



The Power of Stories

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Telling a story is probably the most common form of human communication. Our parents read us stories, we learn to read them to ourselves, we tell them to each other. Stories allow us to connect to each other. When we hear a story, we can fit it with a part of our own story, that ongoing narrative of our life which unfolds day by day.

But we aren't always as effective at story telling in our organizations. For a variety of reasons, we often fall back on exchanging data, or argument, or moral lectures. We get into the habit of formalized business communication that often ignores the basic approach of simply telling our story.

Of course, telling a story well isn't that simple. We need to learn the effective techniques of story telling, how to emphasize the important things, how to build rhythm and drama, how to keep our audience engaged. And we need to think about art so our story doesn't mumble, it sings!

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Stories do a number of important things. They can set a human context for the work we do, so that it is not simply about 1,000 exploited workers or 500 struggling farmers. A story can tell how the impact of exploitation on a woman can affect her children's day at school, her relations with her community, her health. It can follow a farmer from sodden fields to a reluctant store buyer who doesn't want his crop, back to the family home where the bad news permeates dinner hour and lasts until he goes back to the field the next day. Through stories we see the worker and the farmer as our neighbours, and we want to see something change to make their life better.

Stories are the coin of politicians and the media. They know the power of stories, they use them, and they like people to relate to them with stories. Organizations often wonder why the media or the government hasn't reacted to their latest well argued report. They look at other organizations who write less worthy reports that seem to have more impact or get more coverage, and wonder why. The reason is often that the latter group tells better stories.

Stories are also a good way for organizations to be accountable. They provide a window for the majority of people, those who won't read the financial statements or annual report. These people simply want you to tell them what you do.

One tremendous benefit of stories is that they can help unlock a lot of residual knowledge in organizations. Over years of operation, we all tend to build up experience and knowledge, yet we often do little with it, beyond using it to fashion our own work. Once we begin to use stories to communicate, or persuade, or inspire, we find that we are bringing our knowledge into the light, and others can make use of it. Many of us have been concerned with “knowledge management” in recent years, and have struggled for the right mechanisms to bring what we know to the surface. Storytelling is a powerful way to do it. Stories have the ability to transcend data, information, argument, moral suasion, and advocacy. Stories can give us the power to inspire, to connect people to social change personally and with deep understanding.

The upcoming Maytree Conference on October 1 has the theme *Telling Stories: Creating Change*. We have invited journalists, advocates, lawyers, writers and communication experts to help us become better at telling our stories. We’ll look at why stories are important, how to construct powerful stories, and how to think about the stories audiences like to hear. Come and join us.