



Storytelling – A Leadership Development Tool

As the waiters cleared the dessert plates from the banquet tables, Joanne, the VP of Sales, stepped to the podium and began the annual meeting. The CEO, Jeff Carlson, could feel the heat building under his collar. He wiped his sweaty palms on the linen napkin and took another sip of water to wet his cottonmouth lips.

Joanne welcomed everyone with charm and candor. She got a few laughs with a short story about the Region Three delivery truck that was impounded for parking illegally. Then came the moment when she introduced Jeff.

As he moved toward the podium, he felt time stand still. The room was dark except for the spotlight, which felt to Jeff like a heat lamp beaming on his face. He glanced down at his notes, made a funny comment about the driver of the truck, and then, with hands shaking almost uncontrollably, launched into his speech.

Afterward, as his mental acuity returned to normal, he asked his wife how he did. He really didn't know. It was as if he wasn't there during the speech, at least not as the confident and secure CEO that he knew himself to be.

Jeff knew instinctively that something was missing when he spoke in front of a group. After observing the confidence and poise of the guest speaker that followed him, he finally put a name to it: *his power*. In every other aspect of his life, he was a confident and powerful man. But when he stepped in front of a room full of people to speak, he lost connection to that power.



Doug Stevenson is the founder and president of Story Theater International, a speaking, training and consulting company based in Colorado Springs, Colorado. His company trains thousands of professionals and executives each year, for clients that include Microsoft, Amgen, Bayer, Caterpillar, Oracle, State Farm Insurance, Hewlett Packard, Maytag, Super 8 Motels and others.

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Does that happen to you? Do you feel the same level of confidence and power while giving a speech as you do while running your company or department? If not, it's time to learn an important skill that will make sure you retain your power on the platform: strategic storytelling.

Storytelling is a powerful leadership tool. It puts you in touch with your authentic power so you can motivate and inspire your audience. Professional speakers have learned how to turn storytelling into an art form. They know they can both connect with their audience and deliver vital messages using the power of storytelling.

Stories are the perfect form of communication working on many levels. Because they are inherently visual and stimulate the imagination, stories cause the non-linear right brain to get engaged; because the sequence of the story is linear, they cause the left linear brain to get engaged. Stories are emotional as well as educational, thus connecting the head and the heart. They are well received by auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners because well-crafted stories can incorporate all modes of learning. In short, stories are the window through which audience members see their own truth.

Why then, do some stories work and others don't? The answer lies in the art of storytelling. Almost any story has the potential to be a great story. The secret is in choosing and crafting a story for its strategic use.

Here are a few criteria to apply to using stories in your business speeches:

Share personal stories. Audience members want to know who you are and what you believe. Stories from your life humanize you and make you more approachable. They reveal the person beneath the title. Research affirms that people follow leaders they trust and believe in. By sharing personal stories that teach lessons from your life, you reveal



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the source of your wisdom as a leader. Before listeners buy into what you have to say, they have to buy *you*. You are the message. Given that, the next question becomes: What's your story?

Make a point. When told in front of business audiences, stories have to make a point, so strive to match the point you want to make to the story you tell before you begin. But be careful. Never attach a point to a story that doesn't fit naturally. The point should flow effortlessly out of the story. When you know the point you want to teach, ask yourself, "Where did I learn that lesson?" Search for stories from your own life and fan out from there. Start crafting your story with your key point in mind.

Here's an example. In one of my keynote talks, I teach the value of focusing on solutions instead of problems by telling a story about running late for a speech in Kansas City. My plane had been delayed and, to make matters worse, when I finally arrived at the airport, I missed the only shuttle that would have taken me to my appointment on time. So I spotted a limo at the curbside and, out of desperation, asked the driver if he could give me a ride. His other passenger had just cancelled so he said yes.

By focusing on the solution, I saw the limo, took action, and got to my appointment on time. Had I focused on the problem, I would have waited for the next shuttle and been late. I wouldn't have seen the opportunity for an innovative solution. This key point flows out of my limo story and, at the end, I suggest that when things don't work out the way they're supposed to, then "Look for the Limo."

The magic is in the details. To stimulate your listeners' imaginations, be sure to craft your stories with rich detail. Remember and relate every nuance, every character, and every emotion. Was someone driving a car or an old beat up Chevy with spongy shock



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absorbers that made it shimmy down the street like Elvis' pelvis? Did the waiter take your order or did he recite all ten specials of the day as if he were auditioning for Steven Spielberg's new movie? Paint pictures with words. Use a fine brush, not a roller.

Show and tell. Stories come alive when the storyteller re-creates certain moments. Get out from behind the lectern so you can “show and tell.” Move from narration to action and back again. If you simply narrate a past event, it comes across as interesting. If you *re-create* that same event, it comes across as powerful and intriguing. You probably relay show-and-tell stories with animation all the time. Present them as if you were in an intimate setting with a few close friends. Be natural. Whatever you do “off stage” do it “on-stage.” And have fun.



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Stories “Move” People

Think about the last speech you heard. What do you remember? If you’re like most people, you remember the stories that were told. You remember the images and sounds, most of which took place in your own imagination. There is no more receptive environment for planting the seeds of a new idea or vision than the imagination.

When you tell me something, I hear it and understand it, thus I gain knowledge about the subject. But intellectual understanding alone does not motivate people to action.

Motivation comes from the Latin word *motivus*, which means to move. A strategic story contains imagery that stirs the emotions; it “moves” people. When your story makes a logical point, knowledge converges with the motivation you’ve created. This brings your listeners to a new understanding and desire to take action.

Using stories strategically can help you say goodbye to sweaty palms and cottonmouth. Before you know it, you’ll be having fun, making your points, and feeling your authentic power in front of an audience—just like when you’re orchestrating the company’s next strategic move.



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