

Pfeiffer™

Once Upon a Time

Using Story-Based
Activities to Develop
Breakthrough
Communication Skills

Terrence L. Gargiulo



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

About This Book

Why is this topic important?

Breakthrough communication occurs when ideas, thoughts, feelings, learning, knowledge, insights, and wisdom that might otherwise have remained dormant are allowed to emerge in an evocative but safe way. Breakthrough communication obliterates barriers and puts us in touch with ourselves and in connection with others. Imagine people deeply connecting with each other. This whole new level of communicating is a place where active listening to each other, reflecting on our experiences, and synthesizing new insights from each other's experiences are commonplace. Stories help people to communicate with one another in surprising ways. By sharing stories, we are better able to express and appreciate our differences. The social network of stories becomes the fabric for meaning to emerge. Our differentiated sets of experiences are integrated and tied together by the rich, fluid nature of stories. In this medium of stories, we create the foundation for building a true community of learners.

What can you achieve with this book?

Once Upon a Time will show you how to develop exceptional communication skills, and it will serve as an invaluable resource for helping others do the same. Stories are a natural part of how we communicate. Yet many of us are unaware of the different ways we use stories. We will take the intuitive aspects of communicating through stories and break it down into repeatable practices and essential competencies. The story-based activities in the second half of the book will give you powerful, easy to lead, structured, experiential exercises that can be used in a variety of settings and for lots of different purposes that go beyond training.

How is this book organized?

Once Upon a Time is divided into two parts. Part One of the book offers story-based techniques and tools for developing breakthrough communication. Topics covered include how stories function, what role they play in effective communication, how stories are wonderful tools for creating experiential learning, the five levels on which stories operate, and nine ground rules for working with stories. Developed from research with Fortune 500 companies, a story-based communication competency model is presented, along with a tool to measure them. Part One ends with guidelines on how to help others make sense out of their stories.

Part Two of the book is a collection of story-based activities for developing breakthrough communication skills. The introduction to Part Two provides two charts to help you select the activity best suited for your purposes. The book's table of contents will also be helpful, since it includes short descriptions of all the activities. Part Two ends with tips and techniques for telling stories, selecting stories, and "story energizers", short and fun story-based exercises for recharging a group. The CD-ROM accompanying the book includes many resources and handouts to support you.

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Acknowledgments

There is always a story behind the story. As I write this, my ninety-one-year-old father nears the end of his life. I will spend my life reflecting on all of the wonderful stories he has given me. The magic I have tried to re-create in this book is a testament to his art as a conductor and composer. Exceptional facilitation of breakthrough communication is like orchestrating the intricate dynamics of a piece of music. While I have not followed in my father's path as a conductor, I feel his gifts and powers of connecting music, with the hearts of people alive and pulsing in every cell of my being. Mille grazie, Mio Padre. I will never stop trying to create something new from my being each and every moment, and you will be there always as my inspiration.

The gentle spirit deep and true of my wife, Cindy, renews my hope and gives me strength. My dear children, Gabriel and Sophia, touch my imagination. Not enough could ever be said about my mother. She has been a self-less, tireless guide. She has been with me every step of the way, showing me how to grow into myself and reach out to the world with ever greater confidence and love. My sister Franca and brother-in-law Tom are steady voices that help me stay the course and offer warm, accepting companionship. A huge, "thank you" goes out to Barry Rosen for his contribution of the *Listening as an Ally* activity and to Interaction Associates for sharing some of their knowledge and wisdom around the arts of facilitation. And to my dear friends, Hal Kane, Lin O'Neill, Robb Murray, Tom Bunzel, Angelo Ioffreda, and Jamie Douraghy, thank you for your ever-ready ears and constant encouragement.

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All the incredible folks at Pfeiffer deserve a standing ovation. My editor, Martin Delahoussaye, has coaxed me, goaded me, and polished my burgeoning ideas with the patience of a saint. This is the second book for which Susan Rachmeler has acted as development editor and nurtured my words on a page

into books that I am very proud of. I am very grateful for the professionalism of all the other Pfeiffer team members, including Kathleen Dolan Davies, Julie Rodriguez, Dawn Kilgore, Rebecca Taff, and Jeanenne Ray. How you keep all the details straight and exhibit such care and attention for every book is beyond me. But darn, you are good at it. Thanks are due to Marq Lee for his work on all of the title pages in Part Two of the book. I have also been inspired by the artwork of Christine de Camp.

I must end by thanking you. This is a special book to me. I sincerely believe that this book comes straight through me and my experiences to you and that it offers some very tangible and real ways to create more powerful and meaningful connections to each other. Enjoy—and please reach out to me—I want to hear your stories and learn from your journeys.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James H. Pfeiffer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "P".

Foreword

Mel Silberman

He ran up to me at the end of a conference session, grabbed my hand, and shook it vigorously. “That was a stellar presentation, Mr. Silberman. You are an extraordinary storyteller; thank you for sharing your gift with us this afternoon.” He pressed a business card into my hand and walked away before I even had to chance thank him for his comments. Later that night I emptied the contents of my pocket and found his card. Hm . . . I thought to myself, “Terrence L. Gargiulo, president of MAKINGSTORIES.net.” That’s interesting. I wonder what he does. That was over seven years ago. Since then I have learned quite a bit about this extraordinary facilitator.

As Terrence was preparing to write this book, he asked me whether I would be interested in working with him on the project. The link between my passions for experiential and active learning was clear, but I was at a loss as to how I could help him. He was quick to remind me, “Mel, you do this stuff all the time. You’re brilliant at it, and it’s so easy for you.”

“Alright, Terrence, that’s all well and good and thanks for the flattery, but I’m not sure if I can teach people how to do this—that’s your bailiwick,” I responded. “Besides, if I am an effective communicator with stories, I am completely unconscious of what I am doing and how I am doing it. Give me an example of what I do so well that you appreciate.”

Never one to turn down a challenge, Terrence replied, “Okay. Do you remember the discussion you were leading last week on how to understand people during your PeopleSmart workshop?”

“Yes. . . . What about it?”

“When people were struggling with the techniques and tools you were presenting, you began to elicit people’s experiences. In ten minutes you amassed this rich collection of people’s stories. Without judging any of them, you probed the group with reflective questions. People started working with each other’s stories and within moments connections, lessons, parallels, insights, and advice started pouring out of everyone’s mouths. The energy was contagious, and the excitement in the room was unbelievable. Then you masterfully helped the group distill and organize the flood of information. The link between the workshop’s material and

people's day-to-day struggles with understanding other people jumped alive. You used stories to tickle their imaginations."

I was still a little puzzled by Terrence's passionate display of enthusiasm. I pressed him further, "That's an interesting observation. Tell me more."

"Look, Mel, I know this way of communicating is second-nature to you. You see stories are pervasive—they are all around us. Stories are how we communicate, learn, and think, but knowing how to leverage their power is a latent capacity that remains dormant in most of us. In order for people to experience breakthrough communication skills, this potential needs to be unleashed. That's our job. That's why I get up in the morning."

"Right now, Terrence, you are tiring me out. I think this is a project you should tackle on your own. You have my blessing, and I even promise to write a foreword for this prodigious undertaking. I can't wait to see how you craft this book." So here I am writing the foreword.

Once Upon a Time: Using Story-Based Activities to Develop Breakthrough Communication Skills serves a dual purpose: it will show you how to develop exceptional communication skills and it will serve as an invaluable resource for helping others do the same. I can't say enough about this book or the unique facilitation talents of Terrence. In my humble opinion, this book is destined to become a classic.

Introduction

Once upon a time, we were all naturally great communicators without trying or even thinking about it, and then something happened. This book unravels an overlooked and poorly understood tool we all possess. That tool is story. We live and breathe stories every moment of our lives. We take them for granted, and they certainly don't seem like they need a lot of explaining. We know what they are and we're already convinced they work, but do we know how to use them? This book will guide you in how to use story-based techniques, tools, and activities to bring people to a whole new level of communicating.

Breakthrough communication obliterates barriers and puts us in touch with ourselves and in connection with others. Imagine people deeply connecting with each other. This whole new level of communicating is a place in which active listening to each other, reflecting on our experiences, and synthesizing new insights from each other's experiences are commonplace. You see, stories help people to commune with one another in surprising ways. By sharing stories we are better able to express and appreciate our differences. The social network of stories becomes the fabric for meaning to emerge. Think of stories as complex self-organizing systems. Our differentiated sets of experiences are integrated and tied together by the rich, fluid nature of stories. In this medium of stories, we create the foundation for building a true community of learners.

I will not bore you with theories and elaborate justifications as to why stories are so important. This is a roll up your sleeves and let's get to work kind of a book. Although the book is intended for facilitators and performance and learning professionals, it has something to offer anyone interested in developing breakthrough communication skills. It is written and organized to reach multiple audiences and, in addition to being a guide to facilitators wishing to work with stories, it can also be used for personal development and organizational interventions.

Organization of the Book

The book is divided into two parts. Part One of the book offers story-based techniques and tools for developing breakthrough communication. Chapter 1 looks at how stories function and what role they play in effective communication. We look at how stories are wonderful tools for creating experiential learning and outline five levels that stories operate on. The chapter ends with nine ground rules for working with stories. These are the essential techniques for anyone using stories with a group.

Chapter 2 presents a competency model for story-based communication that was derived from research with Fortune 500 companies. After a brief introduction

to the model, a tool (Story-Based Communication Competency Tool or SCCT) for assessing your command of these competencies is offered, along with some guidance on how to interpret your results.

Chapter 3 looks at how we use stories to make sense of the world. A discussion of sense making is followed by practical techniques for how to manage four dynamics that arise when you work with stories to generate sense and meaning from them.

Part Two of the book is a collection of story-based activities for developing breakthrough communication skills. The introduction to Part Two provides two charts to help you select the activity best suited for your purposes. The book's table of contents will also be helpful, since it includes short descriptions of all the activities. Part Two ends with tips and techniques for telling stories, selecting stories, and "story energizers"—exercises that are short, fun story-based exercises for recharging a group.

Appendix A is a short article on how the power of story is in listening—a key message of this book and tenet of breakthrough communication skills. Appendix B includes sample workshop agendas to give you some ideas of how to combine the tools and activities found in the book to create powerful learning experiences for others.

The CD-ROM accompanying the book includes four audio files, a Flash file animating the story-based communication competency model discussed in Chapter 2, and lots of handouts to support you when you are running your own workshops.

Resist the urge to jump right into the activities found in Part Two of the book. There is critical information in Part One of the book. At a minimum, read Chapter 2 and use the tool in it to better understand your strengths and unique combination of story-based communication competencies.

Final Thoughts

I am thrilled to share what I have learned. When communication works well, it is a joy. Even the tough stuff becomes a soulful opportunity to enrich our understanding of our selves and others. I want this book to jumpstart your purposeful use of stories and begin a journey for you. I'd love to hear your stories, so please contact me: terrence@makingstories.net or 781-894-4381. I will find a way to pass along what you discover to others.

Communication is a fascinating phenomenon. If we could all communicate better, wouldn't it be a better world? Trite but true. And as fascinating and as important as communication is, it somehow resists our attempts to systematize and mechanize it into inscrutable practices or irrefutable principles. We are imperfect. While there are no silver bullets, stories open a whole new realm of connecting and learning from each other that otherwise remains an elusive ideal.



The Magic Three

The Magic Three

Background

I've always been a fan of the number 3 and one day it came to my rescue. I was filling in as a facilitator for a colleague of mine. It was early in my career and, not being familiar with the workshop's materials, I was at a loss as to what to do with the group. There were two hours left on the clock and we were ready to go into the workshop's last exercise, which was supposed to last ten minutes. I began to panic. My colleague had warned me not to end the session early. I decided to ad lib and modify the directions of the exercise. The exercise called for participants to share with partners an experience from their past that would be different today if they applied the communication principles we had learned during the course. I put people into groups of four and instructed them to share three experiences instead of one. Something very unexpected and magical happened; and since then the Magic Three has never disappointed me.

Facilitation Level

Easy

Objectives

1. Provide a structured activity to guide people through an experience of reflection.
2. Practice authentic communication.
3. Create a connection with listeners.

Materials

- None

Time

Up to fifteen minutes per person

Directions

1. Give this as an overnight assignment during a multi-day workshop or retreat.
2. Tell participants to think of three personal stories that have some relationship among them.

3. Ask participants to share their stories with the group the next day.
4. Debrief the activity.

Debriefing

- *The good news:* this is *almost always* an easy activity to debrief given the richness of the experience for the teller and the group listening to him or her. The activity runs itself. Your main job is to give people ample time to react to the story. When a teller is finished, it is a good idea to allow some silence in the room. Start the debriefing process with the teller. Ask him, “How did that feel?” Alternatively, if he hasn’t done so already ask him to explain how he came up with the three stories. If it was an emotionally charged set of stories, feel free to ask a few follow-on questions about one or more of the stories. However, be prepared to redirect the group if one or more people become too engrossed in the details of a story or pursue tangential lines of questioning. Some of this sort of thing is okay but can quickly take a group off track.
- Next, if it hasn’t started happening naturally already, ask the group to provide feedback, impressions, and reactions to the teller. Some people may even feel compelled to spontaneously share a story of their own. Encourage the teller and then the group to reflect on the relationship between the stories and discuss insights that have emerged from them.
- Tie the outcomes of the activity to the major themes, lessons, and insights of the workshop.
- *How did the teller’s communication style change when he or she was telling a story? How were you impacted as a listener?* People who find it difficult to speak in front of a group will experience a real connection with their audience. Likewise, listeners will describe the teller as engaging, and the stories as rich or stimulating. This is the result of the teller reliving her experience.
- *What’s the connection between the stories? How and why did these three stories become associated with one another?* Before participating in this activity someone may have never associated these stories to one another. In some cases, this may be the first time he or she is suddenly recalling an experience from the past that was forgotten. One story leads to the trail of another. This is the reflective power of stories. Stories by their nature are multi-threaded. Frays of the thread can twist and unwind in lots of unexpected ways. As stories come apart, they can be rejoined to others to form new networks of meaning and significance.

Variations

- Vary the number of stories (however, it should be two at a minimum and under most circumstances not more than five).

- Have participants work on the assignment during the workshop.
- Tell stories during a working lunch.
- Change the type of stories you ask participants to think about and tell (e.g., from personal ones to work-related ones). Depending on the nature of the workshop and the composition of your group, you can be very specific in the parameters you set.
- Limit the number of participants in the activity.
- Spread out the number of people who share their stories across multiple days.
- Break participants into smaller groups and have people share their stories within the smaller groups. Ask each group to select one of its members' stories and have a member of the group other than the owner of the story retell it to the group at large.
- Invite one of the participants to facilitate the group debriefing.
- Ask everyone to anonymously write down three major things that struck them about the stories (do this before any group debriefing). Provide the feedback to the story owner.
- Add a visual component to the activity. Instruct participants to create a collage or some other kind of visual to document their stories.
- Encourage listeners to share any of their stories that have been triggered by another person's stories.

Tips

- Be purposefully vague in your instructions. This is one of those times when less is more. Some participants may struggle with the directions. Encourage them to grapple with the ambiguity. Out of the ambiguity comes the reflective soul-searching that is necessary. Be aware that detail-oriented people may become slightly frustrated by your lack of clear and precise directions. That's okay. Apologize to them and explain that it will make more sense to them after the activity. Realize that you may need to bear the brunt of their temporary aggravation. At this point there is no need to relieve it. It would only alleviate your feelings, but not help the participant. Afterward, point out that the success of the activity is contingent on participants' finding a path through their experiences. I'll sometimes joke and say, "In the words of Hamlet, 'I must be cruel to be kind.'"
- Emphasize that stories need to have some sort of thread or connection between them. Encourage participants to look for non-linear connections. That is to say, the stories they select that have a relationship to each other can be from very different times and parts of their lives.

- Do not provide your own example in advance. After one or more participants share their three stories, you may feel free to share yours. The purpose in doing so is to generate greater trust, intimacy, and authenticity with the group. Your stories as a facilitator of the group may also be a good tool for defusing any intense or difficult dynamics that arise in the group as a result of someone else's stories.
- Never judge the stories or anyone's response/reaction to them.
- Allow there to be some silence after a participant shares his or her three stories.
- Insist that people come to the front of the room to tell their stories. Unless someone is completely emotionally or physically incapable of being in front of the room, it is an essential part of the activity. People overcome their inhibitions about speaking when they tell stories.
- Confiscate notes from the participant sharing his or her stories. Despite whatever inclination he or she may have, he or she will not need notes, and using them will prevent the person from reliving his or her story.
- Limit the number of tellers if you are pressed for time. People listening learn from the activity sometimes as much if not more than tellers.

Applications

1. This is a great activity to use in any offsite retreat.
2. Incorporate this as a team-building activity or let members of a team take turns sharing their magic three at the start of regular meetings.
3. Use as an icebreaker or lunch activity during an event.

Case Study

I was facilitating a workshop on personal effectiveness in business. Len was a no-nonsense technology project manager for a nuclear research company. Len possessed exceptional communication skills. He was clear, precise, succinct, and very articulate. However, despite his technical prowess as a communicator, Len observed that he often failed to connect with people on an emotional level.

I gave Len two assignments. The first assignment was to take a complex newspaper article on a controversial topic and in thirty seconds or less provide a summary of the article's information and make a recommendation. Len's second assignment was the *Magic Three*.

Len performed the newspaper activity with the prowess of a polished politician. He was absolutely brilliant. I wanted him to serve as an example of how to deliver an effective executive sound bite. There are many times when we have thirty seconds or less to make an elevator pitch.

After appropriate accolades, I asked Len to share his three stories with us. In a matter of a few seconds, Len's body language began to transform in front of our very eyes. His erect, formal stature was replaced with a more relaxed posture. As he began to share his stories with the group, he moved to the edge of a table to sit down. Here is a recapitulation of his stories as I remember them:

I've always been a fairly private person so joining groups was never high on my list of things to do. About seven years ago I decided to get more involved with my local Catholic church group. I was surprised at how quickly I began forming a core group of friends who became a central part of my life. Weekends were filled with fishing trips, barbecues with our wives and families, and general fraternizing with my new cohorts. It had been a long time since I had experienced this kind of camaraderie and I was relishing every minute of it. As a group, we kept growing closer and closer. Even my family was caught off guard by the quality and depth of relationships I developed with a bunch of total strangers. This continued for several years. After a horrible car accident, I found myself in the hospital recovering from a life-threatening back surgery and long days of excruciating pain blunted by the constant dripping of numbing morphine. Everything was a haze. I was in a complete fog of pain, depression, and despair. During these horrific weeks, there were two pins of light that got me through these dark times, my family and my friends. Family you kind of expect to be there for you, but I was amazed at the dedication and energy my friends gave to me when I needed them the most. To this day I believe my friends were a special gift granted to me to ensure I pulled through a very trying experience. A couple of years later my buddies wanted to go on a weekend retreat with the church. I resisted, but after a lot of cajoling I agreed to go. We had a fantastic time, and the retreat was filled with lots of soulful opportunities to recharge our batteries and put the challenges of life into perspective. My friends made the retreat a special experience and I returned home with fresh vigor and zest. A day after my return, my father died unexpectedly. I believe my friends and the retreat were granted to me as a form of preparation for my father's death. I was able to be a source of comfort and strength for my family. I had more emotional energy to give to them. To this day, I am eternally grateful for friendship and all of the richness it has given me in life.

Unfortunately, my retelling is pale in comparison to Len's original account. It's missing all of the other subtle forms of communication that accompanied it, such as body language, eye contact, and tone of voice. When Len finished, there was silence in the room. People needed a moment to exit their imaginations and reenter

the workshop's frame of reference. Ken confessed he had never told these stories to anyone else before; and prior to the workshop he never would have dreamed of sharing them in a work environment. He reflected on the powerful connection of friendship he discovered in the three stories. Then Ken made an amazing leap of insight. He concluded that he needed to be selectively more vulnerable with people at work in order to improve his personal effectiveness. Ken committed to spending more time cultivating relationships in his organization. Stories, he discovered, are one of the best tools for building effective, meaningful relationships.