

Linking the Story to the Change Idea: Using Phrases That Are Pure Magic

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A pitfall that I see many people fall into when they begin using storytelling in organizations is what they do *after* they have told their story.

Sometimes the storyteller has no link between the story and the change idea. He (or she) says something like, “And that’s my story,” and sits down. Saying nothing about “the point of the story” often leaves the audience quite at a loss as to what was the point of the story. The audience is likely to miss the point and so the storytelling is ineffective.

At the other extreme, people who are used to being in authority like CEOs tend to make too strong a link between the story and the change idea. They tend to start laying down in abstract terms the moral of the story. In effect, they dictate to the audience what the story means. Typical phrases include: “Now the point of the story is ...” or “What this story means is that...” or “This is what that story means for you. This is what it means for you tomorrow morning when you go into the office. I want you to do the following sixteen things....”

Of course, if you say anything like that, you are back in the command and control mode. You will have lost all of the energizing impact of narrative. You will be back to imposing your own ideas, your own decisions, your own instructions, and so the listener becomes another passive, possibly disgruntled employee, waiting for the next management directive.

When the storyteller starts lecturing the audience about what the story means, then the storyteller loses most or all of the benefit of having stimulated the listener’s imagination and sparked a new story in the mind of the listener. Instead of giving the story as a gift to the audience, the storyteller takes back the story. And so you are back in the same old “command and control” world that narrative was being used to avoid. The result of this style is that listening to a bunch of these stories feels like being preached to at great length – in effect, not all like listening to stories. Ramming home the point like this is counterproductive. If you do it, the storytelling is once again ineffective.

How to avoid these two pitfalls, of not enough linkage or too much linkage?

The trick is to use some magic phrases, that give the listeners a hint, a suggestion, some guide-rails as to where to go, as to what’s the point, but not so much as to dictate the meaning to them. You need to give them enough guidance but not too much.

And you do this by linking the change idea to the story with one of these magic phrases:

“What if... ”

“Just think... “

“Just imagine...”

These magic phrases reflect a middle way of neither too little nor too much guidance. They're like Goldilock's porridge: just right.

What you're doing here is ***keeping the audience in a narrative mindset***. By asking them to imagine and dream, you're inviting them to keep thinking in stories. If you shift into the “Just tell ‘em” mode, then the audience will shift out of the narrative mindset and into the analytic, critical mindset. In effect, instead of staying in the naturally collaborative relationship of narrative, the storyteller has unwittingly moved into the naturally adversarial stance of argument: the storytelling is arguing with the audience and so the audience will start to argue back: “Yes, it is!” “No, it isn't!” “Yes, it is!” And so on. Even if the storyteller wins the argument in a sense, by giving more powerful reasons, the audience is no mood to own the story as their own story. Instead, they will have been bulldozed by arguments, with all of the grudging and unenthusiastic implications that go with that.

So instead of arguing, you stay in the narrative mode. Suppose you're telling the story about knowledge sharing by using the web. Then you say:

What if all our knowledge was on the web. Just imagine if all the whole population in the world had access to it. What if the people making decisions about poverty could use our website to improve their decision-making? Just think what an organization we could become!

You are inviting the audience to dream. You're not ***telling*** them. You're not directing. You're not controlling. You're issuing an invitation to imagine. The listeners have to make the decision as to whether to dream or not, and whether to decide to live that dream. You point them in the direction. And with luck, some, or even most of the audience, will dream the dream and start planning their own implementation of it.

There's an old Brazilian proverb that when you dream alone it's just a dream, but when you dream together it's already the beginning of a new reality. You're trying to get the audience to dream together. So these little phrases have just the right balance to achieve this: “What if?...” and “Just imagine...” and “Just think!”

“Just think what it would be like if this incident was happening here, not just in this instance, but all across our division. All across the region. All across the company. All across the world.”

You're inviting the audience to make huge leaps of the imagination and they are usually willing to do it if you provide them with these guide-rails.