



The Power of Storytelling

A good story can help to engage employees and clients and inspire a business towards greater success. Kevin Murray, Chairman of The Good Relations Group explains how storytelling can take your company to new heights

The CEO of a major services company faces a crucial presentation in front of 300 customers. He must engage these people, be truly authoritative and spark essential change. Armed with a battery of materials – slides, video clips, and a carefully crafted script, he is still worried.

Something felt wrong and he sought my advice. “What you need,” I tell him, “is a good story. In fact, four stories. No slides, no script, just four stories you enjoy telling.” The CEO hesitated: “But I put so much work into all this,” he said, looking back at his mountain of close-written slides. “Trust me. Four well-told stories will do more for you than these materials ever could!” He paused and drew a deep breath, and said, “OK, let’s do it...”

Storytelling in business is going through a renaissance, and rightly so. Stories are indispensable to giving leaders in business the ‘emotional edge’ that leads to real

competitive advantage. For this reason, I collect them, relish their structure, characters and colour. I admire their ability to hook the imagination and their versatility to fulfill varying needs at different times.

I am not alone in this belief. At a recent Business Leaders’ Forum of some fifty CEOs from organisations around the world, I spoke about the power of stories. The idea caught a wave, people crowded round. As a result, Criticaleye invited me to discuss stories at a dinner that mushroomed from ten to 40 people.

Business leaders were intrigued; there was a flurry of questions. People wanted to know what makes a good story, how to tell it, where they might find such stories and, of course, how they could harness stories in their own company. It was a fascinating evening and has prompted me to try and share with you something of the power of stories. But first, let me tell you a story.

THE PASSIONATE CEO

Some years ago, I was asked to counsel the CEO of a construction company. He was passionate about health and safety but his staff knew ‘Steve’ as angry, controlling and adversarial. They had no sense of what drove him or why he pushed so furiously for every last detail to be checked. Steve fumed that his people “weren’t paying attention,” despised that they merely responded to crises and never sought active ways to tackle problems or bolt the fine points down.

We talked about his beliefs and values; digging deep to find what really drove him. Finally, Steve told me the story of how, at a previous company, a boy had strayed onto one of his sites. The boy had managed to access a gap in the fence, fallen into a deep excavated pit and been impaled on the iron rods at the bottom. When he heard how the boy had died, ▶

Steve took on the agonising responsibility of telling the boy's mother himself. He was the leader, and felt it his duty, but it was the most harrowing experience of his life. It was made worse when he learned the gap in the fence hadn't been secured nor the pit properly protected – minor omissions but a confluence of details that proved fatal. Steve's credo became that no detail was too small when it came to health and safety. No one could have mistaken the strength of his feeling when he told me, "I never want to have to tell another mother that her child has been in an accident on one of our sites." His story, when told, had a profound and positive impact on his business, and genuinely changed perceptions about him.

THE VITAL GAP

Steve's tale is a great example of why business leaders need stories to communicate. If we unlock our ability to communicate, we radically improve our chances of success. Business leaders are tasked to succeed while delivering the best results. The right stories contribute to this success because they fill the 'vital gap' illuminated by two recent pieces of research.

London Business School's Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour, John Hunt, has produced a study on 'Introversion among CEOs'. It reveals that "the majority of people who move to top jobs are not all the smiling, hearty, extroverted 'chappies' espousing vision, values and emotional stimulation described in popular reviews. In fact, whether in the private or public sector, CEOs are more likely to be introverted, task orientated and private individuals who do not find the drama expected of leaders comes easily."

Professor Hunt found that 70 per cent of the 105 CEOs he surveyed were trapped in logic and analysis, uncomfortable about displaying any vulnerability.

On the other hand, research of 1,600 managers in the UK by Cognosis Consulting discovered that the success or failure of any business strategy depends significantly on the "emotional engagement" of employees and front-line managers. Leaders, said the research, must go "beyond reason" and conceive strategies that are not only intellectually acute but have real "emotional edge." However, only one in 20 managers strongly agreed that their company's strategy is either exciting or inspiring. Here, then, is the vital gap. While most CEOs are introverted, task-based and logical, employees and other stakeholders want emotion. Again and again I have found that stories can move people and fill this vital gap.

THE PURPOSE OF STORIES

So will any story do? Absolutely not. To be effective, stories in business must have a defined purpose. Hollywood is riddled with angst about stories; every studio has its bevy of gurus and script doctors whose aim is not to find the perfect story, but to make films that audiences worldwide will pay to see. Movie mogul Peter Guber writes in the Harvard Business Review about the power of a well-told story to captivate and inspire people. He separates stories as entertainment, from stories used to further business purpose when he describes how he himself used impromptu storytelling from the deck of a ship in Havana's harbour to win Fidel Castro's grudging support for a film project. Guber's example highlights the key principle here: the purpose of storytelling in business is to change behaviours and achieve results.

TEN RULES OF GREAT STORYTELLING

The purpose of storytelling in business is to change behaviours and achieve results. So:

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

And, whatever you do, keep practising!

When I persuaded Steve to communicate his story to his company, the entire workforce saw health and safety as important and responded wholeheartedly. His story certainly changed behaviours – employees did what was right whether he was there or not and were happier doing it. Leaders like Steve who manage to harness the power of stories succeed because the tasks of analysis and strategy that are often their background are so different from leadership which is crucially about ‘How do I get people to do this?’

IDENTIFY THE TAKEOUT FIRST

Many leaders nevertheless still cherish topdown messaging as their default position. But in today’s culture where reference has driven out deference, we need to think about communication as a process that is result and behaviour driven. Since business stories are designed to provoke action, the clearer you are about what your stories are for, the better. It is the takeout that is key, not the message. Ask yourself what exactly you are trying to achieve, who you need to influence and what you want them to do. Give careful thought to ‘what’s in it for him?’ What benefit accrues to the people you want to behave differently that will persuade them it’s in their interest too. Focus on what you want them to ‘take out’ of the story, but don’t make this your message. Let people come to that conclusion themselves, with help from your story.

Perhaps you believe your organisation must embrace change. You may need a ‘future story’ that talks so vividly about your vision of a typical day in the future that it will make everyone else want to get to this inspiring place. You might

want your people to have a different value. Then look for a great story about a principled decision. But a word of warning: ensure you really aspire to that future or those principled decisions, otherwise the story will only demonstrate the gap between the storyteller and the story. The heart of the matter is this: the storyteller has to be authentic.

BEING AUTHENTIC

Effective storytelling in business is not a cynical or manipulative process. It has to come from you and be based on the authentic force of your strong point of view. Being authentic means leaders can ‘be themselves, but better’. It allows them to draw on symbolic tales that exemplify their values and which overlap with those of the organisation. This leads to increased authenticity because the stories come from their beliefs, are passionate and are therefore, genuinely convincing.

When leaders ask me for powerful stories, I start by helping them develop their strong point of view. This means being certain about what they think and believe (their true values), how they behave, the benefits they gain as a result and how they think others should behave.

For example, I firmly believe the old adage ‘if you are not learning you are dying’ (belief). I do my best to take time every day to learn something new and give free rein to my curiosity (behaviour). What I gain are unexpected opportunities, new relationships, new perspectives, and personal satisfaction – even an improved vocabulary for my stories (benefit). So, of course, I am pretty certain that you too should spend more time looking to open your mind and learn a new thing every day (advocacy).

Practising what you preach gives you the authority to urge others to do as you do. On the other hand, trying to persuade others without being authentic soon gets rumbled and swiftly results in your reputation going down. Without integrity, success is brief and reputation short-lived.

If you really know your point of view, it will lead you naturally to stories based on your values attuned with the needs of your business, which you can use to recruit others to your cause. Their reaction and the way they act (and the way you listen to them) will tell you whether you are getting through, what further conversations you will need to have and what other stories you may need to tell.

Steve’s story is classic. Authentic, based on his strong point of view and entirely appropriate to his organisation, it did what no amount of rules and regulations could do – it connected with his people, moved them, raised the benchmark for safety and, in the process, changed their perception of him. This was a win-win for all the stakeholders – especially Steve who now knew what his integrity could achieve. The ‘Cognosis’ research does not propose that feelings and emotion supplant reason but that they are fundamental to supporting it. Steve pursued a rational strategy of active health and safety for his company but it alone left him frustrated and his people cold. By going ‘beyond reason’ he achieved real buy-in. His authentic story stuck, strengthened the company, gave Steve emotional edge and filled the vital gap.

GOOD STORIES ARE STICKY

Stories like these are the super-glue that makes a point stick. Research shows that we have a new short-term memory approximately every eight seconds.

What isn't important to us beyond the moment is lost. To get anything into anyone's long-term memory, we need to grab his or her attention and hold it. If my audience is head, heart and soul in my story (in which I too am head, heart and soul), then the story takes root. The listener engages and suspends their critical faculties, their imagination is fired and their heart touched.

So what characterises a good business story? First, it must be easy for the teller to remember: no script, just the odd prompt card to remind him or her which story they are telling. It should be short and simple, appropriate to context and flexible enough to allow improvisation. It must be true to the mission, convey the teller's passion and enlist support for the excellent endeavour it illustrates. Steve's story takes no more than a minute to tell but it is memorable, with an active protagonist, strong characters and vivid imagery. There is a turning point, a resolution and a message arising from a strong point of view, inviting us to say 'yes', change our behaviour and join in ensuring that safety is paramount.

FINDING THE RIGHT STORIES

Finding the right stories for your business is a matter of looking and listening. Once you understand the power of stories, listening will inevitably allow you to recognise the great tales available to you everywhere, in and around your company.

Think about your stakeholders – your customers, employees and shareholders. Look for strategy stories, product-benefit stories, brand stories, stories about history, quality and image. You can use water-cooler stories, stories about the

future, about failure and its lessons or springboard stories – those about the past which point the way to the future. Armed with stories you can challenge, enable, inspire and encourage the behaviours the organisation needs from all employees. Use them to celebrate the heroes around you and they may even make a hero of you in return. This is not to banish logic. Use analysis when it is better, sense when a story is wanted and when one is not; never use a story you don't love or one that is half-baked. A story you believe in, used well, offers a route to the heart and that's the best place to take action with real energy and enthusiasm.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Truly inspiring leaders go beyond reason and spend time on emotional communication because it leads to greater buy-in and the rise in discretionary effort for which every leader is held responsible. This has, in other words, a better chance of success. So prove the power of stories for yourself. If it comes from the heart and connects to the needs of your company, it is valid. And remember – practice makes perfect!

By the way, the anxious CEO I first mentioned did indeed take his courage in both hands, threw away his graphs and stood before his clients armed with four stories we knew had the right takeouts. They came from his experience, reflected his values, cut to the core of what needed to be done and powerfully demonstrated why customers needed a new relationship with his company. Afterwards, he was jubilant. The feedback was incredible: "You really knew what you were talking about... authoritative, clear – and with no damn slides to distract. People really heard!"

The CEO's relief was immense, his clients got engaged and his confidence was renewed. He is now a strong advocate for the real bottom line business benefit of stories.

He says: "The right use of stories constantly opens up new leads and new possibilities. After presentations, clients come up to me and say, 'I relate to what you were saying, I believe you understand what we're going through – I would like to talk to you about what your company can do for me.' More customers come to us from listening to the head of the company and I have the pleasure of knowing that what I get out of it overlaps completely with what the company needs."

Does his story inspire you? Then start living your own! Stories are in your DNA. You already know how. ■

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