

Keeping employees engaged is a key strategy for maintaining a high-performing workforce. Storytelling helps connect people, building relationships and fostering idea sharing and mutual support.

How Do You Keep the Right People on the Bus? Try Stories

Lori L. Silverman

In *Good to Great*, (HarperCollins, 2001) author Jim Collins stresses getting the right people on the bus sitting in the right seats—and the wrong people off—before figuring out where to drive it. This makes it easier for organizations to adapt to an ever-changing world and provides the people ingredients for greatness. He also suggests problems with motivating and managing people largely go away in this scenario because people are internally motivated to produce the best results.

While great organizations may not wrestle with the same level of employee non-engagement and active disengagement facing yet-to-be-great organizations—71% according to the Gallup organization's most recent research—still need to behave in ways that keep employees

engaged since losing good people can cost significant dollars. Thus, the challenge for all organizations wanting a loyal, passionate workforce that gets things done on its own initiative is to simultaneously grow employees' levels of engagement and self-motivation.

Stories can aid in achieving this outcome. Why? Stories have the ability to connect with people physically, cognitively, emotionally, and through the human spirit. By getting employees to invest personal energy in these four areas, they will feel more passionate about their work, committed to the organization, and desire to put forth extra effort.

Strengthen Relationships

Building strong relationships between employees and leaders

and among employees is fundamental to increasing engagement. Research presented in *Vital Friends* (Gallup Press, 2006) reinforces this need: Employees with a best friend at work are more productive, likely to positively engage with customers, share new ideas, and stay longer in their jobs. While sharing personal stories can aid in building rapport and credibility, when you shift from storytelling to the broader use of stories, additional pathways for strengthening relationships emerge.

For a story to exist, someone must “hear” it being “told.” Take a moment and listen to the narrative around you—phrases such as:

- “You won’t believe what just happened to me...”
- “That customer wants something we can’t do...”
- “I just learned there’s a hold up again in shipping...”
- “I can’t figure out how to get this issue resolved to everyone’s satisfaction...”
- “Look at these numbers. I think they’re telling us something...”

You have several choices when you hear these. You could say, “Tell me more...” which will elicit a story ripe with details and contextual information. Or, you could move to fact finding by asking specific questions and receive sound bite responses in return. Then again, you could ignore them. Which of these approaches will get you richer information and empower the person to take action, if needed?

When working with someone who tends not to converse, using the prompt, “Tell me about...” followed by silence will often trigger a story rather than a short response. However, if you do so, listen without interruption and judgment to what is said or the person may view a future invitation to talk with disinterest.

Jodie Beverage, a registered nurse in the operating room at Rush-Copley Medical Center in Aurora, IL, has used these techniques. Whenever staff makes inquiries such as, “Did you ever have this happen to you?” she responds with stories to help them remember important details. She also encourages staff to tell stories about their work in staff meetings. And, she urges them to prompt patients to share stories with the phrase, “Tell me about yourself.” Today, these stories are published in a monthly newsletter and in the annual publication, *Extraordinary Care: A Collection of Stories From the Nurses at Rush-Copley Medical Center*. And, they are told to new nurses to help them understand the warm and caring environment the hospital strives to achieve. Has this made a difference? Since

beginning its story initiative, nursing staff turnover in the operating room has dropped from 35% to less than 5%, with story use acknowledged as a big part of this success.

To strengthen individual relationships, remember these story approaches:

- Get colleagues to share stories about themselves and situations they are currently experiencing by using phrases such as, “Tell me about...”
- Listen in an appreciative, caring manner to others’ stories.
- Share personal stories or those about situations you have observed in response to questions from others about how to get work done or how to respond to a problem.
- Encourage colleagues to prompt stories from others.

By modeling these skills, you will also help others around you to build the types of relationships that foster an engaged and motivated workforce.

Develop Individual Potential

Within weeks of being hired, it is not unusual for new leaders to seek assistance or development opportunities. Using the “tell me about” story prompt technique, Mark Steiman, first vice president and senior human resources manager in Washington Mutual’s home loans division in Irvine, CA, coaches new executives one-on-one in his organization. To help them identify ways to build high-performing teams, he uses, “Tell me something about your last group that moved it to the next level of success even though others thought things couldn’t get better.” To help them communicate personal values, he says, “Tell me about what you’ve learned from growing up that’s important to you today.” Through the process of discovery, story recall helps these leaders access knowledge, skills, and abilities they already have, motivating them to continue their own growth.

When these leaders need to give a presentation, Steiman encourages them to tell the story in their mind rather than flip through large PowerPoint® slide decks. This help them quickly capture people’s attention and to communicate what is most important. And the overall result of Steiman’s coaching style? Unapproachable managers become approachable and engaging and increase their personal power.

Ray Wierzbicki, senior vice president of enterprise customer service in the enterprise solutions group at

Verizon, also uses stories to individually mentor more than 100 associates, first-level supervisors, and vice presidents each year. Like Steiman, he solicits stories but with a unique prompt, “What makes you skip to work?” This is based on his belief that if you love what you do, you will perform well and enjoy doing it. In addition, he coaches mentees to share personal stories with their bosses about church, community, or condominium association involvement that showcase the whole of who they are. While benefiting the people he mentors, Wierzbicki learns about his own organization through the stories he hears.

Often, mentees ask Wierzbicki to describe what got him to the next level throughout his career. In response, he tells personal stories about the journey. Flo Mostaccero, vice president of technical services and business process development at Coors Brewing Company, also shares personal stories when facilitating a 15-member peer group Mentoring Circle® at Molson Coors to develop those identified with high potential. She starts each bi-weekly session by relaying a personal story she has thought about in advance that is related to the day’s topic. Following her story, individuals request assistance by describing their topic-specific situation. Others respond by telling a story. These stories help members learn from other’s life experiences in a safe environment. Has it made a difference? The organization affirms this specific use of story has improved the retention of top talent.

Story prompts that help people recall stories from their past are a valuable coaching tool because they develop critical thinking skills. With them, consider these other story applications when coaching or mentoring others:

- Help people identify the story(ies) that are useful in relaying important information as an adjunct to written materials or PowerPoint slides.
- Share a personal story when there are insights to be gained from it.
- Spark story sharing on the part of others by providing one of your own stories that’s related to the topic at hand.

Promote Collaboration and Teamwork

While individual leader effectiveness can weigh heavily on whether employees are engaged at work, so can the overall tenor of the work group. Beyond strengthening individual relationships, stories can

develop team-based collaboration and teamwork in unique ways.

Started in 2000 by three individuals, the Ginger Group Collaborative, a network of consultants across Canada who study complex human systems, grew to 15 members in four years. Due to this rapid growth, it faced a turning point: whether or not to create a formal business venture. To reveal its purpose and identity, the group convened a weekend retreat. An invited consultant/painter brought in painting techniques to help members create a picture of the group’s unfolding story and to engage them in conversations they found difficult to have with words. In the first round of paintings, retreat attendees individually painted in response to two questions: “How do I see my world?” and “Where am I at?” Afterward, they described their own work through stories. The second round of paintings occurred in a collaborative round-robin approach in response to, “If Ginger were a garden of paradise, what would it look like?” This resulted in each painting holding its collective vision of the group’s purpose and identity. Group story sharing to provoke deeper understanding followed, based on the metaphors embodied in the paintings.

While the retreat did not start with story, what emerged were a shared purpose and a collective story that provided direction around how to work together, clarified roles, increased mutual trust, and promoted camaraderie. Retreat attendees also learned each other’s strengths and capacities.

Drawings are also useful after personal story sharing to build teamwork. So discovered the web strategy and operations team at AARP Services, Inc., during a one-year project to redesign the website maintained for AARP’s 35 million members. After the technical part of the project began, it became obvious that a larger team was needed to complete it. Mike Lee, director of client services, and Liz Kelleher, manager of client services, worked with fellow managers and AARP leaders to reorganize and grow the group from 20 to 46 members. This change involved new positions, colleagues, job titles, and shifts in reporting relationships.

Lee and Kelleher were challenged with getting the “new” team to feel comfortable with these changes and to achieve success, while facing the ever-present possibility of project failure. Kelleher engaged a consultant to help the team in a four-hour retreat. After team members shared personal stories around, “What am I doing here?” they created pictures to connect their

individual team roles to what success would look like for the whole. Then, the web team's historical story—how it started, who was there, changes it had gone through, and how it got to where it is today—was merged with these individual stories to create “living a success story,” a visual story timeline.

And the results, according to Kelleher, that would not have occurred without storytelling? Long-term and new hires were brought together into a single team to build and launch the site faster and with less pressure from leadership. Sharing personal stories gave the team the ability to build the bonds needed to overcome conflict, difficulties, and stresses inherent in a year-long project.

Sometimes, words are insufficient as tools to describe a team's purpose, what it can or needs to achieve, and how members connect to each other. Use paintings, drawing, pictures, and even tangible icons (symbols or representations) to:

- Provoke stories that people are having difficulty expressing in words or that may engender conflict when expressed in this manner.
- Capture the essence of personal stories that have already been shared and merge them into a team-based story.

The value of visual story techniques is that they move people from left-brain to right-brain thinking, evoking whole brain attention to a situation.

Connect to Overall Direction

While strengthening relationships, developing potential, and promoting teamwork and collaboration help build engagement and self-motivation; people also need to know the overall vision and goals of the organization and where they fit into them. This is true whether you are talking about a traditional organization or a more fluid community group.

Development Dimensions International, Inc. (DDI), a midsize human resources consulting firm, has 1,000 employees between its headquarters in Pittsburgh, PA, and more than 75 offices in 26 countries worldwide. A few years ago, DDI discovered its three strategic priorities—increasing client impact, increasing market advantage, and leadership and selection dominance—were not clear to all employees.

Working with marketing, every two weeks on Friday afternoon, DDI president, Bob Rogers tells two short good-news stories about each priority to all employees via voice mail. They come from field

About the Book

Wake Me Up When the Data is Over: How Organizations Use Storytelling to Drive Results is a hands-on guide that helps readers learn how stories can be used to get employees to take action, accelerate knowledge acquisition and organizational change, solidify individual and team working relationships, provide exceptional customer service, and increase the visibility of the organization. The book includes real-life examples from more than 70 respected small and large organizations representing a multitude of industries. Interviews with 171 leaders from organizations such as Microsoft, Lands' End, Verizon, the U.S. Air Force, and World Vision demonstrate the strong positive influence stories can have.

However, the book goes beyond storytelling to reveal five key skills for successfully implementing storytelling programs: how to find existing stories, dig into stories to uncover hidden patterns and themes, select those stories that need to be reinforced, craft memorable stories, and embody stories to positively impact people's attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors. It also includes proven tools and techniques to help sharpen those skills.

Publisher: Jossey-Bass

ISBN Number: 0787982709

Format/Length: Hardcover, 320 pages

Price: \$29.95

personnel that the marketing department canvases on a regular basis. Employees also e-mail Rogers directly with their stories and reactions to those he has told. He routinely receives 20 or more suggestions every two weeks from which he selects the top six. Rogers uses the stories to challenge staff to provide more successes like those he has shared. Afterward, the stories are posted on an internal website, allowing staff to continually access them.

Today, all employees know DDI's top three strategic priorities. These stories also give Rogers access to current trends and patterns and immediate feedback on client impact that he is able to use elsewhere in his work.

While DDI's challenge was communicating its top priorities to employees, sometimes an organization's future strategy is not all that clear. Here, story is useful in articulating the long-term vision and resulting goals.

St. Andrew's United Church in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, faced a maturing population, declining membership, and tight financial times. It became obvious at a board retreat to create goals and action plans, that congregants needed to be included to avoid feeling that board members made all the decisions. A few months later, 12 focus group meetings were held. A total of 120 people shared what originally brought them to St. Andrew's, what kept them with the church, their preferred future, and what they thought would be needed to achieve it. Church minister, Reverend Dr. Geoffrey Wilfong-Pritchard, presented this feedback to the congregation and engaged congregants in dialogue around their vision of the future. Using this input he drafted a future story.

Wilfong-Pritchard tested the story with the focus group facilitators through questions meant to identify whether they liked the story, barriers to its achievement, and how these barriers could be overcome. To gain their excitement and commitment to moving it forward, he ended with, "How do you make it your story?" and discussion around how to take the story to all congregants.

At a Sunday service, Wilfong-Pritchard presented the "Talking to the Future" story. Over lunch, congregants discussed three follow-up questions that led to five goals. The result? The future story changed ongoing conversations from problems and lack of resources to: "Here's what it could look like. How do we get there?" It also spurred congregants to take ownership of their future and commit to several new initiatives.

When people know "where the bus is headed" they can more effectively contribute to the organization's future. Use story to connect people to the organization's overall direction by:

- Finding ways to regularly attach real-life emerging stories from the front line to the organization's espoused strategies, goals, or priorities. Make them readily accessible on an ongoing basis.
- Crafting a future story that describes the organization's vision in details that capture the hopes and dreams of those who are responsible for achieving it.

In both cases, involving people in the process of creating, capturing, or relaying stories strengthens their bond to the organization and the link between their own needs and work to what the enterprise desires to achieve.

In Closing

Getting the right people on the bus sitting in the right seats is one thing. Keeping them there, fully engaged and motivated to do what it takes over the long haul, is another. This is where stories can help. The organizations referenced here are deliberate and purposeful in how they employ stories. They have worked hard to foster cultures where people have an equal voice, they care about each other, and individuals operate without a lot of fear, control, and hierarchy—important prerequisites to success.

If you are wondering whether you have time to embrace these story methods, take a look at the lack of engagement and self-motivation in your workplace. How much time are you spending on these issues? My suggestion is to start simple. Elicit stories and listen to them with an appreciative ear. Then try other techniques. The applications are limitless.

References

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Notes

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Lori L. Silverman is a business strategist and keynote speaker and the owner of Partners for Progress, a management consulting firm. Silverman has appeared on more than 50 radio and television shows to speak about using stories in the workplace. She is the co-author of *Critical SHIFT: The Future of Quality in Organizational Performance* and *Stories Trainers Tell* and editor of *Wake Me Up When the Data is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results*. She can be contacted at lori@partnersforprogress.com.