

The Leader as Storyteller

Have you ever wondered, as you were telling some story to a friend and/or colleague that some times the other person's attention, and their eyes, wandered as you spoke. And at other times, your listener seemed riveted to what you were saying, with full attention as the story unraveled?

A few months ago, scanning the shelf on leadership at Borders, I came across a book I hadn't seen before, Stephen Denning's *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*. The more I read, the more interested I became, and the more I thought we ought to be bringing this skill to bear in our leadership toolbox.

Storytelling is not new. It has existed at least since the Greek bards were telling their stories about Odysseus' wanderings, and probably long before that. Much of the Bible consists of stories about people, which teach lessons that are still told today. In the U.S., there is actually an International Storytelling Center in Jonesboro, TN, which has been in existence for nearly 40 years.

Here's Denning's story: He was a plateau-ed manager at the World Bank, on the way to outplacement. In the *Leader's Guide...*, he tells of his first visit to the Jonesboro Center in 1998, seeking wisdom in convincing his organization, the World Bank, to move from being just a financial organization lending money to poor countries to a "knowledge bank" -- helping people in poor countries to acquire skills to overcome their own poverty. Through storytelling technique, he was able to move the Bank solidly in that direction and save his own career in the process, becoming the Bank's Director of Information Management.

Deming writes: "Leadership is essentially a task of persuasion – of winning people's minds and hearts." One of the writers from the Storytelling Center puts it this way: (I paraphrase.) "People don't want information – they are up to their eyeballs in it. What they want is *Faith*, faith in you, your goals, your successes (and failures); and this faith comes from the story you tell – when it is a meaningful story that inspires belief in you and renews hope that your ideas hold promise for them." ¹ I might hasten to add that the way you walk your talk and live out your stories is crucially important for your credibility in carrying out your persuasive talk. But while "leading by example", and the walk without the talk may be impressive, we know that people respond importantly to language. Who can forget Jack and Bobby Kennedy's, and Martin Luther King's abilities to inspire with their impactful words?

And this is what Deming and the storytellers are emphasizing. In fact, Deming's follow-on book is called *The Secret Language of Leadership*, subtitled *How Leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative*. Together, these 2 volumes are a cogent argument for the use of stories in our leadership efforts. One of the best parts of the 2nd volume is the description of the difference in the language that Al Gore used (unsuccessfully) in his 2000 campaign for president – and then successfully in his 2006 campaign for global warming.

However, I confess that I have read both books without understanding exactly what good narrative leadership is for me. I have recently tried telling some stories in my presentations, and some have worked to rivet the audience. Others have produced the eye-wander described above. I turn to the author referenced in the previous paragraph for a format or recipe, adding what I have learned from Deming and from my own practice:

According to this author, Annette Simmons, a Resource at the International Storytelling Center, here are six types of stories that will serve you in your efforts to lead or influence others:

1. The “Who Am I? “ story

The first question people ask themselves about you as a leader is “Who is this guy/gal, and why should I pay attention?” You can say, “My name is Noel Osborn, I have a PhD in economics, and, believe me, I am an interesting person.” That will get me exactly nowhere, right? But let’s suppose I am talking to a group of CEOs and I tell the following story:

“My first experience in what it is to be a CEO came from my father, who ran a small building materials dealership in Indiana. This was not a big company, but it was large enough to have a manager in each of the 3 adjoining towns where there were offices and operations. In one of these offices, Dad had a manager who had come from a larger city and who seemed to be doing a good job making friends in the community, and in generating business and winning customers’ good will. He had been working for my dad for about 3 years, when one day, as Dad was reviewing the accounts, he found a \$3,000 shortage of funds. When pressed for an explanation, the manager confessed that he had “borrowed” the money for his own expenses. My dad asked him how he was going to pay it back, and then left for another of the offices. That afternoon the manager went out to on a back road of the town, took a shotgun to his chest, and committed suicide. He also left behind a wife and two young children. Now I don’t think my father berated the manager for what he had done; in fact, he wasn’t particularly worried about the money (although \$3,000 in those days would be worth maybe \$20,000 today!). When he told me the story, Dad expressed a profound sadness that something he might have said, or something he didn’t say, provoked the manager enough to take his own life. Most of all, Dad hadn’t realized his impact on this manager, and how much his approval counted for this manager. As I remembered that experience, and my father’s recounting of it, when I first became a CEO, and as I learned more about the impact of a leader on those who follow, I resolved I would reflect on the impact I was having on the people who worked with me....”

So the story tells the audience who you are and why this group should pay attention to you. Deming reminds us that the story must be a genuine one, and it must fit the needs of the audience. Telling the above story to a group of university students at the beginning of a course would almost certainly not serve you as an instructor.

Simmons continues:

You don’t have to tell a personal story. There are lots of...historical stories, stories re-told from a friend, current event stories, etc. Any of these can become a “Who Am I” story if you tell it in a way that genuinely reveals a part of who you are on a personal level.... Psychologists call this self-disclosure. One

theory about why this works is that if I trust you enough to show you my flaws and foibles, you will trust me enough to open up to me. This experience of vulnerability-without-exploitation helps us conclude that we can trust each other in other ways as well.

One of the most powerful examples I have seen of this vulnerability/trust experience was in some team development work we did with a client in Argentina. Following the Lencioni model, participants met for dinner and wine (Argentines love their national wines!) the night before the program, and we engaged in some groupwork. The exercise was to share with the group some difficult experience they had had as children. One of the participants said, no, he hadn't had any difficult experiences at all. But another, from Uruguay, talked about his father, who had ended up on the wrong side of a government coup, and had remained a political prisoner for a number of years as a result. This participant recounted how that had been difficult for him and his siblings, for his identity with his school peers, and the pride and shame he felt for his father's situation. As he told his story, his peers listened with rapt attention, and I could feel the trust and respect they had for him grow tremendously. At the other extreme, the person who had refused to confess any vulnerability turned out to be someone who didn't much care for the group and proved to be a block for deeper team development.

But even if you break through with the Who Am I ? story, there still may be another issue:

2. The "Why Am I Here?" story

People won't cooperate with you if they smell a rat somewhere around your person. We are suspicious, and we sniff out rats, if we suspect that others have hidden agendas. We frequently hear of the WIIFM (What's In It For Me). But before you tell someone what's in it for them in accepting your message, or buying your product, or contributing money to their cause, they want to know the WIIFY, what's in it for *you*. Unless you're clear in your story about what you have to gain, you can come across as hiding selfish goals.

Suppose a CEO who makes 100 times the salary of his workers tries to start a company meeting on a proposed venture with a speech about "We're doing this for you...." Or suppose she's a team manager who wants to have her team excel so that she get the credit....

I heard this kind of statement work very well, on the other hand, in a U.S. subsidiary of a company in Mexico, where we had worked at all levels, from the CEO to the office supervisors. The HR manager was a genius at organizational development, and he asked us what we could also design for his line workers. We had never worked with that level before, so we had a meeting with the labor leaders and asked them what they thought their people would like. They ultimately helped us design a 1-day program with lots of examples of communication problems that we worked through and role-played among the line employees. There were a total of 5 groups of about 30 each of these folks, and they all came to the hotel site dressed up and pleased as punch to be experiencing what their bosses had also done. At the beginning of each seminar, one of the HR managers said: " This program is for you, your work has provided the funds and the time for you to be here. So have a good time, learn what you can to be better mothers, fathers, and employees, and enjoy what the company, through you, has been able to do." Wow! It worked, they did have fun, and months

later, when we went back to the plant, they were still talking about what they had learned and how it had helped them....

But the point is that the story we tell has to be genuine, "authentic" as many writers are saying now, and we have to be out front with it. People want to know what motivates us, or they may assume the worst.

3. The "Vision Thing"

OK so now you have convinced your audience that you are credible and trustworthy. But why would they follow you or join your company, and "tie their vision into yours"?

I remember a few years back when I was working for Colgate-Palmolive Latin America, and the regional goal was to "grow income 2x in the next 5 years" (Or was it 3x, I don't remember...) I asked them, why? Why do you want to have twice or three, or even 4 times more income? That seemed a strange question to some of my C-P executives, but to me it made perfect sense. That goal may make sense to a few top execs, but what does it mean to the folks in the front lines? What's the vision for them to buy into?

The poet-turned-consultant David Whyte (whom I have quoted in the Coaching section of our TEAM International website papers) writes the following in his *The Heart Aroused*:

If we are going to leash ourselves to others' dreams, we had better make sure they are congruent or compatible with our own. If they are not, then we may be simply enrolling ourselves in a system bent to the desires of others....

What is the vision we have bought for ourselves, and why should it matter to others? Unless we can answer that question, and then be able to translate it into a story our followers can believe in, then we haven't come to grips with this part of the story line.

Perhaps the most famous story ever told in the U.S. is Martin Luther King's portrait of his vision/dream of U.S. society in the future. Of course, we believed in MLK, and we knew his selfless WIIFM, which played out in his untimely death. But Dr. King told us a story about what we could be as an integrated nation, much as Abraham Lincoln had inspired us a century earlier with his story about being a united nation. JFK told us a story about a vision/dream of having a man on the moon in that decade. We bought into it (and we did it!).

You all have probably heard the famous story of the bricklayer who is just "laying bricks", and the second who is "building a wall", and the third who knows he's "constructing a cathedral". But how about the fourth, not spoken of, who by laying his bricks is – "saving souls". It's powerful when your audience, and your followers can tie their vision to your own, if you present them with a powerful enough one -- for them!

4. The "Doing Thing" --Teaching Stories for implementation

So now you have gone all this way, and though your folks truly believe in you and "get it" about the Vision, how do you ensure, or at least put the odds behind the implementation of the Vision, i.e. help people understand how to "just do it". Another kind of story, a Teaching Story may help.

Suppose you have a group of workers that are responsible for receiving complaints from clients, resolving them, and converting the complainers into returning customers. Here's a story you could tell:

"Let me tell you about 'Henry', who took care of me at the car rental counter last weekend in New Orleans, which is my old home-town. I usually rent at Hertz, and I'm a frequent preferred customer, which means I go directly to the car lot, there's an electronic board with my name and my space number, and I go to the car and out the exit. So this time there were *** next to my name, which meant, according to the van driver, that I had to go to the office in order to get my car. Well, not a big problem, just that my credit card on file had expired and I had to show them the new card. So then I go to the car assigned me, turn on the engine, and the air conditioner pumped out the foulest cigarette odor I had smelled since years ago checking into a smoking room in a cheap hotel in Las Vegas. So I went back to the office, and the by-then-irritated clerk gave me another car, not particularly clean, but clean smelling at least. OK, fine – till the next day when the rear window rolled down, but not up, exposing me to New Orleans heat and the lack of security downtown in a city still reeling from job loss and crime.

"So back to the airport again, and I'm steaming, and the hot, noisy breeze is blowing in from the back of the car, and I go to the office area again and am directed to park in the front of the rental building. I go in, and Henry greets me with his great New Orleans accent, and says, 'I'm sorry, suh; I'll get you a new car, and give you an upgrade.' Just then, one of the attendants from outside bursts into the room and begins to rant vociferously at me for parking in the rear of the building, in the bus lane. So I yell back at him, and swing the car around to the front, which looks just like the rear to me. I go back to Henry's counter and he says, 'Well, Mistah Ozbonne, here's your car...'; but I interrupt him, complaining about the attendants who, in my view, directed me to the wrong side of the building, then yelled at me, their customer. And this is the 3rd car I'm getting! Henry listens calmly and shakes his head in understanding; and then I calm down and apologize to him for yelling at him, and he says this, bless his heart: 'YEAH, WE ALL NEED TO VENT ONCE IN AWHILE...' I'm disarmed, I get in my new upgraded car, and I'm still a Hertz customer. NOW THERE'S WHAT CUSTOMER COMPLAINT SERVICE LOOKS LIKE. You maintain your calm, you listen to your customer, you sympathize with his problem, you resolve it, you throw in a little extra. (We call that *lagniappe* in New Orleans.) And you send him on his way feeling good about the company. Remember Henry, and do the Big Easy with your customer."

There's the story; I bet they would "get it", don't you? And they would think about Henry when getting tangled up with an irate customer. What would Henry do? And you would remind them to think about the story....and to do what they think Henry would do.

5. and 6. Other useful stories

So now you're fully in the implementation stage, but maybe there are a couple more kinds of stories you can use: one of these is the "values in action" story, where we're supporting a value we want to hold by telling a story around it. Here's mine, about the value of caring for each other on a team:

"I was on active duty in the U.S. Navy for about 3 ½ years, as a cruiser/destroyer weapons officer. My last Commanding Officer on a destroyer was Cmdr. Robert Scott,

under whose command we took our ship to the Tonkin Gulf and to the coastal waters off Vietnam. Bob Scott was a wonderful captain who cared for his wardroom of officers and whom we esteemed greatly. There were many times in dangerous waters when I was glad that Cap'n Scott was my CO, but two times in particular stand out. While we were in "Yankee Station" in the Gulf, the Navy bureau of personnel put out a request for officers to volunteer for command on the new Swift Boats being built. These later became famous through the exploits of one Lieut. John Kerry, but the casualty rate for assignment on these vessels was predictably very high. I was a young adventurer, so I volunteered. The request went up to Cap'n Bob for approval and forwarding -- and he turned me down! We talked about in the wardroom, and I remember almost exactly his words: 'Noel, you're a good officer, and I think too much of you to let you go and do this to yourself.' Given what we later found out about Agent Orange and other hazards on the Vietnamese river patrols, I know that Bob Scott almost certainly saved my life. A few weeks later, I was transferred off the destroyer and sent to cruiser duty back in the Atlantic. When I left, it was on a helicopter that came over from the carrier Enterprise to pick me up. As I waited on the helo deck, Cap'n Scott came astern to shake my hand and wish me good-bye. I said to him, using his first name for the very first time, 'Thank you, Bob, for everything.' I had tears in my eyes when I climbed on the helo and waved good-bye to him and to a few of my sailors who had also come aft to give me a farewell salute. I will never forget Bob Scott, the way he looked, the way he talked, the way he cared...."

The last of the 6 story types is called by Simmons, the "I know what you're thinking" stories. When you tell a story that makes people wonder if you're reading their minds, they love it, according to the author. You get there by knowing your audience and identifying their potential objections to your message. This may save them having to bring up the objection themselves, so they're happy you brought it up and they didn't have to.

For example, people sometimes complain about how much time they have to be away from their real work to attend one of our training courses. The best story/answer I've ever heard to this concern was from David Campbell, one of my mentors at the Center for Creative Leadership. David was not in sales, at least directly, but he might say something like this to clients:

"Sometimes people are concerned about the amount of time the (Leadership Development) Program takes. This was the case of one of our most distinguished alumni, Brig.Gen. James Dozier, who came in with the same trepidation as did many of the new US Army generals who took our program -- they jokingly referred to it as "charm school". But 3 months after he took the LDP, Dozier, stationed in Italy, was kidnapped by the Red Brigade. He was later freed by the Italian Secret Police, and soon after, he wrote me a letter that said that something he had learned in the LDP had 'stood him in good stead during the 6 weeks he had spent as an unwelcome guest of the Red Brigades'. I later saw him, and he told me that what he had learned, especially from the videotaped exercises, was that everything he did or said had an impact on others around him. So when he was a prisoner, Gen. Dozier remembered that experience and made every effort to calm his captors, and lower their tension when they were around him. When he was finally liberated, rather violently, his kidnapers were somewhat caught off-guard, and he was able to be rescued without harm. He was sure that if he had carried himself with his normal demeanor, he probably wouldn't have survived. At that point, he certainly didn't believe his time investment in this program had been a waste!"

So these have been a succession of stories that have worked for me and others I've observed. However, it has to be your story, and one that comes out of your experience. This implies that you have to be alert to your own experiences, and what they teach you. There's no substitute, I believe, for a "lifelong learner" approach to storytelling, where every experience is an opportunity for learning, and helping others in your organization to learn as well, and to write their own stories.

Here's an example of a story that doesn't work for me: I had been referred by a colleague to read some of Lou Tice's work. Lou is the president of The Pacific Institute, which I had heard about a number of times. So I picked up his book, *Smart Talk for Achieving Your Potential*. Tice is a decent storyteller, although I got a bit weary of what I felt was his preaching at me about how to live my life, much of which I had read in one form or another somewhere else. But I soon began to notice in the book that many of Lou's stories were also an advertisement about his own wealth, or prominence, or importance. In the first sentence of his introduction, there's an account about his being flown to a training assignment by pilots in a Blackhawk helicopter. Then there are stories about his large ranch (with a 15,000 sq.ft. lodge), and his thoroughbred horses, and his conversation with a pilot of his aircraft – and hopping into his sports car. Pretty soon you wonder: Who is this guy, and Why is he trying to impress me? One of Lou's Three Basic Principles is to be Authentic, and Tice's definition of authenticity is to "...be who you are, win or lose". "I've just got to be who I am," he writes. For my money, Bill George has got a lot better idea of what it is to be "authentic" than does Tice. Bottom line, I was OK with his Who Am I story, but I definitely doubted his Why Am I Here (writing this book) – Lou flunks the sniff test for me on that matter. I thought it was less for my benefit than for his.

Sometimes a story is not really a full-blown narrative with a plot and protagonists and a build-up of characters. Martin Luther King's story about his dream was more like a poem, or a prayer than a real story. Lincoln's Gettysburg address was short, to the point and, apparently for his listeners, over before it got started. But as you read or especially, hear these stories told, they cover many of the attributes that Simmons talks about in her paper/book. Most of all, they are authentic, they inspire, and they call to action.

Here's one of my favorite of this breed of stories, pronounced by Robert F. Kennedy at the University of California in October, 1966:

"You are living in one of the rarest moments of history – a time when all around us the old order of things is crumbling, and a new world society is painfully struggling to take shape.

"If you shrink from this struggle and the many difficulties, you will betray the trust which your own position forces upon you. You live in the most privileged nation on earth. You are the most privileged citizens of that privileged nation; for you have been given the opportunity to lead.

"You can use your enormous influence and opportunity to seek purely private pleasure and gain. But history will judge you, and as the years pass, you will ultimately judge yourself, in the extent to which you have used your gifts and talents to lighten and enrich the lives of your fellow men.

"In your hands lies the future of your world and the fulfillment of the best qualities of your own spirit."

Now there's a story to live by! Watch and listen to a tape of Bobby Kennedy speaking to an audience sometime. He was a master storyteller!

¹ Annette Simmons, "The Six Stories You Need to Know How to Tell", International Storytelling Center, website
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