

Successful leaders are storytellers: it's time to re-discover this skill

Just the other day my business partner, Mark Schenk, surprised himself and in the process learned a valuable lesson. Mark had developed the strong belief that people don't leave companies, they leave bad managers. Even if a company is poorly run if the employee has an excellent manager they are likely to stay on. Mark was extolling this point of view at a leadership development program he was facilitating when one of the participants said, "I don't buy it." This defiance made Mark bristle inside. He knew this chap was wrong and was ready to argue with him but rather than lose his cool Mark said, "Can you give me an example of what you mean?"

"Sure," he said. "I was working at [large utility company] and it was one of the worst companies I've worked for. Ruled by fear, with too many incompetent executives who were unclear about where the company was headed. And at the same time I had the very best manager any one could hope for. She did her best to shield us from all the crap that was going on and also gave me plenty of scope to do my job in the way I knew it needed to be done. She had been with this company for 12 years and was doing everything she could to make a change but to no avail. In the end I left the company to seek out a more productive working environment."

Immediately Mark realised he had to rethink his point of view. His mind was changed by a simple story describing someone's real life experience.

Successful leaders are game changers; they change the minds, feelings and ultimately the actions of people in a way that conveys the meaning and significance of what needs to be done. So by this definition anyone in an organisation can be a leader. The chap in Mark's workshop is one. It's about getting things done with help from your colleagues. But changing people's minds and actions takes more than persuasive argument. In fact argument alone can merely result in people digging in their heels. Changing minds and actions also involves empathy, listening, questioning and in particular, stories. Harvard Professor and author of *Changing Minds*, Howard Gardner, puts it this way: "The principle vehicle of leadership is the story: The leader affects individual behavior, thought, and feelings through the stories that he and she tells."ⁱ

WAYS LEADERS USE STORIES AND WHY THEY ARE EFFECTIVE

Leaders can tell stories to paint a vision or strategic direction, share a lesson, convey values or illustrate desired behaviours. Stories also have an ability to forge deeper connections between people that inspire them to focus their attention and take action. As Terrence Gargiulo said, "The shortest distance between two people is a story."ⁱⁱ

Stories work for leaders as an effective communication and engagement technique for three main reasons.

Firstly, stories convey emotion effectively and emotion united with a strong idea is persuasive. We remember what we feel. And our emotions inspire us to take action.

Secondly, stories are concrete and have the ability to transport you to a place in time where we can picture the events that are recounted in our mind's eye. And this is another reason stories are memorable. We are up to 22 times more likely to remember a story than a set of disconnected facts (such as presentation dot points). <ref>

Lastly, stories represent a pull strategy, unlike the push strategy we use when we argue in a more traditional way. Stories engage the listener pulling them into the story to participate in the conversation rather than telling them what to think.ⁱⁱⁱ

WHAT IS A STORY ANYWAY?

At this point you might be thinking, "so what do you really mean by a *story*?" In business a story is simply a recounting of an event that might have happened to you, or to someone else you know or even a story from another source such as a movie or a book. For example you

might be a leader of a business unit facing a terrific opportunity to launch a new major product but you're unable to raise enough capital to fund the venture into profitability. To get your sponsors on board you might recount this story about Ted Turner and the launch of CNN.^{iv}

When Ted Turner was planning to launch CNN in 1979 he knew he didn't have enough funds to see it through to profitability but at the same time he knew he had to move quickly and no one was going to lend him the money because of his inexperience in delivering TV news. So he recalled his knowledge of military history, and likened the CNN launch strategy to Irwin Rommel's desert campaign during World War II. On several occasions, the German general attacked the British when he knew he didn't have enough fuel to conduct an entire offensive. What he intended to do was strike when they weren't expecting it, overrun their lines, and then capture their fuel dumps. At that point he could refuel his Panzers and continue the offensive. Turner's vision for financing CNN was similar. If they had enough cash to get on the air and could somehow get through their first year of service, people would see it was a viable and valuable service. Once the concept was proven, he would have easier access to capital. Even in the worst case, Turner figured that if he ran out of money after launching the channel and getting some distribution, he would have created a valuable asset that he could sell to a competitor.

Our stories, collectively and individually, have a profound affect on what we believe is possible. Therefore the challenge for leaders is to both understand the stories affecting individuals and groups and then know how to define and tell (ideally through wide participation) new stories that set the direction for the company. But that's not all. The greatest challenge is to help people hear, remember and believe where the company is headed and then inspire people to act in line with that belief.

Aligning everyone's actions to the company's strategy is equivalent of finding the corporate Shangri-la. It can be done. Take IBM's turnaround for example. Lou Gerstner arrived as the new CEO in 1993 at a time when IBM was on the endangered species list. Gerster had been CEO at Nabisco and American Express and before that he was a director of McKinsey Consulting. He'd seen hundreds of strategies and knew that most are the same—it's extremely difficult to have a unique strategy. What makes the difference, however, is executing the strategy. Gerstner set about turning around IBM by telling new stories about their direction such as the new emphasis on services and the growth that will come from software. And of course Lou didn't do this alone. He worked hard to develop a good team who understood the stories and could act in a way that created new ones that reinforced the strategy.^v

FINDING YOUR OWN STORIES

The first step to become a storytelling leader is to develop an awareness of the stories that swirl around you every day. Whenever a set of events hits you as remarkable take notice of what happened and ask yourself the question, "What does that set events say about the behaviours I want to instil or dispel in my group?" Say, for example, you are a leader at FedEx, the company that promises to deliver your package "absolutely, positively" overnight, and you hear the following:

"In St. Vincent, a tractor trailer accident blocked the main road going into the airport. Together a FedEx driver and ramp agent tried every possible alternate route to the airport but were stymied by traffic jams. They eventually struck out on foot, shuttling every package the last mile to the airport for an on-time departure."^{vi}

This story is packed with the behaviours you want everyone in your company to exhibit, so instead of pleading for people to be persistent, innovative, collaborative, just tell this story as an example of what can be done.

The second step is to move your way of speaking from being predominantly rational and argument-based to be a good mixture of stories and argument. But here's the secret. We humans are afflicted by what psychologists call the confirmation bias, which results in us digging in our heels whenever someone tries to convince us to change our minds with sophisticated rationale. In fact we often come away from these exchanges doubly convinced of our own opinions. We can avoid triggering this bias by starting our presentations with examples. Specifically it's beneficial to start with a negative story to grab their attention. We are hard wired to notice negative stories but negativity rarely changes our minds. So we follow with a positive story of what's possible. These two examples give the listener the opportunity to gain

a new perspective and shift their position without telling them what to think. At this point a rational argument can be effective. Now think about how most presentations flow: we outline our argument and follow with examples and unwittingly trigger that pesky confirmation bias.

Finally, where possible ask for feedback about what people infer about you from your stories. Each time you recount an experience you're conveying your values, whether you like it or not. Sometimes it's hard for you to really detect what's being conveyed. You might think your story conveys the importance of persistence and attention to detail but your listeners infer you're inflexible and a nick picker. You need trusted advisers to give you this frank feedback.

Good leaders are good storytellers. For the lucky few it is a skill that has stayed with them despite organisational cultures favouring rational argument. Everyone is a storyteller but some get it beaten out of them. Consequently storytelling is not the exclusive domain of the naturally gifted few. Rather, it is a skill that every leader can, and should, re-discover and develop.

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ⁱ Gardner, H. (1999). "The vehicle and the vehicles of leadership." *American Behavioural Scientist* 42(6): 1009-1023.

ⁱⁱ Gargiulo, T. L. (2007). *Once Upon a Time: Using Story-Based Activities to Develop Breakthrough Communication Skills*. San Francisco, Pfeiffer.

ⁱⁱⁱ Simmons, A. (2006). *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*. New York, Basic Books.

^{iv} Turner, T. (2008). *Call Me Ted: The Autobiography of the Extraordinary Business Leader and Founder of CNN*. London, Sphere.

^v Gerstner, L. V. (2002). *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance? Inside IBM's Historic Turnaround*. New York, Harper Collins.

^{vi} Heath, C. and D. Heath (2007) "Talking Strategy: Three Straightforward Ways to Make Your Strategy Stick." *ChangeThis*, DOI: <http://www.changethis.com/31.01.TalkingStrategy>