

Storytelling is a Great Coaching Skill

We all love a great story. Great stories can take us on emotional journeys of excitement, anger, love, despair – and can live on for centuries. For thousands of years people have been moved by tales told around campfires, at bedsides, in theatres, in public squares... and today on YouTube, Facebook, etc. The medium doesn't matter; what matters is the power of the story.

In coaching we can harness the power of stories to tap into the leaders' emotions to overcome their predisposed notions and paradigms. Telling the right story makes our job, facilitating leadership change, a lot easier. While our listeners won't always agree with us, when they empathize with the story's characters they are much more likely to listen – and to challenge their own thinking.

And changing people's thinking so that they change their behavior lies at the core of executive coaching! Tell the right story the right way and you can illustrate even the most complex issue into one that is engaging and easy to understand – and one that unlocks the leaders' creativity and imagination.

So how do you tell the right story the right way? Here are twelve secrets to a great story:

1. Start with the end in mind.

Every story is a journey. Where do you want the business leaders in your audience to end up? How do you want them to feel? What do you want them to learn? What do you want them to do? Then think about where those leaders are before you speak: their backgrounds, their experiences, their motivations, and their (personal) agendas.

Your job is to take them from here to there – so always know what there is.

2. Let the leader join the story.

A masterful storyteller creates a framework that allows the listener to fill in his or her own gaps. The goal is to unlock the leaders' imaginations and allow them to turn your story into their story – that way each person can relate and engage on their own terms.

A great story allows each member of the audience to take away the individual message they need, even though that message may be different from the message everyone else hears. You can't control what the listener takes away, and that's great. The best stories allow the audience to find its own answers because when it's "mine" I care much more... and am much more willing to change.

3. Let leaders draw their own conclusions.

Stories can unleash emotions and perspectives, whereas explaining the story in logical terms (think sharing “the moral of the story”) does the opposite. When we “understand” (or are told what we should “understand”) we naturally stop thinking. And why shouldn’t we? We already “know.”

When you use stories and metaphors to illustrate a logical point you may decide to explain your story in rational terms. But if you want to sow seeds that will create positive major change in the listener, go out of your way not to explain your stories.

Leave the listener processing what you said. Then they can draw their own conclusions – and that will help them get a lot more from your stories.

4. Create characters leaders care about.

Who do people tend to care the most about? Themselves.

And that’s why leaders tend to relate best to stories about people like themselves. Say you’re speaking to leaders excited about a change in their organization or industry yet also concerned about how that change will actually play out. You could create instant rapport by saying:

“Last week I spoke to a group of senior executives who were experiencing an interesting blend of emotions. Some were genuinely anxious, some were concerned, but at the same time they were all really excited about the opportunity to...”

Get it right and the leaders can relate to the characters in your story... and then follow those characters to where you want them to go.

5. Take your audience on an emotional rollercoaster.

Emotion almost always trumps logic. For example, when a person hears extreme news they typically experience a series of emotions before they reach a more rational state. (In short, they go through the grief cycle.) You can speed up that process by using a story designed to take leaders through that emotional sequence.

Try telling a story where the main character goes through the same cycle: shock, anger, resistance, awareness, acceptance, action and finally achievement. As you tell the story you can elicit those states and create an emotional pathway that will make the transition faster and less painful than it would have been.

6. Create a character that provides a role model.

Some leaders want to move forward but don't know how – and are too embarrassed to ask. An effective solution is to share the story of a person who has moved forward, sharing the key steps that allowed that person to succeed. That way the story – and the main character – provides a role model everyone can follow without having to ask.

Plus telling a story is often much more effective than telling people what to do.

7. Use the power of metaphors.

Aristotle recognized the transformative power of metaphors, saying, “The soul never thinks without a picture.” Using metaphors in stories makes it easier for the listener to grasp the concept of big ideas. Don't create instruction manuals filled with, “Do this, do that, then do this...”

No one reads instruction manuals. No one likes to be told what to do. Everyone likes to draw connections. Use metaphors to help listeners draw – and remember – those connections.

8. Use a story to challenge deeply held beliefs.

The characters in a story can suggest ideas that you could never overtly recommend. Those characters can make it possible for you to distance yourself from a suggestion while still having introduced the idea. For example:

“A previous client said she would only promote employees who consistently over-delivered on their annual business goals over the last 3 to 4 years. I wouldn't go that far... but she did have a point.”

Everyone in your audience might not be willing to go that far either – but some might. By using a story you allow leaders to decide on an individual basis how far they are each willing to go.

9. Use humor to introduce new ideas.

Humor and playfulness increase rapport, create an openness to change, and make it easier to let go of old beliefs. Plus, when we laugh we remember. But don't tell a joke simply to tell a joke – select your message and use humor appropriately and it can be much easier to open people's minds to new ways of thinking.

10. Use proven structures to take advantage of how our minds work.

There are a number of proven structures for stories. A classic example is **SOAR** for business cases:

S: Situation and problem

O: Objectives

A: Actions

R: Results and Implications

Using the SOAR structure to illustrate a (mini) business case creates the impression you have strong leadership skills and deep business experience.

Without realizing it the listener tunes in to the logical structure and their thinking flows naturally from one step to the next. That means there are no surprises, which lets people concentrate on the content... and that gives your message a much greater impact.

11. Include the **REAL YOU** in the story.

There is no way to tell a good story without sharing something personal. Trust is a fragile asset. Listeners instantly sense if you're authentic – and they instantly realize when you lie, boast, or manipulate.

So don't be afraid to be humble. Don't be afraid to show vulnerability. Don't be afraid to make fun of yourself. The weaknesses, mistakes, and anxieties you share may be the same emotions the leaders are feeling – and when that is the case, they will be far more likely to listen and absorb what you're saying...

...because they trust you.

Be yourself. Be vulnerable. Wear your emotions on your sleeve as you tell the story. Not only will leaders connect to your authenticity, you can use those emotions to bring your stories to life.

12. **YOU** are responsible.

As your storytelling skills increase, so does the impact you can have on others. While listeners will take their own messages from your stories, you can still guide the direction. With greater influence comes greater responsibility. All of us have the responsibility to lead people in a direction that is useful to them – not to us.

And finally:

Always remember the context. When you speak to leaders you have a lot more freedom to develop stories, but less so when you use PowerPoint and even less when you write articles. That's not to say stories can't be used, though: even a quick story or a brief metaphor can bring an article to life.

For more information on executive coaching and other leadership development programs using 360 Feedforward Coaching, please email us at **Coach@GlobalCoachGroup.com**.

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