

Chapter 2

Stories Empower Speakers, Create an Environment, and Help People Bond

STORIES EMPOWER A SPEAKER

Jack approached the podium with confidence. He could not believe it had been over twenty years since his high school graduation. The perfunctory applause died down, and Jack's eyes met the stares of over five hundred students awaiting his words of wisdom.

Jack took a beat of silence and then raised his fist in the air and yelled, "Shazam!" into the microphone. Without waiting for his startled audience to settle back in their seats, Jack continued.

"Ms. Coldenfish was her name. Paints, charcoal, and paper mache were the game. Room 62, second period, on Mondays and Thursdays, this was my junior year nightmare. I must have flunked preschool, because to this day I cannot draw a circle and color it yellow inside. To avoid sinking into a pool of artistic self-contempt I used art class as an opportunity to religiously pursue one of my favorite subjects: flirting! Ms. Coldenfish and I had very different agendas. She could not understand how anyone could resist being drawn into her world of shapes, colors, and perspectives. I could not understand why she insisted on trying

to sell us on her passion, even as she persisted in interfering with mine.

“Art was her strength, and discipline was her weakness. Whenever our class got out of control, Ms. Coldenfish would yell ‘Shazam!’ Perhaps some of you have seen a TV show called *The Greatest American Hero*. The main character was your typical nerd by day, superhero by night. Whenever he had to transform himself from nerd to superhero, he would yell his magic word. And what word do you think he yelled?”

Analysis

Every speaker faces the challenge of engaging his audience. Try to recall the most memorable speakers you have heard. Undoubtedly, you are recalling a story or anecdote the speaker used to anchor the talk. Jack remembers what it was like to be a high school student. Jack’s story is funny. We are drawn into the picture he paints of art class with his idiosyncratic art teacher. However, there is more than humor in this story. If Jack is merely an accomplished public speaker with all of the skills and techniques of the trade, he may not realize how he can use his story as leverage to reach deep into the minds of his audience and not just entertain them.

Jack’s story allows him to be vulnerable in front of his audience. His talk is to a group of high school students about to take a ceremonial step toward adulthood. Memories of failing art and goofing off in a class taught by a quirky but passionate teacher, reviewed later in life, can yield rich lessons. Jack can now weave a collage of stories and anecdotes that chronicle his maturation. Stories and experiences must be seen in relation to one another. Stories in isolation are deprived of their fullest potential.

STORIES CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT OF TRUST

Phil Anderman, president and CEO of Precision Dynamics, had no idea why his company had fallen on such bad times. Profits were down, morale was low, and interdepartmental feuds threatened to turn a bad situation into a deadly one.

Phil knew he needed to change the organization’s culture. Currently, departments were competing for vital resources. The company’s structure, which he had put in place, did not encourage the integration of resources. At the time, the strategy had sounded

brilliant: encourage innovation and teamwork by fostering a competitive environment. Now, with the luxury of hindsight, he knew he had been wrong.

Tomorrow morning he was to meet with all the departmental heads, and he wasn't sure what he was going to say. Well, first things first, he thought. It was time to tuck his daughter into bed. Morning would come soon enough.

When Phil walked into the conference room the next day, it was buzzing with uncertainty and suspicion. There had been a lot of rumors and people were on edge; so was Phil, for that matter.

"Good morning everyone. Please take a seat so we can get started; we have a lot to discuss. Last night I sat at home agonizing about what I should say this morning. As I was tucking my seven-year-old daughter Maya into bed, she shared with me a story she had heard at school. It goes something like this.

"There once was a farmer. After working all morning in the scorching sun, he sat down under a shady tree to take a rest. Wiping the sweat from his eyes, the farmer thought, 'Oh, I wish I had some cool, clear water to splash on my face.' Suddenly a pail of water fell from the tree, drenching the farmer below.

"That felt so good,' the farmer said to himself. 'I just wish I had some more water to quench my thirst.' This time a bucket of water appeared by his side. Now, the farmer was no dummy. He knew that he had stumbled upon a wishing tree and that he had only one wish left. Lifting his voice to the leaves above, he said, 'I want to meet the wisest teacher.'

"Before he had even completed uttering his wish, a robed figure appeared before him. He asked the farmer, 'What would you like to learn or see?'

"Without hesitation, the farmer replied, 'I want to learn how to get to heaven.'

"The teacher's sparkling blue eyes flashed, and suddenly the ground in front of the farmer opened up with a fierce rumble and an escalator appeared. The farmer asked the wise teacher, 'Where will this take us?'

"The teacher smiled and said, 'The way to heaven is through hell.'

"They both stepped onto the escalator and began their descent. At last they saw a sign that read, 'Welcome to Hell—Banquet Hall Straight Ahead.' The farmer was awfully hungry from the long trip. He turned to the teacher and said, 'Let's go get some food.'

"They headed for the banquet hall. As they entered, the farmer stopped in his tracks at the magnificent sight. There were long marble tables with large vases filled with bright and sweet-smell-

ing flowers. Each table held dozens of gold trays heaped with the most delectable foods.

“The farmer turned to the teacher and said, ‘I don’t understand.’

“‘Look very carefully,’ responded the teacher.

“The farmer suddenly noticed food flying all over the place. People were swarming from one table to another grabbing food from golden trays. Then the farmer saw what the teacher wanted him to observe; the elbows of each person were permanently locked straight. People were attempting to eat the food from the trays by throwing it in the air and then trying to catch it in their mouths. As a result, food was flying everywhere and very little of it was actually getting eaten.

“In a pleading voice the farmer said, ‘May we go now? I have seen enough.’

“The teacher nodded, and in the wink of an eye they were on another escalator and climbing into the sky. At long last it stopped by a sign that read, ‘Welcome to Heaven—Banquet Hall Straight Ahead.’

“So the teacher and farmer went to the banquet hall, and again the farmer stopped dead in his tracks. The banquet hall was identical to the one in hell with long, marble tables decorated with large vases filled with bright and sweet-smelling flowers and gold trays heaped with the most delectable foods.

“The teacher guided the farmer toward one of the tables. As the farmer approached he felt his elbows lock straight. Glancing around the room, he realized that everyone was in the same predicament. Even the teacher’s arms could not bend. The teacher spoke: ‘We are hungry. Let us eat.’ With that, he picked up a piece of food and extended it toward the farmer’s mouth. The farmer did likewise, and they ate to their hearts’ content. When the farmer had chewed his last morsel of food, he found himself, once again, in the shade of the wishing tree.

“I’m afraid I have neither a wishing tree nor wisdom to offer you. We are going through some tough times. I realize that we have not always made the best decisions, or implemented the best policies, but I firmly believe we can get through this. Before we dive into the strategic plan, would someone please pass me the coffee?”

Analysis

Phil recognizes the relevance of the story his daughter heard in school to his company’s predicament. He shows us how a story or experience becomes an opportunity for reflection and insight. Phil’s

receptivity to the story is a defining characteristic of the “story mind”; it does not matter that the story comes from a child. The story mind develops the discipline of synthesizing information. While on the surface there may be an apparent connection, the story mind looks for relationships between ideas and concepts from different areas and experiences.

Phil decides that he does not need to put up a false front of strength and leadership in order to motivate his managers. On the surface, he risks appearing vulnerable by alluding to the ineffective policies he instated that encouraged competition between departments, by expressing his uncertainty and apprehensions about the company’s present position, and by sharing a story told to him by his daughter. But that very vulnerability and use of the story creates an environment of trust. The story encapsulates the changes the company will need to embrace in order to regain market share. And deliberately or not, Phil ends his story by asking someone to pass him the coffee. To Phil, “The way to heaven is through hell” story is not just an allegorical tale; it is a template for his thinking and communication.

What if Phil had said this instead: “We all know that Precision Dynamics has fallen on hard times. Sometimes a company needs to go through a little hell before it can reap the benefits of growth. Now more than ever you need to pull together as a team and do whatever it takes to beat the market’s down cycle. We will not allow our competitors to push their way into our value chains. Today I will take you through our strategic plan for the next quarter. It is imperative that you follow the road map set out in this plan. Precision Dynamics’s success rests in your hands.”

Here Phil sounds like a no-nonsense CEO. He gets to his point quickly and tells his managers what they need to do. But is he as effective? The tone is dictatorial. When was the last time you changed your behavior because of a motivating speech someone made? Words can be silvery; all of us can be moved by a person’s charisma and rhetoric, but we rarely identify with the speaker or undergo a significant shift within ourselves. Phil’s tone and words are unlikely to elicit the response he seeks. He is presenting a strategy of teamwork, but he is clearly setting himself apart from the team.

Incidentally, a colleague of mine was named director of a dysfunctional department. For years people had been bickering and fighting. Over the course of a year and a half, things improved. At the department’s annual holiday party, my colleague decided to tell “the way to heaven is through hell” story and act it out with his

staff assistant. The response was unbelievable. Managers came up to them after the party and said, "Thank you for showing us the way out of hell."

STORIES BIND AND BOND INDIVIDUALS

Michael Moore ended his telephone conversation and headed toward the elevators. As CEO and chairman, he had called a press conference for Wall Street financial analysts to go over the company's third-quarter revenue projections. Prospects looked good, and he wanted to get the word out on the street.

Jerry Johnson fumbled his way out of the human resources department and stopped for a moment to check his clipboard. His next stop was the executive suite on the twenty-eighth floor. He took out his identification badge and pinned it to his shirt; he would need it to gain access to the offices on that floor.

This was Jerry's second week at Allbright Conglomerate, and he hadn't yet gotten into the swing of things. If delivering mail was this hard, how would he ever climb the corporate ladder and become an executive? he wondered to himself. Jerry stepped into the elevator and absentmindedly thumbed through the packages and envelopes in his cart. He became so engrossed that he didn't notice that the elevator doors had opened on the twenty-eighth floor.

Michael got into the elevator and pressed the button for the lobby. Before Jerry realized what had happened, the doors had closed. "Shoot!" Jerry exclaimed. "I needed to get off on the twenty-eighth floor."

In his frustration, Jerry dropped the mail he was carrying. Jerry shook his head in disgust. Michael, without a second thought, bent down to pick up the dropped mail and handed it to Jerry. He paused for a moment to look into Jerry's eyes.

"Thanks," Jerry muttered self-consciously. He could feel Michael's concerned gaze searching through him. "This is my second week working here, and I'm still trying to learn my delivery route. I am a first-year business studies major at Walton University, but if I keep this up I won't be fit for a job flipping hamburgers."

"I'll never forget my first job," said Michael. "I worked as a receptionist for an automotive company. Have you ever seen one of those old switchboards with plugs and holes?"

"Yeah, you mean like the one featured in that AT&T commercial where the operator is trying to answer a bunch of lines at the same time?" answered Jerry.

“Yes, that was me,” Michael mused. “I was the biggest disaster. I could never keep the outgoing lines separated from the incoming lines, and I was constantly hanging up on people. That was the most difficult and chaotic job I have ever had. Certainly taught me to appreciate operators.”

The doors of the elevator opened onto the lobby and Michael stepped out. “Good luck, Jerry Johnson,” Michael said. “My name is Michael Moore. Let me know how you get on.”

Analysis

Stories act as glue between people. In other words, stories show how our sets of experiences, memories, hopes, fears, and desires match with someone else's. I will be able to understand you, and communicate effectively with you, only when I can relate my stories to your stories.

Stories have the power to bind and bond individuals regardless of their relative position or experience. Michael Moore is a busy CEO with an important press conference to get to, and Jerry Johnson is a young kid in his first job as a mail clerk for a big corporation.

Jerry is so preoccupied with trying to figure out how to do his job that he does not realize the elevator has reached the twenty-eighth floor. Frazzled, Jerry drops a bundle of mail. Michael picks it up and looks into Jerry's eyes. He initially tries to connect with Jerry by making eye contact. Naturally Jerry becomes self-conscious and tries to explain his clumsiness.

His explanation triggers a memory, and Michael decides to share a story about his first job. Notice that Michael begins his story in the form of a question. By doing that he is involving Jerry. When Jerry answers, he must transcend his own predicament and vicariously imagine Michael's first job experience as a switchboard operator.

Why doesn't Michael just give Jerry a pep talk? He could have easily said something like, “Well, son, I remember my first job and it wasn't easy. You need to keep your nose to the grindstone and believe in yourself. With hard work and a little luck, who knows? Maybe you'll be CEO of a company one day.”

Michael does not give a pep talk because he knows how ineffective it would be. A pep talk would not be the best response. He does not want to distance himself from Jerry; he wants to connect with him. Michael completes the bond by noticing Jerry's name badge. He wishes Jerry good luck and invites him to seek another oppor-

tunity to continue their discussion. (Note: Take a look at the vignettes in Appendix A for more examples of how stories bind and bond individuals.)

Footnote

Time and again I have witnessed the magic of people forming bonds with one another during training workshops. I remember one striking example. I was facilitating a workshop for a company that was going through massive layoffs. Employees were fairly certain that their plant was going to be shut down and that many of them would either be laid off or relocated. Morale was not good, and people were less than enthusiastic to be attending a communications workshop.

I began the workshop with a series of exercises aimed at getting participants to bind and bond with one another. I must confess that I did not expect miracles, but the results amazed us all. One quiet, conservatively dressed woman with two kids related her adventures as a Harley Davidson biker and brought in pictures to show us. Another woman shared her passion for home craft projects and brought in a number of examples. Someone else revealed his hobby as an emergency ham radio operator. By the end of the workshop, people had discovered a wealth of stories and experiences in one another. These stories enabled them to see past their real and legitimate fears about the future.

SUMMARY

We have examined three facets of the story model:

Stories are used to	Stories have the following effects
Empower a speaker.	Entertain.
Create an environment.	Create trust and openness between yourself and others.
Bind and bond individuals.	Elicit stories from others.

Managers can try to inspire employees with motivational talks; or they can use stories to engage their audience, to induce reflection or as metaphors for problems to be solved. In doing the latter, they draw listeners in as collaborators and become more approachable.

