

Telling Stories at Work

By John Durel

Choose your reasons for telling a story at work. Stories can be used as a leadership tool. Be intentional in using a story to achieve a specific purpose, and shape the story accordingly:

- **To teach:** people remember stories more readily than they do facts. If you want them to learn how to do something, give them a good story about how someone has done it well. For example, if you want them to give your visitors extraordinary service, tell a story of how this has happened in the past.
- **To inspire confidence and action:** a story of how your organization has had a positive and meaningful impact on an individual, or in your community, can motivate people and spur them to action. It can lead them to work harder, make a donation, or speak well of you with their friends.
- **To share your vision:** a story of how things could be in your community or in your organization, and how you intend to lead the organization into the future.
- **To show the mission:** by describing the actual experience someone has with your organization, a story can reveal how the mission impacts the people you serve.
- **To instill values:** stories can be especially effective in changing the way people behave in an organization. It is not enough to tell people what your values are. You need to give examples of what it means to live those values.
- **To strengthen relationships:** the most effective organizations are those in which people know, like, and trust one another. Telling stories about yourself enables others to understand who you are, what is important to you, and what motivates you. Stories that show a little vulnerability will build their trust and confidence in you.
- **To build teamwork:** the best teams are those in which the members trust one another enough so that they can have constructive conflict. Encourage members to tell stories about themselves, and to create “team stories” about their work together.
- **To learn from mistakes:** some of the most important stories are those that tell about past failures or mistakes, and the lessons learned. In the most enduring organizations, these stories are handed down from veteran employees to new ones.
- **To orient new stakeholders:** tell the story of your organization in a way that highlights its values and service to the community. Show how the mission actually plays out in the lives of people you serve.

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How to Tell a Good Story

- A good story has a beginning, middle and end.
- It has a few interesting characters (not too many – people will get confused.)
Select a primary character that your listeners can identify with.
- A plot that entails challenges to be overcome, a surprising turn of events, a turning point ... events that ultimately lead to the achievement of a goal or a lesson learned.
- Select a story that fits your purpose. Be clear in your own mind about the point you are trying to make and the impact you want to have on your listeners. Say why you are telling the story, either at the beginning or at the end.
- Know your audience. Design your story to connect with their values.
- Avoid too many details. This is especially important for stories about the future or that seem improbable. Listeners may discount stories if they can say: that might be true someplace else, but it really doesn't apply to our situation. Give just enough details so that people can follow the story and see how to apply it to themselves.
- Practice telling the story enough so that you can adapt it to different situations. Tell it so that it feels spontaneous, not memorized.
- Speak with confidence. Don't be tentative in telling the story. Have full command of what you want to say.
- Tell it in a conversational tone, as if you were speaking to a friend.
- Try telling the story in the present tense. It may work better that way.
- Develop your own story telling style. Make eye contact. Use gestures.
- Use visual aids judiciously. Power point presentations can get in the way of good story telling.
- End with strength. Use emotion to bring home the significance of the story.

Help Others Tell Stories

- Ask employees to tell a story about a time when they were really proud of your organization.
- Ask board members the same question.
- Let your visitors or members tell stories about how your organization has impacted them. Post these stories on a bulletin board, on your website, or in your newsletter.