

Telling Stories for Better Communication

How do we ensure our communication is understood? How do we get communication to be relevant, interesting, and exciting to the other participant?

In communication we understand that there are two key elements – one is the information you want to impart, and the second is the method that you choose to use. The main methods are verbal, written, and nonverbal, each with their own strengths and weaknesses.

By far the fastest and easiest is verbal communication, and this is an area where we have the most errors, the most mistakes, the most misinterpretations, and the most miscommunications. If you think back to the successful communications that you remember in your conscious mind, many of them will have a common element, that is, they are a story.

From the time we tell stories to our young children at night before they go to bed, listen to their stories from the playground, listen to their stories from the college grounds, and listen to stories from our family members, team members, customer and clients, we realize that the most powerful communication is a story.

As human beings involved in business, we love stories. We love stories of success, we love stories of disasters, we love stories of interesting problems being overcome.

As a good communicator, the power to create a story makes the communication of the information much more powerful and much more interesting.

A good story has three main components – a beginning, a middle, and an end.

In the beginning of the story you need to set the scene, describe the problems, describe the people involved, describe the situation, and perhaps even add a time element.

In the middle, you should build on the information, tell the story of how the people overcame the problem, or investigated the problem and the solutions that they looked at, or how the client worked through with your sales rep the problems, or the steps that were taken to evaluate and analyse the problems or the situation or what was happening at the time, and the people's thoughts, and their fears, and what they wanted to change and what they didn't want to change, and then start drawing towards a conclusion of the story.

The end needs to have a successful conclusion to overcoming the problem, preferably with your product, service, or people being the hero, a logical set of steps that has now come into place through the use of a formula or through the weaving of the story so that it became rational that this was the next step to take, a summary of actions to take to follow up, and perhaps even a moral to the story or a key point, or personal activity that people can engage in.

Towards the end you may even allow time for questions, always give this as an advanced warning before you start your ending summary of action, tell the audience there will be an opportunity for questions when you complete your summary of action. Then at the completion of your story invite questions, as people have now been prepared, even if over a few minutes, to think up the questions.

You can improve the art of your story in the way in which you add tone of voice, loudness of voice, perhaps even add some sounds within the voice so that the mind picture that is created in the theatre that is your mind, becomes more vivid.

Your body language gestures, such as moving the arms, waving the hands, nodding the head, all add to the effectiveness of the picture that will be created from the verbal presentation.

Because people are interested in people, and people do business with people, the good communicator uses stories that involve people to best effect. These become highly interesting, they become stimulating, and best of all they get listened to.

Well told stories like “The Trojan Horse” have managed to survive for over 3,500 years, since emerging as a Greek legend. How long will your communication of the information last in your environment?

While the best stories are certainly verbal, because of the theatre of the mind activity, of course you can create a story in writing, and by emails, using exactly the same format approach.

Your story becomes a scene in which the listener/reader can place themselves as a participant, and judge for themselves how interesting the presentation was by the value of the story.

While it is reasonably obvious that you can use a story to sell a customer or a client on a new product or service, think of the other uses for stories, such as telling a story about how successful a customer was having used your product or service which then becomes a testimonial story or a motivational story to your own team. Telling a story to implement a change in procedure is more likely to have the procedure adopted, than issuing a set of new rules.

Management reporting in a story style is much more interesting to listen to, and the figures come alive when you are told a story about how the success of the combined team’s effort has been.

Personal stories that come from the heart are always going to be remembered better than stories that are copied from somebody else.

The length of time it takes to tell a story should never be a judgement on the story. Human beings have attention time spans that run in 20 minute time cycles, so a story that is anywhere from several minutes to 20 minutes will be remembered with ease.

If you have more than one story, then it becomes a speech.

The speech in itself, as a structure, is just a collection of stories, so if you want to create a speech just add up your stories.

Even negative impact seems to have much less fear attached to it if the changes demanded are put into a story.

Good stories then become great communication tools.

So go on now, review your stories!

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