



## **SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP:**

### **How to Influence and Inspire Others through the Art of Storytelling**

**By Suzanne Bates**

Excerpts published in *Affluent: The Authority on Lifestyle*, August 2006 issue

Managers go to classes, read books and try to learn from other manager's success, all in an effort to be a good leader. They try to mold employees into what they perceive to be the perfect successful worker. What they don't realize is that by persuading and telling people how to behave, they are actually alienating everyone. Instead of telling people how to behave, you can show them how by telling a story.

A senior vice president wanted to instill in her team the sense that they should go out of their way to build relationships with their internal clients – other businesses within the company. Her team was not seen as a group that solved problems or helped their colleagues. Instead of lecturing them about it at the all hands meeting, she chose instead to tell the story of an employee who had gone above and beyond – working overtime on a weekend to solve a problem for another department, which went a long way toward rebuilding a soured relationship.

Storytelling is a subtle but powerful tool. By telling stories, you can reinforce values and behaviors without hitting people over the head. A manager or leader provides employees with subconscious clues as to how to get ahead at work.

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. As a result, today our brains are hardwired to listen to and respond to stories.

When a manager or leader tries to communicate, whether in a one-on-one meeting or a formal speech to a large auditorium of people, they have two choices. They can either lecture the audience with dry, dull data, or they 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.

You can use storytelling regularly as a technique to motivate and inspire people with stories about others who've done a good job. This recognition or appreciation will allow your audience to relate to the "characters" in your story, and they will want to be the hero or subject of the next story.



The CEO of an airline draws on his background as a mechanic, pilot and business man, telling stories appropriate to each type of audience. He relates to them in their language, and often regales them with funny stories that tell them he's walked in their shoes.

You may feel you don't have any good stories to tell, but everyone has hundreds of stories in them, and observing will bring you hundreds more that you can use to communicate more effectively at work and advance your career. Follow these easy steps to use writing and telling stories as a significant leadership skill.

### **1. What's Your Point?**

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.

### **2. Who Are You Talking To?**

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.

### **3. Who Are You Talking About?**

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.



#### **4. Where Do You Find a Story?**

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 had to work hard to achieve something?
- 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.

#### **5. How Do You Use a Story?**

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.

A CEO who is widely admired for his entertaining speeches keeps a "bible" of personal stories. It was started and passed down to him by his mentor, who was also a great speaker. Today he continues to add to its rich contents and now has hundreds of stories, poems, funny lines, toasts, and famous quotes to use in his talks. Whenever he's asked to speak, he simply pulls out his trusted resource, as thick as the New York Yellow Pages.

When writing a story, he's always sure to include a few colorful descriptive words and phrases. This brings your stories alive and paints a picture for your listeners. 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 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.



## **6. Structure 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.

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 its right. Learn it by heart, but don't memorize it word for word. Just visualize and internalize, so that when you 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.

### **Story telling 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. As you develop a story, don't be afraid to "dramatize" a bit. A few gestures, facial expression, different tones of voice, or character voices will bring it alive.

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!