

Using stories to make sessions memorable

The power of using stories

You'll probably know from your own experience how powerful real examples and stories can be in bringing words to life – they are so much easier to remember than bland corporate words and Power Point slides aren't they?

Many years ago, a Global Head of Health and Safety changed my view of why it matters. I had seen the systems and processes as mechanical and (frankly) a bit onerous. He told a 2-minute story of a lorry that hit a 10-year-old girl. It took 10 minutes to find her. Her body was in the wheel arch. The lorry had been speeding. His message was simple. "That's why I do this job and why this matters – so that things like this never happen again".

Robert McKee writes, ***"Persuasion is the centrepiece of business activity. Customers must be convinced to buy your company's products or services, employees and colleagues to go along with a new strategic plan or reorganisation"*** and too often people get lost in what he calls the ***"accoutrements of company speak"***.

Stories can help bring about change and help others to make sense of what we're trying to achieve. Steven Denning said, "Analysis is what drives business thinking [...] Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart".

"At a time when corporate survival often requires disruptive change, leadership involves inspiring people to act in unfamiliar and often unwelcome ways. Mind-numbing cascades of numbers or daze-inducing PowerPoint slides won't achieve this goal. Even the most logical arguments won't usually do the trick."

"Story telling can translate those dry and abstract numbers into compelling pictures of a leader's goals".

Sharing stories will send a strong message about how you would like the whole team to behave going forward and will make it OK for others to do the same (creating courage and confidence to challenge and change things).



So how can you set people on fire?

What are some tips to really engage people and ensure your story is memorable, encourages behaviour change and delivers results??

- Identify the take aways and outcomes: Start with the audience in mind. What do you want them to do? Consider the outcome rather than the key message. What's in it for them? What would you like them to be saying or doing as a result of hearing your story?
- Look for stories that drive home your points. Make sure they are active and about doing things.
- Be authentic – only use stories that bond to your deeply held values, which overlap with those of your organisation. Develop a strong point of view – be certain about what you truly believe and where you can be an exemplar.
- Your stories must be short – no more than a minute – vivid, with strong characters and a protagonist to care about.
- There must be a turning point or resolution and an underlying theme or message that encourages us to change and say 'yes'.
- Listen for stories everywhere and jot them down for later use.
- Think about the story the situation demands – is it a 'future,' 'customer' or 'values' story?
- Use stories to make heroes of your people.
- Never use a story you don't love.

Use “Springboard stories” to spark action

These:

- Are about enabling change & Inspiring an often skeptical organisation
- Describe how a successful change was implemented in the past and allows listeners to imagine how it might work in their situation.
- Enable listeners to visualise the transformation needed in their circumstances
- Are based on an actual event
- Have a single protagonist your audience can identify with
- Have an authentic and positive ending in which the change has at least been partially implemented
- Have enough detail to be intelligible and credible

Preparing your stories...

Some questions which may help you:

- What was the situation & context?
- Who was involved?
- What happened?
- What were some of the hurdles and challenges on the way? (talk about any changes, conflicts, tensions on the way)
- How did you overcome them?
- What did you/the person do – how did they behave?
- How did it feel – how did those involved react? What did they say?
- What was it that you admired about what the individual did?

Encouraging exploration

Stories are a good start – and if you can go one step further and get people talking, this will generate more discussion. Here are some questions you could use:

- What do you take from that story?
- What would your examples be?
- What are some examples within your/ our influence that we might want to change?
- What are your ideas about how to do that?



Final thoughts....

I hope you read this and think “of course I had already thought of that!”.

If you can – walk through your story with a partner before you tell it live – partly as a rehearsal, but more importantly to ask for their reactions. They will respond based on their experience, they may well single out a word or a message and suggest improvements (so ask them to be ready to offer those before you start).

Make it real – add colour with real words/ reactions (where you can!!!). Avoid corporate speak and share it in simple day-to-day language.

Keep practising! The art of a good story is one which you can tell without referring to lots of notes and PowerPoint.

Reference and further exploration

Storytelling that moves people: A conversation with Screenwriting coach Robert McKee (HBR June 2003)

Success stories: How stories give leaders essential competitive advantage (Kevin Murray) Telling Tales, Steven Denning (HBR 2004)

How to speak so that people want to listen. 10 mins Julian Treasure Ted Talk

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