardly wait to get on the airplane, for the plane to reach 30,000 feet, and for me to get a Wi-Fi connection. I couldn't even wait to get back on the ground. I wanted to share that story immediately. My first email out was to our Vi at Silverstone employees, our president, our head of operations, our head of nursing. And I shared with them the encounter that I had just had with a resident's daughter, who told me how our employees have positively impacted her parent. The positive feedback and the reinforcement of our culture, our mission, what we do for residents—I believe that communicating this message is one of the most important things we can do as leaders. And that's something that I practice every day now. When I hear those types of stories, I realize their impact and value.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Lani Peterson, Psy.D., is a psychologist, professional storyteller, and executive coach who specializes in the use of story as a powerful medium for growth, connection, and change. Drawing on her experience with individuals, teams, and organizations, Lani brings a unique

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