

Why Is Leadership Storytelling So Powerful?

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“I’m in the storytelling business,” says Oprah Winfrey. “I believe that the humanity that all of us share is the stories of our lives, and everybody has a story. Your story is as important as the next person’s story.”

What’s true for media mogul Oprah Winfrey is true for any leader. We are *all* in the storytelling business. After all, being granted the authority of a leadership position is not enough. If you tell great stories, then you also have *social* power as a leader and people will want to align with your vision.

How do I become a successful business storyteller?

Much like leadership, storytelling is not a mysterious inborn gift. Rather, it is a highly trainable skill that affirms and enhances a leader’s presence. You don’t have to be a superhero to tell great stories, but you do need the right tools and processes.

And you don't need to have scaled Kilimanjaro or invented the next Google to tell stories from your life. Somebody who's good at telling stories can make plywood or even paperclips interesting!

When it comes to improving ourselves as storytellers, I've discovered four secrets.

1. Become a Story Collector

To get good at telling stories, start collecting them. Why? It lets you develop a discriminating taste for good stories. It's just like how a sommelier understands the various types of wines —by tasting a lot of them! So immerse yourself in stories.

Collect the good ones. Keep them in a file. Refer to the story file from time to time.

2. Become a Reverse Engineer

What's even better than collecting stories? Dissecting them. If you think it's good, learn to identify why. If you like it, consider how it makes you feel. What is it that the story presented in the characters or the sequence of events that makes it resonate with you?

3. Notice the Bad Stories

Yeah, it's not difficult. Bad stories are all around us! Whether the source is your relatives, that painful reunion story, your colleagues' presentations, your clients, your suppliers—a lecture, a talk, a panel—bad stories are just everywhere!

It's easy to say, "this is terrible." But that's not enough. You've got to follow up with *why*. What makes it so terrible? Or, if you're bored before the teller even begins.... *why*?

So, again, be that reverse engineer. At the start of the story, you might be bored because they rehashed things you know already. Or, you might be bored because you're in a hurry and have a million other things to do, and you wish the person could just get to the point. Or, you're thinking, "I'm bored because I don't really understand what they're saying, but I don't want to ask questions, and now I'm even more irritated and aggravated because that means I have to go and look things up myself. My boss is going to think I'm an idiot if I don't understand these things."

So when you encounter a bad story, list the reasons that make it so bad. Ask yourself this last question: "Do I do that sometimes when I tell stories? When I speak publicly? When I present?"

4. Seek Feedback

As you collect stories, seek feedback. Tell the story to a test audience and ask them how the story makes them feel, what they remember, and what questions they have for you. If their questions are good, that's a good sign that you are making your points effectively!

Why is storytelling so powerful for leaders?

If becoming a good storyteller sounds like it takes a lot of effort, well... it does. But it's worthwhile.

Neuroscientists have begun to understand how stories affect the brain. This short video based on the work of Paul Zak, founding director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University, explains that the brain may produce cortisol while hearing stories that make us distressed, which can focus our attention. (Isn't that what we all want most whenever we are interacting with an audience?) Stories that make us feel care, connection and empathy can produce oxytocin. The more oxytocin, the more empathy one feels.

That's not all. When you tell stories, people are far more likely to remember what you say. Most people forget more than 40% of the information you tell them by the very next day. After a week, they will likely have forgotten a full 90% of what you said.

Stories give you an advantage because information is up to 20 times more memorable when delivered in a story.

But most importantly, stories often lead to action. Author Alan Weiss has noted, "Logic makes people think; emotion makes them act." At the end of the day, we want to prompt people to *do* something, and logic doesn't necessarily emote. We need emotion to get people off the couch and onto their feet to do something about our message.

How do you write a business story?

Now that you know the overall process of becoming a better business storyteller—and why it matters—would you like a template for getting started on writing a business story of your own?

In this article, I have outlined three of the most popular plots used for business stories and provided templates and examples to get you started on creating one that fits your business needs.

I'm always collecting stories — good and bad — so please feel free to share with me any publicly available examples (i.e., Youtube) or sufficiently anonymous but true stories (i.e., "almost all my professors are working on extremely interesting research... the problem is,

they're so bad at explaining why we, undergrads, should care.") The most important thing is not only the good or bad story, but *how* we can all learn from it. Please reach out at esther@leadershipstorylab.com if you would like to share an example.