

Career Compass No. 50:

Storytelling- A Powerful Way to Lead and Communicate

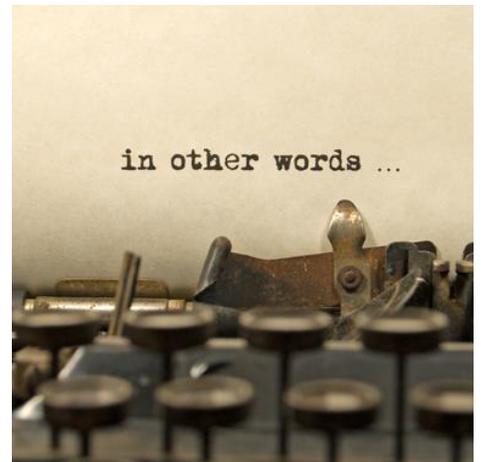
In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Frank Benest explains how to persuasively use stories to influence public policy decisions.

by Dr. Frank Benest
June 1, 2016

I'm a traffic engineer in a small Midwestern city. I just had a difficult experience presenting a mobility safety plan to my city council. I did a lot of research on best practices to better protect pedestrians and bicyclists along a fairly busy street, while still maintaining reasonable traffic flow. As part of my report, I presented traffic count, accident data, and made a set of well-balanced recommendations based on the information.

The council members seemed to show support for my recommendations until the public comment portion of the hearing, when a mother with her son beside her told the council about their experience riding bicycles to his school. She stated that the recommendations did not go far enough and demanded action well beyond what the technical data supported. She blew my presentation out of the water, and the council voted to do what she wanted.

It was very frustrating to see policy-makers ignore our technical recommendations. How do I better communicate our recommendations in the future?



Let me tell you a story.

DR. BENEST: I understand your frustration. As a long-time local government manager, I too have tried to communicate and influence public policy decisions based on sound technical research, best practices, and good staff work. Yet I often failed when a little old lady (or in your case a mother and child) has a personal experience or story that trumps my technical data. Over time, I learned that I had to enhance my leadership and communication skills through story-telling.

WHY STORIES?

We professionals often feel that stories are “fluff.” In fact, stories are the most powerful way to communicate.

Data becomes less important when we are overwhelmed with data. Stories are memorable and make the data “stick.” In research conducted by Stanford University, people retain only 5-10% of the information and message with statistics alone. With data and anecdotes (“stories”), people retain 65-70%.

In addition to helping people retain the message, stories also help leaders connect with their audience. Leadership is all about connection.

Most importantly, stories help us win hearts as well as minds. As opposed to data alone, stories can inspire us to act.

In short, data is necessary but completely insufficient. In making recommendations to senior management or to your governing board, you certainly need data or you will get thrown out of the room. However, to carry the day, you need a narrative to reinforce the data.

Brené Brown defined stories as “data with a soul.” (See Brené Brown’s TED.com talk [“The Power of Vulnerability.”](#))

WHAT IS AN APPROPRIATE STORY?

A good story that adds value to the data must be a “true” story. An appropriate story must be relevant to the issue and aligned with the data and recommendations. Again, a good story makes the data come alive.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF A GOOD STORY?

Good stories often have some typical elements:

- The stories are personal with a strong point of view.
- People can relate to the protagonist or situation.
- The narrative involves a big problem, failure, or misfortune.
- The audience develops “rooting interest” in the main character.
- The story builds to a conclusion.
- The experience includes lessons to be learned.
- There’s a “call to action.”

WHAT SIMPLE STORY COULD YOU USE?

To enhance your safety presentation, you could share a personal experience (which is a “story”). For example, you could start your presentation by briefly relating how you as a resident drive everyday on this

well-traveled street from your home to work at city hall. You also often walk this route to the downtown district for lunch. You could relate that due to traffic speeds you feel uncomfortable crossing the street as a pedestrian even though the crosswalks are marked.

You can conclude your personal experience by stating that the street must work and be safe for all users. You could emphasize that staff have tried to develop a set of well-balanced recommendations based on the experiences of other cities, data gathered by the city related to the functioning of the street, and input from several community meetings.

While your presentation may include photos of several traffic-calming measures, you might use a prop to enhance the narrative. For instance, you could hold up one of the bright flags that you recommend pedestrians use as a safety measure in crossing the street.

This is a simple yet effective story. It is aligned with data and underscores the need for the proposed safety plan that works for all. It also attaches a human face (yours) to the proposal and humanizes you.

WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF A GOOD STORY?

A classic story has three acts:

- Act one introduces the main character facing a challenge or some obstacles.
- Act two involves some action that is taken by the protagonist or someone else.
- Act three features a “happy” conclusion, a triumph over adversity, or some ending with an important lesson for us all.

In your story to the council, you are introduced in act one. In act two, you encounter problems using the street. In act three, you conclude that the challenges will be addressed by your recommendations.

WHEN SHOULD YOU USE A STORY OR NARRATIVE?

Always or often. As a leader and communicator, you must serve as a “bard,” making issues come alive and inspiring action. You can tie stories to efforts

- Improving customer service.
- Promoting an organizational culture of excellence.
- Developing partnerships with business, neighborhood or school groups.
- Supporting the senior citizen population.
- Promoting a new technology.
- Overcoming a major organizational or community challenge.

WHO SHOULD TELL THE STORY?

You as the leader can tell the story. Or, you can invite several users or partners to share their experiences as a way to make the data come alive.

In terms of the public hearing regarding the safety plan, you could have involved in your presentation someone from the local bicycle coalition or the PTA to share their experiences. These narratives could have replaced your story or augmented it.

HOW CAN YOU IMPROVE YOUR STORY-TELLING?

HERE ARE TEN TIPS TO ENHANCE YOUR STORY-TELLING SKILLS:

1. Search for stories. Be on the look-out for personal experiences that can become a story. This requires self-reflection and that you know and have tried to understand your own personal history.
2. Critique the stories of others. Be aware of the stories told by others and critique them. Was the story relevant? Did the story connect you to the storyteller? Did the narrative include elements of a powerful story? For example, did the story exhibit a strong point of view or allow the audience to develop a "rooting interest"? Did the narrative have the classic three-act structure?
3. Outline the story. Never write out the full story and read it. It is better to make some notes outlining the sequence of events. Don't memorize the story as part of the presentation. You want the telling to seem natural, like you are at a cocktail party and sharing an experience with a small circle of friends.
4. Remove the "fluff." After you outline the story, examine the story with a very critical eye. Oftentimes, we love our stories so much that we include a lot of context and detail that make the story too long, get in the way of the conclusions or lessons, and/or simply bore the audience. You need to eliminate the fluff so the story is "tight" and leads to the conclusions desired.
5. Practice in a safe environment. Try out your material in a comfortable and "safe" environment. Comedian Chris Rock practices his jokes and stories at dive bars. I practice stories in the car as I'm driving the freeways.
6. Debrief your stories. After telling a story, always debrief the story so you can refine it. Ask yourself (or better yet a friend or colleague who heard the story) the following questions: What went well with the story? What did not go so well? How could I improve the story with the next telling?
7. Start a story file. Once you become more aware of personal experiences that can turn into powerful stories, begin a paper or digital file and throw in any stories that can be used in internal and external presentations. In hunting for a relevant story, you first go to your story file. Your unit can create a file that contains your collective stories.
8. Use stories at the beginning of staff meetings. To showcase stories and practice storytelling, make it a practice for someone at the beginning of each staff meeting to tell an informal story (i.e., share a work or personal experience that they or someone else had relevant to your endeavors). You can also invite internal or external customers or partners to join you at the beginning of a staff meeting and share their experiences with your services or joint efforts.
9. Use a prop. A prop helps illustrate the story. The suggested bright pedestrian flag to illustrate a safety measure supports your story.
10. Show "vulnerability." If you want people in the audience to connect with you and "root" for you, show vulnerability. Share "my worst experience" or a fabulous flop.

Most importantly, you must practice this skill. Like most behaviors, storytelling gets better the more you do it.

HOW DOES ONE START?

To get started in developing this capability, I suggest the following:

- Critique other leaders as they tell stories and try to influence others.
- Incorporate a personal experience or other story in your next presentation. Ensure that this first effort is in a fairly comfortable environment, such as your unit staff meeting.
- Get feedback from a trusted colleague after the meeting so you can tweak the story going forward.
- Try out the story or another story in your next formal presentation.
- Start a story file.

STORY-TELLING AS A KEY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY

The ability to tell relevant and engaging stories will expand your leadership capacity and effectiveness. Stories will

- Help people connect with you.
- Help the audience retain your message and make it “sticky.”
- Persuade others.
- Inspire others to act with you.