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**(Note: This is a more in depth version of the article)**

Stories are fundamental to the way we learn and to the way we communicate. They are the most efficient way of storing, retrieving, and conveying information. Since story hearing requires active participation by the listener, stories are the most profoundly social form of human interaction and communication.

Today organizations must constantly change and adapt. It is tempting to believe that the tools of technology can meet today's market challenges head on. But unless an organization can communicate and learn, there is very little that technology can do. Leaders need processes and strategies to get an accurate read on their company and to communicate new visions and missions to employees.

Stories can be used strategically to galvanize an organization in a lot of different ways. Stories are everywhere, but not all stories look like stories. If you consider a story to be a previously prepared gist of something to say, something that you have said before or heard another say, then a great deal of conversation is simply mutual storytelling.

One of the common misconceptions about stories is that they are used only to convey an intended message. Certainly, stories can be used to communicate a predigested message such as a moral; but to limit stories to such simplistic forms of communication is to miss out on a whole array of nuances and possibilities. Stories interplay with one another. The same story can evoke totally different responses in different people. The point is not to control what people take from a story but to engage their imaginations.

Stories do not always begin with the words "once upon a time." Stories can be as short as one or two sentences. They may not even be expressed in words. In fact, a basic premise of stories is that through them we "enact" rather than "announce" our intentions, thoughts, values, or knowledge. Essentially, stories allow us to model what we want to communicate instead of having to explain it.

Here are nine key ways that stories function:

1. Stories empower a speaker.
2. Stories create an environment.
3. Stories bind and bond individuals.
4. Stories engage our minds in active listening.
5. Stories negotiate differences.
6. Stories encode information.
7. Stories are tools for thinking.
8. Stories serve as weapons.
9. Stories bring about healing.

Here is a summary of how stories can be used in an organization:

<b>When are stories applicable in business?</b>	<b>How are stories used in business?</b>	<b>Who uses stories in business?</b>
<b>Presenting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Animating talks and presentations</li> <li>• Anchoring a message</li> <li>• Potentiating a message</li> </ul>	Leaders Public Relations Sales Marketing
<b>Imaging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Product positioning</li> <li>• Appealing to an audience</li> <li>• Dialoguing with customers</li> <li>• Innovating</li> </ul>	Marketing Advertising Sales Customer Service Research & Development
<b>Connecting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pacing/getting in sync with others</li> <li>• Recruiting</li> <li>• Discovering talents of employees</li> <li>• Problem solving</li> <li>• Finding the critical point in a system</li> </ul>	Sales Market Research Human Resources Managers/Leaders
<b>Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Developing staff</li> <li>• Knowledge management</li> <li>• Change management</li> </ul>	Trainers Human Resources Organizational Developers Managers/Leaders
<b>Leading/Staff Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building and managing corporate culture</li> <li>• Mentoring and coaching</li> <li>• Engendering loyalty</li> <li>• Cultivating diversity</li> </ul>	Trainers Human Resources Managers/Leaders
<b>Team Building</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energizing employees</li> <li>• Creating synergy</li> <li>• Collaborating</li> <li>• Partnering</li> </ul>	Team Leaders Managers

Through stories people find common ground. Since stories require active listening people are able to share a depth of experiences otherwise not possible through normal dialog. Stories can emphasize shades of meaning and feelings often left hidden or inadequately expressed in didactic forms of communication. As one person shares a story the listener finds a similar correspondence from their experience.

Leaders know that an essential part of their job is to initiate and nurture connections between people. Stories facilitate the development of bonds between people thereby maximizing informal channels of communication. As people overlap in crisscrossing patterns with one another, leaders can leverage these relationships to move information, manage change, promote new understandings, encourage people to take ownership of the organization's success, and catalyze action.

More and more organizations are becoming purposeful in how they use stories. The organizations I have been working with are going beyond superficial application of stories and discovering ways to make them a central part of new management practices. Stories have a front seat in discussions about how to transform the cultures

of their organizations. These companies start by listening to stories from their employees/customers and in the process realize a whole new way of thinking about them selves.

The simple act of making time for people to share their organizational stories and encouraging them to listen actively yields tremendous results in people's level of engagement and excitement. As the stories unfold a tapestry of key stories emerges. These stories define the company's strengths and become central beacons of purpose and motivation for people. There are additional benefits of informal learning. As the stories spread through the organization they produce new networks of learning and information exchange that might otherwise remain dormant or never discovered.

Stories play a central role in leaders' relationships by promoting healing. Like muscles that rip under the duress of heavy exercise, relationships are torn by the natural rhythms of people coexisting with one another. Without proper healing these tears cause long lasting damage that can be difficult and even impossible to heal. Stories open channels of communication and allow people to meaningful converse about the experiences and perceptions that can get in the way of trust, and positive energy.

## **Stories & a Little TLC Produce Business Results – 3 Practices to Start Using Today**

### **1. Tell Stories**

Start sharing your personal experiences and ideas in the form of stories. Use every opportunity to enrich your communications by becoming more mindful and purposeful in using stories. It's been my experience as an executive coach that good leaders have a rich index of stories. They find the right story to tell at the right time. For example:

1. Open meetings with an internal or external customer story
2. Use stories during after action reviews
3. Incorporate stories into employee orientation programs
4. Set aside time during all-hands meeting for sharing stories
5. Weave stories into corporate communications
6. Add stories to intranets sites
7. Strengthen business cases with stories
8. Make stories a core part of leadership development and coaching processes
9. Integrate the telling, collection and analysis of stories into strategic planning
10. Increase the quality of dialog with stories to facilitate continuous performance management

Here is a guide for how to select a story to tell:

Use the matrix below to determine what type of story to select. There are three steps to the process. First, select a word from the row titled “1.Size,” which best describes the size of group you intend to select a story for. Second, select a word from the row titled, “2. Intention.” Lastly, select a word from the row titled, “3. Trigger.” At the bottom of each column there is a number indicating a value. Add up the values of your choices using the values listed at the bottom of each column to get your overall score.

<p><b>1. SIZE</b> <i>“How many people will hear your story?”</i></p>	<p><b>Intimate</b> Usually a conversation involving two people, the nature of the exchange is personal</p>	<p><b>Small</b> Several people who share good relationships with one another</p>	<p><b>Meeting</b> More formal setting, there is structure to the group interactions, people may or may not know one well or have good relationships</p>	<p><b>Presentation</b> Very formal setting, usually large group</p>
<p><b>2. INTENTION</b> <i>“Why do you need to select a story?”</i></p>	<p><b>Connect</b> You need to build stronger relationships and bond with your listeners</p>	<p><b>Teach</b> You need to elucidate, explain, or help others conceptualize new ideas or concepts</p>	<p><b>Transfer</b> You need to communicate key pieces of information</p>	<p><b>Entertain</b> You need to break the ice, empower yourself as a speaker or make people laugh</p>
<p><b>3. TRIGGER</b> <i>“What is prompting you to select a story?”</i></p>	<p><b>Listen</b> You want to hear what a person is thinking, or feeling so you share a personal story to create an opportunity for reciprocity</p>	<p><b>Insight</b> You need to share an epiphany or while you are listening you suddenly realize something new</p>	<p><b>Reaction</b> You need to respond to another person’s or story, or comment, you may also be responding to group dynamics</p>	<p><b>Plant</b> You need to deliver a very specific message or invoke a specific mood</p>
	<b>COLUMN VALUE = 1</b>	<b>COLUMN VALUE = 2</b>	<b>COLUMN VALUE = 3</b>	<b>COLUMN VALUE= 4</b>

<b>SCORE</b>	<b>WHAT KIND OF STORY TO SELECT</b>
<b>3-6</b>	<b>Personal Story</b>
<b>6-9</b>	<b>Other People’s Personal Stories</b>
<b>9-12</b>	<b>Stories From Other Domains</b>

Here is how to interpret your score:

For example, if you selected “Intimate,” for “Size,” “Connect,” for “Intention,” and “Listen,” for “Trigger,” your score would be 3. The best category of story to select from would be Personal Story.

For the sake of simplicity I am going to reduce the kinds of stories we can select from into three broad categories:

1. Personal Stories
2. Other People’s Personal Stories
3. Stories from Other Domains

Personal stories run the gamut from very recent experiences to experiences deep in our past. There is often a quality of vulnerability associated with sharing a personal story especially ones from our past. We often relate personal stories in the form of a collage. Stories that are well indexed in our mind will be tightly interwoven with one another and we may feel the desire to share a series of linked stories. “Other People’s Personal Stories,” may come from ones they have shared with us. They can also be events we have observed. The major defining characteristic of these stories is that they describe things that have not happened to us. And “Stories from Other Domains,” may come from anywhere. Some good examples are books, movies, history, or science. That is not an exhaustive list but gives you the sense that these are stories drawn from lots of different disciplines.

There is some overlap between the categories’ scores to account for situations that naturally could fall into either one. This is meant to be a guideline. You may end up with a score of 12 and decide that selecting a personal story is still the best option. As a general rule, I place a higher value on personal stories, however they are not always appropriate.

The key to selecting stories is having plenty to choose from. While it is possible to get a lot of mileage out of a few stories and reuse them in a variety of settings this is not optimal. Reviewing our categories of stories we know Personal Stories require a rich index. These are your most important ones. If you find yourself coming up short on personal stories to share then you need to spend more time reflecting on them. Another good source of personal stories are recent experiences since they are current in our minds. Be aware of sharing a story to simply vent or boast. Stories used in a self-serving fashion do not resonate well with others. They have little impact and communication potential. For sharing “Other People’s Personal Stories,” recent experiences are also effective. If we have recently heard another person’s story we are likely to remember it. This story can be used when we do not want to share a personal one or when it is inappropriate to do so. Stories that really strike us stay with us. We are bound to have a collection of stories we have heard from others that are not recent ones. They need to be well indexed along with our personal ones.

“Stories from Other Domains,” are our last category of stories. This provides an endless assortment of potential stories. These come from lots of different disciplines. Movies and books are a good place to start. Who are your favorite characters? Look for stories and characters that you have a strong connection with. History and science are another place to look since they are filled with exceptional stories and personages. After awhile you will notice a pattern. Without thinking much about it you will find yourself repeating certain stories over and over again.

## **2. Learn from Stories**

Tell stories to elicit others to tell them and then learn from them. The more you can get others to share their stories the more in tune you will be with their needs, ideas, and concerns. Even our own stories have the greatest value when we reflect on them. To paraphrase a famous Greek guy, “an unexamined story is not worth having.” Make the time and space to explore the stories you hear by asking questions and making people feel safe so they are open and willing to share their stories.

Sharing stories promotes healing when there is tension or conflict between people in the organizations. These strained relationships require the attention of leader who can introduce healing. The fact that stories involve active listening means that leaders can encourage people to share them so that people can enter a perspective different from their own. By doing so, misunderstandings and breakdowns in communications can be overcome. Healing becomes possible when we are willing to embrace others’ perspectives.

### **3. Connect Stories to Guide Your Actions**

Stories yield tremendous insights and opportunities when we connect them to one another. Stories in isolation are not particularly valuable. Viewed as a collection we can discern patterns and relationships. Our knowledge of other people, situations and ourselves is dramatically increased. Turn these insights into actions. And then watch, as these actions produce great business results and generate a whole new slew of stories of their own.

**(Pieces of this article have been adopted and reprinted with permission from, *Stories at Work: Using Stories to Improve Communications and Build Relationships*, Praeger, 2006)**

#### **About The Author:**

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