
Storytelling: More Than a Presentation Tool



By Roger Jones , CEO, Vantage Hill Partners

How a story can make a strategy come to life.

We all love a good story. Perhaps for you it's the suspense and rollercoaster of emotions of an action movie or the page turning intrigue of a novel. We can't wait to see what happens next as we immerse ourselves and drift into another world.

Many executives too have discovered the power of leadership storytelling, but most only see stories as a tool to bring presentations to life. And many leaders find greater comfort just using logic. However, when used wisely stories can be employed to engage with your stakeholders emotions, change attitudes and behaviours, and, importantly, make change happen.

Learning stories

I recall Sandra (not her real name), a recently appointed CEO of a technology company. When we first met she expressed her frustration that the changes she needed to make were not happening as smoothly or as quickly as she'd hoped, everything from getting her senior managers to implement the

culture change needed through to her top team supporting her future plans.

Sandra then shared her plans with me. They looked really well thought through: detailed analysis of competitors, market trends and financials, a clear customer value proposition. To her it was all reassuringly data driven and she wondered why resistance to them was so rife.

I then asked her how her children learnt about the world when they were young. She was silent for a few moments and I think a little perplexed why I should ask such a question when what was top of her mind was getting things done in her business. Her response was one word: stories. Sandra then rattled off the names of a number of books she remembers her children reading, *Topsy and Tim Go To The Dentist* and *Peppa Pig: Recycling Fun*.

We then spoke about why these and other stories helped her children develop. We explored topics such as how stories helped her children put their world into context, showing them how things work, how we relate to each other and feel comfortable with new experiences. A broad smile appeared on Sandra's face when she told me how one day when her son was four years old, she remembered walking into his bedroom to see him tidying up, a first for him. He told his mum he was doing this as a character in a story he'd seen tidying their bedroom. At this point Sandra laughed and said stories even inspire action.

It was then that Sandra had what can only be described as her light bulb moment. She declared she was a '*logic junkie*' (her words not mine) and hadn't thought of how she might use narratives for business aims. Then she asked, '*How can I use stories to inspire change, when all my creative juices were sucked out of me way back in my career.*'

Becoming a storyteller

A reasonable question, to which I responded: "How would a documentary film maker explain your culture change to senior managers or your future plans to your top team; how would an artist, a creative writer, a teacher or a customer do the same?"

This type of thinking was new for Sandra, and it took her a little time to become playful and share her random ideas. Over a short period of time we lifted her future plans off the page and turned them into a future story that she shared with her top team who, although they had many questions,

seemed to feel comfortable with her vision.

Between us, we thought of how we might describe the story of the culture change, and devised a framework for her senior managers to create the story themselves so they felt a greater sense of ownership.

At first, Sandra felt nervous using storytelling rather than her more customary factual approach, but when she saw how facts can be wrapped in the narrative to make them more memorable, and how resistance to her initiative was beginning to melt away her nervousness evaporated.

Sandra started to see other benefits too. She felt there was greater trust in her top team after our away day in which team members disclosed experiences from their early life that had shaped their leadership values. The business development teams' results also improved by weaving stories into their traditional sales approach.

Clearly to achieve all these positive results Sandra brought other approaches into play such as fair-process and adopting a participative style, but she gives a significant amount of credit down to her adopting a storytelling approach.

If using the narrative is something you seldom do, then the first step in becoming an effective leadership storyteller is to use your personal experiences. Here are some dos and don'ts to help get you started:

- I. Draw a straight line on a sheet of A4 paper and mark your age from birth to today on it. Then note down on the time-line experiences you can remember and what you learnt from each, these might be anything from something a teacher said to you, through to what you learnt if you failed your first driving test.
- II. Select three or four experiences that were significant for you and that you will be happy to share, though nothing boastful.
- III. Now, craft these experiences into stories by putting them into this structure: introduce the characters; begin the journey; have an element of surprise or a point that made you have a light bulb moment; then resolve the story. Finally, share with your audience what you learnt as a result of the experience.

- IV. Think how you might use each story. Perhaps one will help encourage change, another trust or collaboration, and so on.
- V. Keep your story short. Three minutes is long enough.
- VI. When sharing your story tell people how you felt during the experience.

As you start to feel comfortable using your personal stories, you might then like to think how you can bring your company vision, strategy or company values to life using organisational stories.

Roger Jones *is an executive and top team coach, and author of The Storytelling Pocketbook. An alumnus of INSEAD's EMCCC, the Financial Times have featured his leadership storytelling work.*

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