

Inside Knowledge

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Thought Leader

An open letter to Stephen Denning

By Charles Savage

Your wonderful new book, *'The Leader's Guide to Storytelling'*, just arrived in Munich. It may be your third book on 'storytelling', after *'The Springboard'* and *'Squirrel Inc'*, but I still remember our long conversations in your office at the World Bank a decade ago, when you were just grasping the real power of stories.

In the introduction to your latest work, you explain how you have complemented your 'rational' side with the sense of drama and excitement of a context-setting story that focuses and motivates. And you offer some wise approaches for leaders at all levels who want to engage, inspire and innovate.

However, might I persuade you to focus your next book on 'story asking'? Why? Well, you rightly say, "Good storytelling begins and ends in listening". I am convinced there is great power in both listening and asking.

You mention 'Judo leadership'. I grew up in Hawaii and did Aikido as a teenager. I therefore wonder whether you'd consider 'Aikido leadership'. As you know, Aikido means, 'the way of the binding Ki'. 'Ki' is Japanese for energy as 'Chi' is in Chinese. There is always a lot of energy in a good story, whether shared by the CEO or the union steward. And each of us has our own good stories, rich in energy – yet we hardly have an opportunity to tell them.

Your reference to a leader who is interactive and ego-less reminds me of Jim Collin's Level Five Leadership. Such people are both humble and hard driving. They create an atmosphere where the team doesn't just tell one another stories, they listen and reflect together, too.

And my point? Instead of just focusing on the 'telling', shouldn't we also consider the 'asking'?

Envisage 'Margaret Farnsworth', the CEO of a major international consumer-products company. When she arrived, some people felt she had more iron than Margaret Thatcher, but she has proved to be remarkably adroit at drawing out the best stories from her VPs and staff.

She often begins meetings with a powerful question, one that is not easy to answer. She then invites staff to envisage ways to address this question. Instead of encouraging them to see who can tell the best story, she actively listens. She knows, thanks to the insights of Michael Polanyi that, "We know more than we can say". And in her 'story-asking' she weaves the thread of their stories together.

"That's really interesting, would you please tell me more?" she asks. She encourages staff to connect with their inner feelings and fields of experience. Then she asks, "How does your story relate to what Frank was saying?"

She not only connects with the energy of the stories, but weaves their energy together into an exciting tapestry of new possibilities. When they come out of a meeting, many say, "I never thought we'd get so far... and Margaret hardly said anything".

When she involves larger groups, she doesn't use the auditorium. Instead she sets up a room with many small tables, each for four people. She has found that the World Café approach enables these small groups to weave together their own stories and, as they move between tables, they create a web of interconnected stories.

What people feel in this organisation is that they are not only 'telling stories', but are a story in progress. And so much of this has begun with the simple story-asking questions.

So Stephen, might I implore you to write your next book on story-listening and story-asking?

Charles Savage

Charles Savage is a teacher, consultant and author. He is currently working on his next book, which focuses on the transition to the knowledge economy. He can be contacted on charles.savage@kee-inc.com

Reply to Charles Savage:

Hi Charles,

Thanks for your letter, for the notice you have drawn to my book, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, and for your sympathetic interest in story.

I appreciate your request that my next book be about story-listening and story-asking. I can assure you this will be an important aspect of my forthcoming book, entitled *The Secret Language of Leadership*, due to be published by Jossey-Bass in September 2007. At the same time, leaders need to recognize that after they've done a lot of story-asking and story-listening, eventually they have make a decision

as to which direction they are heading and then persuade others to go along with with them.

Contrary to what you read in a lot of leadership books, change doesn't occur by osmosis or extra-sensory perception. If leaders' inner commitment to change is to have any effect, they have to communicate it compellingly to the people they aspire to lead. True, the leaders' actions will eventually speak louder than words, but in the short run, it's what managers say—or don't say—that has the impact. The right words can have a galvanizing effect, generating enthusiasm, energy, momentum and more, while the wrong words can undermine the best intentions and kill the initiative on the spot, stone dead.

Great leaders have always known instinctively what to say and how to say it. We call it "silver-tongued eloquence" or "the gift of the gab", as if knowing what to say or how to say it was a matter of genetic inheritance. For too long, we have assumed that those who are not born talkers have no choice but stand tongue-tied, or put their feet in their mouths. For too long, we have failed to examine the language that successful leaders actually use to inspire lasting, sustainable change, not in general terms or in broad generalities, but specifically: what do they say at 9 am Monday morning to get people not just to do something different, but to *want* to do something different? What do they say that generates not just followers, but new leaders and champions? Too long, we have failed to realize that the language of leadership comprises specific, identifiable, measurable, trainable behaviors that can be used to galvanize action.

The Secret Language of Leadership will be about the entire range of leadership behaviors, both active and passive, including story-asking, story-listening and storytelling as well as non-narrative ways of persuasion.

In the meantime, if you're particularly interested in story-asking and story-listening, you might want to read again the chapters of *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, that already dwell at length on these subjects, including particularly chapter 2 (how you perform a story), chapter 7 (how you get collaboration), chapter 9 (how you tame the grapevine), chapter 11 (how you spark innovation) and chapter 12 (how to be an interactive leader).

Thanks again for your letter and all the best,

Steve Denning