

People & Change:

The power of storytelling in times of change

Martin Luther King understood the power of storytelling when he started his famous speech with the memorable words “I have a dream.” He didn’t call for change by giving us the facts. He started by painting a big, beautiful, audacious dream – not only for himself, but for an entire nation. We wonder if Harvard University professor Dr Howard Gardner had this in mind when he said: “stories constitute the single most powerful weapon in a leader’s arsenal”¹?

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How can we expect people to trust us, when we don't let them know who we are? When we separate our attempts to influence from who we are personally, we neglect the most important criteria people use to decide whether to listen to us or not.³

Many organisations are dealing with transformations that are bigger than ever before. These times require bold, visionary leadership without the command-and-control style of what may have worked well over the past decades. Teams are looking for leaders they can trust. Leaders that guide and inspire, that provide clarity and structure, but don’t control or diminish their enthusiasm, energy and drive. And we don’t just mean the CEO that needs to provide this vision. Leaders of today – on all levels – need to cascade this aspiration, break down what a new strategy means for their team, exemplify a new vision or take people on the journey of finding a company’s purpose. That needs more than facts – it needs a personalized interpretation of the transformation journey and what it means.

In the work we do at FTI Consulting’s People & Change practice, we have noticed that in many of the disruptive transformations happening in organizations today, leaders often still struggle to get their communications and interaction with employees right. They struggle to find their “authentic voice” – yet it is in this “authentic voice”² that great storytelling is born.

1. Gardner, Howard, and Emma Laskin. *Leading Minds: an Anatomy of Leadership*. BasicBooks, 2011.
2. For more information on this topic we recommend the following two authors:
 - Brené Brown. *Dare To Lead*. Random House, 2018. Or watch [Brené Brown ted talk about vulnerability](#).
 - Terry Pearce - *Leading Out Loud: Inspiring Change Through Authentic Communications*, New and Revised (17.03.2003). Or watch [Terry Pearce's video about Leading Out Loud](#).
3. Annette Simmons “The Story Factor” (2000).

Storytelling...what?

Storytelling is a very powerful technique that is traditionally known from the advertising and marketing industries, but which is equally impactful in a management context. Simply put, storytelling is about knowing who your audience is and what information they need from you – and then making it personal and appealing to help people relate to it more easily. A great (authentic!) story helps people trust you. It gives your day-to-day communications a personality. Only what an individual understands and considers important will be remembered. More importantly, only what is truly embraced guides behaviour and future actions. **Storytelling can help you become a better leader.** So, we agree with Dr Gardner that “stories constitute the single most powerful weapon in a leader’s arsenal”.

The “left-brain-right-brain”-logic behind it

Storytelling allows us to understand things by using both sides of the brain together. While the left side of the brain will try to make sense of what is being said, the right side contributes the bodily sensations, emotions and personal memories.⁴ If you communicate only facts and information, this only stimulates the left-brain hemisphere. Your listeners are left without an emotional impact and often fail to understand why information is important to them. Storytelling combines factual relevance with emotions. It makes your employees experience the emotion of the story and at the same time tells them why it matters. This is what makes it so powerful.

We can hear you say: “But I am not the naturally born storyteller”

Yes, many feel this way, but we tell leaders two things: Firstly, everybody tells stories – that’s how we as human beings communicate. It’s not about entertainment or making up big narratives. It’s about sharing thoughts and personal experiences as part of a conversation. And we all already do this every day – on the phone, with friends or in an informal dialog with colleagues. Secondly, everybody can learn to tell great stories. It requires to find out one’s individual style, it requires some commitment and it requires practice.

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Here is an example that may help you on your way to unlock storytelling as a powerful leadership tool

The business topic/context

“Today I would like to speak to you about the integration process we are heading into with company B...”

Transition to story

“Before I start, I would like to share with you a personal story to illustrate how I believe we can master this challenging period ahead together...”

Story

In 2008, my wife was offered the career opportunity of a lifetime, but it required us to move the family to Canada. I remember the trepidation and uncertainty I felt at the prospect of such an adventure... What would be the impact on our family? What would my life look like if we decided to do this...?”

Personal learning of story

“What my wife said that day, reminded me so powerfully that no matter the challenge, together we can...”

Message for your audience

“So, are we willing to actively take ownership and make this work together? I certainly am.”

Keep in mind that if you want to invite trust, your story must be your own and true. It must arise from your vision, your convictions and what really matters to you – as a leader and as a person. Ultimately, you have to be authentic and find your voice! We leave you with the invitation we always extend to the leaders we work with: Dare to share passion, gratitude or other emotions inherent to you as a person. The world – and your organization – needs you to be you. Particularly in times of perpetual change. So, when is the next opportunity for you to use storytelling in order to connect the dots between your people and a business matter?

4. Roger Sperry. “Split brain study” (1968).

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About FTI Consulting

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