

T Red Cross Trainer



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The Big Leap from “War Stories” to Effective Outcomes by Jo Anne Jones

The use of stories to enhance training experiences is not a new thing to the American Red Cross. As trainers, we have been dealing with “war stories” for decades. We have told them, encouraged participants to tell them, sometimes dreaded them and often worked hard at trying to limit them. They were usually spontaneous and very often had no outcome that added value to the training.

The good news is that using

stories is now a growing trend among Fortune 500 companies and nonprofits as an effective tool for trainers and for managers. The result is a wealth of books, seminars and workshops which can offer us countless ideas on how we can incorporate our rich supply of stories into a framework that we can use strategically to get points across in a dynamic and memorable way to build teams, foster change, uplift morale or to reach any outcome which would be beneficial in the learning process.

United Way of America, American Association for Retired Persons, World Bank and many other organizations have learned that the use of stories can help

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mobilize large numbers of employees to understand complex and difficult changes.

I talked with Lori Silverman, author of *Stories Trainers Tell and Wake Me Up When The Data Is Over*. “The human brain is set up to handle information on a narrative level,” she said, “because story creates a visual picture which the brain recognizes and remembers.”

We can absorb extensive amounts of information when it is on a narrative level, as our senses are touched, emotional reactions are stirred and we feel connected to the teller and the other participants. We are opened up to deeper learning.

The four levels of brain activity include: (1) beta (wide awake and conscious); (2) alpha (relaxed awareness); (3) theta (on the edge of sleep); and (4) delta (deep sleep). If we are deluged with facts and figures in the form of charts and bullets, we are required to stay within the beta mode and we become exhausted. If we are hearing stories, we can absorb huge quantities in a relaxed or natural alpha state – reducing the brain activity.

Seeds are planted when stories are told. One story leads to another. People are motivated and often stirred into action. Facts and figures and bullet points are not always retained to a great extent, much less repeated. Stories touch our senses. We remember them and repeat them. There is a power found in stories that just isn't found anywhere else.

“Stories can change people's attitude, beliefs, or behaviors.” Silverman said. “And I think that is truly

what we are looking for in organizations today in terms of the sort of results we would like to get. Stories are a natural stimulant.” Silverman explained that it is one thing to use stories spontaneously, but quite another to plan them so that we get the results we want. She suggests that we write them out and practice telling them.

Specific results of story use were captured in Silverman's book for the first time. City Year, United Way, and World Vision are some of the more than 70 organizations she and her contributors interviewed for the publication. As reported at on [this blog](#), more than one-third of the 72 examples in Silverman's book demonstrate improved financial performance, to the tune of double-digit growth and funding increases. One-quarter of the examples link story use to furthering specific organizational goals. And another quarter of the examples highlight increased engagement between employees and the organizations and/or higher levels of teamwork.

Stephen Denning's *The Springboard* is the first book to teach storytelling as a powerful and formal discipline for organizational change and knowledge management. In this book, he explains how we can use stories as a springboard to commu-

nicate new and envisioned strategies, structures, identities, goals and values to employees, partners, volunteers, customers and ourselves. This book shows how storytelling can assist in mobilizing large numbers of managers and employees to understand complex and difficult changes; how storytelling can enable a leap in understanding so that the audience intuitively grasps what the change involves and why it might be desirable, and why the community might change.

Denning writes that “Springboard stories enable individuals to make a leap in understanding how an organization, community or complex system can change.” In the book he explains that stories must be in



a form that will enable others to understand the implications. There must be enough plot so they can see how the content is relevant. There should be dates and names and pizzazz. Denning mentions three essential keys. They are:

1. **Connectedness:** The story, however condensed, has to link the audience with a positive controlling idea and a protagonist with whom the audience empathizes.
2. **Strangeness:** The springboard story must violate the listener's expectations in some way.
3. **Comprehensibility:** The story has to embody the idea so as to spring the listener to a new level of understanding.

The appendix in Denning's book is a treasure in itself. There are charts that explain the elements for identifying springboard stories, using visual aids in storytelling, and performing a springboard story. There are examples of springboard stories. Denning provides four structures for enhancing the effect of presentations you already have.

1. Immediate launching into a story at the beginning of the presentation.
2. Serendipity: When we aren't too sure of the follow-up actions, the telling of multiple stories can enhance the chance of the audience co-creating the follow-up.
3. Sensitization: Stark delineation of ongoing problems can help an unreceptive audience to see the relevance of a springboard story.
4. Urgency: Where time is short, the whole weight of the argument may be placed on the story.

Although it takes a lot of good plan-

ning to work a few stories into a Red Cross course or workshop that is already packed full of essential information, the outcome is well worth the effort. It can make the difference in whether or not you rope the participants in and keep their attention all day. It can make a remarkable difference in how much they retain and for how long. The Red Cross is rich in its history and steeped with wonderful stories. Because of the nature of our work, there are new stories every day. We have stories of grandmothers without guns accompanying the troops to the front lines, stories of disaster workers driving in to ride out hurricanes and working into the night to feed and comfort affected families. There are heart wrenching thank you letters we sometimes receive and stories of lives being saved by persons who were trained in Red Cross CPR.

AS TRAINERS,

we often use stories from our own experiences. I have found it useful to tell my stories in third person. Instead of saying that I had a certain experience, I might say "a woman had this experience." This method has taken away the fear of over-using "I" and has increased my comfort in using stories frequently. At the end of one class, a participant came up to me and said, "I loved the story you told about Martha Stewart." Actually the story was about my own experience. I hadn't mentioned Martha Stewart. I was pleased – not because there is any resemblance between Martha Stewart and me - but because I realized that taking the "I" out of the story had made it so interesting to at least one participant that he made the effort to match the story to a famous person.

Another suggestion I would make is to plan ahead on how to draw out stories from the participants. You will sometimes know participants ahead of time – or you will hear their stories before class or at break or lunch time. When those stories relate to the subject matter, you can draw them out and point out the desired outcome.

You might want to write out possible stories for each course you teach. Practice them and see which ones can be best used for the outcomes you need. Be prepared with a number of them for each class and then use the ones that fit in best with the situation. You can also be prepared to replace some of them with good stories you find from among the participants.

Take advantage of some of the books, websites, and workshops that are available. Enjoy using your stories! You and your participants will reap rewards from the outcome!

For further study, I recommend:

- *The Springboard* by Stephen Denning
- *Leaders Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative* by Stephen Denning
- *Stories Trainers Tell* by Lori Silverman
- *Wake Me Up When the Data is Over* by Lori Silverman
- www.sayitwithastory.com
- The National Storytelling Festival, Jonesborough, TN – First Weekend in October 2007 ●



Inspired by the cover of the September/October 2006 *Red Cross Trainer* newsletter, Jo Anne Jones wrote this article to tell the full story of storytelling.