ONE OF THE BEST-KEPT SECRETS
IN BUSINESS TODAY

By Lori L. Silverman

In recent years, organizations have used a variety of cost cutting measures to address the downturn in business. This has resulted in far fewer workers being pushed to work harder and longer hours, and to produce more than ever before. It is no surprise that employee stress and frustration have greatly heightened.

Imagine the impact this is having on their ability to learn, retain, and recall critical information. Information they need to make important decisions. Information they need to respond appropriately to customers. Information they need to follow through quickly on key strategies.

What if I told you there is a communication approach whose benefits far outweigh the singular use of spreadsheets and reports showcasing data and statistics and lists of do's and don'ts? What if I told you it is woefully underutilized, except by enterprises who know its benefits, such as Rush-Copley Medical Center, Microsoft, Kimpton Hotels, Lands' End and Verizon? What if I told you that it costs next to nothing to use? Would you want to use this approach at work?

- It makes information more memorable.

- It strengthens the accurate recall of key points over time.

- It quickly and successfully conveys the meaning of complex concepts.

- It captivates people's interest and makes them more attentive listeners.

- It fosters creativity and enhances problem solving.

- It communicates information faster.

- It enhances individual and organizational learning.

- It makes information more believable.

- It makes people's jobs and work more meaningful.

- It strengthens relationships.

- It engages people's minds, hearts, physical beings and the human spirit.

- It inspires people to change–to try a new behavior, to let go of an old attitude, to embrace the future, and to take action.

What is it, you ask? It's stories. Stories are considered by some to be the most powerful currency in human communications. They already exist in organizations and in our everyday lives. We use them with family to relay what happened during the day. We use them with friends to talk about our experiences. When we engage in casual conversation, they come to us naturally and are easy to impart. Yet, we do not use them as readily in a formal sense within the workplace.

Since story use can reap enormous benefits, it behooves you to use them in all aspects of your work. Whether presenting information in a meeting, coaching employees through a difficult situation, mentoring someone to develop new skills, or training staff on departmental changes, you can increase your effectiveness by integrating stories into your communications. To aid you in moving forward, this article covers where to find great stories, some tips on how to craft them for impact, and how you can use them at work.

FINDING GREAT STORIES

RIGHT UNDER YOUR NOSE

Contributed by Sharon L. Bowman, Director, The Lake Tahoe Trainers Group

A Cessna 172. Red and white. Four-seater. My first dual cross-country flight as a student pilot. All checked out to fly from the South Lake Tahoe Airport, high in the California Sierras, to Fallon, Nevada, a tiny airstrip in the middle of the Nevada desert.

My flight plan in my lap, the little plane droning loudly in the still morning air, I turned in the direction of Fallon and set the navigation instruments to guide me there. My instructor Gary sat in the right seat, quietly offering suggestions to polish my level flight skills.

An hour later, checking and rechecking my location, I proudly announced, "Here we are!" Then I looked around for the airstrip. To my consternation, I couldn't see it anywhere. I rechecked the instruments, looked over to the left and the right of the little plane, then said with panic in my voice, "But it should be here! The airstrip should be right here. But I don't see it and can't find it. What am I doing wrong?"

Gary sat in silence for about thirty seconds, until it became obvious that I didn't have a clue as to what to do next. Then he smiled, leaned forward, and whispered, "Look under your nose!"

I looked straight under the nose of the plane and sure enough, I was directly over the tiny airstrip. I had missed seeing it because it was under me and not in my line of vision.

Gary and I had a good laugh about it and I've remembered the lesson to this day: When you're looking for what you need most and can't seem to find it anywhere, …[look] under your nose!

Where is the first place you can look for stories? Just like Sharon, your own personal experiences are ripe with them. Whether it is a personal test, as demonstrated here, or a situation in which you have found yourself challenged, faced with a dilemma, or confronted with an outrageous response, you have the makings of a story. Here are a couple of prompts you can use as story starters.

- Tell me about a time when you discovered a universal truth about life.

- Tell me about an experience where you learned a valuable life lesson.

- Tell me about a situation that has profoundly impacted who you are today.

- Tell me about a time when you overcame a significant fear.

You can also look outside yourself for stories. Here, the possibilities are endless. Consider these sources:

- Timeless tales about the organization and its culture.

- Anecdotes shared by family, friends, and colleagues.

- Current or historical events outlined in newspapers, magazines, or online sources.

- Incidents from television or radio news programs.

- Ancient fables and fairytales.

- Stories from storytellers and professionals from a variety of industries on web sites such as www.sayitwithastory.com.

In each case, it is important from an ethical standpoint to give appropriate attribution to the story's creator. If unknown, at the very least share with people how you found the story. Keep in mind that you may also need to combine material from several sources to verify critical facts and to reflect the full flavor and richness of the situation.

TIPS ON CRAFTING STORIES

No matter where you obtain stories, you will need to hone them for use at work. There are three main parts to crafting stories to obtain impact. First, paint a context in order to capture people's attention. Set the stage by introducing the cast of characters (Sharon and Gary in "Right Under Your Nose") and describing pertinent elements such as the location, time of year, weather, geography, and what is going on in the situation. Next, outline the obstacle, the challenge, or the conflict and build to a climax. (For Sharon, her challenge was not being able to see the landing field and feeling anxious as a result.) Finally, bring the story to closure by describing how the situation is resolved and by moving listeners to meaning. Bringing the meaning of the story to listeners is accomplished by answering the question, "what's the point?" (look under your nose), and stating the "call to action" (When you're looking for what you need most and can't seem to find it anywhere, …[look] under your nose!)

To aid in getting stories to work well for you, audiotape and transcribe your words. Then, work on polishing the main point of the story until you find a positive statement of no more than seven words in length that people can easily recall. Once you have this piece, fine-tune what you have documented from the audiotape by organizing it around the three parts of a story, adding the main point and a call to action (i.e., what people need to do as a result of hearing the story) at the end. Remember, your words need to paint a picture. Carefully select words that help people to vividly imagine what you are saying in their mind's eye.

HOW TO USE STORIES AT WORK

Should you throw out all the PowerPoint slides, the charts and graphs that highlight key business indicators, and written policies and procedures in favor of stories? Absolutely not. These communication tools are still necessary. Yet they are not sufficient in helping you achieve the results you need at work. Consider using stories in conjunction with other communication tools:

- To introduce a tough issue, as a way of capturing people's attention.

- To emphasize key information that has already been discussed.

- To validate materials which have already been reviewed.

- To introduce a complex issue, problem, or concept.

- To reinforce specific ideas which have been explored.

- To answer a question.

- To persuade people to embrace a specific solution or action.

- To wrap up a lengthy conversation.

Take Sharon's story, for instance. Where could you use it at work? In a meeting, tell it to refocus a project team that has previously developed and implemented complex responses to issues, few of which have worked. During training, use it to talk about the need for simplistic elegance when brainstorming solutions to problems. When undertaking an initiative to organize the work area, share it as a way of introducing a key operating principle. Most times, a single story's application is bound only by your ability to clearly link its main point and call to action to the situation at hand.

HOW ABOUT YOU?

Do you have a need to enhance your communications at work? To get others to pay attention to what you say and take action? If you do, then adding the right stories to your repertoire will help you strengthen your ability to be heard, to have influence, and to make connections. Why hesitate? Just do it!

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