

## THE LOST ART OF STORYTELLING

By Leta M. Beam

Storytelling is one of the most ancient and powerful ways of communicating and connecting with people. From the earliest days, it has been considered an art, one of the primary ways that everyone received information.

Long ago guardians of oral and written traditions enjoyed leadership status and were often considered “wise” women and men. Other tellers were renowned entertainers and early “motivational speakers” who could mesmerize crowds of kings and commoners alike.

They did not simply tell a story; rather they created an experience that evoked emotions from the listener. They made an impression; changed a mood; transmitted values; inspired listeners to action; and catapulted groups over significant challenges.

Gifted tellers were imaginative and insightful thinkers. They were not expected to rely solely on the stories of others but were called upon instead to create their own original works. Storytelling was often the galvanizing force that brought people together and often the Velcro that held them there.

A huge part of our role as organizational leaders is to create a clear vision of exactly and precisely what our future looks like - What is it that we want and need to achieve together? And to communicate it in Technicolor, as specifically and precisely as possible. And then, to share that vision with *everyone* in such a way that it engages their logical, emotional and intuitive intelligences and generates what Ben and Roz Zander call “sparks of possibility” in them (1).

Great leaders need to be artful storytellers. We need to capture the hearts and minds of our people, by uniting an idea (vision) with emotion. This packs an incredible psychic punch. We also need to be very intentional storytellers. Our stories must be memorable and instill a strong sense of trust and confidence and dispel the organizational bogeymen of fear, anxiety and paralysis. A story should resonate with our core values while simultaneously creating cultural buzz. Above all, it needs to be relatable and it needs to hit home to the listener (employees). We are all aware of the core brilliances and professional skill sets that are part of the leadership equation. But all of those may leave you short if you can’t tell compelling organizational stories that *move* people.

Gifted storytellers (and re-tellers) make telling a great story look easy. Here are some success secrets shared by current masters of the art:

- Effective organizational storytellers are active listeners and keen observers. They are almost never on autopilot but rather fully present in the moment.
- Effective organizational storytellers keep an open ear, eye and mind to everything. Great stories are often born under unusual circumstances. Many keep a journal of “story worthy” material.
- Effective organizational storytellers spend time with informal leaders at all levels of the organization. This is key to creating a high relate-ability factor for a story. And it helps in choosing the perfect way to language a story to move the most people.
- Effective organizational storytellers prepare well. That doesn’t mean that they sacrifice authenticity and genuine connection. Rather, they carefully craft their

story and check facts and information and give thought to tone and other elements of delivery in order to be more confident and powerful.

- Effective organizational storytellers create an atmosphere. They establish intimacy and engage people rather than talking at them. They give them a reason to listen willingly. Great storytellers tell stories that have a climax. They also pay attention to the structure of the story using alliteration, metaphors and theater to appeal to the listeners' hearts through their ears.
- Effective organizational storytellers realize that making the story repeatable is important to creating an organizational "vision" epidemic. They make it "catchy". Not so much clever as sticky, so that every listener tells someone else, and pretty soon it becomes what everybody knows. One of the most effective techniques that I've run across is "one minute stories." These are simple home grown entertaining vignettes that people want to repeat. They always reinforce (sometimes ever so subtly) the leader's vision and sometimes become the organizational equivalent of urban legends.
- Effective organizational storytellers often focus less on audiovisuals preferring instead to appeal to the ear rather than the eye.

Now, let me tell you a story about one of my favorite leaders. This masterful teller is the Chief Operating Officer of a large health care system on the East Coast. She has all of the expected credentials – degrees, experience, creativity, moxy and an iron will. She is a fabulous storyteller, and is currently writing a novel, in her spare time. The pictures she paints with words are amazing. She creates an experience where you are lost in the sights, sounds, smells and emotions of the story. And you find yourself not only living her experience but also wanting for more.

Long ago, she was clever enough to realize the incredible contribution that storytelling would make to her leadership successes. Her storytelling transcends organizational boundaries. It is extremely intentional. Whether she is standing in front of the Board with a PowerPoint presentation, meeting informally with her staff "town hall" style or practicing followership in a team meeting, she is telling powerful stories. Some are "just in time" short stories, told with a laser-like precision. Other stories are the "never-ending" type, repeated until they become what everyone knows and believes. They are built upon with new plots and twists as milestones are reached and the organization evolves.

This masterful storytelling COO employs this tool to:

- Create a shared vision of the future
- Kick start new projects or initiatives
- Build bridges across teams and within workgroups
- Highlight lessons learned
- Surface up limiting beliefs that may be holding the organization back
- Speak her truth in a way that can be heard by most

Sometimes, she becomes particularly playful and invites others to co-create the story's ending with her, coaching others in the fine art of storytelling. Lately, she has begun to transform email, usually a pretty stark communication tool, into story telling opportunities. These stories all remind people over and over again about the adventure

they are on together, the roadmap they are following, the wondrous sights along the way and their current destination. Most everyone is eager to go along for the ride.

Oh, by the way, the cultural shifts that she and her listeners have created together are seismic. They routinely win awards, exceed goals, financially and receive national recognition for innovation, dial up patient and employee satisfaction, and the story goes on.

You don't have to be writing the great American novel in order to be an effective storyteller. You don't have to have a certain personality type, but the stories should reflect your personality. Powerful organizational stories have some common features:

- They conjure up vivid mental images that are relatable
- They provide just the right amount of detail while leaving something to the imagination
- They captivate and engage almost everyone
- They are believable, even if there is a stretch
- They flow and it is easy to be swept up by them
- They are intentional. The point is very clear and most everyone gets it.

Here is the essence of becoming a powerful organizational storyteller – the stories must reflect your own strong inner connection, first to yourself, and then to the rest of the organization and the outside world. You have to have the capacity to touch others and be touched by them. Not all great storytellers are great leaders. But anyone who wants to lead in today's business milieu must be a compelling teller.

TELL YOUR ORGANIZATION'S STORY.

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Technical Footnotes

(1) Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life*. Penguin Books, 2000.