Using Stories for Strategic Communication

ESSENTIALS

In most organizations, few employees have the analytical skills to critically look at the data they have at their fingertips, let alone use it for good decision-making. Only 43% of employees are **informed skeptics** (effectively balance judgment and analysis).

Few organizations have addressed how to effectively share knowledge/data/information among employees; workers often have insufficient knowledge to make key decisions and take effective action for improved productivity.

Without (developing) a cohesive, dedicated, and informed staff… businesses can easily become the equivalent of dinosaurs – stuck in the mud, doomed to extinction.
- Lori Silverman in *Wake Me Up When the Data is Over*

Given that a satisfied and engaged workforce is a significant factor in productivity, it is more important that organizations find ways to communicate organizational information/knowledge that gives workers what they need to make and be engaged in key decisions and actions that improve and sustain the organization's profitability. How do this if 57% of employees are unquestioning empiricists (trust analysis over judgment) or visceral decision-makers (go exclusively with their gut)?

Enter stories. Facts inform but stories resonate. Strategy, culture, and systems do not change behavior in the same way stories do.

People will remember stories long after they've forgotten the facts.
- Sharon Love, owner, Incredible Pets

Stories are the most ancient forms of communication. Prehistoric people conveyed stories with drawings on stone walls, Egyptians told stories with hieroglyphics. Jesus used parables to change people's thinking and beliefs, redirecting lives. The use of stories in today's businesses, non-profit organizations and government is only just being recognized to engage people in the organization's mission.

Stores of our lives form the basis of all we are and do. Lest leaders think this is all fluff, stories and storytelling have bottom-line impact. Stories can convey tribal knowledge, demonstrate the value of specific initiatives and of the organization to its customers and community. Stories which envision the future build trust, enable mutual respect, and have the power to reframe perspectives and create alignment. All these benefits positively engage workers which in turn increases productivity and profitability. When organizations provide customers with something to talk about, they will talk about it, positive or negative. Positive stories will attract more business; this is the ripple effect stories have on organization's profitability. Organizations that use stories as part of their sales process create two powerful advantages: they better understand their customer needs by listening to their stories, and they build trust, an essential ingredient to a long-term customer relationship. One hospital that captures and shares patient stories sends the message that patients are valued. Sharing patient stories also provides ordinary people a way to give back to the hospital staff that helped them heal while providing hope to others.

The key to telling good stories in organizations is to integrate right-brain imagination with left-brain analytical thought. Those that learn how to do this through the power of story are the most likely to succeed.
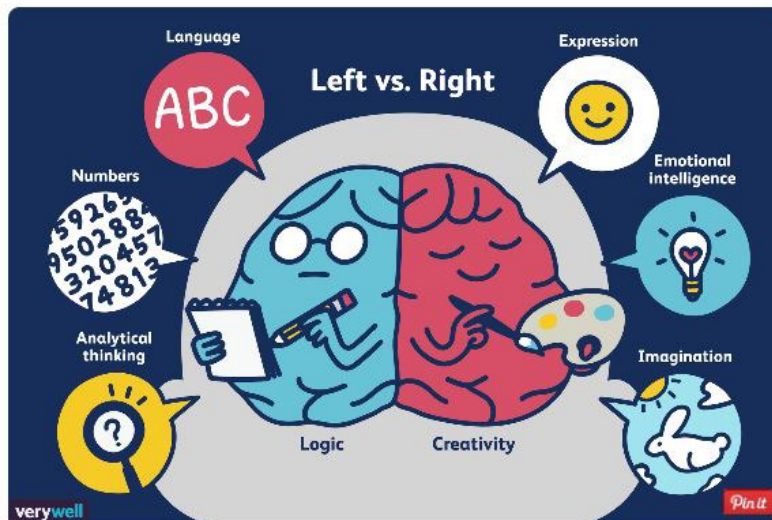
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The challenge is getting employees to come forward with their stories. Assume employees are already telling stories (at the lunch table, in the copier room). Train managers/supervisors to be on the lookout for them. Share stories about outstanding service during training, starting with orientation. Identify the key learning points and values you want to highlight and then search for stories that reinforce them. Be intentional about finding such stories. Sponsor contests to share best stories then publish and broadly share them. Regular encouragement and recognition can help. Lands' End has implemented a Legendary Customer Service Award to draw out employee stories.

There is an art to telling stories that have impact. Success requires a good story and someone comfortable telling it. According to Doug Stevenson, creator of the Story Theatre Method, great stories make great theatre. Story comes alive when we move around. Acting implies action. Good storytelling features both physical and emotional movement. Spicing up a story with acting techniques helps your audience SEE what you are saying.

> *If you want to inspire and stir your audience to action, you don't do it by standing in one place.*
> - Doug Stevenson

Key to acting out any story is to be authentic – remain true to yourself; bring yourself to the platform. You are the vehicle through which information is being transmitted; If you are not comfortable with yourself, transmission of the message will not be strong. Inexperienced storytellers spend a disproportionate time on content, not enough on delivery.

You don't have to be a good actor to tell a good story.

How to Tell a Good Story
First choose the right story – one that:
1) includes vivid details,
2) includes a lesson learned,
3) can be used in a business context,
4) will call people to a higher standard,
5) you enjoy telling

The story does not have to be personal. You can use current events, inspirational historical individuals, TV shows, movies. Good stories often involve a 'turning point' – a time when someone made a change in their life – geography, relationship, job. career, responsibility, perspective, accomplishment, or tragedy/injury.

The story must be congruent with the point you want to make and be relevant to the audience. This may take some imagination. If you stick to the facts, the essence of the event/situation/obstacle and the process used to overcome the obstacle and lesson learned, it is ok to embellish details – timelines, location, character names and character descriptions.

Once you have chosen the right story, craft the story. Crafting a good story takes time and multiple drafts. Doug Stevenson suggests you use the first draft to remember the story, use the second to structure the story using the 9 steps below, the third to embellish the story with juicy details and the fourth to polish the story.

The 9 steps to structuring a good story are:
1) Set the stage/scene – create context; frame the story to help audience know where you are starting
2) Introduce the characters - use physical an emotional description
3) Begin the journey – leave the safety and comfort of the initial scene
4) Encounter obstacle – a person, decision, physical or emotional problem; this is the most dramatic part of the story. Help your audience experience it.
5) Overcome the obstacle- plant the seed for the lesson to be learned
6) Resolve the story –; the let audience know how everything turned out; tie up loose ends, leaving no unanswered questions
7) Make the point - share the lesson learned
8) Ask the question – engage the audience in their experience with something similar
9) Restate the point – summarize the story and call your audience to action

Audiences will seldom take away more than one or two ideas from your story. People remember what hits home for them, not necessarily the point you wanted them to take home. If you want your story to accomplish a specific purpose for employees to buy into new technology, to embrace a new way of work, you need a phrase that sticks – something memorable. Doug Stevenson suggests ten ways to make it memorable:
1) Summarizes the point of the stories
2) Use only one phase per story
3) Make it short and sweet
4) Make it musical and rhythmic
5) Use words organic to the story
6) Use words that repeat the initial consonant sound
7) Use rhyming words
8) Turn it into a call to action
9) Use words that end in a consonant
10) Make it memorable by saying it repeatedly during your story.

Six Stories You Need to Know How to Tell
Annette Simmons in *The Story Factor* identifies six stories you need to know how to tell:

1) **Who Am I**? This story allows others to see you 'walk the talk' before they have an opportunity to work with you and serves to establish trust
2) **Why Am I Here**? This story reveals enough for people to make a distinction between healthy ambition and dishonest exploitation.
3) **Vision Story** This story connects people to a promised tomorrow in a way that shrinks today's frustration.
4) **Teaching Stories** These stories allow you to deal with complexity by helping people make sense of new information/skills in new ways. Can also demonstrate your values.
5) **Values in Action**. These stories provide an example of what the value looks like in daily use.
6) **I know What you Are Thinking** These stories disarm objections to the information/proposal you are sharing; serves to neutralize concerns without direct confrontation.

Without clarity and alignment, any communication, no matter how well structured or delivered, will create confusion, and will not mobilize the workforce. People are skeptical about what they are told until they hear it consistently over time. Leaders must communicate strategic clarity over and over and over and over and over; repeatedly, seven times. Employees wait to see how serious leaders really are about the message.

Messaging is not so much an intellectual process as an emotional one. The whole point of leadership is to mobilize the workforce around what is most important. Therefore, leaders must appeal to the head and the heart when communicating.

Communication is the real work of leadership.
- *Nitin Nohria*

Examples
I share two stories below from my consultant experiences as examples of how I might share who I am and my values.

Story #1: Variability Reduction versus Over time
Twenty years ago, I was working with a national print/communications company to deploy a shop floor variability reduction methodology (PVE), focused on reducing downtime and driving consistent schedules, across their 26 North American plants. As the master trainer, I went to a book printing plant in northeast Ohio to certifyt heir trainer. At the end of the day, I had a meeting scheduled with the Quality Manager, Lori. When I arrived a Lori's office, a pressman was loudly making his case for his team to be the next to implement PVR. Lori calmly explained the business criteria for prioritizing print lines during this phase of deployment, but he was adamant, his team NEEDED to be next. Shop floor teams almost never argue to implement change. There was something else going on here beyond the business case. I needed to find out what.

After meeting with Lori, I asked to meet this pressman. Upon reaching him on the shop floor I asked why he wanted PVR for this team. He responded, "I want what they have" and pointed to an adjacent print line that had implemented PVR. I followed up with another question, "What do they have that you don't?" "I want my weekends with my family," he responded. Turns out this plant ran a 3 shift, 8 - hour per day schedule five days a week, Monday through Friday. Falling behind schedule could lead to penalties from the publisher. So, when lines fell behind schedule, teams were scheduled to work the weekend. Teams often did not know they would work the weekend until Thursday afternoon, leaving little time to make or change plans with family. I was awed by this team. They could have refused the

overtime to spend time with their family. But, instead, they saw a way to support the business AND have family time through PVR; they were all in. Wanting to help this team and others like them, I worked with the PVR corporate steering team to revise the business criteria used to prioritize the lines at a plant to incorporate team enthusiasm for PVR.

While doing this, I was also providing coaching to four Six Sigma Black Belts at this plant and another two hours south. The Black Belt at the second plant, Tom, had a project focused on "overruns". The plant was experiencing "overruns" (over production) on personalized orders at 2.6%, representing a loss to the division of $48,827 in paper and ink consumption, and $15,940 in equipment run time per month. Shorting orders to the customer resulted in fines and the potential for loss of business. Tom had gone months without any Six Sigma support. He was not seeing the results he expected, lacked confidence in his analysis skills and was discouraged. Given my Six Sigma experience, I quickly saw how his work with the teams to standardize the process and change the set-ups had reduced variability. He could not see it, so I knew I needed to help him create a simple graphic that it made it intuitively obvious. I walked him through the creation of a multi-phase control chart in Minitab, color-coding each phase of the project. The reduction in variability immediately became visible. Tom jumped from his chair, grabbed the chart off the printer and loudly exclaimed, "I can explain this to my kids!" Once he calmed down, I asked him why he wanted to share the graph with his kids. He shared that he had taken his lack of confidence and discouragement home with him and had not been the Dad he wanted to be the last few months; he could share this with his kids as a lesson that hard work and patience eventually pays off.

Story #2: Statistical Thinking and the Burnt Cookies

A large bakery mass producing cookies experienced dough that was too wet or too dry at least once a week; this dough was burnt as the cookies went through the oven and had to be scrapped, costing $356,000 /year. It was well known that consistent ingredient amounts, and final mix temperature contribute to a successful production system with very low waste levels. Plant engineers had adjusted the equipment and recipe over the years, but the problem persisted; a breakthrough was needed. When business leadership decided to implement Six Sigma, this was identified as one of the first projects at the plant. Plant engineers remained skeptical - knowing that Six Sigma is a data-based improvement methodology, they doubted the project would get beyond the Measure phase as data did not exist on quantities and timing of ingredients – or so they assumed.

"Between knowledge of what really exists and ignorance of what does not exist lies the domain of opinion. It is more obscure than knowledge, but clearer than ignorance." --Plato

A third-party vendor had already been engaged in design of a new costly control system to replace the existing system. It seems that no one had ever asked the third-party vendor that designed and implemented the original control system that metered ingredients (flour, sugar, water, oil) into the mixers whether data on ingredient quantity and timing was available and accessible from the system. Coached by SOS on the Six Sigma methodology, the cross-functional Six Sigma team obtained access to this data (seven years of data!) and analyzed it using various statistical and graphical analyses to identify patterns in ingredient delivery that aligned with burnt batches. Turns out that variation in timing of the delivery of flour led to variation in the amount of flour added to the mixer. In addition, the meter that measured oil to the mixer contained air bubbles and the hot water valve was not fully open. The control system managed ingredient delivery for multiple mixers and programmers had failed

to incorporate multiple delivery requests in the logic, resulting in variations in the timing of delivery and amount of flour which had a cascading impact on the other ingredients. Once this variation was understood, simple modifications to the control system logic made, meter maintenance, and the hot water valve added to the set-up checklist, burnt cookies because of wet or dry dough was eliminated from the weekly schedule. Statistical thinking enabled the team to understand the story behind the burnt cookies and make lasting improvements, avoiding costly new technology and lost production time.

So, what do these two stories tell you about me? That I:
- Am family oriented
- Listen to and work with all levels of an organization to get results with and through people
- Use data for decision-making and improvement
- Challenge assumptions

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