

WHEN COMMUNICATION MATTERS:



SAY IT WITH A STORY™

By Lori L. Silverman

Studies by the Gallup Organization (*First, Break All the Rules*, Simon & Schuster, 1999) and Towers Perrin (2003 Talent Report) show many employees are only moderately engaged in their work. Not surprisingly, this level of disengagement negatively impacts employee productivity, loyalty, and retention and overall company profitability and customer satisfaction.

Moreover, a February 27, 2003 *Wall Street Journal* article by Sue Shellenbarger states 45 percent of American workers feel they are asked to accomplish too many tasks at once which is problematic because research shows that multi-tasking reduces short-term memory and makes people less efficient.

These issues especially challenge human resource departments. What can be done to ensure that information conveyed to new hires sticks over time? How can human resource professionals help leaders to effectively introduce changes? What communication can be used to foster change in organizational strategy?

THE BENEFITS OF STORIES

Much workplace information is a combination of facts and statistics. The brain actually struggles to remember this material, especially when it is relayed through emails, spreadsheets, and reports. Ultimately, repetition becomes the means for important points to be remembered. Because of time pressures, this communication frequency is often unrealistic.

Consider this. Neurologists suggest stories may be the fundamental building block for memory since the brain prefers novelty, involvement, visuals, and an emotional jolt. Because stories engage a person's mind, heart, physical being and human spirit, they address these preferences and motivate the brain to pay attention. Since stories also transmit

meaning and knowledge, they heighten individual and organizational learning. "In the same way that fairy tales leave a lasting impression on children, stories have the ability to inspire employees to change—to try new behaviors, to let go of old attitudes, to embrace the future, and to take action," says Lori Silverman, a management consultant and co-author of *Stories Trainers Tell* (ISBN 0-7879-6436-0, Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2003).

Sharing stories at work can help build rapport and credibility as well as believability in the information that is shared. They also captivate people's interest and make them more attentive listeners. Furthermore, stories can rapidly and successfully convey complex concepts such as ethics and diversity. The experiences Jim Stead, chief development officer for Utah Community Credit Union, has had with using stories at work causes him to assert, "Stories communicate information in fewer words with less time and the point comes across stronger. [When] you touch emotions you create greater impact and make the issue more relevant. You [also] say to people 'this is important' and they are important enough to be getting this information."

COMMUNICATING HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

New hires are often overwhelmed, be it with benefits, policies, procedures, colleague's names, or where the restrooms are located. Using stories to highlight

company history, values, cultural norms, and strategy can make them more memorable over longer periods of time and bring about deeper levels of understanding. Take this story, for example.

A CULTURE ROOTED IN GUNPOWDER

Contributed by Merrill Anderson, Ph.D., CEO, MetrixGlobal, LLC

Almost immediately after my colleagues and I were contracted to work for a textile manufacturer, the client wrote up two consultants on my team for safety violations. Now, this is fairly serious in this company. Employees who had three safety violations—three write-ups—were terminated. Even if you had one, it wasn't considered to be a good thing.

In the eyes of Jim and David—who were the consultants—this was warfare! As far as they were concerned, these two safety violations were trivial. One occurred when Jim was facilitating a client meeting in a conference room with David. David needed a marker to write on an easel. So, Joe threw the marker to him. An employee who attended the session noted this as a violation of safety and security rules and so Joe was written up.

Soon after that it was David's turn. He had just returned from the manufacturing facility and was running down the stairs to get to a meeting. An employee who was in the stairwell noticed this, got his name, and wrote him up. Since these

are activities that consultants routinely engage in, Jim and David did not view them as bad. They thought the write-ups were petty—just the client’s way of making their jobs more difficult.

I decided to do some digging. This manufacturer had a long, long history dating back to the 1850s—before the Civil War. I visited some of their early facilities, which were part of a state park. Long ago, these facilities were used to manufacture gunpowder. The individual mixing areas had seven-foot-thick walls around them. Behind these walls there was another seven-foot-high wall that an observer could look over. It was obvious that the company wanted to minimize risk to any individual worker and went to a lot of expense to guard their safety.

Past the gunpowder plant, the next building in the complex was, in fact, the plant manager’s residence. He and his family lived closest to the mixing mills. And, his managers lived on the hillside, behind his residence. If you continued going up the hill, past a wooded area, you found the spot where the rest of the workers lived. What struck me was that those most responsible for the safety of others were the most vulnerable to the consequences of safety violations.

I came back and shared my findings with my colleagues. There was no doubt in my mind that the emphasis on safety and security was a cherished and time-honored tradition. Safety and security were deeply rooted in “guarding the gunpowder.” Jim and David quickly came to understand that what people were really doing—guarding them from unsafe conditions—was a lifelong value of the organization.

Your organization has deeply held values, too—that it protects to this day—much like this organization’s value on safety. Think about it. What values does your organization guard like gunpowder?

Jim Stead’s repertoire includes stories about his credit union’s history and traditions. He believes, “Employees get more ownership in the organization when they know our history and how important it is to maintain our reputation in the community.” Jim’s organization also encourages sharing great service stories from other industries to see if it can transfer core concepts relevant to the financial realm.

COMMUNICATING A CHANGE

Are you spearheading a change? Here is what Karen Dietz, Ph.D., a folklorist with Polaris Associates LLC and executive director of the National Storytelling Network, used with a senior human resources executive who was responsible for designing and implementing a standardized performance management system throughout a global organization. Karen’s work revolved around implementation. The challenge was finding a story to enroll leaders across different cultures in the vision for the new system while minimizing resistance and the need to motivate through negative consequences.

The executive found a personal story when she experienced great change, had multiple choices to make as a result, and quickly realized benefits from the change and her choices. Since Karen believes that being a great listener makes one a great storyteller, after the executive told her story she elicited personal stories from the groups of executives she met with about changes that positively impacted them. Afterwards, they talked about the performance management system, its benefits to the organization, and the implementation criteria and timeline.

The results? Leaders were relaxed in the implementation meetings and very receptive to the new system. The senior

human resources executive, who had one year with the organization prior to this situation, built deeper connections with other business leaders and established a reputation as someone who could be trusted.

COMMUNICATING ORGANIZATIONAL DIRECTION

Shell Oil brought storytelling skills to its top 280 leaders in the mid 1990s. This approach was provided to help them address difficult issues such as budget cuts and layoffs as part of a larger corporate turnaround effort.

According to Marcy Fisher, former vice president of Organization Development and Human Resources for Shell Technology Ventures, Inc., “The challenge for these executives was finding stories that openly communicated the situation, while also giving people hope for the future.” She recalls one leader who told an African tale about life on the Serengeti for a lion and a gazelle. The lion knew he had to work hard to catch the gazelle and the gazelle knew he had to run fast or he would die. The morale? Like these two animals, people in the organization would have to work very hard and run very fast in order to survive.

Personal stories were also a part of this initiative. First, each leader created face masks out of plaster, the left side depicting where the executive’s current perspective, the right side depicting what the executive expected of him or herself after the turnaround. Then, these leaders presented their personal journey story based on the mask to mid-level managers. “This experience,” notes Marcy, “caused executives to address what they needed to change about themselves before expecting changes from others.”

GETTING STARTED

How can you begin using stories in your work? First, take the time to develop your own stories. Also collect organizational stories and stories from outside sources. Select them based on the key point you need to convey. Second, take the time to tell them. No meeting, training program, coaching session, or interview should be without them. Stories can act as a natural stimulant and the antidote to disengagement. Third, take the time to listen. Stories are like viruses. They are contagious. Tell a story and you will hear many in return. Acknowledging them will foster new connections for you and for others.

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Lori L. Silverman is the owner of Partners for Progress, a management consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations think and act differently so they can achieve higher levels of performance. She is the co-author of *Critical SHIFT: The Future of Quality in Organizational Performance* and *Stories Trainers Tell*. Her new book is *Wake Me Up When the Data is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results*.

Lori can be reached by e-mail at lori@partnersforprogress.com. For additional free articles, check out www.partnersforprogress.com.
