

Storytelling in Harvard Business Review

The December 2007 issue of Harvard Business Review features storytelling. It's the subject of the editor's letter, the lead article "*The Four Truths of a Storyteller*" (pages 52-59) and the theme of another article on what leaders try to do with stories: "*What Every Leader Needs to Know About Followers.*"

The editor, Tom Stewart, writes that "the leader's role as a storyteller is an important topic because it is through stories that leaders so often enlist others in support of their ideas – so that they, too, aim for the stars."

The Four Truths of the Storyteller

The lead article, "The Four Truths of a Storyteller" is by Peter Guber, who has made a considerable fortune on the basis of his gift for knowing a good story when he sees one, as a moviemaker (*RainMan*, *Batman*, *The Color Purple* and *Midnight Express*) and as an executive running big companies such as Sony Pictures.

From his experience, Guber has distilled what he believes are four essential ways a story must be true in order to engage and move its audience: truth to the teller, to the audience, to the moment and to the mission.

The article declares the central importance of storytelling as follows:

"The ability to articulate your story or that of your company is crucial in almost every phase of enterprise management. It works all along the business food chain: A great salesperson knows how to tell a story in which the product is the hero. A successful line manager can rally the team to extraordinary efforts through a story that shows how short-term sacrifice leads to long-term success. An effective CEO uses an emotional narrative about the company's mission to attract investors and partners, to set lofty goals, and to inspire employees. Sometimes, a well-crafted story can even transform a seemingly hopeless situation into an unexpected triumph...

"Storytelling ... is one of the world's most powerful tools for achieving astonishing results. For the leader, storytelling is action oriented – a force for turning dreams into goals and then into results."

The article also helpfully stresses "the crucial importance of truth as an attribute of both the powerful story and the effective storyteller... Great storytelling does not

conflict with truth. In the business world and elsewhere, it is always built on the integrity of the story and its teller."

Guber sees four kinds of truth:

1. Truth to the teller

"Authenticity ... is a crucial quality of the storyteller. He must be congruent with his story – his tongue, feet, and wallet must move in the same direction. The consummate modern shaman knows his own deepest values and reveals them in his story with honesty and candor."

2. Truth to the audience

"There's always an implicit contract between the storyteller and his audience. It includes a promise that the listeners' expectations, once aroused, will be fulfilled. Listeners give the storyteller their time, with the understanding that he will spend it wisely for them. For most businesspeople, time is the scarcest resource; the storyteller who doesn't respect that will pay dearly. Fulfilling this promise is what I mean by 'truth to the audience.'"

Guber says: "you'll want to tell your story in an interactive fashion, so people will feel they've participated in shaping the story experience. This requires a willingness to surrender ownership of the story. The storyteller must recognize that the story is bigger than she is and must enlist her audience's help."

3. Truth to the moment

"A great storyteller never tells a story the same way twice. Instead, she sees what is unique in each storytelling experience and responds fully to what is demanded. A story involving your company should sound different each time. Whether you tell it to 2,000 customers at a convention, 500 salespeople at a marketing meeting, ten stock analysts in a conference call, or three CEOs over drinks, you should tailor it to the situation. The context of the telling is always a part of the story.

"Great storytellers prepare obsessively. They think about, rethink, work, and rework their stories. As Scott Adelson, an investment banker who uses storytelling to help clients raise capital in public markets, said at our dinner: "Sheer repetition and the practice it brings is one key to great storytelling. When we help companies sell themselves to Wall Street, we often see the CEO and his team present their story 10, 20, 30 times. And usually each telling is better and more compelling than the one before."

4. Truth to the mission

"A great storyteller is devoted to a cause beyond self. That mission is embodied in his stories, which capture and express values that he believes in and wants others

to adopt as their own. Thus, the story itself must offer a value proposition that is worthy of its audience.”

“The job of the teller is to capture his mission in a story that evokes powerful emotions and thereby wins the assent and support of his listeners. Everything he does must serve that mission. This explains the passion that great storytellers exude. They infuse their stories with meaning because they really believe in the mission.”

An assessment of the article

Overall, it’s a generally sound article, making valuable points about the role of storytelling and its importance in organizations today.

The fact that the article is given so much prominence in Harvard Business Review, the “gold standard” of management practice, is also a positive sign that narrative is now entering the mainstream of American business.

There is therefore much to celebrate in the publication of the article.

Nevertheless a few qualifications are in order.

- The article doesn’t distinguish the different types of stories that are useful for different purposes in business. For Guber, it seems that each story is a “one-off” creative act, depending on capabilities of the virtuoso artist, crafting the perfect story for that particular audience in that particular moment. He seems unaware that there are certain recurring leadership situations, for which certain narrative patterns are more effective than others. He doesn’t point out that understanding the differences between those narrative patterns can greatly facilitate the crafting of appropriate stories, and so place less burden on the brilliance of the individual storyteller. The article is more about Guber’s undoubted triumphs as a storyteller than showing readers how they could replicate those triumphs. For more on the different patterns of narrative, see [The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling](#).
- Guber does cite a few stories of other leaders, such as the story of Jim Sinegal, CEO of Costco, about the Calvin Klein jeans on which he declined to make a windfall profit, in order to pass savings along to his customers. It would however have been nice to acknowledge that the same story has already appeared in Evelyn Clark’s book, [Around the Corporate Campfire](#) (2004)
- The article uncritically adopts (page 56) the “transportation” theory of storytelling, namely that a listener is transported by the story on a journey and is so marked by the emotional experience of the imaginary journey that

he/she returns to reality in an altered psychological state and so acts differently. That theory is only plausible, if at all, for epic stories that move listeners deeply. It's not a plausible account of how a reader is moved to action by simple, minimalist stories, like Jim Sinegal's story about the Calvin Klein jeans. Guber seems unaware of the possibility that listeners are moved to action as a result of such a story, not because they are "emotionally scarred as a result of the story's journey," but rather because they are imagining a new story of which they are the heroes. Further discussion of this issue can be found in chapter 5 of [The Secret Language of Leadership](#).

- Overall, the article shows little awareness that it is only scratching the surface of a rather large subject. It's a pity that the article doesn't acknowledge what has already been written on the subject or point readers to where they can learn more. This perhaps reflects the editorial style of Harvard Business Review articles in general, about which individual writers can do little.

Despite these qualifications, the publication of the article is an important positive step for the cause of organizational storytelling as a core competence for all organizations.