Leadership storytelling

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this viewpoint piece is to focus on sharing a set of best practices with senior and emerging leaders.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper demonstrates the relevance of the skills of storytelling to the practice of leadership and provides a set of suggestions and recommendations for effective use of stories, based on the authors’ personal experience and observations.

Findings – Leaders who tell stories compellingly communicate important messages in a memorable way, offer a pathway to leadership for others, develop more effective relationships with those they lead, and can create an inspirational culture in their organizations.

Practical implications – Leaders can search their own history and experience for important lessons learned that can be communicated in the form of a narrative and learn to tell them with grace, humor, and/or incisiveness at appropriate times in the life of their organization or key people.

Originality/value – Those who are leaders or who work to develop leaders can benefit from this alternative approach to leadership communication.

Keywords Leadership, Storytelling, Management skills

You are leading other senior managers in a discussion of the current state of affairs at your company. Or you are a project manager whose timelines have been missed and it is your responsibility to rally the troops to work harder and longer. Or you are a parent trying to help your child to make the right decision. In each of these cases and countless others, you need to find a way to communicate a complex idea in a clear and powerful way.

Why are stories important?

Human beings learn from experiences – their own and those of others – through stories. As long as human beings have had language, there have been stories. A story creates an indelible message. It is a container for important life lessons. Most of us carry several virtual volumes of “lessons learned” from childhood forward – we remember the lessons especially well because we can recreate the story of how we learned them. We tell those stories to our own children or young relatives in the hope that they can benefit from our experiences (without necessarily having to recreate them). As leaders, we can learn to use our own stories to communicate important messages to others.

Stories can entertain, teach, delight, frighten or inspire. They are tools of leadership. Political, religious, military and business leaders have always used stories (myths, parables, proverbs, sagas, allegories) to inspire others toward right action. Sometimes the stories are heroic in nature (you probably couldn’t do this), sometimes cautionary (never do this), sometimes motivational (you should try to do this), sometimes exhortative (always do this) and sometimes expository (I did this and this is what I learned).
Because we all have our stories, one of the greatest sources of teaching or leadership stories is our own experience. To inspire others, you must first get their attention – opportunities for this are greatest during the first few minutes of a meeting when focus and attention are highest. You need to get your audience to connect with you and what you are saying. Stories, allegories, and metaphors are fast and powerful leadership tools for communicating complex concepts in unforgettable ways.

How can stories help me be a more effective leader?

Stories can reach across boundaries of culture, profession, and age. Using metaphors can create an understanding of a scientific principle in the mind of an artist or a young student, a sales manager or a subsistence farmer. (For example, Kukule’s idea – one that came to him in a dream – of a carbon ring being like a snake with its tail in its mouth). You may be brilliant in your own field, but if you cannot communicate your idea in a way that makes it understandable to those outside your field, you place limits on your idea. If you can’t explain the impact of your technical breakthrough to those who are in a position to invest in it, you are unlikely to get your product to market.

Self-disclosure through storytelling is a powerful method of engaging and inspiring others. As a respected and admired leader, a story disclosing a failure can have the somewhat paradoxical effect of building trust and encouraging openness. You may tell a story about how you acted on incomplete information, made a bad decision – or talk about a risk you should have taken but didn’t. There is high value to the connection that results when your team members see you as fallible – yet successful. The door opens to productive discussion about learning, course correction and development. Such a disclosure, told with humor and confidence, can stimulate a dialogue about what you could have done differently and opens the way for others to share their stories and life lessons.

Of course, communication is a two-way process. No matter how important or profound an idea may be, it will have no impact or influence unless others listen to it, understand it, and take action on the basis of what has been communicated. People want to listen to someone who has an interesting story to tell or with whom they can identify. The issue for many leaders is getting others to listen – really listen – to an important message with an impact on the success of an initiative or an organizational change process.

Leaders, especially senior leaders, are often perceived as being distant and unable to relate to or understand the issues and concerns of ordinary employees. How can the boss know what I’m dealing with if he or she has never been there and done that? How can I trust the advice or recommendation of someone unfamiliar with the problem at hand? Relating a story that describes a familiar situation will often provide the credibility that is vital to connecting with the audience. Sharing a story with a group of employees to help them realize that you understand their issues and dilemmas can be a very successful strategy for building trust, especially if the story relates a human weakness or failure on your part. Don’t underestimate the value of the connectivity that results when your employees see you as fallible. They will discuss it among themselves. Disclosing your weaknesses can make employees feel that you are more approachable. While this type of disclosure may seem to be a risky thing to do in some organizations, respected leaders can, by the very fact of their position and security, afford to take the first step in opening up an organization to learning from both successful and unsuccessful experiences. This creates opportunities for innovation and lessens the likelihood that mistakes and failures will be covered up until they become serious problems.

During a one-to-one conversation with an employee who needs constructive feedback or coaching, you can get started by telling a story that helps the employee relate to you. Once you have done so, you can take the conversation in a productive direction; the employee is likely to feel more relaxed, talkative, and ready to tell you what is really going on. In medical school, they teach that if you just listen to the patient, the patient will tell you what is wrong. By creating an opening through story telling, then listening to the other person, you take the first step in solving the problem. As he or she discloses needs, concerns, and shortcomings, you create an opportunity to solve problems and plan a personal development strategy.
How can I tell a story with impact?

The best leadership stories begin with an icebreaker – an opening phrase that grabs everyone by the ears and refuses to let go ... the words that make people want to look up from their laptops or PDAs and listen for what is coming next.

Let me tell you about a time when I really screwed up.

I'm going to tell you a story about something I learned the hard way.

I want to tell you about how I failed my way to success.

I'd like to tell you about one of my personal heroes (or mentor or model...)

I'm going to tell you a story and then ask what you would have done in my place to create a better outcome – because almost anything would have worked better than what I did.

I'd like to tell you a story about a risk I took...(or a failure or a major challenge or...)

I wish someone had told me the following story when I started working here . . .

This is a story that might seem strange to you... (or unrelated to the current situation).

You will almost always get people's attention by using a self-deprecating opener. People who admire and respect you may be surprised to learn that you have failed and encouraged to know that you have learned from it and continued to succeed. Paradoxically, a heroic story starring you will probably not be as well accepted, at least in most cultures, because it will be seen as unnecessary bragging; this will not communicate your membership in the human race or a reason for the listener to connect personally with your message.

Themes

You may talk about a time during which you acted on incomplete or bad information or made a decision that resulted in a negative outcome, discussing how you used that experience to grow and improve. You can share how devastating the experience was, yet show how “that which does not kill us makes us stronger.” You can tell a story about a risk you took that failed – and perhaps led to later success or an important learning. You can talk about a choice you had where you made the wrong decision – and ask the group how they might have dealt with it differently.

Some common themes for leadership stories include:

- mistakes and failures;
- unexpected opportunities;
- risk and reward;
- choices and consequences;
- lessons learned;
- obstacles and challenges;
- advice from a mentor; and
- someone who inspired me.

These themes can stand alone or be combined to create an effective story.

Criteria for effectiveness

To be most effective, leadership stories should meet many of the following criteria:
- they should disclose something about you that listeners may not have known;
- have a clear and compelling message;
- avoid self-serving or boastful content;
- avoid sarcasm or implied negative comments about listeners or those known to them;
- avoid “preaching”;
- include an element with which others can identify;
- be relevant to a current issue;
- communicate empathy or understanding;
- open a door to new ideas or solutions;
- start a conversation; and
- include playful or self-deprecating humor.

**Applications for leadership stories**

There are many times when a leader might find storytelling to be an effective way to communicate. Among the situations that lend themselves especially well to stories are:

- mentoring opportunities;
- introducing yourself to a new team;
- orienting new people to your team or organization;
- starting a meeting about a difficult issue;
- illustrating a concept;
- re-energizing an individual, group or team that has experienced failure or difficulty;
- coaching;
- leadership development courses or events;
- getting a key point across to a group that needs to hear it;
- beginning a conversation about a common problem; and
- moving an organizational culture toward greater openness and a focus on learning.

You can follow a story by asking questions or facilitating a dialogue where the group analyzes your story, identifying what you could have done to prevent a mistake or failure, or what you could have done better to rectify it. You can discuss solutions to a problem you encountered. You can ask how to apply lessons you learned to a current problem. You can use a metaphor or “yarn” that others can apply to a real situation. When the content of the story is tied to the issue at hand, learning will be shared and individuals or groups will have benefited both from your experience and their own engagement. The organization will benefit from the increased openness, learning, and trust engendered by telling the truth in interesting and productive ways.

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