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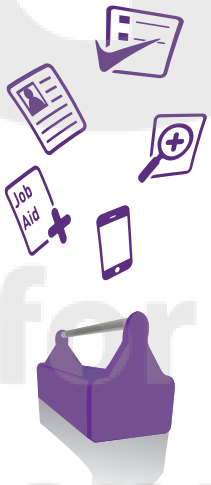
POWERFUL STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES

by David Lee



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LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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POWERFUL STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES

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Why would you tell stories in the business world? Storytelling is a powerful communication modality that allows you to:

Make your presentations more fascinating, compelling, and memorable. Stories grab your audience's attention, impact listeners at an emotional level, and make your presentation more entertaining. They also give your message staying power by making it live on in the listener's mind.

Challenge people without coming across as confrontational. Stories help you challenge people's limiting beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes without triggering defensiveness and resistance. Thus, storytelling is a powerful coaching and teaching tool.

Open people's minds to new possibilities in ways that direct approaches cannot. Stories that are well told act like virtual reality, providing people a nonthreatening environment to vicariously experience new ways of acting and responding. Rather than immediately dismissing a direct recommendation, listeners can absorb a new idea or suggested course of action without defending their perceived limitations. This receptive state of mind enables them to entertain new possibilities.

Make your ideas and recommendations more understandable, compelling, and memorable. This increases your ability to influence others. In *Made to Stick,* Chip and Dan Heath identify storytelling as one of the key components of messages that are "sticky" and leave a lasting impression.

Make new concepts and complex ideas understandable to the novice. Simple stories and analogies help you translate foreign concepts into ideas and experiences that are familiar to the learner. This translation of the foreign into the familiar dramatically accelerates understanding.

TYPES OF STORIES AND THEIR USES

Often when people talk about storytelling, they think of traditional folktales, fairytales, or fables. While those genres are excellent sources of transformative and entertaining stories, the types of stories we will draw upon are "everyday life stories." Stories from everyday life are better suited for business contexts, both because they feel more natural for a nonprofessional storyteller to relate, and they seem more applicable and relevant to the listener than fantastical tales.

In this *Infoline*, we will explore how to draw from your personal experience as well as experiences others have shared with you, and apply these stories to the work world. You will also learn about analogies and their use. Despite the fact that some analogies are not technically stories, they are used in the same way that stories are: They make complex ideas and abstract concepts more understandable, they make ideas come alive, and they make your important points more memorable. Because of their close relationship to stories, and because they provide a conceptual building block for translating stories from one context to another, discussion of them has been included in this issue.

You will also learn how to use storytelling in a wide range of business contexts where you want your message to be more inspiring, influential, and understandable. These include:

- formal training and presentations
- presentations at meetings and organizational events
- one-on-one "presentations" where you want to sell an idea
- new employee orientation
- coaching situations.

Before we dive into discussion, refer to the sidebar *How Might You Use This Story?* to get you thinking about how to adapt an "everyday life" story for teaching in the workplace.

HOW MIGHT YOU USE THIS STORY?

Here's a short version of a story I often tell in my resilience programs. After reading it, see if you can think of what messages it gets across to an audience.

"Back in the 90's I did a customer service seminar for a Fortune 500 company. When I arrived at my hotel I discovered, to my horror, that the garment bag I had packed did not contain the full suit ensemble I thought I had so carefully packed. Instead, it contained only my blue blazer. I had no suit and no tie.

This was back in the day when you would never do any kind of business consulting in business casual. I wasn't willing to buy a whole new suit, but I knew I couldn't get away without having a tie, so I begrudgingly trudged out to my rental car and headed off to the closest mall. It was near closing time. I was tired. I just wanted to hunker down in the hotel room for the rest of the evening, and I was feeling sorry for myself and more than a little grumpy.

I found the mall, went to the first department store, looked in the men's section, and couldn't find any tie I would wear. It was a very small mall, so there was only one other alternative, which I headed for. At this point, there was only about 20-30 minutes left before closing time. I looked at the ties and found one that I could stomach. But there was one small problem. It was behind glass and no clerks were to be found.

'Isn't this great,' I grumbled to myself. 'Where the heck is the clerk? Goofing off or something?'

Out from the back emerged a kindly-looking middle-aged woman who, with a big smile, asked me if she could help me. Trying to maintain a pleasant tone of voice despite my mood, I replied 'Yes, I'd like that tie there.'

'Oh,' she replied. 'You can just take it right off the shelf there. I know it looks like it's behind glass, but that's sort of an optical illusion.'

Sure enough, when I looked more closely I saw that the barrier between me and the tie was an illusion. I reached out and picked up the tie."

As you consider this experience, ask yourself, "How could this be used as a teaching story?"

Hints:

1. Notice what I was doing, and not doing.
2. How did my attitude affect the outcome I wanted to achieve?
3. What was I waiting for?
4. What did I discover?
5. What psychological principles or phenomena does this little drama illustrate?
6. What experiences or encounters in the workplace are similar to this experience?

ILLUSTRATION, EXPLANATION, AND IMPACT STORIES AND ANALOGIES

These are used to make your ideas and your overall presentation more understandable, impactful, and memorable. Use illustration, explanation, and impact stories and analogies to:

- grab your audience's attention and interest from the outset and help them bond with you
- explain and illustrate major points
- help your point hit home at a more visceral level
- explain a concept or experience from a field or realm of experience that is foreign to an audience
- end your presentation on a strong note.

Types of Illustration, Explanation, and Impact Stories and Analogies

The presentation opening story. When you begin a presentation, you want to immediately grab your audience's attention and communicate that your presentation won't be like the many boring, pedantic talks they've endured. Using a compelling story to begin a presentation is an example of an "impact story" because you tell the story in the beginning to make an impact, to make a strong first impression. When considering what story to use to open your presentation, think of stories that communicate these important messages:

"I understand your pain." These stories communicate that you understand the challenges your audience faces. They help you establish rapport with the audience and tap into their pain.

"I'm like you. I'm just a regular person." These stories also illustrate that you can personally relate to the challenges the audience faces. Stories that involve self-deprecating humor help the audience bond with you. If you use this type of story, you want to include components of the next story theme, so you blend both vulnerability and credibility.

"I know what I'm talking about." While it's important to establish your credibility, you don't want to come across as boastful. You can demonstrate credibility by telling a story that illustrates the difference the material you're sharing has made in your life.

"This information can make a huge difference in your life." The more (and more quickly) your audience understands this, the more they will pay attention to, and take seriously, what you have to say. You can do this by sharing stories about how your information and methods have helped others facing similar challenges as the audience.

Explanation stories or analogies. Stories meant to explain key points are similar to illustrative stories, but serve a slightly different purpose. Whereas illustrative stories add more depth and aliveness to a point you want to make, explanatory stories do that and more. They are used to make a concept—which by nature is abstract—more understandable by giving a concrete example.

So for example, to make the point that employers pay a steep price for not listening to employee feedback, you could use an illustrative story to make that point come alive. Then let's say later in the presentation you presented the idea of "emotional safety," and its role in whether employees are willing to speak up. Chances are good that some of your listeners wouldn't know what emotional safety means. You would want to use a story that illustrates what emotional safety looks and sounds like in the real world, and through that example, provides an explanation of this concept.

Explanation stories are also very helpful when faced with one of the biggest challenges in teaching: trying to explain a concept that is far outside a person's experience or knowledge base. Because the person doesn't have a frame of reference to draw from in this new domain, you need to borrow from the frame of reference they already have. You can do this by translating the foreign concept into analogous situations from their own experience.

Impact stories and analogies. These stories make your points hit home at a visceral level. Impact stories are illustrative and explanatory stories that don't just create deeper understanding; they also evoke an emotional response and add drama to your presentations. Here's an example of an analogy I use that is designed to provide an explanation and add impact. When I talk about the effect a management team's interpersonal skills have on its ability to access the potential of its workforce, I want participants to understand that there's nothing "soft" about "soft skills." I know that many managers in the room have long considered interpersonal skills as "touchy feely" and don't really see how critical they are. So I use a computer analogy that hopefully makes the importance of so-called "soft skills" undeniable:

> *"The machinery, the processes, and the talent of your organization are like computer hardware, and your management team's people skills and understanding of human nature are like the software. You can have the best, most powerful hardware, but if you have outdated software, you will never get close to the true output of which your computer is capable.*
>
> *It's the same way with interpersonal skills and management skills. Not investing in updated software—management skills and knowledge of what brings out the best in people—is like buying new PCs for everybody in your organization, but trying to run them on Windows 3.0. If you're trying to get the most out of today's employees in today's complex world, you're basically trying to run a state-of-the-art computer on Windows 3.0."*

Notice how the analogy both explains and provides impact. It makes the message that soft skills are critical for managers more understandable and the argument about why it's important to invest in people more compelling. See the sidebar *Strengthening Your Analogy-Building Muscles* for a strategy you can use to come up with effective analogies.

STRENGTHENING YOUR ANALOGY-BUILDING MUSCLES 

Analogies are the building blocks of effective storytelling. As you develop your skills in recognizing and creating analogies, you grow your ability to identify stories that make your ideas "sticky." Being able to think in analogies is especially important in finding and creating stories that make an impact. Here are some pointers for developing effective analogies:

When you identify an abstract concept and you want to make it more concrete and understandable, ask "What is this like?" To answer this question, draw from common everyday objects, activities, or experiences to which most people can relate. For example, when I first started developing my program on resilience, I wanted to come up with an analogy that explained both what resilience was and how you develop it. Because resilience in many ways is similar to the concepts of "mental toughness" and "emotional strength," I found myself thinking how resilience is like physical fitness. So here are some of the ways I explain resilience:

"Developing greater resilience is like becoming physically fit. You need to engage in practices that develop strength, endurance, and flexibility. In resilience, 'strength' is our ability to handle challenging situations and be at our best in difficult circumstances, 'endurance' is our ability to handle the stressors and pressures of day-to-day life without burning out. The 'flexibility' component of resilience refers to our ability to adapt to changing circumstances and feel comfortable during times of change. Developing resilience is also like becoming physically fit because recovery time plays an important role in cultivating both.

Also, just as in becoming physically stronger, we become mentally and emotionally stronger—or more resilient—by challenging ourselves. Instead of 'pumping iron' to build physical muscle, we 'pump anxiety and fear' by stepping outside our comfort zone to build our 'resilience muscles.' Finally, resilience is like physical fitness in that you need to continually 'work out' if you're going to 'stay in shape.' In the case of resilience, this means not only engaging in the practices that build resilience, but also continually learning how to recognize and challenge stress-producing self-talk."

When you experience something interesting in your life, something that evokes strong emotions, surprise, a new perspective, or is amusing in an ironic way, ask "What is this like?" What could that experience be an analogy for? How might you use it as a metaphor for some concept or teaching point? For example, years ago when broadband Internet service was quite new and expensive, I went through a long process of debating whether it was an extravagance or a justifiable expense. Then I estimated how much time I spent each day waiting for my modem to connect and for email and files to download and upload. When I multiplied this by the hourly rate, I realized it was costing me hundreds of dollars per month of time wasted by waiting. By not investing in technology that allowed me to be more efficient, I was being "penny wise and dollar foolish." Once I got broadband and experienced the increase in productivity, I realized how foolish I had been all that time I thought it was "too expensive."

Later I asked myself, "What is this like?" "How can I use this simple experience as a teaching story?" The analogy I developed from this experience was that my decision to stick with dial-up for so long because I thought broadband was too expensive is like organizations not investing in management development because they believe it is "too expensive." They are trying to use management practices that worked (somewhat) in the Industrial Age in the far more complex, sophisticated, and demanding world of the Information Age. In essence, they are using dial-up management practices in a broadband world. Because of that, they are only getting a fraction of the true productive potential of their employees. Just like I was, they are being penny wise and dollar foolish.

Tips on Using Illustration, Explanation, and Impact Stories and Analogies

- As you prepare your presentation, for each major point or concept, come up with a story or analogy that illustrates or explains it.
- For those points that you especially want to have a visceral impact, reflect on the stories you are considering and pick one that is the most dramatic and hard-hitting.
- Whether you are giving a formal presentation, coaching, or informally teaching, practice following up important terms and concepts with statements such as, "What I mean by that is _____" or "For instance_____" followed by an explanation or illustration story.

"THIS IS WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE'RE PROUD OF" STORIES

These stories capture the essence of who you are as an organization, your cultural values and norms in action, and the good you do in the world. "This is who we are and what we're proud of" stories often come from customers, clients, or patients, and tell how your organization made a difference in their lives or went above and beyond their expectations. They can also come from both leaders or individual contributors who want to communicate what your culture is like and what makes it a great place to work. These stories not only teach your organization's core values and desired behaviors in a compelling way; they make employee communications and events far more interesting and inspiring. You might tell these stories during:

- new employee orientation
- organization-wide meetings
- employee recognition events
- organization newsletters and other communication vehicles
- recruiting materials and events
- employer branding materials.

Types of "This is who we are and what we're proud of..." Stories

Stories that illustrate your cultural values in action. For example, one of Ritz Carlton's core values that sets them apart is anticipating unexpressed needs. Here's a story they use to illustrate this value in action: While making a telephone registration, a guest mentioned that he was looking forward to "holing up for the weekend" in his hotel room and watching football. When he arrived, waiting for him in his room were several football magazines and a guide to all the televised games that weekend.

Stories about the great things your organization does. These include stories that communicate the difference your organization makes in the lives or businesses of your customers, about the good work you do in your community, and the positive impact you have in the world—both through your philanthropic work and directly from your goods or services.

Stories about employees going the extra mile or doing great things. These stories inspire pride and communicate a compelling vision of greatness for others to aspire to and emulate. They draw on what Chip and Dan Heath describe as storytelling's strong suit, its ability to provide "inspiration and simulation." Companies known for great customer service—like Ritz Carlton, Southwest Airlines, Zappos, and Nordstrom—continually use these stories as part of their Employer Branding, in their orientation programs, and to inspire their people.

Tips on Using "This is who we are and what we're proud of..." Stories

- Whether you are eliciting a story from an end user of your product or service—a customer, client, or patient—or an employee, ask them follow-up questions about the impact the experience had on them. Capturing and relating the personal impact of your organization on a customer or employee allows you to make your story much more powerful. The more employees understand the impact that the situation had on the person telling the story, the more they appreciate the importance of the story's message. Useful follow-up questions include:
  - "How did you feel when _____?"
  - "How did your experience affect the way you think about the organization?"
  - "What did this experience mean to you?"
- To gather stories that capture your organization's values in action, make a list of those values and then ask employees when they either experienced or demonstrated one of your values in action. Create a database of these teaching stories.
- Post these stories on your recruiting site. Remove generic-sounding testimonials, such as, "This is a great place to work. They have lots of career opportunities here," and replace them with personalized stories that capture why employees love working in your organization.

PERSPECTIVE CHANGE STORIES

These stories help the listener to see a situation from a new perspective. They are especially useful for persuading against strongly held positions or limiting beliefs, without directly appearing to do so. When people hold tightly to their position or belief, direct attempts at challenging them typically result in defensiveness and resistance. Perspective change stories can bypass these responses because audiences tend to be disarmed by fictionalized stories. Use perspective change stories:

- when coaching someone who has an entrenched view of another person and you want him or her to consider an alternative view
- when coaching someone who has an entrenched perspective about an issue or problem she is facing and can't see any alternative perspectives
- when teaching a group in which a number of participants hold a limiting perspective about an issue and you want them to consider alternate views
- in any situation where you believe a direct approach to offering a different perspective would be met with resistance or defensiveness.

Types of Perspective Change Stories

New perspective stories. In this type of perspective change story, you share how you or another person had a particular perspective on something and then something happened to change it.

"Opening a closed mind" stories: moving from certainty to uncertainty. While new perspective stories are designed to stimulate the listener to consider the new perspective described in the story, "opening a closed mind" stories are designed simply to stimulate the listener to take the first step in considering a new perspective: being willing to consider there might be an alternative perspective.

If someone adamantly states their position is right and even self-evident, they are fairly impervious to feedback and alternative perspectives. The first step toward being open to feedback or entertaining a different perspective is going from certainty—"Of course I'm right," to uncertainty—"I wonder if I could be wrong about this." When uncertain or confused, we are far more open to feedback and input. That's the rationale behind telling a story about how someone discovered that an idea or perspective they thought was self-evident was actually incorrect. Such stories can help the listener shift from certainty to uncertainty, which opens the door to their considering alternative perspectives.

For a well-known example of a perspective change story, do an Internet search for Valerie Cox's "The Cookie Thief." That short story in poem format does a great job of dramatizing a self-righteous perspective and by doing so, connecting the reader with their own version of such a judgment. Then, in a surprise ending, the story presents a totally different perspective on the person the protagonist was judging.

The following themes have great potential for shifting people from certainty to uncertainty:

- stories in which you "knew" you were right about something, and then you discovered you were wrong
- stories in which you assumed you knew another person's intention, only to discover you were wrong
- stories in which you firmly believed a problem was all someone else's fault, and then discovered later you had a significant role in causing it.

Tips on Telling Perspective Change Stories Effectively

When you describe the perspective that you had in the beginning of the story, you want to describe it in such a way that resonates with the "of course this is the way it is" perspective you are trying to challenge.

When you are telling a story about how someone's original viewpoint or conviction turned out to be mistaken, make sure you do not telegraph through word choice or tone that the protagonist's initial perspective is going to turn out incorrect. You want the audience to be surprised when it hears how the story ends.

"I DIDN'T THINK I COULD DO IT...BUT I DID!" STORIES

These stories are designed to help shift listeners from the emotional and mental state of "I can't do this," or "I don't know how I'm going to handle this," into the emotional and mental state of "I can do this!" Use these stories

- when you are coaching an individual who feels overwhelmed, beleaguered, or simply incapable of handling a challenging situation
- when you are speaking to a group—such as at an organization-wide meeting—and people are feeling overwhelmed by a major change, or daunted by the challenges ahead.

Types of "I didn't think I could do it...but I did!" Stories

Overcoming doubt about skills. Stories about situations where you were certain you didn't have the skills to solve the problems, but to your surprise, you did. In these stories, you detail your struggles and what you went through to achieve your victory.

Overcoming doubt about ability to handle situations. Stories about situations where you had previously believed you were not capable of handling, but to your surprise, it was quite easy. Now, you have a very different understanding of yourself and your capabilities.

Tips on Using "I didn't think I could do it...but I did!" Stories

Just as with other types of perspective shift stories, make sure you don't telegraph the ending by indicating with your tone or word choice that you were in for a surprise. Play up the difficulty or inevitability of your not being able to handle the situation, so the eventual surprise—"I could do it!"—has maximum impact.

The key to understanding both how and why to use "I didn't think I could do it…but I did!" stories is to recognize that when people are feeling disempowered, they cannot solve problems effectively. Their emotions directly affect their cognitive abilities. Your goal in relating these stories is to shift listeners into an empowered, "possibilities abound" mental state, which will enable them to generate solutions. When you share an "I didn't think I could do it…but I did!" story, you help the listener shift into a resourceful emotional state and a "can do" mental state. After sharing one or more "I didn't think I could do it…but I did!" stories, you can then ask them questions such as, "So…let's say you really *do* have the ability to deal with this situation…just like I discovered with mine…what might be your first steps?" or "So let's say there really is a different way of looking at this situation, just like I discovered in my situation. What might that be?"

After your story, you may ask audience members to think of similar experiences they have had and share them with you. Recalling how they overcame mental and emotional defeat in the past will shift their emotional state. Once in that resourceful "can do" state, they become open to new possibilities and plans for action. Having them come up with their own experience is actually more powerful than immediately shifting into coaching mode, because it provides undeniable proof that they can "know" something is impossible and then discover it isn't.

To use this type of story in group settings, such as a problem-solving meeting where you can see people are stuck in a "there's nothing we can do" mindset, you can use either of the above methods. You can share your example, and notice if they seem to have shifted to a more empowered, "can do" attitude. If not, share another story or ask for their reactions, and then work with that.

Once they seem to have shifted into a more empowered state, you can then ask them to play with the "we really do have the ability to come up with an excellent response to this situation…" perspective, and then work from there. Even better, to make things more interactive and to increase the odds that your group will shift to an empowered state, you can have them break up into pairs or triads and share their own examples of "I didn't think I could…but I did!" stories. When this is over, you can have people briefly share what they discovered with the larger group, and then shift into problem-solving mode.

"SO I SAID TO HIM '_____'" STORIES

You may find yourself in a coaching situation in which the person you are coaching needs to hear constructive criticism. There are certain story telling techniques that will help you couch a potentially confrontational message in a story, so that the listener can absorb the message without defending against it. There's nothing to resist, be offended by, or get defensive about, because the message was just something that was said to someone else in your story. Use "So I said to him '_____'" stories:

- when you are coaching someone and you want her to consider an idea or a new point of view, but believe she will dismiss it or respond defensively if you bring it up directly
- when you are coaching someone and want her to examine a point of view she has or some behavior she is engaging in
- when you are teaching a group and want to challenge people, but again, believe it will only trigger defensiveness and resistance.

Types of "So I said to him '_____'" Stories

Stories in which you actually said the message to another person. Let's say you are coaching an employee who tends to be a "know-it-all." Rather than confront him directly about this, you could tell him a story about another employee who was overly confident of her opinions. Try to recreate the conversation you had with this other employee as much as possible. You could say "So I said to her 'I know you're really bright and you have good reason to be confident in your opinions. You might want to loosen up a bit on the certainty factor though, because if you think about it, if we're certain we're right all the time, we're going to be left in the dust by those people who are opened-minded enough to look at new ideas and new perspectives."

Stories in which you said the message to yourself. For example, here's a story I often tell about not letting fear and procrastination stop you from moving ahead in life:

> *Awhile back I was listening to a speaker at a conference tell how he finally got tired of letting fear and procrastination hold him back. He shared how he looked at other entrepreneurs he knew and said to himself, "They're no smarter than me; why aren't I doing as well as they are?" He realized that the difference was that he was letting fear stop him from doing the things he needed to do. So he finally got fed up with himself and said: "Stop being a big wimp, and get your butt in gear."*
>
> *After telling the group this story, I then share how I found myself thinking about where I wanted to be in life and times when I had let fear hold me back. I conclude by borrowing his line and using it on myself: "Yeah, stop being a wimp and get your butt in gear."*

Notice how in this story, listeners hear this message twice—once from the speaker sharing with the audience and once from me, telling that to myself. If I had said it to my listeners directly, it would have been received as overly harsh and rude.

Stories in which someone else said something important, yet confrontational. Let's say you are coaching someone who knows he needs to have a difficult conversation but continues to make excuses about why he can't because he's afraid. And let's say you notice that he gets very defensive and shuts down whenever you try to confront him directly about his limiting beliefs and excuses. Taking an indirect approach to delivering your message can actually help it to better penetrate your listener's consciousness. Here is another example of a story in which you were the recipient of a confrontational message.

> *"....I was feeling really frustrated because while intellectually I knew I needed to leave the place I was working, emotionally I didn't feel ready. So, I kept coming up with reasons why I couldn't leave. I lied to myself so much about my situation that I believed my own lies. One day I was discussing my problems with my best friend. He was the rare kind of friend who will tell you what you need to hear, even if it makes you mad, because he cares that much.*
>
> *After I whined for about 10 minutes, he looked at me with real concern in his eyes and said: 'You know you're kidding yourself, don't you? You know you need to do something about this, but because you're afraid it won't work out, you spend your time convincing yourself you can't... and being miserable. How about if you say instead 'I'm going to get some advice about what I need to do so it can work out' and then get your butt in gear and learn what it is you need to learn, so you can take care of this and move on?'*
>
> *At first I was a little annoyed by his bluntness, but I knew he cared and I knew he was right. So I did get career advice and job-hunting advice, and I did end up leaving that job and finding a better one. I just wished I had done it a lot earlier, rather than convincing myself I couldn't do anything about it, and making myself miserable for so long."*

Stories in which you share what you *felt* like saying, but didn't. So for instance, you might say "As she's talking in such a disrespectful way to me and the rest of the team, I felt like saying, 'Do you realize the price you're paying for treating us this way? Just because we're not speaking up doesn't mean we're not really angry and that we won't find ways of paying you back!'"

Stories in which you share your inner thoughts about another person's behavior. In this version, you share your perceptions and even judgments of another person whose behavior is similar to the listener's. Even though you're not telling a story about what you said or wanted to say, you're still delivering a strong message that would most likely be met with resistance if given directly.

So for instance, in my management seminars, I will sometimes have "old school" managers who don't think that learning interpersonal skills is worth the time or effort. One of my goals is to help them see how it's in their best interest to learn what I will be sharing.

So, I often share a story about a vice president I worked with years ago who was frustrated that the management team he inherited wasn't making the efficiency improvements he was hired to achieve. He saw his managers as the problem.

When I interviewed his managers, it was clear what the problem was. They despised this VP because he was arrogant, disrespectful, and just plain rude. When he and I met to discuss my findings, his voice rose with frustration as he said, "I don't see one thing in your report about how we can improve efficiencies. Not one person offered a single idea about improving efficiencies. They don't even care!"

When I get to this part in telling the story to a group, I then say, "I'm thinking 'Dude…they don't care about improving efficiencies because they don't like you. That's why they're not talking about how to improve efficiencies.'"

After this short vignette, I then talk about the natural human response of pointing fingers at others when they're not performing the way *we* want them to, but how often we are the primary source of the problem. The hardcore managers in the seminar who would get defensive if I challenged them directly with this message don't have to defend anything because my thoughts aren't directed at them. But still, the message registers.

Tips on Using "So I said to him '_____'" Stories Effectively

If you use this type of story in a one-on-one conversation, choose a person and situation that doesn't too closely match the situation of the person to whom you are talking. If the connection between them and your story is too obvious, your story will trigger defensiveness, defeating the whole purpose of using a story. So for instance, if you want to help an over-controlling manager realize how counterproductive her behavior is, you might tell a story about what the child of an over-controlling parent said to the parent about the effects of their behavior.

If you tell this type of story in a group, the person's behavior in the story can closely match the undesired behavior exhibited by some of the group members you want to address, because it's not so obvious that you are directly addressing any one person.

"FLIGHT SIMULATOR" STORIES

Just as a flight simulator provides a safe, virtual experience for pilots to develop new skills and responses, flight simulator stories are meant to provide a safe, virtual experience for the listener to develop their skills and responses. These stories describe how a person responded to a challenging situation or demonstrated a certain attitude or particular set of skills. Flight simulator stories are excellent examples of how stories provide both "inspiration and simulation," as described by Chip and Dan Heath, authors of *Made to Stick*. They provide inspiration in part because they expand the listener's views of what is possible. They also provide inspiration because they give the person proof that the situation he or she has found too difficult has already been handled successfully by other people.

Flight simulator stories also give listeners a chance to vicariously experience a problem-solving scenario. When a person hears a story about someone exhibiting a productive attitude or demonstrating a resourceful behavior, it adds to their cognitive map of what is possible and how he or she might act in similar circumstances. Flight simulator stories make use of the power of vicarious learning—learning that takes place by observing others. As they listen to the story, they are vicariously experiencing the thought processes, emotions, and skills demonstrated by your protagonist. You can use flight simulator stories in the following scenarios:

- teaching people a new skill
- teaching people new responses to situations they have previously been ineffective in, or triggered by
- helping people gain insight into their own feelings, attitudes, issues, and motivations.

Types of Flight Simulator Stories

New behavior stories. When people don't know how to deal with a situation, they literally cannot see in their mind's eye how one might act in that context to get the results they want. New behavior stories provide a virtual training video that plays in the mind's eye. In your story you are describing someone acting effectively in the situation your listener finds challenging or simply does not know how to handle.

Teaching others how to approach a difficult conversation. These stories detail a difficult conversation and what was said to make it go well. Flight simulator stories are especially useful in these scenarios because when people don't know how to approach a difficult discussion, they don't just want strategic advice—such as "don't use language that could trigger defensiveness"—they want specific suggestions regarding word choices and phraseology. A story that reenacts a difficult conversation provides this in an engaging format for the listener.

Self-awareness stories. This type of flight simulator story is designed not to teach new skills and behaviors, but to create a situation that stimulates the listener to develop self-awareness. These stories help people gain insight into their own actions, feelings, attitudes, and motivations. For example, in management development seminars, I often share stories about managerial moments of truth where managers did something inadvertently that damaged an employee's commitment and engagement. The purpose of telling managers these stories is to make them more mindful in their interactions with their own employees.

In these stories, I share both the moment of truth and what the employees told me about how it affected them. The purpose of telling managers these stories is to trigger participants to think about their own version of this moment of truth gone bad. I want them to think of times they were the employee on the receiving end of a disrespectful or counterproductive behavior from a manager. I want them to think about how it affected them and how their managers probably never knew the

consequence of that behavior in terms of diminished respect or engagement. Doing this increases managers' recognition that it's important to get this moment of truth right, thereby increasing the willingness to examine whether they make the same mistake themselves. It also, hopefully, stimulates greater mindfulness in participants, because the stories help them see the long-term effect of mindless, inconsiderate interactions and misuses of power.

In seminars on how to give constructive feedback, I share an experience of mine where I felt my boss didn't do his due diligence in coming up with a rationale for "constructive" feedback. I share the illogical and sloppy homework done by my manager and its effect on how seriously I took his feedback after that. As in the example above, my goal in telling that story is to create an experience they can relate to, so that both the reaction it triggers in the moment, and the reactions it reminds them from their own experience, will provide them with useful insights.

In this case, as in the previous example, my goal is to first get participants to appreciate the importance of "doing your homework" and ensuring that one's rationale makes sense before giving feedback. By getting participants to feel the emotional reaction they had, my goal is for them to know experientially how important it is to not create this reaction in others. With this heightened sense of importance, they are more likely to take learning how to give effective feedback seriously.

Tips on Using Flight Simulator Stories

Because these stories are in essence virtual training videos, you want to use plenty of detail so the listener can easily picture in their mind what the protagonist and other characters are doing throughout the story. One way to help get into that mindset is to picture the story in your own mind's eye and act like a radio sports announcer who has to paint a picture in the listeners' minds about what is happening.

Increase the impact of your flight simulator stories, make them more entertaining, and minimize the chance that they will come across as confrontational by using self-deprecating humor. When you share a story in which you ruefully discover that you had been mindlessly doing something counterproductive, you make it more comfortable for the listener to take in your message of being willing to scrutinize oneself (this tactic is also useful in coaching stories). Because you are sharing your own fallibility, it puts you on even ground with the listener, rather than in a "one-up" position, thus making it easier for them to feel safe critically assessing themselves.

COOL SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH STORIES

Scientific research offers you a goldmine of material for making your presentations more intriguing, credible, and memorable. Sometimes, simply relating the results of a research study will make an idea stick with your audience. However, sharing research findings as a story—rather than just as a take-away message—will illustrate the conclusions for the audience in a way that resonates with them. As the authors of *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything* note, simply giving the "Take-Away Message" of an experience often leaves people unmoved, while telling the full story changes hearts and minds. Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink* is a great example of how drawing from scientific research and telling a story about the research can make one's ideas more convincing, entertaining, and memorable. Other books that offer a great model for sharing scientific research in a fascinating way are *Predictably Irrational* by Daniel Ariely, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)* by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, and *On Being Certain* by Robert Burton. Enrich the research that backs your story with details that will

- grab the audience's attention and communicate credibility
- make a point more fascinating and memorable
- add credibility to an idea or point, especially one that might seem too "soft" to your audience
- help audience members pass on your ideas to their peers or superiors.

Types of Cool Scientific Research Stories

Direct illustrations and examples of a point. For research that directly relates to your field and presentation, you can simply relate the findings in a straightforward way. So for instance, the research by Wendy Levinson and Nalini Ambady that Malcolm Gladwell refers to in *Blink,* about which physicians get sued and which ones don't, could be used as a direct example in a program for physicians about the importance of bedside manner.

The take-away message from the research was that patients sued doctors, not because of their technical mistakes, but because they treated the patient with disinterest and dominance. Read *Blink* if you want to learn the story behind the research. It is worth reading both for the content and because Malcom Gladwell demonstrates so well how to tell fascinating stories about scientific research. By the way, when you read the story, you will experience the difference in effect between hearing the take-away message of a research study—like the one I gave above—and actually hearing a well-told story about the research. So in this brief *Infoline*, I can only give you the take-away message, but when you read the story, it will be far more fascinating and "sticky."

If you used this story as part of the presentation on the importance of bedside manner, it would make your message more credible. However, the research has some very fascinating details that make it far more interesting and memorable when shared as a story. For instance, Dr. Ambady had the sound waves that transport words filtered out of the recordings that were made of the surgeons talking with their patients. This made it possible for her and her colleagues to only hear the tone of voice surgeons used. By listening to just their tones, she could predict who got sued and who didn't! Notice how that detail makes the story more intriguing.

Scientific research as analogy. You can also take research from one field and apply it to another as an analogy, to make your point hit home more powerfully and to make your presentation more entertaining. For example, I often use the research on medical malpractice cited in *Blink* in my "What Every Manager Should Know About Human Nature" programs and those related to employee morale. That research concluded that physicians who exhibited disinterested or rude behavior toward their patients are most often sued. My take-away message for these programs is "If you treat employees with indifference and dominance, or disrespect in other ways, they will take revenge." This message is easily absorbed by the listener at an intellectual level, with no visceral impact. "Yeah... that makes sense," would be an understandable response to that message. Telling the story of the malpractice research, combined with other research on the innate desire for justice and retribution, makes for a harder-hitting message that increases the odds of influencing the listener's future behavior.

In addition to that malpractice research story, I also tell stories from the field of neuroeconomics and anthropology. From neuroeconomics, I talk about research involving the *Ultimatum Game*, which shows how the brain responds to unfair treatment. From anthropology, I share the work of Donald E. Brown, author of *Human Universals*, which shows that every culture studied by anthropologists valued justice as well as retribution in the face of injustice. Combined, these various scientific studies suggest a hard-wired desire for justice, along with a hard-wired drive to seek revenge on those who treat us unjustly.

Synthesizing this research and then translating it to the workplace paints a very disturbing picture of the price employers pay when employees are treated in authoritarian, dismissive ways, or when employees believe they are being treated unfairly. My hope is that the combination of these research stories will increase participants' desire to (1) examine how they treat their employees, (2) ask for employee feedback, and (3) increase their desire to learn how to make it safe for people to speak up so they can resolve issues rather simmer in resentment.

Related to the innate human desire for fairness, I sometimes use the above research, and add the truism "perception is reality" as a way to support this message: "It's worth the often arduous work of explaining to employees your reasoning behind significant decisions and engaging them in conversation until you get buy-in. While you might think 'they just have to get over it,' just because you say that, doesn't make it so. If they don't believe you are being fair or respectful, even if their belief is mistaken, you will pay the price in terms of ill will, diminished employee engagement, resistance, and attempts to sabotage your efforts." While I can just say that message, notice how preceding that message with the research stories makes the message far more powerful.

HOW TO BECOME A "STORY-CATCHER"

Pay attention to your everyday life. Pay special attention to situations or stories that surprise you, make you think of something from a new perspective, or elicit a strong feeling. Ask yourself "What did this experience teach me?" "How can I use it as a teaching or coaching story?" and "How can I use this directly or as a metaphor to explain, illustrate or add impact to a concept or point?" The same story can be used in multiple ways, to get different messages across. See the sidebar *How to Use the Same Story for Different Purposes* for tips on how to adapt a story for different contexts in the workplace.

The following story is an example of taking an experience I had and using it as an analogy.

A few hours before speaking on organizational resilience at a conference, I took a walk in a nature preserve next to the college where the conference was being held. I had been musing on what story I wanted to open my presentation with. Although I had a reserve of tried-and-true stories ready to choose from, I wanted to try something new. As daybreak lightened the forest, I heard a shuffling noise. Off to my right I spotted a skunk racing about the forest floor, peeking under logs, nosing in the leaves, foraging for breakfast.

He was coming right at me, so engrossed in his mission that he was totally unaware of my presence. I didn't want him to see me at the last minute, get scared, and spray me, so I said in a loud voice: "Hi, it's just me walking. No worries," because, of course, skunks understand English.

He didn't even break his stride. He clearly didn't consider me as a potential threat.

I was amused by his non-response, especially compared to other wild animals, and because it was an unusual and amusing experience, I immediately asked myself how it might work as a teaching metaphor.

The answer was almost immediate. It would be a perfect metaphor for the difference that having a resilient workforce makes. Because the skunk has the tools to handle just about any predator, he doesn't get anxious or fearful when he sees a human, like other animals do. He just goes on his merry way, getting his work done. It's like resilient employees: The more resilient your workforce, the less they sweat the small stuff, the less anxious they feel in the face of challenging situations. Because they trust they can handle them, they focus their energy on their work, not on all the other "scary things" that distract stressed out, overwhelmed employees.

I opened my presentation with that story, both as a way to grab people's attention—which it did—and to illustrate through an analogy the difference my information could make to their organization.

Pay attention to the stories other people tell you about things that happened to them or someone they know. Listen to them with an attentive "storyteller's ear." Just as with your own experiences, if you find yourself surprised, moved, or seeing things in a new light, make note of the story and use this *Infoline* to decipher how you could use the story. Jot down your story as soon as possible. Don't trust yourself to remember a story, especially if it's about an experience that is not particularly dramatic. I believe that often the more subtle, easily forgotten experiences provide us with some of the most useful teaching stories. The problem is that they're so easily forgotten, especially the subtle details that contain the true "teaching gold." Perhaps the simplest way of cataloging stories is to make a two column table or database with each row holding a story. The left column contains searchable key words and phrases that the story can be used to illustrate or dramatize, such as "employee morale, EQ, stress, change." The right column contains a short description of the experience, with enough detail that reading it will refresh your memory enough that you can tell the story. By using this simple format, you can easily find stories to illustrate and explain specific points you want to make.

SURPRISE! YOU'RE ALREADY A STORYTELLER... NOW LET'S GET INTENTIONAL

A friend of mine, Fran Liautaud, has never taken a seminar nor read a book on storytelling. She is also an amazing storyteller. She's animated, she includes enough detail so you can easily put yourself into the story, and the way she recounts dialogue is riveting.

Often when she tells me stories, I take notes and ask her if I can use them as a teaching story or blog post. They're that good. For the first few years of our friendship, she would be surprised and momentarily puzzled when I would almost shout "What an awesome story!" and then talk about how it could be a perfect teaching story or how it could be used as an analogy. To her, she was simply recounting something interesting or funny that happened. She had never thought of herself as telling stories or realized how amazing she was at doing so.

Whether you are already an "amazing" storyteller or not, you *are* already a storyteller. The next step is to reflect on some of the favorite stories you've told people and then use this *Infoline* to identify what genre or genres they fall under, and how you can use them to illustrate a point, challenge a limiting belief, encourage a new perspective, etc. In other words, start becoming more aware of how the stories you already tell can be used with a purpose, and become more intentional when you tell a particular story.

HOW TO USE THE SAME STORY FOR DIFFERENT PURPOSES 

You can take the same experience and tell stories about it that accomplish different goals, depending on how much detail you keep in and what you emphasize. For instance, when I do presentations and seminars on "Constructive Conversations," I almost always tell a story about the most difficult conversation I ever had with a co-worker. I use this story because it's a great source of both inspiration and simulation. Because I didn't believe the conversation would go well, and it did, it offers listeners hope that the difficult discussions they've been avoiding might actually work out too, if they would only give them a try. It also offers a simulation experience because I describe the process I went through going from "furious to curious," and then the words I used to bring up the issue to my co-worker. This story is an example of how the same story can be told to accomplish multiple goals.

Purpose: To Kick Off a Seminar or Presentation. I will often begin my "Constructive Conversations" workshop with the first part of the story to capture workshop attendees' attention and interest. I don't tell them how it was resolved at that point, but promise to share that later. This is sometimes called "salting." Salting makes people thirsty for the information you will share. (Notice the metaphorical use of the term "salting" to create a visceral sense of the need to satisfy one's curiosity.)

Purpose: Illustrate a Key Point. Depending on the audience and context, I sometimes include in this story some comments that illustrate the tremendous price employers pay for not addressing workplace bullying and toxic behavior, and not helping their employees develop "crucial conversation skills."

After relating the abusive comments my co-worker made toward me I often ask my audience: "So for the rest of the day, do you think my mind was focused on my work?" Of course, they laugh and say "No." When I ask them what I was focused on, they usually respond "On what he said," or "On getting him back!" Both guesses are right.

I then tell the group that if they multiply this by thousands or even millions of times a day in workplaces all across the world, they can grasp how much work time is lost because employees are ruminating about being mistreated by a co-worker or boss, and how much it costs employers. Other times, I will ask the group to think of how much time is lost because employees are preoccupied with their mistreatment, but avoid confronting the person who offended them. If they had the skills—and therefore the confidence—to address these issues, they wouldn't waste time being upset. They would have the conversation, work it out, and move on. So by sharing my personal experience in a story, it dramatizes the tremendous cost associated with these situations.

Purpose: Develop Self-Awareness Using a Flight Simulator Story. I also use this story to trigger participants to reflect on their own counterproductive thought processes about the person with whom they are anticipating the difficult discussion. When I tell this story, I share with participants how I analyzed what my co-worker said to me, the assumptions I made about why he said what he said, the self-righteous outrage I felt, and the time I spent plotting how I was going to get revenge. I often use the counterproductive self-talk I engaged in as examples of counterproductive thinking that they may then identify in themselves. When I share this story with the group, I explain that I am sharing it to help them recognize the same behavior in themselves, so that it's clear I'm not venting or unwisely sharing something personal. I also share my internal process to help them bond with me, so they understand that I struggle with the same challenges they do.

Purpose: Teach Constructive Conversation Skills Using a Flight Simulator Story. After describing my internal process to get into a productive emotional state so that I could have an effective conversation with my co-worker, I share with the group exactly how I initiated the conversation so that he could hear what I had to say without getting defensive. I share the words I used, his response, and the positive outcome it created.

Purpose: To Empower Listeners. In some contexts, my goal isn't to teach constructive conversation skills, it's to open people's minds to the possibility that they really can have the difficult conversation they've been avoiding and achieve a positive outcome. With this goal in mind, I don't go into detail about my process, nor do I describe the conversation. Instead, I emphasize how doubtful I was that the conversation would work out well and how reluctant I was to approach it. As mentioned in previous sections, by emphasizing my original feelings, I get in sync with the audience's doubts. Then when I tell them it worked out, it offers a new, more hopeful perspective on having difficult discussions.

So, depending on the context and my goals, I might share a brief version of this story or a detailed "extended play" version that includes the many teaching points I want to make.

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JOB AID

ANALOGY-BUILDING EXERCISES

Directions: See how many ways you can complete the following sentences. You can complete this activity independently or in groups.

"Life is like a grocery store because...."

"Relationships are like a game of tennis because...."

"Great work teams are like a great orchestra because...."

"Being a good manager is like being a good parent because..."

"Being a great leader is like being a great tour guide because..."

MAKING SURE ANALOGIES ARE USEFUL

When I do the above exercise in workshops, some of the analogies people come up with are fun and whimsical, but not accurate nor particularly useful (for example—"Relationships are like a game of tennis because it's more fun when you win," or "Relationships are like a game of tennis because they involve love") while others embody teachable wisdom (for example—"Relationships are like a game of tennis because the more you put into it, the more likely you'll succeed").

To cultivate discernment in creating analogies, have someone in your group:

1. Jot down people's responses for each sentence.
2. Go through your list and analyze which analogies make the most sense and offer the most useful insights.

Here are a couple questions you can ask to help in this process:

1. "Is the analogy really accurate; are these two things really alike in this way?"
2. "Does this similarity represent something trivial or significant about the idea I want to explain, or the point I want to make?"

JOB AID

CHECKLIST: USING STORIES AND ANALOGIES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

NEW HIRE ORIENTATION

Use stories that define your organization's mission, values, and culture.

- ✔ Share stories about what you do as an organization that makes a difference in the world—both to your end-users and to your community.
- ✔ Share stories about employees making a difference and doing great things.
- ✔ Collect stories from your end-users about how your product or service made a difference in their lives, or how your organization went the extra mile to achieve excellence.
- ✔ Share stories that exemplify your behavioral norms and values in action.

STARTING A PRESENTATION

Think of a story that will start your presentation off with a bang. You might share

- ✔ a short story about the difference the information you will present made to someone you worked with
- ✔ a story that dramatizes the cost of not addressing the topic you will cover
- ✔ a humorous story—not a joke, but a real experience.

MAKING YOUR PRESENTATION MORE INTERESTING

For each major point you want to make, ask "How can I illustrate this?" or "What's an example of this?" If you want your audience to appreciate the importance of a particular idea or point at an emotional level, not just an intellectual level, don't forget to:

- ✔ Ask "What analogy or story can I use to make this hit home, to dramatize this so they never forget it?"
- ✔ Intersperse your presentation with short, light stories and examples, as energy boosters.
- ✔ For your ending, tell a story that summarizes your main theme and the benefits of taking action, so you leave your audience on a high, inspired note.

MAKING ABSTRACT OR NOVEL CONCEPTS MORE UNDERSTANDABLE

When you are teaching concepts that are very abstract or novel to the learner, try to think of analogies both from common everyday life and from your learner's unique professional background.

- ✔ Draw from common experiences as well as from knowledge, principles, and experiences that are profession- or industry-specific.
- ✔ Using profession- or industry-specific analogies helps you form an even stronger bond with your listeners as it signals that you understand their unique world. For instance, if you are teaching communication skills to software engineers who are being promoted to managers, you could use examples from their world of programming—such as Garbage In, Garbage Out, or having a bug in the code—as analogies to explain management concepts.

JOB AID

CHECKLIST: USING STORIES AND ANALOGIES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (CONTINUED)

COACHING

When explaining ideas, illustrating points, and attempting to persuade the person you're coaching, use the tips in the two previous sections of this job aid—"Making Your Presentation More Interesting" and "Making Abstract or Novel Concepts More Understandable." If you are attempting to help a person look at their situation from a different perspective or challenge them to examine a limiting belief, but believe a direct approach would just trigger resistance and defensiveness, you can use a story to do this.

- ✔ Use a perspective change story in which you or another person "just knew" something was true—such as believing another person was doing something to be manipulative—only to discover you were wrong. Pick a story that doesn't too closely match the situation of the person you're coaching, or they will apply the same limiting perspective to your story. They will also likely respond with defensiveness, just as they would if you confronted them directly, thus defeating the whole purpose of using a story.
- ✔ Use an "I didn't think I could do...but I did!" story where you "just knew" you didn't have what it took to handle a challenging situation, but then realized you did. In this case, telling a story that involves a situation similar to that of the person you are coaching is fine.
- ✔ Use "So I said to him '_____'" stories if you want to deliver a challenging message, such as "Stop making excuses for why you can't do it and start focusing on how you can do it," without triggering defensiveness.

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