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STORIES MAKE GOOD BUSINESS

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ORVILLE MYERS/The Herald

Terrence Gargiulo works in his parents' home in Pasadera. Gargiulo is a business consultant and author of several books dealing with storytelling and organizational management.

Once upon a time may be just in fairy tales, but there's plenty of room for fable in Terrence Gargiulo's business.

Because his business today is storytelling in business.

A Salinas business consultant and speaker who specializes in organizational development and group process facilitating, Gargiulo is the author of several books on the subject. His company, Masters of Management, serves businesses of all sizes, from Dreyer's Ice Cream, Coca-Cola and CTB/McGraw-Hill to nonprofits, small businesses and schools.

These days, fatherhood -- and the chance to write more books -- are calling him to spend more time at his home in Monterey.

To hear Gargiulo tell it, there's no shortage of material.

His first book, "Making Stories," was published in 2002. "The Strategic Use of Stories in Organizational Communication and Learning" followed in early 2005, and a few months later, "On Cloud Nine: An Inspiring Tale," was published, an intergenerational workplace fable he co-wrote with Robert W. Wendover, managing director of the Center for

Generational Studies in Aurora, Colo. The book's illustrator was the late Eldon Dedini, whose cartoons appeared nationally in The New Yorker for years.

Gargiulo estimates that book is now in more than 40 percent of major bookstores -- not bad for a guy whose initial focus was technology consulting.

But when he started meeting with clients, he discovered that the more experiences he heard from people within various organizations, the better he could serve them.

"The best thing I could do," Gargiulo said, "was to hear people's stories."

These days, he talks about the difference between managing cash flow and managing relationships, which he says is "at the heart of an organization." A successful business recognizes that success is as dependent on "cultivating relationships with customers, with employees... (as) about creating experiences and stories."

A self-described "relentless and passionate learner," Gargiulo's mission in life is to have "passion for inciting insight in others."

His own upbringing was an inspiration.

His father was a conductor, his mother a professional singer. As a boy, Gargiulo used to marvel at how much his father could -- with a few movements of his baton -- inspire the young soldiers at Fort Ord's chapel to become a cohesive choir able to evoke emotion. Watching that transformation, Gargiulo knew there was something more at play than simple mechanics. A story, without words, was being told.

The turning point came when he went away to college.

Sitting in a humanities course at Brandeis University -- where he admits not wanting to be -- his professor walked into the lecture hall, pulled out a copy of Shel Silverstein's "The Giving Tree," and read it aloud. Then, without comment, he read it again.

The impact was unexpected.

"What he was trying to do is show us that stories are fundamental to who and how we are," says Gargiulo. "From this, I became a student of stories."

How could what's generally thought of as a children's story be so powerful?

Stories, says Gargiulo, "are how we gain the freedom to act and be different, to evolve."

But the lesson, applied to business, isn't in long narratives or beautiful words. And to a degree, he says, it's less about the storyteller than the listener.

It's rare that someone at work will actually say the words, "tell me your story." Workplace storytelling, says Gargiulo, is sometimes more subtle -- it can be a CEO's anecdote that illustrates how a mentor helped him understand teamwork, the tale a new manager shares about her first time drafting a performance review. Or it can be as simple as a single word that recalls a shared message between team members.

Used correctly, they're more than entertainment -- in the business world, stories facilitate learning. They work, says Gargiulo, because they are a bridge toward empathy.

"Stories join us to others, allow us to negotiate our differences," he says. "We have individual experience, yet we're also a part of something larger. There are common threads to my experience and yours."

Jill Russell, principal and co-founder of TPO, a human resource management firm in Monterey, has trained and coached hundreds of executives, managers and employees for more than 20 years, and says stories are integral to her own work.

"I think telling stories just drills points home," she says, "and I think it helps people illustrate, in their own mind, that message."

Russell says she's found particular relevance in "On Cloud Nine" with its message of opportunity and teamwork in intergenerational workplaces. It's not uncommon these days for four generations to make up a workplace, says Russell. Today's business environment blends "all these people from different generations, cultures and values, then asks them to spend more time together than they do at home."

The result, she says, can be very stressful.

The trick is understanding those elements and tapping into what each has to offer. Storytelling is often the vehicle to bridge the gaps.

"If you boil it all down, you can see the common thread of people's backgrounds and values and what they bring to work," says Russell. "(Gargiulo's book) is a very entertaining and poignant way to address that." Particularly in workshops, she uses stories to connect and communicate; by now, the process is almost intuitive. But she doesn't underestimate the value of Gargiulo's work, even for other experts.

"What Terrence has done is to take that and really structure it," she says. "I think he's a jewel for the region."

Later this month, Gargiulo's "Stories at Work: Using Stories to Improve Communication and Build Relationships," is scheduled for release. Among the companies highlighted in that book is the Kinship Center, whose development director, Olivia Yates, uses storytelling as an integral part of fundraising.

And in September, another book, "Building Business Acumen for Trainers: Skills to Empower the Learning Function," is due out. A portable trainers' guide featuring 75 story-based business activities is in development.

And he's got plans for even more book projects.

In perhaps the most non-traditional approach to a business book yet, he's planning a graphic novel on the subject of emerging leadership for young professionals. "How else do you reach the 25- to 35-year-old who's walking around with his Blackberry, his iPod?" he says.

And he hopes to write another fable, this time on difficult people in the workplace.

As a storyteller, it seems Gargiulo is just getting warmed up.

Visit Terrence Gargiulo's Web site at www.makingstories.net for information about his books or his work.