

Effective Communications: Lead Through Storytelling

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The most effective leaders use storytelling to engage the hearts and minds of those around them, as well as compel them to action. Storytelling is an important communications tool CIOs and other IT business executives can use to become stronger leaders.

Gartner foundational research is reviewed periodically for accuracy. This document was last reviewed on 7 December 2015.

Key Findings

- Communications classes teach that one aspect of good leadership is to clearly tell employees what you want and what they must do. But telling people what to do is not enough, particularly when optimal performance is required.
- Great leaders use storytelling to help create understanding at a personal level. They have a catalog of stories, select the right story and link the message of the story to the point they want to convey at the right time to reinforce their messages.
- Storytelling is not a widely taught business tool, yet learning how to effectively use stories makes for stronger leaders.

Recommendations

- Replace "telling" with "storytelling" to more effectively move your audience to action.
- Use storytelling in change initiatives, to build commitment, when solving a problem, to facilitate understanding, when coaching others, to make learning easier, to enliven a presentation, when starting a planning session to motivate employees or to explain the company vision.
- Build a collection of stories to have the right story available at the right time.
- Rehearse the inventory of stories you have to maximize your effectiveness.

Analysis

Storytelling is the oldest form of passing information from person to person and generation to generation. Today's most effective leaders use stories to inspire their employees and build a culture of high performance. Stories can be used to entertain, inform, inspire and communicate values to others. Stories can help build culture. They are particularly useful when helping people to understand complex ideas, to embrace change and to remember important points. Today's leaders can use stories to inspire their employees and build a culture of high performance. Effective storytelling is an important communications tool for CIOs and other IT executives to become stronger leaders.

Why Use Storytelling?

Effective leaders use storytelling as a tool to engage employees and build employee commitment to taking action on new ideas. Storytelling has many uses within an organization. Leaders use storytelling to do the following:

1. *Capture attention.* Stories engage employees emotionally. Managers can transform dull presentations into interesting events by sharing heartwarming stories. Research shows that people are more inclined to act on their emotions and data than they are on data alone. Analysis may excite the mind, but stories excite the heart. Create action and performance by exciting the heart while engaging the mind.
2. *Facilitate understanding.* People learn more easily from experiences when stories are used to impart key points that you want them to learn. Stories break down complex ideas into concepts that are easier to understand and often appeal to emotions. People enjoy sharing stories more than sharing concepts or numbers. Word of a desired change may spread faster if told to them in the form of a story. They can connect and relate to a personal story more easily.
3. *Enable the listeners to remember the message longer.* Messages coming from stories contain information, emotions and sounds, resulting in longer retention. Employees may not easily retain concepts that contain only information. People tend to remember stories more easily than pure facts.
4. *Fill an emotional need.* Simply telling employees to do something is not enough. To accomplish change, leaders must do more than just tell employees the reasons for the change. Achieving change in an organization is about emotions, relationships and gaining the commitment of people.
5. *Help people connect ideas with past experiences.* Storytelling helps employees personalize their own messages. A story may remind them of a similar experience or a particular challenge, enabling them to apply their previous experiences to the current event.

Storytelling is an effective way to communicate multiple ideas in a simple way so that people can understand them and relate them to their situations. Instead of listing several ideas in an expected way using a PowerPoint slide, a story helps convey the messages in a more palatable way.

When to Use Storytelling

There is a time and a place to tell stories. Do not use stories to communicate procedures, company rules or policies. Instead, use stories where greater impact is needed, such as when dealing with an abstract concept, ideas subject to interpretation or when a consistent view is required. Stories can be very effective to communicate in situations such as the following:

- Leaders need to deliver a vision and help employees to understand how to reach the goals of the company.
- Companies face contradictions or ambiguities between the vision and daily execution.
- A problem needs to be discussed. Stories reduce stress and let people understand the problem better. The story could be used at the start of the meeting to break the tension or while talking about the problem.
- Leaders need to make employees aware of a major change and obtain commitment.
- Managers coaching others may use storytelling as a way to facilitate learning.
- Leaders starting a planning session with a group of employees may use storytelling to provide inspiration.
- Leaders are making a presentation and want to grab the attention of the audience.
- Leaders want employees to understand what behaviors are desired.

For example, established in 1937, the School Employees Retirement System of Ohio (SERS) is a statewide \$11.6 billion pension fund. Located in Columbus, Ohio, it provides pension benefits and access to postretirement healthcare coverage to Ohio's 186,500 retired school employees. CIO Adam Frumkin needed to turn around IT when he joined the organization in 2005. So he looked for a visible way to demonstrate change. He explains:

"The first thing I did was to assemble the team and tell them that everything was going to change.

"We then developed 16 'culture killer' words, such as 'oppressive' and 'fear.' I had an employee draw up cartoons for each of the words, which we then enlarged. I talked with the team about each word and why it wasn't part of our culture, and offered an alternative for each word. After the talk, we went into a paintball shooting range I had set up, and each person took a turn at wiping out the words. This started the two-year journey to change the culture of the organization. You have to follow what you say with action."

How to Develop a Story

Leaders can acquire the ability to tell stories. Stories may be communicated verbally or in writing. Follow these steps to become an effective storyteller and develop a compelling story:

1. *Have a clear objective.* Start by asking, "What am I trying to accomplish? What idea would I like people to understand and accept? What are people not doing now that I would want them to

start doing?" Once the idea is clear, write the idea down, preferably in one sentence. Try to make the idea clear, concise and specific, so others can easily evaluate progress. Ensure that success criteria are established and recognized easily. For example, a CIO may want the IT organization to focus on how to deliver value to the enterprise instead of focusing solely on improving the technical aspects of the environment.

2. *Look for similar examples.* Identify a similar situation within the organization or in another organization. Another alternative is to look for motivational or inspirational stories on the Web, and adapt the message to the objective. Many stories about children, animals and other noncorporate settings have a message applicable to the organization's specific change.
3. *State the story clearly, eliminating irrelevant detail.* Describe a few characteristics of the setting to give the audience a vivid view of the story. Excessive detail makes people lose interest. Do not give any disclaimers — simply tell the story.
4. *Start the story with an icebreaker, and use humor.* By using an interesting opening phrase, leaders may engage people. Interesting opening phrases, adapted from Jack Harris and B. Kim Barnes in their piece "Leadership Storytelling," include:
 1. "Let me tell you about a time I made a mistake."
 2. "I am going to tell you a story about something I learned."
 3. "I wish someone had told me the following story 10 years ago."

Humor helps your audience not only get to know you better, but also can help defuse tense situations and reassure people.

5. *Finish the story on a positive note.* The goal of storytelling is to inspire employees to take action. Ending the story on a positive tone makes people feel good and excited, motivating change. Tell any negative parts at the start of the story.
6. *Inspire your listeners.* Inspire your listeners by being yourself. Nothing is more powerful than a genuine leader who does not sound too rehearsed or contrived. (Of course, it takes a lot of practice to sound natural!) Once the story has ended, state the message. If the story provided an example of the change, include phrases such as "Just imagine ..." or "Just think" Do not describe in detail the change. Invite the audience to envision the future. Effective leaders are able to take a powerful story and develop a message to link to the idea they wish to convey.

Storytelling in Action

The Warehouse Group, founded in 1982, is New Zealand's largest department store retailer, with more than 120 stores and 8,000 employees. Headquartered in Auckland, The Warehouse reported a 2007 net profit of NZ\$97.9 million (US\$77.3 million) on sales of NZ\$1.76 billion (US\$1.4 billion).

Owen McCall, CIO of The Warehouse Group, was asked to deliver the closing speech for a strategy and leadership meeting because his boss had to leave early. Unfamiliar with the dynamics of the group, he chose to close with a leadership story instead of a summary, drawn from his personal experience:

"We were on holiday as a family and went to Franz Josef Glacier down on the South Island of New Zealand. As you walk along the glacier, you've got the glacial river, and it's very, very rocky.

"And the first thing my son, Ryan, who was five at the time, did when he saw the rock was to run up to it, climb up on top and jump off. Because that's what 5-year-old boys do.

"Then he found another rock and climbed up on it and jumped off. Meanwhile, the rest of the family trekked down toward the glacier terminal, and I hung back with Ryan. And he climbed up on the rocks and jumped off, and he climbed up on the rocks and jumped off. Eventually, I said, 'Look, Ryan, you need to stop climbing up on rocks and jumping off because we need to go over where the rest of the family is — because this is what we're doing; we're going to the terminal of the glacier.'

"So I grabbed his hand and started walking toward the rest of the group. And as 5-year-old boys do, they get very tired, very quickly when they're not doing what they want. So he got very tired, very quickly and started with, 'Dad, carry me, carry me.'

"I figured out that what I needed to do was not stop him from jumping on rocks but get him to jump on the rocks along the trek. So I said, 'Ryan, see how many rocks you can jump on between here and that next post.' And so he'd run away, jump on the rocks and jump off. We did that all the way there and all the way back. He had a great time, and he had lots and lots of energy; it was awesome.

"I told that story at the leadership meeting, and I said, 'You know, I started thinking about that afterwards and about what that means for us in business. Too often, as leaders, we kill people's passions. We kill the passion by saying, 'Stop jumping off the rocks; you need to go this way; come and do this.' A better approach may be to guide people's passions. Don't stop them from climbing and jumping off rocks, but get them to climb and jump off rocks in the right direction. Let's stop killing people's passions, and harness those passions instead.'"

Key Considerations for Effective Storytelling

Like McCall, all leaders can learn the art of storytelling as a tool to provoke thought and engage people in change. People like stories with messages they can relate to their daily environment. To be effective, leaders should implement the following best practices, adapted from Harris and Barnes:

- Have a clear, easy-to-understand message.
- Be positive, and ensure an uplifting ending.
- Include sufficient detail to describe the situation.
- Relate to a current problem.
- Communicate empathy and sincerity, and be genuine.
- Encourage self-reflection.
- Use humor.

While stories are an effective tool in communicating a message, leaders should not rely solely on storytelling. Other tools such as training, rewards and other forms of recognition are needed to achieve the goal. Leaders must clearly communicate a story and its message and help people answer the questions: "So what? What does this mean to me?" Because, remember, by engaging the hearts and minds of your audience, you can lead them anywhere.

Recommended Reading

"Toolkit: How to Create a One-Page IT Strategy"

"Effective Communications: A Strategy"

"Effective Communications: Stakeholder Analysis"

"A Practical Guide to Stakeholder Management"

"Effective Communications: How to Develop a Communications Plan"

"Effective Communications: IT Strategy"

"Effective Communications: Performance Dashboards"

"Effective Communications: Policies"

"Effective Communications: IT Satisfaction Surveys"

"Effective Communications: IT Updates"

"Effective Communications: Difficult Communications"

"Creating the Communications Core: The CIO's Guide to Effective Communications"

"How Storytelling Can Drive Strategic Change," by G. Adamson, J. Pine, T. Van Steenhoven and J. Kroupa, published in *Strategy and Leadership*, January 2006

"'I Wanna Tell You a Story': Leaders as Storytellers," by P. Bates and P. Gilbert, published in *The International Journal of Leadership in Public Services*, August 2008

"Story Building: A New Tool for Engaging Employees in Setting Direction," by R. Beslin, published in *The Ivey Business Journal*, May 2007

"Leadership Storytelling," by J. Harris and B. K. Barnes, published in *Industrial and Commercial Training*, July 2006

"The Six Sigma Leader — How Top Executives Will Prevail in the 21st Century," by P. S. Pande, published by McGraw-Hill, 2007

"Leading Words: How to Use Stories to Change Minds and Ignite Action," by C. M. Phoel, published in the Harvard Management Communication Letter, 2006

"Storytelling and the 'Information Overload,'" by B. Sax, published in On the Horizon, April 2006

More on This Topic

This is part of an in-depth collection of research. See the collection:

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