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TELL US A GOOD ONE

Stories for Business Presentations

By Suzanne Bates

Given the choice, most of us would rather stare into a bright light and listen to a dentist drill away at our molars than sit through yet another endless, droning, statistics-filled PowerPoint slide show. On the other hand, everyone loves to read a good story, watch a movie or TV show, or sit with funny or dramatic friends and loved ones swapping tales.

People love stories of all kinds. Centuries ago, people passed information from one person to another via storytelling long before they could read or write. The great leaders of our time, including Abraham Lincoln, were remarkable storytellers. Today, we still love to read and listen to stories about business and success. Our brains are hardwired to learn this way.

When delivering any type of presentation, whether during a one-on-one meeting or a formal speech to a large auditorium of people, you have two choices. You can either lecture your audience with dry, dull data, or you can ensure their interest with a story whose characters and message come to life, right before their eyes. If you're like most people, option two is probably more appealing. Rather than force-feeding your audience facts or stats, presenting your information in an enjoyable fashion helps you to connect with others.

You can use storytelling regularly as a technique to motivate and inspire people. Recognition or appreciation told through stories will allow your audience to relate to the "characters" or people in your world. They will want to be the hero or subject of the next story you tell.

Stories open up the lines of communication. Your employees want you to know about what they're doing. If they know you're going to share their success with others, they'll be more likely to share, in the hope that you will turn their accomplishments into stories.

You may feel you don't have any good stories to tell, but everyone has hundreds of stories; things that happen every day. Becoming more observant will open the floodgates and bring you so much rich material you can use to communicate effectively.

Follow these easy steps to use writing and telling stories as a significant leadership skill.

Identifying your topic/audience

When you're ready to create a great story, figure out the topic, value, or idea you want to promote. What is your reason for telling your story? What purpose do you want the story to serve? Every story should make a point. It may be hysterical when you tell it at a cocktail party, but if it doesn't drive home a business point, save it for your social life.

Next, decide who the audience is for your story and how you'll include them. The topic has to be relevant to that particular group of listeners, or you may entertain but will accomplish very little.

Looking at your life to find stories

Coming up with the idea for a story can be the hardest part. Powerful, original stories reveal a lot about you as a leader and a person, without being about you but rather about people you know, events you've witnessed, or things you've observed.

You probably should not make yourself the hero of your own stories unless you are relating to your audience something you felt, understood, or learned. You can also make yourself the central figure if you use self-deprecating humor to make a point. Many leaders use humor effectively to become one of the gang or part of the crowd. Humor breaks the ice and sets up learning.

Begin by considering stories you have told to friends or family in the past. What have been some of your "greatest hits"? Consider looking for stories in the challenges you have faced, conflicts you have witnessed or experienced, and difficult decisions you have made. Any painful experience has many lessons inherent in it. When you have a little distance from those conflicts, you can better understand what they really meant.

Looking around you – stories are everywhere

Storytelling begins with awareness. Start paying attention to what's going on around you, and every day you will pick up at least one new story to add to your repertoire. Other prompts for great stories include:

- Startling events, historical events, and major changes. Has your group or company had new experiences, lost opportunities, or anything that they had to work hard to achieve?
- Embarrassments, awkward situations, and dumb ideas that worked. Failures, turn-arounds, and last-minute saves make great story topics! Especially when you want to provide incentive, consider this type of story.
- Inspiring people, remarkable achievements, memorable events, athletic contests, wins and losses.
- Seemingly insignificant, everyday occurrences, travel stories, interesting people you've met, unexpected discoveries.

Putting pen to paper

When you know what story you want to tell, write it down. You really must put it on paper to tell it right and ensure that you are actually making the point you want to make. Feel free to embellish a little to make the story work most effectively. You can use the same story to make a lot of different points, and you can use the story with a wide variety of audiences.

Your stories should always include a few colorful descriptive words to make them real and paint a picture for your listeners. But don't use so many details that you slow the story down. As you write your story, imagine how you might "draw a picture" with your hands, or "show" a feeling with a facial expression, instead of saying that you were upset, angry, or thrilled. Make a note in the margin of the text to remind you where to pause and appear perplexed or irritated or happy. Showing is better than telling.

Structuring your story for maximum effect

All good stories have a beginning, middle, and end. And whether the story is meant to be funny, sad, serious, or touching, some conflict or tension must be resolved by the story's end. Include an element of suspense, too, when you can, to keep your audience guessing about what's going to happen. And sometimes you'll want to tell the story so that the listeners "get it" even before you seem to.

As you work on your story, read it out loud, evaluate what works, and then rewrite and edit it. Read it again, and work on it until it's right. Learn it by heart, but don't memorize it word for word. Just visualize and internalize, so that when you get up to tell the story, you recall the major events and picture the people. Then you will be able to relate the essence of what happened while remaining conversational.

Storytelling leads to career success

Not all of your stories need to relate astonishing, riveting, hang-on-for-your life experiences. Some will be simple slice of life anecdotes, funny or serious, that are quick and simple to tell.

Other stories from business life will have some drama or suspense that inspires and motivates the listeners. As you develop this type of story, don't be afraid to "dramatize" a bit. A few gestures, facial expressions, different tones of voice, or character voices will bring it alive. Don't be afraid to ham it up a little, even in front of a business audience. Your audience will be surprised and thrilled to laugh or feel emotion in a business meeting.

Telling stories will become one of your most valuable communication tools. Try a tale or two out and see where they take you and your career!