

How to Tell Stories to Communicate Vision

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2008, published in the Houston Home Journal on Sat., February 9, 2008

“When you dream alone, it’s just a dream. But when you dream together, it’s already the beginning of a new reality.” Brazilian proverb

As a leader, a major responsibility is to prepare others for what lies ahead. Perhaps a clear direction has already been established. Maybe you want to engage the imagination of your team members relative to an inspiring “what could be” vision.

Stephen Denning, in his book *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling*, offers guidance for leaders who want to “motivate people not only to take action but to do so with energy and enthusiasm.”

I’ve experienced the power that a well-told story can have in harnessing energy and stimulating individuals to move from their daily reality into a better future state. I want to improve my skills at commanding that kind of interest.

Storytelling is a performance art. Denning explains that you can’t master skiing just by reading about it. Similarly, you’ll need practical storytelling experience to develop your ability to engage listeners. Denning’s guidance certainly helps. I share here what I considered to be significant suggestions.

Speak as if you are talking with a single individual. Your story will be most engaging if it appears to be spontaneous, as if it just occurred to you to share the event with your audience. Each thought should feel like a natural progression from the previous thought. Your delivery should sound as if it is a dialogue with a friend.

Keep the story focused, simple, and clear. Despite the appearance of spontaneity, your story should be well planned and rehearsed. The focus should be on the content of the story, not on your brilliance as a storyteller. Eliminate all ambiguity, doubt, and unusual mannerisms.

Present the story as inherently valuable. There is no need to seek permission or to apologize for sharing your information in story form. The audience presumes the story relates to a larger role-- that the elements of the story will be relevant in a significant way to the organization’s needs or opportunities.

Be yourself. You are sharing insights that you have discovered. You want the audience to know them also. Present the information in the story with the conviction you have of knowing that it is true and appropriate for the situation. Your implication should be that each listener is free to draw his or her own conclusion, but you are enthusiastic (or disappointed or curious or whatever other emotion is appropriate) because the evidence leads to insights that we all can share.

Rehearse your delivery. How can your story sound spontaneous if you practice telling it? If you mentally relive the story each time you tell it, the message will seem fresh to the audience.

Perform. Storytelling is a performance art. There is no need to be exaggerated, but you can do better than parking yourself behind the podium and reading from your notes. Connect with all parts of the audience, looking directly at and engaging personally as many individuals as you can. Move toward the listeners, not away from them. Connect as if engaging each one in dialogue.

Know your audience. You cannot connect with your audience if you don’t know them. At least know about them. What are their interests and hopes? What do they have to gain or lose?

You may already be a superb storyteller. If you are, please know that I am growing in this area. I welcome contact from anyone who wants to offer additional suggestions!

Dennis Hooper is a certified leadership development coach, supporting leaders who are intent on improving their already healthy organizations. Tell Dennis your story by calling (478)-988-0237, or send an e-mail to him at dhooper2@juno.com.