Leadership Through Storytelling Training

Workshop Summary
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The Timeless Power of Storytelling

Nitin Nohria, Dean of Harvard Business School, once described communications as “the real work of leadership.” Indeed, of all the skills required by today’s leaders—today’s managers, executives, sales people, etc.—perhaps none is more important than their ability to communicate effectively.

Skills, however, do not operate at peak performance without tune-ups and maintenance. We use tools to keep our skills sharp and increase their potency. Such is the case with communications, especially leadership communications, on which more responsibility and importance is placed. As managers and executives, our communications must consistently operate at a higher level. They must inform, but also inspire. They must convey important facts and information, but also vision and perspective. They must help people not only understand what they’re doing, but also why they’re doing it.

There are many tools available to today’s executives to sharpen his or her skills as a communicator. There are also increasing arrays of technologies through which we can now communicate, reaching people in ways we wouldn’t have thought possible ten years ago. Yet amidst all these advancements and technologies, there is one timeless communication tool that has endured: storytelling.

The great Danish author Isak Dinesen once said, “To be a person is to have a story.” Indeed, storytelling is one of the most human of activities. In fact our history, our persona, our very identity is the sum of the stories we tell about ourselves and people tell about us. We are all, inherently, storytellers; and there are few things we love more than to hear a great story and pass it along to others. Time and again we witness the power of storytelling, having experienced how a well-crafted story, well-told can literally get us to see and hear things in our minds and feel things we hadn’t anticipated feeling.

Once, long ago, there was nothing but stories. Before there was television, blogs, movies, emails, podcasts; newspapers, Facebook, books or even written
language, there were stories. Stories were used by civilizations and societies to build culture and transmit hard-won knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next. Over the past 20 to 25 years, modern technology may have originally distracted us from this familiar craft; but more and more people are gravitating back to storytelling as not only a way to communicate and connect, but also a way to express themselves. After all, what are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn if not platforms on which people can craft and share their stories with others?

Today, companies and organizations—and more specifically, their leaders—are recognizing the power of storytelling and understanding the rightful place this timeless and infinitely familiar practice has in the cold, hard world of business. For storytelling has a way of reaching through to the most important asset any organization has today: people, touching them in ways that the typical advertising campaign or mission statement cannot. Stories help a leader connect us to a larger vision and sense of purpose and, in doing so, connect us to others we work with. Personally and professionally, we all inherently want to be part of something that is bigger than ourselves, and a great leader telling a great story can make that happen.

Great leaders are great communicators. And great communicators are great storytellers. Historic individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. have long known the power of stories to guide and move people, influencing them and motivating them to take action. They use storytelling to paint a compelling vision of the future and, in doing so, shape the way we see ourselves and see the world around us. By sharing their stories with others, great leaders pull us into them, compelling us to see ourselves in their stories; and when that happens, we become that much more committed to making those stories our own and doing what we can to make them real.

**Why Stories Work with Our Brains**

In many ways, leadership is about managing change. In fact these days, leadership isn’t just about managing change; it’s about creating transformations in the way a team thinks, feels and ultimately acts. And to affect this transformation, a leader has to take people from where they are now to where they need to be in the future to make that change happen. It’s about taking people into unknown terrain: and one of the best ways for a leader to take his or her team there is to take them in their minds and hearts first, to get them to imagine, to envision, to see this future they need to be a part of and make real.

Translative leadership is about taking people from where they are to where they need to be.

This is where storytelling comes in. For telling the right story at the right time can get people to those different, unfamiliar places in their minds and hearts first so that they can go there in person later.

Stories work because we are, as humans, already hard-wired to tell them, to hear them and to comprehend them. They help us process information better, and when that happens, we are infinitely more likely to recall that information and act on it. This is why stories are so powerful for leaders; because they help a leader get his or her team to act more effectively on the information, messages and direction that leader is giving. Howard Gardner—a thought leader in the way people think and a professor at the Harvard School of Education—has done a lot of work to connect leadership to the way we cognitively process information, and he says, “The single most effective tool a leader has to persuade and influence other people is story.” Here’s why.

Many years ago, Dr. Gardner pioneered a theory around multiple intelligences, the thought being that we don’t just have one type of intelligence that is tested on the standardized IQ test, we actually have eight different types of intelligence (see diagram below). We use all eight of these intelligences all the time, but when we become an adult our brains gravitate towards on way of thinking it prefers over all others. We use all eight ways of thinking, but we have one preferred way. As adults, we recognize this diversity of thinking in our friends and colleagues.
For a leader to come in and try to transform a company, they must first transform the way they think and feel about a situation. To think that a leader can create that change by simply delivering a message once, in a straightforward way, and that it will get through and really resonate with everyone is mistaken. Some might get the message if the way that leader delivered it synchs up with the way those people are already used to thinking. However, the chances of that message getting through with everyone on a team are slim to none.

When a leader wraps his or her message in a story, it dramatically increases the chances of their message getting through to a diverse group of people because it serves up that message from a variety of different angles appealing to a variety of intelligences. Stories are richer and more layered than pure information or directives. They use a variety of different stimulus and paint bigger pictures so they tap into and use different parts of our brains and appeal to many different ways of thinking. They surround the brain instead of just attacking it from one direction and therefore greatly increase the chances of a message getting through to the very people he or she wants, needs to act on that message. Storytelling works because, in many respects, it's already in our nature.

The Journey of the Leader Storyteller

Leadership storytelling is not an overly analytical endeavor. It's not data-driven, and it's hard to test or quantify. It's really a journey: a constantly revealing path of discovery, communication, interaction, sharing and understanding. It's fluid, dynamic and always evolving. For some, this is an unfamiliar thing to grasp because it is, inherently, somewhat intangible and not readily controlled. Great storytelling for a leader requires us to look more to ourselves than to reams of hard facts and information. It requires us to have knowledge and insight, but also faith; and understandably for some, there might be some discomfort in that.

To use storytelling effectively in leadership communications—to use storytelling to effectively persuade, influence and inspire others—one must look at the stories they tell from three different and complementary angles—the strategy behind the story; the content of that story; and the delivery of the story. Surrounding those three areas is the effort of building up a library of strategic stories so that a leader is better able and equipped to always have the right story to tell at the right time.

Being a great storyteller is a combination of the person, their level of understanding and their material. The greatest leader in the world cannot become a great storyteller unless he or she first has great stories to tell as well as full knowledge of the intent of those stories and the best way to deliver them. As such, to develop the proficient executive storyteller, we need to take a broader, more holistic view across these three key areas.

The Strategy behind the Story

We define storytelling as an exchange of something meaningful shared from one person to another. But we add to that definition the phrase, “for a purpose,” because in our world it's not just storytelling, it's strategic storytelling: storytelling with intent, with
objectives, with goals, working towards a needed outcome. Storytelling is telling any story at any time. Strategic storytelling is about telling the right story at the right time to shape the way your audience thinks and feels and moving them towards a desired action.

**Storytelling = An exchange of something meaningful shared from one person to another...for a purpose.**

While stories may lead communications when actually delivered, when developing those communications, it is often best to “reverse engineer” the selection of a proper story. Looking at the situation strategically, I...

- Think first of what I want my audience to do, what action I want them to take
- Then I consider what I need them to think and/or feel to compel them to take that action
- Then I determine what message I can give them to get them to think or feel that way
- And finally, I find or develop an appropriate story to help foster any and all of the above

Beyond thinking strategically about the stories you select, it is good to understand the larger, holistic impacts that well-crafted stories can have.

- **Great stories tap into emotion** – They break down cynicism and make an emotional connection. They make us laugh; they make us cry. Importantly, they make us feel; for when we feel something with a story, we are infinitely more likely to recall it and share it with others.

- **Great stories are universal** – This might seem counter-intuitive to those who work tirelessly to zero in on a “sweet spot” target, but great stories appeal to many. They are viral and they spread, with an ability to travel great distances, transcend cultures, cross generations and speak to many different groups simultaneously.

- **Great stories are relevant** – They provide answers to questions that people have always wanted to ask, and they take us to places that we’ve always wanted to be. They enable us to be part of something bigger, something more. And in hearing these stories, we not only discover something about ourselves, we also discover something about the world we live in.

- **Great stories are never completely told** – They have endurance, allowing them to last over great periods of time becoming emblematic legends in the process. And while the characters and nuances may change from culture to culture, generation to generation, the core messages of great stories stay true. There is an openness to them that allows them to evolve, becoming richer with each soul who takes hold of it.

### The Content of Strategic Stories

Part and parcel of great storytelling is first building great stories to be told: ensuring those stories have great content that flows seamlessly. And while every story is different and unique, all great strategic stories are composed of five essential elements.

- **Premise** – This is the context for your story, connecting the story you are about to tell to the situation in which you’re telling it. It frames the story and sets it up, ensuring it is not only relevant to that situation, but also to the audience. In explaining the premise, you help people understand the reason you are sharing this particular story at this time.

- **Platform** – This is the stage upon which your story is set. It establishes the time and place for your story (e.g. “Once upon a time in a galaxy far, far away…”) and helps people understand the old situation in which your story begins.

- **Person** – These are the characters in your story who find themselves in the time and place of the story’s Platform. Most often, the characters include you, the storyteller, as you share a personal narrative from your own experience. But other characters may be part of that experience as well, journeying along with you and/or affecting your journey in some way. Ideally, your audience can see themselves in your characters and relate to the journey they’re on.

- **Plot** – Plot is the backbone of any great narrative or story, entailing the series of events that have unfolded, are unfolding or have yet to unfold. While there are many plots a story can follow, the most typical involves a group of people (Person) in a current situation (Platform) who have a goal of achieving a new reality, and experience obstacles and challenges in trying to reach that
goal, but somehow manage to overcome them. A story’s plot becomes more engaging when there is tension built up around those challenges and obstacles and that tension is relieved when the characters succeed by moving past them.

- **Point** – And of course, every great strategic story, especially those shared at work, has a point to it. There is a key message, learning or take-away that the audience draws from the story because there is a strategic reason the storyteller shared it with them in the first place.

When you start infusing storytelling into your presentations or communications, think about these five elements and make certain you are hitting on each one, especially the first and fifth one, for those are the key elements that make that story strategic.

### The Delivery of Strategic Stories

Truly great storytellers are each as unique as the stories they tell. And while the strengths of one will most certainly be different than the strengths of another, great storytellers do share some common characteristics that they either consciously or subconsciously use when making communicating.

- **Great storytellers listen, engage and interact with their audience** – They bridge the gap between “you” and “me” to create a shared experience in which the audience is just as active a participant as the storyteller. They make their audience see the storyteller as one of them. They understand that storytelling is really a conversation; a dialogue between people; an exchange of meaning. It is not a lecture or a seemingly endless download of information.

- **Great storytellers empower others** – It’s about facilitating the way people think about a situation versus trying to force the way they think. When done well, storytelling enables people to hear what you have to tell them, but then draw their own conclusions from what they have heard. Those conclusions are remarkably similar to what you want them to be; but they are nonetheless their conclusions, not yours.

- **Great storytellers are generous in spirit** – They understand that storytelling is a selfless gift. It is ego-less. It is not about personal praise or grandeur. Rather, it’s about giving something special to someone else. In fact, with great storytelling, the storyteller is not the hero; the audience is.

- **Great storytellers are expressive, animated and highly descriptive** – They paint verbal pictures in the minds of their audience, using detailed and visual language to do so. In doing that, they transport the audience to the place and time of the story, pulling them into it. And they aren’t afraid to act things out and use their bodies to further enrich the story and its telling.

- **Great storytellers are human, vulnerable and truthful** – They are authentic and genuine, admitting doubts, confusion or mistakes. They let down their armour and open themselves up, revealing the parts of themselves that are most human. In turn, the audience connects with them at a human level and trusts them as a result.

Oh…and Great Storytellers Do Not Hide behind PowerPoint

PowerPoint is, indeed, an incredible program that has greatly enhanced our capabilities to make meaningful and effective presentations. As powerful as it is, however, we must always remember that it is there to support and enhance our role as communicators, not play that role for us. PowerPoint should be thought of as a tool, not a crutch. It is there to bring greater meaning, creativity and engagement to your presentations; and when used effectively—with arresting images, motion graphics and a judicious use of text—it can do just that. However, one must always
remember two important things about PowerPoint to get the most power out of PowerPoint.

- **PowerPoint is not a teleprompter** – It is nerve-wrecking to stand up in front of an audience and make a presentation. No matter how much you practice, you still have a thousand thoughts running through your head as you try to remember what your opening line is. And PowerPoint can be very helpful in getting you past those nerves, guiding you through your presentation, helping you track from one point to the next. Still, few things are more boring than sitting in an audience and watching someone read lots of text on a slide. Use the “notes page” section on PowerPoint to help you remember key points you want to hit. Or, if you need to read from a script, read from a script. But don’t make your audience read through that script at the same time by having everything you’re saying up on the PowerPoint slides.

- **Treat PowerPoint slides for presenting and slides for a leave-behind are different things** – Your audience will often ask for a copy of your slides so they can refer back to them after your presentation is done. This is a reasonable request and you should try to honour it (unless you are presenting proprietary information). However, recognize in doing so that when people are reading your slides later (or emailing them to someone who missed the meeting), they are not going to have the benefit of you presenting them. So your slides may have to have more content in them so the reader gets the full picture. But don’t then use those same, more content rich slides to present from. Because in that situation, you can do most of the communicating, and your slides don’t have to. This often requires you developing two different versions of the PowerPoint (or a written leave behind as this document is), and that is more work. But it’s infinitely worth the effort.

What about hard data, charts or graphs? You are all undoubtedly faced with situations in which you need to present a great deal of complex information to your audience. And sometimes the only way to do that effectively is to actually show that information on a slide. That’s ok. The guidance outlined above is not meant to negate the need or the effectiveness of well-constructed charts or graphs. It is also not meant to suggest that you should only use images, quotes, clips and/or a few words on every slide of your presentation, as that’s not realistic nor is it effective.

It’s really about balance across the entire body of your presentation. So, if you need to convey complex information within your presentation, then…

- Keep that detailed information (charts, graphs) as simple as possible, only showing what you need to show to make your point,
- Ensure your audience knows that the full body of data or information is in their leave behind,
- And rather than simply present that information to your audience, position it, shaping the way they think and feel about it and pulling them towards the conclusions you yourself have already formed. Sharing a short story (or image, or headline or video or quote) at the start of your presentation of the data can help you set the stage for the data you’re about to present and lead your audience towards those desired conclusions.

### Developing a Library of Strategic Stories

Strong executive storytellers are able to assess a situation, read their audience, determine what they want their audience to think, feel and do and then quickly share the perfect story in order to forge those thoughts, emotions and actions. Over time, as an executive does more and more storytelling in business situations, he or she starts to build up a library of strategic stories that are always available at a moment’s notice. While this library will grow naturally through life and workplace experiences, you can accelerate its development by doing two things:

- **Find Great Stories** – Consider your workplace environment and the groups of people you have to lead and regularly interact with, assess what you want them to think, feel and most importantly do,
and then identify the key messages, guidance or inspiration you most often need to communicate—e.g. the importance of teamwork, being more innovative, great customer service, etc. (Use the “reverse engineering” outlined on p. 6 to help you with this.) Don’t just think about these things in your head; write them down. Once you’ve done this, you better understand the stories you already have in your library and, importantly, the gaps in that library that you may still need to fill.

• **Let Great Stories Find You** – Because storytelling comes so naturally to us, we are not always conscious of it. However, strong executive storytellers are, keeping their eyes and ears open to recognize a great story when they hear one and then thinking strategically about how they might use that story in a workplace situation to help influence the way people think, feel and act. When you see or hear a great story, the point of that story might not be readily apparent to you, and that’s ok. Still, if it speaks to you for any reason, grab onto it and file it away somewhere. For some day you will find the right situation in which to share it to others.

Whether you’re finding great stories or letting great stories find you, it’s important to remember that a story, an exchange of meaning, can take many forms. It can be a more traditional narrative with a beginning, middle and end, but it can also be a great quote, an engaging video, a captivating image, a funny cartoon, a headline, a metaphor, etc. All of these can help you exchange meaning with others, and you would be wise to make your library of strategic stories rich and eclectic in its make-up.

**Three Key Strategic Stories to Develop**

In the world of executive storytelling, there are lots of different strategic stories a leader should have in his or her library (e.g. the power of teamwork, taking initiative, getting through change, etc.). However, for the time being, we are going to focus on three areas of stories that every leader should develop.

• **Your Story** – We all need a CV, but your story is different and can be a powerful tool, whether you are transitioning to a new job or just want to present who you are in a more compelling fashion. While your story certainly conveys what you have done and how your career has unfolded, this is the opportunity to emphasize why you do what you do: the passion that drives your work, the change you want to make in the world, the things you are fighting for and against. It may be appropriate to bring in some personal aspects of your life that further illuminate your human side. Regardless, your story can be an effective way to give people a snapshot of who you are and a more personal, accessible way of knowing you as a whole person.

• **Core Brand Story** – Your core story is the story that you would tell about your company or brand. Like Your Story, this narrative focuses less on the nuts and bolts of what you do and more on the why you do it: the higher purpose driving your business; the difference you’re looking to make in the lives of your customers; the difference you’re looking to make in the world. Also like your story, your core story is often brought to life through examples of company’s vision, mission, values and higher sense of purpose coming to life.

• **Transformative Stories** – Against the backdrop of your core story, transformative stories talk about some sort of change that needs to take place for that core story to realize its full potential. Transformative stories often focus on challenges or obstacles that are getting in the way of your company getting to where it needs to go; but a transformative story can also talk about opportunities that have yet to be fully realized. Transformative stories allow the greatest creative opportunity for using metaphorical or allegorical stories to illustrate a point.

The strategic objective of these different types of stories can vary and all do some degree of informing and inspiring. Your story and the core stories of your company are primarily meant to inform and enlighten people, generating relevant knowledge about who you are, the organization you’re a part of and the work that you do. In this regard, these types of stories can serve as a True North: something constant and unwavering that guides you and your organization as you move forward.

However, the core story can also serve to magnetize others and compel them into action, especially when they provide permission to believe by focusing on the incredible your company has done, are doing and are striving to do in the future. In this regard, the core story of your company can be effective in inspiring
people and inviting them to become a part of that story—e.g. new recruits, future customers, potential partners, etc.

On the farther end of the spectrum are transformative stories, which certainly do some degree of informing, but are much more intended to inspire people into action, getting them to bring about whatever change needs to take place for the core story to stay on course. This change may be external in nature, affecting the world around your audience, but it might also require internal change as you challenge the audience to change themselves.

**To Be Human is to Have a Story**

Leadership is so often about affecting and managing people through change; and communications is one of the most powerful tools a leader has to do that. With this in mind, however, it is always important to remember that, at the end of the day, people follow people. They do not follow PowerPoint presentations. They do not follow emails. They do not follow reports. They follow people.

Storytelling may not be right for every single situation or for every single audience. But it can be very powerful for the vast majority of them. So practice it. Try to use some of the ideas from this class in your next presentation. Try to use even more of these ideas in the presentation after that. Be brave. Be bold. But more than anything, when you start becoming the executive storyteller of tomorrow, be yourself. Your audience will respect you, admire you and follow you all the more for it.

“We live by stories. We also live in them. We are living the stories that are planted in us or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted in ourselves.” — Ben Okri, Nigerian Storyteller

So let your communications let others see some (not all) of who you are as a person in addition to as a leader. Let them see the person behind the leader. Whether you’re making an important presentation to a room full of people or having an intimate one-on-one with an employee or client, make certain you are doing so as one person to another. Find your message; make it clear; but make it human as well. Take off your armour, let down your defenses and open yourself up to your audience, revealing the genuine human being behind the message being conveyed.
About Your Instructor, Bill Baker, and BB&Co Strategic Storytelling

Since Bill first learned to talk, he has been telling stories: to grandparents, teachers, bus drivers, the nice lady at the grocery store...anyone who would listen. Early on, Bill recognized the profound impact that stories had on people as well as the fact that different stories would generate different responses. This penchant for storytelling continued into his career as Bill started using stories in his day-to-day communications with colleagues and clients. With storytelling in his blood, Bill founded BB&Co Strategic Storytelling specifically to help companies and their leaders bring more meaning, focus and productivity to their work, and therefore their workforce...using the power of storytelling to do so.

BB&Co is a boutique strategic storytelling consultancy who works with clients all over the world to help them uncover the unique story of their brand or branded initiative, define a strategic vision for its future and then engage, align and inspire employees around both. An American by birth (a Canadian by choice), Bill spent the first 10 years of his career working in New York City managing global accounts for large multinational agencies such as Grey and Saatchi & Saatchi. Before starting BB&Co, Bill was part of the Global Planning Group of DDB Worldwide where he helped redefine and deploy the suite of strategic planning tools used across the agency’s 205 offices across the globe.

There is barely a category of industry that Bill and the BB&Co team has not worked in, having collaborated with respected clients of all shapes and sizes, including GE, Coca-Cola, Relais & Châteaux, Cisco, Hilton, Travel Alberta, Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, Pfizer, Cadillac Fairview, TELUS, UBC and Irvine Company. Bill is a regular presence on the public speaking circuit, an avid blogger and sits on the board of the Alzheimer Society of British Columbia. He is also a fervent skier, an aspiring jazz pianist and an eternally frustrated golfer.

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