

# Leading Words: How to Use Stories to Change Minds and Ignite Action

The right story at the right time can be a very powerful leadership tool.

by Cynthia M. Phoel

**A**S A PROGRAM DIRECTOR AT THE WORLD BANK (Washington, D.C.) in the mid-1990s, Stephen Denning was at a loss for how to convince his colleagues of the value of knowledge management. Presentations built on solid research and carefully constructed PowerPoint slides got him nowhere. Then he started telling this simple story:

*In June of last year, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia went to the Web site of the Centers for Disease Control and got an answer to a question about the treatment of malaria. Remember that this was in Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world, and it was in a tiny place six hundred kilometers from the capitol city. But the most striking thing about this picture, at least for us, is that the World Bank isn't in it. Despite our know-how on all kinds of poverty-related issues, that knowledge isn't available to the millions of people who could use it. Imagine if it were. Think what an organization we could become.*

This narrative succeeded in persuading Denning's listeners to envision a broader, more ambitious future for the organization. It succeeded where analysis and argument had failed.

"Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart. And that's where you must go if you are to motivate people not only to take action but to do so with energy and enthusiasm," writes Denning in *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005). Denning, now a knowledge management and organizational storytelling consultant, argues that effective leadership requires the ability to choose the right story at the right time and tell it well. His book dispenses thoughtful advice for leaders who want their words to work powerfully on their behalf.

## Springing to action

Denning believes that all leaders can use stories effectively. But first, he says, they must understand which story to tell when; different leadership objectives require different narrative patterns.

Is your primary goal to motivate others to act? Build trust? Tame the rumor mill? Your purpose in telling a story will determine whether it is positive or negative, richly detailed or bare bones, satirical or heartwarming. Denning identifies eight narrative patterns that correspond to specific leadership goals. Of these eight patterns, he singles out one type of story that every leader must be able to use: the springboard story, which communicates a new idea and inspires others to work to implement it.

Consider Denning's Zambia story. Before he resorted to story, Denning couldn't get management to give him the time of day; afterward, they were ready to pounce.

Springboard stories depict a past event, such as the health worker's visit to the Internet to access the needed information. By minimizing embellishment, these spry little stories invite people to imagine the story for themselves: What if the World Bank were able to share its knowledge with the millions who need it? As people consider this possibility and flesh out the story in their minds, they begin to make that idea their own.

The following eight steps will help you work this storytelling magic in your organization:

### 1. Have a clear purpose

Whereas the entertainment industry can get away with stories that simply entertain, leaders wishing to use a story to move others to action must keep its central purpose firmly in mind. To help you clarify the idea you are trying to communicate, Denning poses these questions: "What are you trying to change in the world? What is the specific idea that you are attempting to get people to understand and implement? What are they not doing now that you want them to do in the future?"

Here is how Denning might have answered these questions as he constructed his World Bank story:

#### What are you trying to change in the world?

*I want to make the World Bank's deep well of poverty-related information widely available.*

**What is the specific idea that you are attempting to get people to understand and implement?**

*That knowledge management is the key to accomplishing this.*

**What are they not doing now that you want them to do in the future?**

*Lending their creative, enthusiastic support to knowledge-management efforts.*

Once you're clear on your idea, write it down in a single sentence, if possible. The change idea, Denning writes, must be specific enough for others to judge whether they're making progress toward implementing it. If you don't know what signs of success will look like, your audience won't, either.

## 2. Identify an example of successful change

To find the story that will illustrate your change idea, look for an example where the change has, at least in part, already occurred. You may look inside your own organization or at another organization (preferably similar to yours) to find this model.

## 3. Tell the truth

This is imperative. "It's the truth of the story that shakes the skeptics out of their complacency," writes Denning. He emphasizes that your story must be not only factually accurate but also authentically true, encapsulating what actually happened. Consider the following: "Seven hundred happy passengers reach New York after *Titanic's* maiden voyage." While this account of the *Titanic* may be factually accurate in the sense that the arriving passengers were happy not to have drowned with their many shipmates, it is not authentic to what actually happened. Take measures to avoid this common pitfall of corporate storytelling; don't paint a rosy picture if bad news is on the horizon.

## 4. Say who, what, when

A few particulars will go a long way to creating a sense of story. What's more, anchoring your story in time and place will help signal that this is a true story. Introduce the date, place, and protagonist at the very beginning of the story.

In choosing your protagonist, Denning reminds us that we are trying to get the audience to envision themselves in the story: "So you tell the story from the perspective of someone who is very similar to the audience, so that it will be one tiny step for the audience to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist and think to themselves, 'That could be me! I could be doing that!'"

## 5. Trim detail

While a few specifics are essential, the key is not to overdo it. The traditional story elements that help entertain—plot, character, detail—may not serve your springboard story well. In an organizational setting, the story is the means to the end, not the end itself.

Take the Zambia story. We know that the protagonist is a health worker and that the needed information was found on the CDC Web site. But we don't know the health worker's gender or anything about who's being helped or the weather that day or the scene in that village—those details are irrelevant. The idea is to give enough specifics to ignite the imagination and get your listener thinking.

## 6. Underscore the cost of failure

Be explicit about what has happened and what will happen as a result of your organization's standing pat. In his Zambia example, Denning is careful to point out this painful fact:

*Despite our know-how on all kinds of poverty-related*

### TELLING THE STORY RIGHT

It's not just what you say but how you say it that will determine the success of your story. The way a story is presented can dramatically influence the listener's experience:

- **Speak as one person to another.** Don't hedge or protect yourself from objections by offering disclaimers or other points of view. In short, don't get in the way of your story. Rather, stand behind it, and keep your focus on the content.
- **Present the truth as you see it.** Resist the urge to persuade. Respect your audience as people who know what you know and can understand the truth.
- **It's counterintuitive but true: spontaneity is rehearsed.** Strike a balance between planning and performing. Know what you're going to say and how you're going to say it. But if your audience laughs, be ready to pause for a moment; if they fidget, push on.
- **Relive your story as you tell it.** Leave the podium, and engage your audience. Don't read! Instead, speak in an impromptu, conversational manner. Know your audience well, and adapt your story to connect person-to-person.

## Use Stories to Ignite Action *(continued)*

*issues, that knowledge isn't available to the millions of people who could use it.*

For your listeners to work toward a better future, they have to understand why business as usual isn't an option.

### 7. End on a positive note

Here is one place where you can take a tip from Hollywood: a springboard story must be positive and end happily. Your goal is to inspire people to act. To do this, you want to create a sense of excitement, even euphoria, about the possibilities that lie ahead.

There are sound physiological reasons for ending on an upbeat note. When audiences hear a story with an unhappy ending, Denning writes, the "ancient part of the brain, the limbic system, kicks in and the message is: "Trouble! Something bad is happening! Do something! Fight! Flee!" The result of this turmoil is that your audience won't be receptive to envisioning a positive future. If there are negative aspects to your story that are integral to the narrative, include them early in the telling.

Ending on a positive note also gets the limbic system going, but in a way that furthers your change goals. Your listeners' brains get hit with some feel-good dopamine that leaves them feeling a little "warm and floaty," writes Denning, and this is "the perfect frame of mind to be thinking about a new future, a new identity for yourself or your organization."

### 8. Invite your audience to dream

Once you've offered an example, link your story to the change idea. Use phrases like, "What if..." or "Just imagine..." or "Just think..." Here is how this might play out in our Zambia example:

*What if all our knowledge were on the Web? Just imagine if the whole population in the world had access to it. What if the people making decisions about poverty could use the World Bank Web site to improve their decision making? Just think what an organization we could become.*

It's critical here not to spell out every detail of the future you imagine. What you want to do instead is invite the audience to envision for themselves what the future will look like. Once they're engaged in constructing the "What if..." they'll be primed for fleshing out the "What now?" ✽

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