

How smart leaders use storytelling



A consultant friend told me a story about the **power of storytelling** during the financial crisis.

He was working for one of the big financial services firms and as the economy worsened, so did the stock price. As anxiety rose in the office, there were two reactions: he noticed one manager lock himself in his office and refuse to take calls. He could be seen through the glass, slumped at his desk, head in his hands, a dark, desperate look on his face.

Another manager, on the other hand, walked the floor. She told reassuring stories about how she'd been through these things before, it was part of the business cycle and that they would all get through it.

During lunch she pulled everyone together and said, "We've had a great year and worked really hard. I don't know about you, but I've really enjoyed it ... up until now." (She used humour to help get her point across.)

She continued, “As a team we now have two choices. We can let this get us down and give up. Or we could fight back. Let me tell you the story of my brave son, Ben ...”

She then shared a **powerful personal experience**. Her son, Ben, had been diagnosed with a rare form of childhood cancer.

Though he faced a challenging diagnosis it hadn't gotten him down. “My son is a fighter. Just like us.” Everyone left the office that day a bit more reassured: If this kid could make it, so could they.

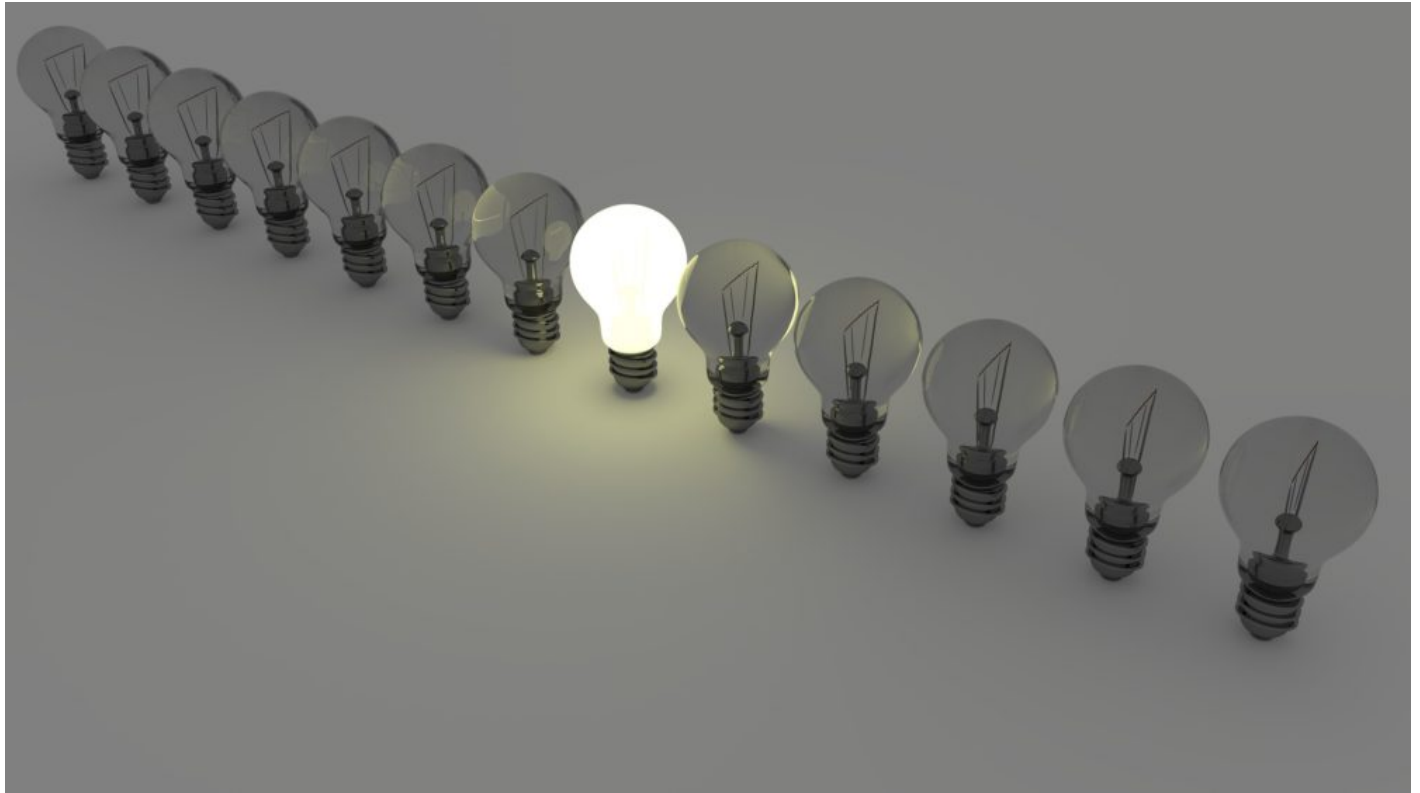
We all love stories. They are a huge part of what makes us human. Think about the prehistoric cave drawings of Lascaux, for example. Anthropologists theorize that these paintings of large animals are a depiction of successful hunts. In other words, they're stories.

Stories harness the same power you use when watching a great movie, writing a Facebook post about your holiday or telling your child a story before going to sleep. They enable us to link our experience with meaning for our own self and a sense of shared meaning with others.

We all need to find out what comes next.

THE NEUROSCIENCE RESEARCH

Recent neuroscience research tells us more about how storytelling works. When you tell a story, a chemical called oxytocin is produced by the brain.



It generates trust in the listener. (The same principle works when you show someone an unexpected kindness.)

The chemical motivates cooperation with others, and does this by enhancing the sense of empathy, our ability to experience others' emotions.

This is important for social creatures because it allows us to understand how others are likely to react to a situation, including those with whom we work.

STORY CONSTRUCTION

Instinctively, from a young age we know how stories are constructed: There's a beginning, a middle and an end. The American writer Kurt Vonnegut, discussing one of the oldest stories in the book ("boy gets girl"), put it this way:

Notice how the story starts on a bit of a high — boy meets girl and falls in love, usually "love at first sight" — but then ... the girl meets another guy and the boy wonders if he'll be able to compete and keep her. But he does in the end, of course! But still we wonder how it's going to happen, and that wonder is tension.

How are the obstacles going to be overcome? If the story you tell is able to create that tension then it is likely that attentive viewers/listeners will come to share your emotions and continue mimicking your feelings and behaviours.

This explains the feeling of dominance you have after James Bond saves the world, and your motivation to work out after watching the Spartans fight in the film 300.

WHEN TO USE LEADERSHIP STORIES



You don't have to wait for a "big event" to use a story. Less dramatic opportunities appear all the time in the workplace. As Jim Laughlin points out on his story blog, here are three common opportunities to share your leadership story with others:

1. When taking on a new position

A new manager has a great opportunity to use a story to make a great first impression. Often the early period is filled with one-on-one meetings as well as multiple team meetings as the new

manager does fact-finding and rapport-building while learning their new area of responsibility and establishing priorities.

Look to include stories into these meetings. Help people understand who you are and what motivates you by telling a brief story about yourself or by sharing one of your formative experiences.

2. When orienting a new report

There is much to talk about with a new employee as we seek to clarify their goals and responsibilities as well as help them understand the resources, tools and processes they need to rely on to accomplish their work. But don't miss the opportunity to create a personal connection by sharing your story.

The number one predictor of job satisfaction for an employee is their relationship with their immediate supervisor. Why not start out on a good, productive personal note that creates rapport and clarifies what's most important to you? And encourage their stories too.

Find out about the unique person who has joined your team and what shaping experiences they have had. They will value your personal interest in them and be more engaged in their work as a result.

3. When launching a project

Big projects and difficult undertakings often begin with great anxiety. Can we pull it off? Will we be successful? How are we going to accomplish this new thing?

Smart leaders use stories to remind their group that teams can accomplish great things together, that they have been part of successes in the past under challenging circumstances, and that they can't wait to experience success again with this team.

BUILDING THE STORY

But how do you do this in practicality – particularly if you are on the quieter side.

Let's say that you, the team leader, need to get your team to "willingly" work over the weekend to get out an important client project. You can use the following four steps to build your leadership story:

1. Storytelling is ultimately about **delivering important business messages**. Decide what is the message you need to get across and the feeling you want the receivers of the communication to have. Get it clearly, succinctly in your head.

2. How can your points be **supported by stories or a narrative**? For instance, you could get buy-in for a new initiative, by talking about individual clients you know and how this new initiative will positively affect them.
3. **Rehearse delivering the story**. If you don't feel comfortable with storytelling, rehearse it. Don't worry about being perfect the first time. That's why it's called rehearsal. Each time you repeat it, it will be smoother and help build your confidence.
4. **Memorise the opening**. This will help you begin with confidence that will grow as you continue.

As Andy Raskin, a leadership guru says, "storytelling isn't a fashion accessory that leaders can decide to wear or not. Very literally, leadership is storytelling and leaders are storytellers."

Now try it out — whether it's at your weekly team meeting, a town hall or a crucial 1:1, stories can help you deliver key messages and demonstrate your leadership chops.



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