

What's your story?

The power of business narrative

'Storytelling' as a leadership/training technique has become ultra-fashionable in the last couple of years, but it is in fact the oldest trick in the book - we have been telling stories around the campfire since the dawn of mankind. But what is it that makes stories so attractive?

It is simple: human beings need stories. It is our way of ordering the surrounding chaos of sensory information – in order to make sense of our lives we are constantly structuring and restructuring that information into a narrative about who we are, what we are doing here, and what the point of it all is.

Without a narrative we are lost.

An important characteristic of a story is that its appeal is holistic. It goes beyond the merely rational, and involves body, mind and soul, through sensory detail, intellectual content and emotion. A story connects reason and passion.

The reason why storytelling in a professional context suddenly is so hot is the realisation that the frequent disconnect between reason and passion in the work environment ('emotions are unprofessional') isn't working: there is an 'emerging realisation in the business community that thriving organisations need whole persons working for them – that anything less cheats both the individual and the firm.'⁽¹⁾

This means that if they are to give their best, people need to connect with their work both intellectually and emotionally ('engagement' is the trendy name for it). People don't need more information, more objectives, more KPIs, more management plans. They need meaning and identity. They need to know what they are contributing to. This is where the story comes in. A compelling, inclusive story about what you are doing and where you are going – 'generating a common narrative' in the handbooks – will create more 'engagement' and motivation than 100 mission statements.

So how do you go about it? Here are some key principles (adapted from Annette Simmons):

Anyone can tell a story. It's the intention that matters, not the talent for public speaking.

The six main kinds of stories you need to be able to tell are:

- | Who am I?
- | Why am I here?
- | What is my vision?
- | Values-in-action-stories
- | Teaching stories
- | I-know-what-you-are-thinking stories (where you give voice to your listeners' secret objections in a story that first validates and then dispels them without sounding defensive).

Failure stories are as good as success stories, provided they illustrate the point you are trying to make.

You have to know why you are telling the story. What is your message?

Authenticity: the story has to be true, and you have to believe in it. Don't lie, don't manipulate, and stay on the right side of the thin line between propaganda and enthusiastic communication.

Tell the story, but trust people to draw their own conclusions from it. Explaining the moral of the story is counter-productive.

To find out more, the website and books below are really good (and practical) sources of information and inspiration.

<http://www.annettesimmons.com/storytelling/>

Annette Simmons: *The Story Factor*

Stephen Denning: *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*

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(1) Foreword to Annette Simmons: *The Story Factor*