The Art of Storytelling

Idea In Short

Master storytelling by knowing your audience, structuring ideas logically and making people care. Appeal to the head, heart and hand. Invite listeners to fill in blanks rather than spoon-feeding them every detail.

Storytelling Matters for Professionals

Most professionals agree that storytelling is important for career success. In a survey of working professionals and MBAs, respondents rated storytelling 6.3 out of 7 on importance. Storytelling connects people and builds rapport. It gets a bad reputation because less talented, lazier people sometimes advance simply because they are good talkers. Storytelling can be used for good or evil. The assumption here is that you will use your powers for good.

Inputs to Good Storytelling

Engineers understand process. They know what an input is and what an output is. The same thinking applies to storytelling. Common inputs from professionals include bringing the problem to the forefront and creating a storyline with an underdog protagonist. Know your audience and their interests. Be the expert who comes prepared. Frame the story, touch the high points and avoid dragging people through noise.

Be likable and be yourself. Convey a simple message that is easy to follow. Have a point of view and do not waste their time. Address the question every listener asks: what is in it for me? Create suspense, keep people engaged and spark curiosity. Engage their senses because people learn differently through sight, sound and movement.

Outputs of Good Storytelling

Design thinking asks not what you said or what you taught, but how the audience feels. After hearing a thoughtful story, how do you want the audience to feel? You want them engaged and provoked to take action. You want them inspired with more energy than they arrived with. You want them confident in the recommendation or better informed to make choices.

You want them aligned and onboard. You want them curious to hear more and ready to start a genuine discussion. You want them thinking about their own thinking. You want them feeling accountable for what comes next. These outcomes distinguish a presentation from a story that moves people to act.

Storytelling Is Human and Vulnerable

Research suggests that human brains are wired for stories. Books are a relatively new invention in the arc of history. People are more accustomed to hearing words than reading them. Do not be a business robot. Humans make terrible robots because we are emotional, creative, stubborn, moody, loyal and often petty. Thank goodness. Being human is perhaps the only thing that cannot be outsourced to a machine. Go with your rare and valuable resources.

Storytelling Bridges People

It seems like people are lonelier than ever. Polarized media asks everyone to make simplistic, bimodal judgments. Red states and blue states. Default choices and false equivalence. Storytelling offers a safe, fun and reasonable middle ground. It breaks through the silos of individual experience to transcend toward a bigger truth. In the end, people discover they share a lot in common. Everyone has failed at something. Everyone has something to teach. Everyone was once an awkward teenager.

Know Your Audience

This seems basic, yet most people are wildly insensitive to one fact: it is not about you, it is about them. How long is the talk? How many people attend? How informed are they? Is the talk first thing in the morning before coffee, or right after lunch? Is it the end of the quarter when people are nervous about hitting sales targets? Who are the opinion leaders in the room? Who are the meeting terrorists?

Are you a finder, minder or grinder? The answer changes your approach. If you are a minder speaking to a grinder, give clear directions and set high expectations. Motivate them to do great, often tedious work. Help them understand why the work matters. Demonstrate openness and create a culture of learning. If you are a minder speaking to a finder, ease their concerns and cover just the basics. Highlight problem areas if any. Ask how you can make their life easier and manage up.

Appeal to the Head, Heart and Hand

You want to use stories to make a difference and get people to act. This means your story must be sensible for the head, motivating for the heart and doable for the hand. The best client presentations are the ones where the PowerPoint never leaves your bag. You have done the pre-wiring, the nemawashi, and satisfied their intellect, emotional concerns and skeptical questions. You want the client to say that it makes sense and they are ready to proceed.

Structure Your Ideas Logically

In a corporate setting, logical structure is critically important. The flow of the story must be easy to follow. Diagrams help because different shapes have stories. The audience needs to know where you are headed, whether through slides or verbal narrative. Nothing is more painful than a room full of confused looks and folded arms. Keep it simple. The spine of your story should be obvious. This actually gives you more freedom to explore, laugh, joke, walk around, illustrate or simply pause and let the room go quiet.

Use Examples

Great stories are specific. You want people to remember the stories long after they leave the room. Consider how Toby Cosgrove, chief executive of Cleveland Clinic, answered questions in interviews. He communicated clearly and with heart. Feedback noted that he could have included a patient story to make the message even more memorable. Specificity transforms abstract ideas into experiences the audience can feel and recall.

Make Me Care

Attention spans are short. More than half of blog readers will have abandoned a post before

reaching this point. People carry postage-stamp-sized screens strapped to their wrists. Are you more interesting than the latest streaming series? More controversial than celebrity gossip? Why should anyone pay attention to you? Why is this relevant to their life? Simon Sinek made a splash when he talked about starting with why. 1 For leaders who get work done through people, you have to motivate the heart. The what and the how can be looked up online. The why is what moves people.

Invite Listeners to the Table

This is a new approach for many. Many professionals tell stories in classrooms and boardrooms where they control the environment. Andrew Stanton, Pixar director of Finding Nemo and Wall-E, explained in his TED talk that audiences do not want to be spoon-fed. 2 He argues that absence of information pulls people in. Provide the framework. Paint the picture with detailed context. Keep the storyline clean enough to follow. Do not baby the audience. Bring 80 percent of the puzzle and let them fill in the remaining 20 percent themselves. Leave a few things unsaid.

Be More Like You

Everyone is radically different. Storytelling is not science nor art. Like management, it is a practice. As a practitioner, put in the time to improve. Improve your word choice. Learn witty quotations. Learn to pause when you speak. Definitely do not read your slides. You can copy your way to good, but great is variable. Great is you. If someone just read your story, speech or email, would they know it was you?

Facts are cheap. Anything searchable in ten seconds is not worth much. Once you get past the obvious best practices and textbooks, the real questions are these. What do you think? Why do you think that? What evidence do you have? What would make you change your mind? I think something different, what is your reaction?

Bring Energy and Clarity

Satya Nadella, the iconic leader of Microsoft, said he looks for energy and clarity from new hires. This is exactly what powerful storytelling does. It gets people pumped up and it gets people clear. 3 Storytelling is not reserved for TED-style talks with 800 people. It happens all the time. If you are persuading anyone of anything, it is storytelling. If you are walking

your client back to their office from a meeting, it is storytelling. If you are finding smart ways to say no to a client, it is storytelling. If you are asking a spouse to run a half marathon, it is storytelling.

- 1Start With Why
- 2Andrew Stanton: The Clues To A Great Story
- 3Satya Nadella's Leadership Principles

Summary

Storytelling is human, vulnerable and irreplaceable. It bridges people across silos and perspectives. Leaders who combine energy, clarity and authenticity will always outperform those who read slides. Practice deliberately and develop your own voice.