

# STORYTELLING



## A LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY

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What relevance does 'Storytelling' have with leadership competency and business in the emerging market and business economy. Storytelling has been around since the dawn of civilization, so why is it now such a hot topic in business circles?

Charlotte Linde, a linguist at Stanford University and the Institute for Research on Learning in Menlo Park, California, has shown in her research, how "stories of identity help organizations bring in new members, adapt to change, and crucially, define who is "us" (and who "them") and "why we're here". Linde makes the connection between "stories" and "institutional memory". For Linde "they are principal means by which groups remember."

According to Howard Gardner, Professor of Education at Harvard, stories are more important than memos, mission statements, newsletters, speeches and policy manuals. They constitute the single most powerful weapons in the leader's literary arsenal.

David Snowden, Director at IBM's Knowledge Management Institute, in his writings for *Fortune* magazine (1998) mentions " Nothing serves a leader better than a knack for narrative. Stories anoint role models, impart values, and show how to execute indescribably complex task."

Today, more and more people are talking about how stories can be used to create change, build culture, disseminate learning, and capture knowledge. Thinkers like former World Bank Vice President Stephen Denning are elevating the discourse with disciplined tomes like *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative* and *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*.

David Hutchens, author of *Outlearning the Wolves* invites readers to consider the practice of storytelling as a provocative first step in the journey of organizational learning. According to Hutchens "Storytelling is a solid business discipline that goes to the core of your leadership."

Some organizations have revised their leadership competency models to include storytelling as a core capability. And an unmistakable constructivist tone is creeping into the business vernacular: "Markets are conversations," claimed one dramatic online manifesto as it slapped organizations out of their comas and challenged them to find more relevant and human ways of talking with customers and among themselves.

Let's look at the organizational or business context. Business people not only have to understand their companies' past, they must also project the future – by creating possible pictures or scenarios of possible future events – to try and anticipate the life of their companies or their own personal life.

We always hear and read about leaders with vision – how inspirational leadership is about creating a desired picture of the future. How does a leader paint that picture so vividly and passionately, a picture that only he /she can see while his people not having seen it so far? Through the power of weaving appropriate words breathing life into a non-existent world. A big part of a CEO's job is to motivate people to reach certain goals. To do that, he /she must engage their emotions, and the key to their hearts is story.

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What about other levels in the organization? Persuasion is the centrepiece of business activity. Customers must be persuaded to buy your products or services, your employees must be persuaded to agree and align to new strategic plans or reorganization, investors to buy your stocks and partners to sign the next deal. Yet most managers and executives struggle to communicate, let alone inspire. Too often they get lost in complex presentations, dry memos and circulars – even the most carefully built up communication exercises are greeted with cynicism or outright dismissal.

It is believed that there are two ways to persuade people. The first is by using conventional rhetoric's, which is what most executives are trained in. It is an intellectual process, usually consisting of PowerPoint presentations in which you say, 'here's our major achievement / biggest challenge etc.... and here is how we performed / what we need to do etc...' And you build your case with statistics and data and sometimes quotes from authoritative sources as reference points. Does this work – let's for a moment, examine the thought process of the people you are talking to. First of all they have their own set of experiences and facts and also reference points with maybe different perspectives to what you have stated. While you are trying to persuade or convince them – they are mentally arguing with what you said or presented, within their heads. Secondly, if you do succeed in winning them over, you have done so purely on an intellectual basis. Is that good enough? Maybe no.... people are not inspired by intellect or reason only!

The other way – and ultimately a more powerful way – is by integrating an idea with emotions – by telling a compelling story. You can arouse a lot of emotion and energy in your audience while weaving information about the subject into your story, by your narrative style. It normally takes rationality only to build logical arguments into your presentation and rhetoric to present. But it demands creativity, vivid imagination, insight, passion and skill to present an idea as a story that has enough emotional power to become inspiring and memorable. Imagine, if you can present your idea as a story that appeals to your listeners to such an extent that it gets them to rise to their feet with applause rather than yawns and continuous checking their watches while the presentation is on, waiting for it to be over.

Robert McKee, an award-winning screenwriter and director, who did his PhD in cinema arts at Michigan, was screenwriting lecturer at the University of South California' School of Cinema and Television and later formed his own company, Two Arts, took his lectures on storytelling worldwide. McKee believes that stories "fulfil a profound human need to grasp the patterns of living – not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience."

Stories have been implanted in our minds and lives – hundreds of time – since the time our mothers took us on their knees and told us tales. Good books, movies, plays attract us and sometimes inspire us. Human beings naturally want to work through stories. If we look at even the latest best sellers in management writing, there are plenty of examples of the concepts and message being garbed in the form of well-narrated stories.



According to researchers, narrative is the most powerful way humans have to communicate and remember information. It is something we all do all the time and is one of the key organizing principles of our mind. Cognitive psychologists have pointed out that the human mind, in its attempt to understand and remember, assembles the bits and pieces of experience into a story, beginning with a personal desire, a life purpose and then enacting the struggle against the forces that block the desire.

So what's a story? Essentially, a story expresses how and why life changes. It begins with a situation in which life is relatively balanced – then there's an event that throws life out of balance – how subjective expectations crash into objective reality – the story then goes on to narrate an effort to restore balance, how the opposing forces are dealt with and the issues resolved – and ultimately success. Of course you do not tell a beginnings-to-end tale describing how results meet expectations – that would be boring. Instead, one has to dramatically display the struggle between expectation and reality in all its grimness.

But what makes one story resonate with us, even after many years, while another almost instantly becomes yesterday's news? That's skill and needs to be learnt and cultivated.

Finally, how can those of us committed to bringing about positive change – either corporate or political – use the power of story for the common good?

Well that's another story.... 

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Over the past decade, a significant corporate change has been in progress. This global revolution, the new economy, refers to the new world of business that emphasizes people who are committed to new ways of working, living and growing.

In the new economy, competition is global, capital is abundant, ideas are developed quickly and cheaply and people are willing to change jobs often. In this environment, people and their skills and ideas are the prime resource, a resource that is becoming increasingly scarce.

Gray Matters comprises of consultants who understand the challenges that businesses face in attracting, retaining and motivating people in this competitive environment. We work in partnership with our clients to deliver people solutions which would help accelerate growth for the organizations, based on our knowledge of businesses and expertise in HR leading practices.

Our solutions and approaches unlock the full potential of an organization – and deliver real, measurable, substantial and meaningful business results.

We offer the following services in the people solutions gamut:

- Organization Vision, Mission & Values**
- Organization design and Mapping**
- Job Banding & Evaluation**
- Performance Management System**
- Balanced Scorecard Design & Implementation**
- Competency Mapping & Assessments**
- Compensation Strategy & Structures**
- Reward Strategies**
- Leadership Development & Transformation**
- HR Strategy formulation**
- HR Effectiveness**
- HR Measurements & Audit**
- HR Communication & Branding**
- HR Operational Improvement**
- HR Governance**
- HR Technology enablement**
- Implementation Support**
- HR for Family Businesses**

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