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Why Storytelling Is a Leadership Asset That Takes Many Forms

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You can call storytelling a fine art, a talent, a method, a skill, the mark of a leader or all of the above. But what proves effective storytelling is a powerful leadership asset? Well to get technical about it, neuroscience does.



Research into the neurobiological impact of storytelling by Paul Zak shows that stories change the activity in people's brains. Powerful character-driven stories produce neurochemicals that enhance our sense of empathy (thinking, feeling, and responding the same way as the character) and motivate us toward cooperative behavior – “stories bring brains together” and people with them.

Paul Zak recommends professionals to begin every presentation with a “compelling human-scale story.” His experiments in business settings show that emotive character-driven stories equate to better understanding and greater retention of your key speaking points weeks later. “In terms of making impact,” he writes, “this blows the standard PowerPoint presentation to bits.”

A Core Leadership Skill That Leads?

David Hutchens, author of *Circle of the 9 Muses: A Storytelling Field Guide for Innovators & Meaning Makers* says that leaders are “rediscovering that story is the most efficient path to creating connection, engagement, and shared meaning.”

According to Hutchens, leaders are connecting the power of stories with the ability to address pressing issues facing organizations such as capturing decisions, knowledge and wisdom after the event; engaging Millennial talent through organizational purpose; creating value; and defining individual and organizational identity.

Certainly top female executives such as Meg Whitman and Indra Nooyi leverage the power of stories in public speaking. We also recognize stories for their potential and power to make diversity personal, inspire women on pathways to



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leadership, and to advance gender equality.

We know stories are integral to leadership. According to researchers and consultants Stort and Nordstrom in Forbes, "Proper storytelling just might be the most impactful leadership method yet."

And leadership communications expert Dianna Booher writes, "Storytelling makes leadership possible. A leader without the ability to tell a great story has lost the platform and power to persuade."

Going even further, perhaps stories are leadership. Research by Parry and Hansen transcends "the notion that leaders tell stories", and instead proposes "that stories themselves operate like leaders" or "the story becomes the leader."

Ways Stories are Used in Everyday Leadership Situations

Stories clearly play a starring role in pivotal and powerful leadership moments. We tend to think of the big impact presentations, heroic personal tales, and big organizational stories. But storytelling is also integrated into everyday leadership situations in various ways.

Finnish researchers Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist sought to understand "storytelling managers" (managers who often integrate stories into leadership situations and conversations), identified by those reporting to them, to understand why they brought narration into leadership situations and how it related to trust-building.

They examined managers' use of story or narratives and the intention behind using stories. They identified seven categories of influence that stories were used for, of which there are likely multiples more. The first two are:

Motivation – Motivating co-workers to carry out tasks, adopt behavior, or achieve goals. These stories often brought in comparison or competition and/or revealed values and attitudes as encouragement to elevate the game.

Inspiration – Inspiring a shared vision and energizing towards higher order goals. These stories often brought in faith and supremacy over competitors through a focused collective effort.

We often equate leadership storytelling with motivating and inspiring – epic stories that lay out a great quest or heroic stories that portray triumph over adversity to reach an ultimate goal.

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In Forbes, Stort and Nordstrom identified four great stories leaders tell to engage people, which seem to fall mostly in these categories:

- Organizational stories which fosters connection and unite in purpose – such as the founding story or the strategic story
- Pivotal stories that illustrate big thinking or mindset shifts to overcome big challenges
- Teamwork stories which illustrate hard work, challenges to the status quo and dramatic breakthroughs
- Great work stories recognizing individual achievement and performance

They note that stories play a huge part in showing appreciation, as research has shown that among people who report the highest morale at work, 94% agreed

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Prevent/defuse conflict – Making co-workers feel involved and defusing a negative atmosphere. These stories used humor or personal experiences to break the energy.

Influencing boss's thinking – Managing up. Opening a manager's perspective by promoting creative or new thinking. For example, conveying a changing market by telling a personal story that leads to discovery of a new insight or new reality.

Discovering a focus – Empowering co-workers to freely explore new ways of doing things, to shake up what's not working. These stories might focus on examples of big unexpected changes or setbacks that ultimately catalyzed success or new advancements by wiping or changing the slate, blessings in disguise.

Direct trust-building – Showing empathy, identification and concern, or role-modelling. For example, cheering up a co-worker through an empathetic story of shared experience; revealing a story of personal vulnerability/failure to encourage self-trust or persistence; or sharing a personal story in which the manager has role-modelled or championed behavior they seek to identify and encourage in the team.

Dianna Booher notes in her top storytelling tips that while stories need an identifiable hero, leaders also have to be careful not to always position themselves as hero. She shares, "Audiences relate more often and learn more

from ‘failure’ stories.”

Mutual trust-building - Sparking iterative trust-building storytelling. For example, first sharing a personal anecdote that demonstrates a value, or illustrates trust in and alignment with the organization, in order to encourage mutual discussion and trust.

Author and consultant Terrence L. Gargiulo writes, “The shortest distance between two people is a story.” Leaders bring in stories to close that gap and inspire greater bonding and cohesion.

While no storyteller can ever control the impact of their story, congruency between various stories a leader shares and walking the walk behind the words are both important factors for trust and credibility.

Not Just For the Big Meetings

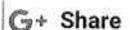
There are countless ways to use story as a leader, countless ways to get better at storytelling, and countless resources for doing so. But above all, storytelling is accessible to all managers. Stories aren’t just what top executives pull out at the annual review meeting or when introducing the next new initiative.

Storytelling can be naturally weaved into many leadership situations. Tomorrow you might tell a story about the exceptional contribution of one team member, the strategic insight that dawned on you in the most unlikely of contexts, or that devastating failure that was a huge gift only in retrospect.

Sometimes, the shortest distance between you and a moment of defining leadership might just be a story.

By Aimee Hansen

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