

# Tell me a story if you want to foster business change

---

 [theaustralian.com.au/careers/tell-me-a-story-if-you-want-to-foster-business-change/news-story/4423008aa619f17d1ee5bdd05087b1a9](https://www.theaustralian.com.au/careers/tell-me-a-story-if-you-want-to-foster-business-change/news-story/4423008aa619f17d1ee5bdd05087b1a9)

Gabrielle  
Dolan

7/7/2017

Business storytelling has emerged as a critical strategy to drive organisational change, and with good reason. A well-told, appropriate story creates an emotional connection and signals we can be trusted, a critical component when driving change.

Organisations including Australia Post and Bupa are using stories to drive organisational change and research shows this not just good science; it also makes sense.

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, neuroeconomist Paul Zak revealed the powerful impact oxytocin has on the brain when we tell stories. Oxytocin is often referred to as the trust hormone. Our bodies release it when we are with people we love and trust, when we hug, or even when we shake hands in a business meeting. And it's released when listening to stories.

Neuroscientist Uri Hasson opened his 2016 TED talk thus: "Imagine if I invented a device that could record my memories, my dreams, my ideas and transmit them to your brain." It would be game-changing technology.

But we already possess this technology: it's called the human communication system and effective storytelling. Hasson's research shows that even across different languages, our brains show similar activity when we hear a story, becoming what he calls aligned or synchronised.

In one study, listeners lay in the dark waiting to hear a story spoken aloud. The moment the story started, the auditory cortex of the listeners' brains, where we process sound, became active and aligned.

Hasson calls this neural entrainment. It was only when the listeners heard the story in a coherent way that this happened. This did not happen if the story was played backwards, or the words or sentences were scrambled. The story was understood in a similar way when told in Russian to a group of Russian listeners, as it was in English to English listeners.

Sharing stories is the perfect way to create common ground and a shared vision for change.

This is typically attempted in organisations through a cascade communication approach of PowerPoint presentations filled with facts and figures or an outline of the pros and cons. These strategies are based on logic and fail to tap into emotion, a critical mistake when driving change.

According to Christine Comaford, neuroscience expert and author of *The New York Times* bestseller *Smart Tribes: How Teams Become Brilliant Together*, 90 per cent of human behaviour and decision-making is driven by our emotions.

Not fully understanding this is often why we get incredibly frustrated when change fails, even though it may make logical sense.

Marketing executives and advertisers are acutely aware of the power of storytelling and emotion to drive decisions.

A study of more than 1400 marketing campaigns submitted to the British-based Institute of Practitioners in Advertising rated how effective marketing campaigns were, based on profit gains.

Campaigns based purely on emotion rated as 31 per cent effective, campaigns based purely on logic were only 16

per cent effective and those that combined both were 26 per cent effective.

So using logic alone has the least impact, and using emotion almost doubles the effect. The same is true for driving change. Focusing on logic has little impact. There needs to be a focus on stories to allow employees to emotionally connect. That is when we can foster real change.

*Gabrielle Dolan is the author of Stories for Work: The Essential Guide to Business Storytelling.*