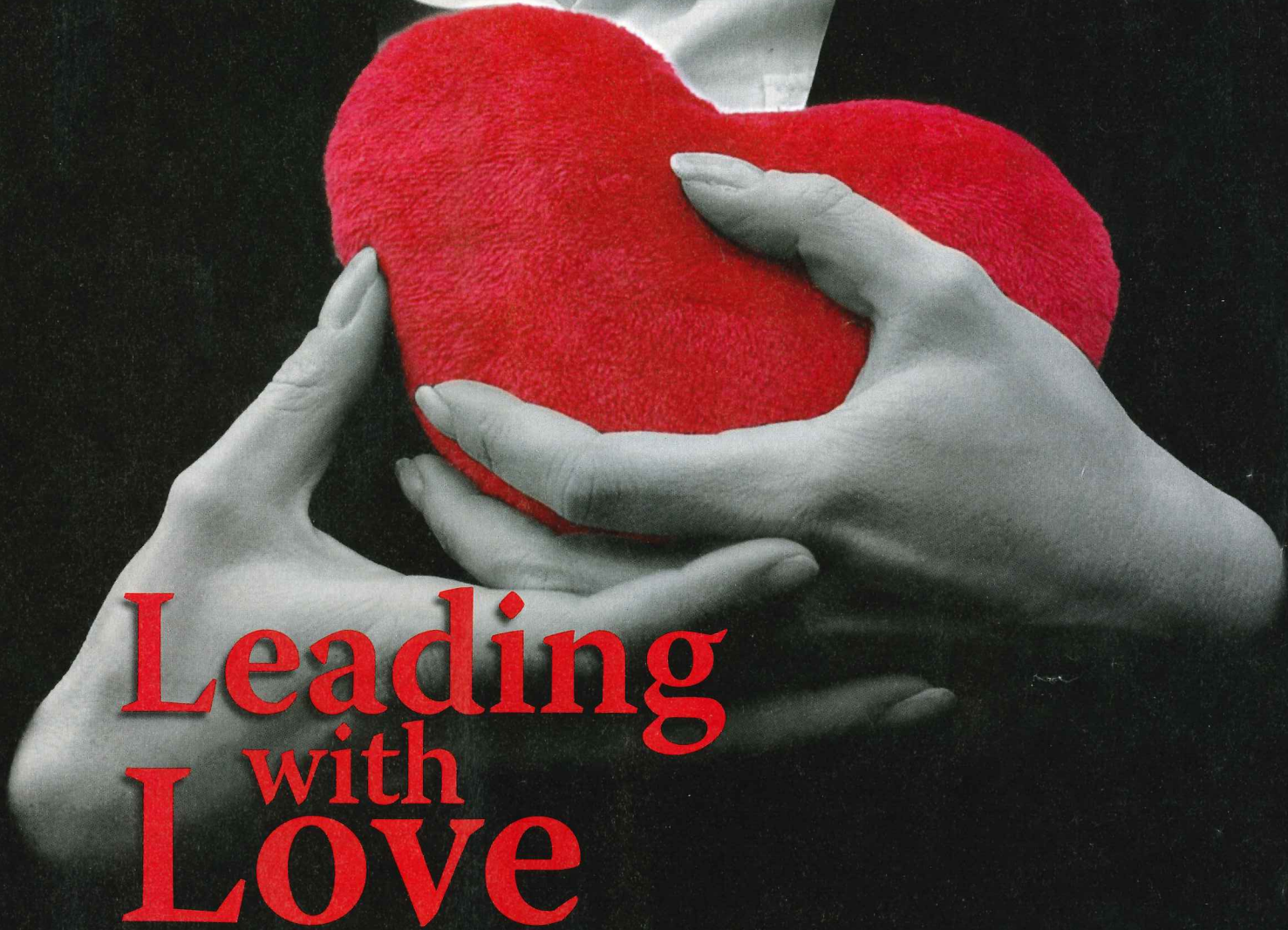


# TOASTMASTER®



## Leading with Love

The bottom line in  
corporate leadership.

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## Telling Tales at the Office

How storytelling leaves  
a lasting impression.

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# Telling Tales at the Office

Storytelling is a valuable tool in the business world.

BY CAREN S. NEILE, PH.D., ATMS, CL

I was once hired to write a speech for the host of a reception honoring the nation's top financial planners. The client explained how he needed "the storytelling touch" to make this particular event come alive. I interviewed the men and women he planned to honor and created stories for him that demonstrated why these people were the best in their field.

While I was not present during the speech, I knew what the outcome would be. As the host relayed each story, audience members were able to visualize the situation he described as if they were present when it occurred. The visualization process allowed listeners to empathize, appreciate and identify with each story, which then left a lasting impression.

It is this effect that is the reason for using storytelling in the workplace. From the pages of the *Harvard Business Review* to the website of your favorite restaurant, business professionals celebrate the persuasive power of a well-told story.

### Why Tell Stories in Business?

"Stories are experiences," wrote Karen Dietz and Lori L. Silverman in *Business Storytelling for Dummies*. "When you share a story, you relive an experience and invite others to share in it with you. In this way, you move people from focusing on the tangible and intangible qualities of products and services to memorableness. And today's customers want memorable experiences." They are willing to pay more for them too.

According to Dietz and Silverman, stories are also transformational. When



*People tell stories in the workplace—whether to co-workers, clients or employees—because it drives home their point in a vivid and persuasive manner.*

customers are encouraged to make a link between your company's story and a change for the better in their own lives, they are connected to your company in a more profound way than simply through the purchase they make.

### Who Tells Stories in Business?

Carolyn O'Hara, in her post "How to Tell a Great Story" on the *Harvard Business Review Blog Network*, wrote "We tell stories to our coworkers and peers all the time—to persuade someone to support our project,

to explain to an employee how he might improve, or to inspire a team that is facing challenges." The same is true for the CEO of a bank who tells his board of directors how his grandfather founded the company with his own money, or the manager who motivates his team by sharing the story of a satisfied customer, or the injured worker who is asked to begin a safety training session by sharing the tragic tale of how ignorance of the rules caused her accident.

As you can see, unlike many other forms of communication, storytelling is



not a top-down process. It is just as useful when peers tell stories to peers, or employees to bosses. That's because storytelling is the great equalizer. The sharing of story is such a potent activity that it imparts power to the powerless, and gives voice to the voiceless.

### What Makes an Effective Story?

The legendary communication scholar Walter Fisher believed that effective stories required *coherence*, *probability* and *fidelity*. What he meant was that a story must hang together, sound plausible and adhere to listeners' values and their understanding of the world.

Consider these tips for effective stories:

**1 Be specific, yet universal:** If you tell a story that occurs in any city, it's more difficult for listeners to live in the world of the story. Be specific with places, names (even if they are changed for anonymity) and other details to make the story more believable.

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On the other hand, if the experience and the details you describe are *too* specific, listeners cannot relate them to their own experiences without the storyteller's help. If an employee tells about her experience in a particularly unique job, she can connect with her listeners by comparing the job to something people in her audience know.

**2 Employ imagery:** When you use imagery to help tell a story, it simply means you evoke the five senses in a colorful way. Most beginning storytellers rely only on the sense of sight—that is, "Her hair was brown." But if you say, "The plate was as hot as burning coal," you have not only helped listeners feel they are in the story by promoting the sense of touch, but you have also done so in an interesting way. One caveat, however: Avoid clichés. They make you look lazy—as a mule.

**3 Refer to your own experience:** There's a nice little business parable in which the output of two woodcutters is compared when one takes frequent breaks, and the other doesn't. At the end of the test, the man who took the breaks cut more wood. Why? Because each time he walked away, he sharpened his axe.

That's a good way to introduce the importance of vacation time, but more often than not, listeners will respond even more intensely to a story that happened to you. If you don't have a terrific story, it's OK to embellish it a bit. If you don't have one at all, however, tell someone else's, as long as you don't say it is your own.

**4 Solve a problem:** Stories, at their heart, are about problems that are solved. If you can identify the problem, question or itch that needs to be scratched in the story you plan to tell, you are well on your way to success.

### When Are Stories Used in Business?

Uses for storytelling in business include:

- **Knowledge management**—That is, maintaining and transmitting the accumulated skills and knowledge of employees, past and present.
- **Strategic planning**
- **Mission/vision statement creation**
- **Conflict resolution**
- **New employee initiation**
- **Morale boosting**
- **Meetings**—Case in point: I once had a university student who did a class project on storytelling in business. As part of her research, she encouraged telling five-minute stories during her company's weekly conference calls, asking managers to share an incident that occurred in their departments in the past week. She reported that her boss was delighted with the resulting openness, learning and connections, and intended to make storytelling a regular feature of the meetings.
- **Sales**—Salespeople may be the most accustomed to using storytelling in their work. Whether it's a joke to foster a connection, or a personal story to demonstrate how a product or service worked for another customer, storytelling sells, and sales people know it.
- **Training**
- **Public relations and marketing**
- **Commemorative events**—Anniversaries or retirement parties offer good opportunities for storytelling.

### What Is the Best Way to Present a Story?

It depends on the occasion. Live storytelling is particularly useful because the storyteller and the listener share the same time and space. This provides the speaker the opportunity to tailor the tale to each audience. When this isn't convenient, always employ Skype or another teleconferencing technology to share stories. Printed stories and digital presentations (including video, audio and images) are also effective ways to relay a story.

So how can your business live happily ever after? Simply foster a culture of storytelling for all employees, in person or through books, video, teleconferencing or images. ■

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**TABLET SPECIAL:** Just as individuals can tell stories to conduct business, companies can too. Download the tablet edition to learn how companies utilize storytelling.