

Use Stories to Communicate Your 'Sticky' Vision

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For managers and leaders, talk is work! According to Henry Mintzberg in his book *The Nature of Managerial Work*, talking comprises 78 percent of what managers actually do with their time.

“If you can learn to talk more effectively, you can become much more productive.” Helping you do that is Stephen Denning’s objective in his book *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling*.

Denning acknowledges that many business leaders are skeptical about stories. They know that hard facts are what drive business thinking, cutting through myths, gossip, and speculation. “Like most business executives, I knew that analytical was good, anecdotal was bad. The strength of analysis lies in its objectivity, its impersonality, its heartlessness.”

“Yet this strength is also a weakness. Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart. And that’s where you must go if you are to motivate people not only to take action, but to do so with energy and enthusiasm. Leadership involves inspiring people to act.”

Imagine this. You have thought deeply about “what could be” in your organization. Yet others live daily in the reality of “what is now.” They cannot envision what you see so clearly in your imagination. You want to inspire them to consider what’s possible. How do you do that?

Find an appropriate story. Chip and Dan Heath, in their book *Made to Stick*, suggest that stories are a powerful medium for teaching and inspiring. “Stories are usually concrete. Most have emotional and unexpected elements. Make sure they are simple, reflecting your core message.”

After extensive analysis, the Heath brothers conclude that most inspirational stories have one of three major plots: Challenge, Connection, or Creativity. The type of story to tell depends on the objective you want to accomplish.

In the Challenge plot, the main character overcomes daunting challenges and succeeds. “Challenge plots appeal to our perseverance and courage. They make us want to work harder, take on new challenges, and overcome obstacles. They inspire us to act.”

In the Connection plot, “people develop a relationship that bridges a gap—racial, class, ethnic, religious, demographic, or otherwise. Connection plots make us want to help others, be more tolerant of others, work with others, and love others.”

“The Creativity plot involves someone making a mental breakthrough, solving a longstanding puzzle, or attacking a problem in an innovative way. Creativity plots make us want to do something different, to be creative, and to experiment with new approaches.”

If you are telling a story at the kickoff of a new project, use a Challenge plot. If you are conducting a team-building activity, tell a Connection plot story. If you are working to reinvent the company culture, go with a Creativity plot. Be conscious of the purpose you want to achieve. Select the kind of story that will best achieve your desired outcome.

Does the thought of sharing your vision through generating and telling stories feel a bit overwhelming to you? The Heath brothers suggest that you not put pressure on yourself to author relevant stories. They point out that the hugely successful *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series of books contains uplifting, energizing, inspirational stories, none of which were written by the authors! They merely collected and presented them.

You, too, can train yourself to spot stories for later use—in newspapers and magazines, at family gatherings, and over your company’s break table. With your vision clearly in mind and your subconscious on the lookout for new and interesting ways to share it, you’ll just have to work on your presentation style. And I’ll provide guidance on that next week.

Dennis Hooper is a certified leadership development coach, helping leaders develop the capabilities of future leaders. Call Dennis at (478)-988-0237, or e-mail him at dhooper2@juno.com.