

Stories in the Workplace

Capture employees' attention during change—
or when they need a change in mind-set.

By Stephen Denning

Think back to when you were learning the ropes as a manager. Do you recall anyone mentioning storytelling as being relevant to the tough-minded discipline of management? Most likely, if anyone dared raise the subject, it would have been dismissed with labels such as “soft,” “fuzzy,” “squishy” or “emotional.”

That was yesterday.

Today, you read statements like Peter Guber's in “The Four Truths of the Storyteller,” from the December 2007 *Harvard Business Review*:

“The ability to articulate your story or that of your company is crucial to almost every phase of enterprise management. It works all along the business food chain. A great salesperson knows how to tell a story in which the product is the hero. A successful line manager can rally the team to extraordinary efforts through a story that shows how short-term sacrifice leads to long-term success. An effective CEO uses an emotional narrative about the company's mission to attract investors and partners, to set lofty goals, and to inspire employees. Sometimes a well-crafted story can even transform a seemingly hopeless situation into an unexpected triumph.”

A flood of articles and books are now touting the importance of storytelling as a leadership tool. What is going on?

The Case for Storytelling

In an era of accelerating economic and social change, the communication challenges facing managers are more difficult than they were a decade ago.

The imperative for faster innovation, the emergence of global networks of partners, the rapidly growing role of intangibles, the increasing ownership of the means of production by knowledge workers, the escalating power of customers in the marketplace and burgeoning diversity—all these forces imply a capacity to communicate in a compelling manner

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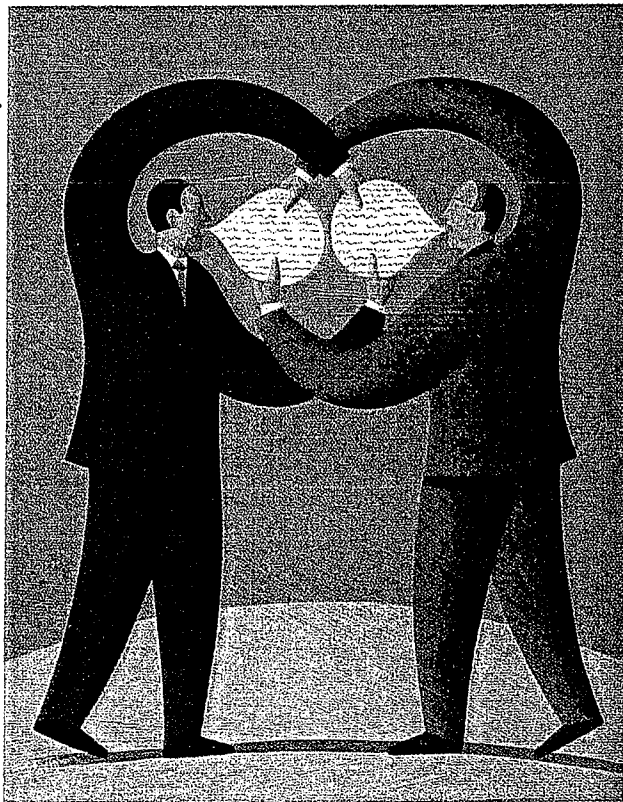


ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM NIKLEWICZ

and mobilize people energetically and rapidly behind change.

Smart managers ask, "How many people do we need in our organization who can communicate compellingly and engagingly, and inspire staff and clients to embrace change with enduring enthusiasm?" The answer is "everyone," because a capacity to communicate difficult change messages offers immediate impact on the bottom line.

These days, command-and-control approaches are unlikely to generate positive responses in employees, let alone the marketplace. The era when top managers could simply give orders and expect their will to be done has long gone.

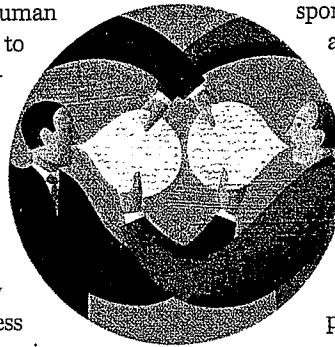
Nor is it effective to give people reasons why they should change if they already have different opinions, a phenomenon psychologists call "confirmation bias": When we already have an opinion and receive inconsistent information, we question the new information, not our pre-existing opinion.

As a result, leaders turn to storytelling to overcome barriers to communication.

Leadership storytelling involves taking a capacity that people already have and applying it for constructive purposes.

Since time immemorial, human beings have used stories to spread religions, win support for political agendas or launch wars. And as we look around the business world, stories are everywhere. Managers think in stories, they remember in stories, they plan in stories, they express hopes and fears and dreams in stories, and they make decisions in stories. Storytelling is already part of our world.

Moreover, storytelling is not a rare skill possessed by a few people born with the gift of gab. All human beings start



spontaneously telling stories at age 2 and go on doing it for the rest of their lives.

They tell stories effortlessly in social settings.

Leadership storytelling involves taking a capacity that people already have and applying it for constructive purposes. Anyone can master the discipline.

Organizational Storytelling

My own initiation into storytelling began in early 1996 at the World Bank. I had been a manager for several decades and was familiar with traditional manage-

Lessons in Leadership Storytelling

Keep these four tips in mind when using storytelling as a leadership tool:

Learn the narrative patterns relevant to business. Only a fairly narrow range of stories have the capacity to communicate a complex idea, such as knowledge management, and spark action. The stories that have this capacity have an underlying narrative pattern. Understanding this narrative pattern remains key to getting business benefit from storytelling.

Be authentic and truthful. Leaders have little success with stories about imaginary events. Hard-edged business audiences typically respond, "That will never happen here." And that is the end of the discussion unless the teller can point out that it has already happened there.

Moreover, the story needs to be factually accurate as far as it goes and authentically true when people check it out.

Here's an example of a factually accurate story that has a problem: "700 happy passengers reached New York after the Titanic's maiden voyage."

That's true as far as it goes. But when people find out, if they don't already know, that the Titanic sank and 1,500 people drowned, the backlash on the story and the storyteller is devastating.

You can see this phenomenon playing out in political campaigns. For instance, in 2008 Hillary Clinton talked about having landed in Bosnia "under sniper fire." In fact, pictures of that event show her smiling as she deplaned with no fire in sight.

Leaders who don't tell authentic stories become known as people who "just tell stories."

"Story listening" is just as important as storytelling. "Storytelling" is an unfortunate

term in that it implies that the activity is about "telling" people. In fact, the effectiveness of storytelling in organizations depends as much on "story listening" as it does on storytelling.

That's because all effective communication begins "where the audience is," not "where you are" as a communicator. Unless you know where people come from, and what stories they are living, it's going to be very difficult for you to craft and perform a story that will resonate with them.

As a result, knowing the audience, mingling in their world and listening to their stories are precursors to effective storytelling.

Beware of the prevalent myths of organizational storytelling. Many books and articles on the use of stories in organizations mistakenly equate organizational storytelling with entertainment storytelling.

—Stephen Denning

ment techniques. I was trying to persuade leaders at the World Bank to adopt knowledge sharing as a key strategy.

I found that traditional management techniques don't work when it comes to winning support for a disruptive change idea. I gave reasons, and no one paid attention. I showed slides, and people just looked dazed. One day, I stumbled on a simple story that got people to listen:

In June 1995, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia went to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

web site and got the answer to a question about malaria treatment. Zambia is one of the poorest countries in the world—and this town is 375 miles from the capital city. But the most striking element in this picture, at least for us, was that the World Bank wasn't in it, despite its know-how on poverty. Imagine if it were. Think what an organization it could become.

This simple story helped World Bank staff and managers envision a different future. When knowledge man-

agement became an official corporate priority, I used similar stories to maintain momentum. Within several years, the World Bank was benchmarked as a leader in knowledge management.

The narrative pattern underlying the Zambia story had key components necessary for business applications: it is true and actually happened; positive in tone, it has a happy ending; it was told in a minimalist fashion with none of the sights and sounds and smells of what was going on in Zambia; and it linked to the change idea. These guidelines make it easy to find stories to spark support for an infinite variety of possible change ideas.

Stories as Tools

Some leaders get so enthusiastic about storytelling that they spend an inordinate amount of time sitting around telling stories ad infinitum. Fun, perhaps, but not particularly useful. Eventually, employees say, "When are we going to get any work done?" Storytelling is a tool, not a goal. It needs to be focused on business objectives.

Beware of the myths of organizational storytelling, including:

- Storytelling is an ancient art that hasn't changed much in several thousand years.
- Storytelling is a rare skill in which relatively few human beings excel.
- The goal of an organization is to establish a storytelling culture.
- Organizational storytelling is about bringing people together and getting them to tell their stories.
- Leadership storytelling is about mastering the "well-told story" with the sights and sounds and smells of the context fully articulated.

Once you have effective stories, keep them alive, vibrant and part of the living culture of the company by making a repository of stories where people can record their stories and from which others can draw when they need stories. Make it easy for people to retell stories by providing relevant images and background. Keep to the oral tradition. Oral stories live on in memory; written stories tend to become ossified. If possible, keep stories in oral or video recordings, not official written versions. ■

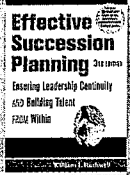
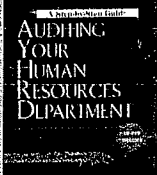



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