



03-2022

The Leader as a Story-Teller

As a child I loved the bedtime routine. It culminated with a bedtime story. My favorite was Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak. I think fondly of those times and as I continue to explore what I think it means to be a leader I can see that my parents were in the act displaying one of the hallmark qualities of a powerful leader - their ability to tell a story. You see it didn't even need to be their story, but the leadership quality was their ability to tell the story in a way that connected the listener (me in this case) to the message.

Storytelling is one of the most important traits that great leaders possess. In *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*, the author, Howard Gardner, provides a number of profiles of leaders. He profiles some rich, some poor, some well-educated and some from the "school of hard knocks". His main message is that leaders achieve their effectiveness largely through the stories they relate. Context is important. Relatability is important. The critical message is imbedded. The story telling is critical to the message being heard.

Story telling is in fact how history was recorded and past down before the written word. Stories were also told through art using drawings. The Egyptians used hieroglyphics. The Greeks and Romans allowed their storied come to life in their Forums and on the stage of their Amphitheaters. Anywhere you go in the "old world" there was story-telling. Through genetic adaptation and conditioning the human brain is in fact now fully conditioned to hearing and understanding stories. As a leader you need to be aware that you can hone your skill at story-telling and take great advantage of your people's natural ability to listen if you do it right.

As a life-long occupational hygienist and leadership consultant I have spent the last 35 years being invited into companies and working with them on a particular project or program. Often my role is to dissect the company management system, auditing it, and looking for poorly controlled risks. My first impression with companies occurs when I am greeted at reception. First impressions are rarely wrong. When interacting with the employees assigned to work with me I listen to their stories. It doesn't take long to pick up on things and figure out what is really going on.

Each of the stories told, whether it by the receptionist or the VP of Operations has a place in helping me understand the organization. Each story has an explicit message and important implicit messaging too. A great deal can be learned about corporate values – those being applied and those that are being ignored. It is also true that imbedded in the stories are indicators about the future of the organization, its past, and its leaders. Sometimes those stories tell a good news story. Sometimes they foretell a worrisome future. Regardless these stories tell the truth about the organization. In effect the stories reveal the organizational DNA.

In the same way stories and story-telling have great power to alter the organizational climate and over time the organizational culture. It is in fact part of the leaders' responsibility to manage this aspect of the organizational climate. By managing the message and being active in the method leaders have the opportunity and capacity to change the stories that are being told.

Many leaders will respond to my thinking by saying that they have better things to do with their time than to be the lunchtime story-teller. It is my view and opinion that little else is more important if you want to manage the message and win the hearts and minds of the masses. You need to take this responsibility seriously. I would encourage you to try this out.

It doesn't take much time or much effort really. As a leader you already know the history and you have a built in platform to get your message to the employees. In fact, as a leader most employees will be encouraged and engaged by simply having you take time to share with them. The more informal the interaction the greater the perceived value of the interaction by the employees. By paying attention to a few important considerations, leaders can make great use of these opportunities.

People rarely remember the facts that may be communicated at an official company meeting or briefing. The more you are able to imbue your message into a "narrative worth listening to" the more your message will be heard, and its meaning will resonate. Stories told well are memorable.

Whether you know it or not as a leader one of your key roles is the sharer of information. In order to move an organization forward, everyone needs to be in the "right seats on the bus" and ready to move in the same direction. By telling stories and having them re-interpreted and then re-told by other employees, your organization becomes better aligned such that the messages the employees tell become part of their thinking. Employees will repeatedly state that they are left in the dark about what is going on. In spite of your best efforts they will say "nobody tells me anything". Communication through story telling can be one of the most effective ways for you to meet this responsibility to share information.

Story-telling if told the right way has the ability to captivate the entire employee group and bind the group together toward common goals. Trust is built when faith in the leadership is developed. Faith in leadership comes from exhibiting a certain authenticity. Your "authenticity" is on display when you tell a thoughtful but relevant story. So I suppose the question as a leader, or future leader, is how do you get better at story-telling? Practically speaking there are a number of things you can do immediately to make your stories more impactful:

1. Be Authentic – "keep it real". Being authentic in story-telling means you are the same person in front of the group as you are away from the group. People want to know who you really are and what your real motivations are. That is why great leaders know who they are and act that way all of the time. When your motivations are clear your message will more likely stick.
2. Know your Audience – "anticipate concern". Great leaders know their audience and can anticipate concerns, confusion, and push-back before they begin. By anticipating concerns, you can imbue answers to them into your message before they are raised and in doing so you appear to be even more the "all knowing leader".
3. Stay on Point - "Be word-careful". Be careful to keep your message on point and only offer the most pertinent information. The listener is usually thinking WIFM, what is in this for me. Let them know the WIFM.
4. Get better – "Gaining the gift as an orator takes practice". Story telling is an art. Becoming an artisan is an evolution that moves from apprentice, to tradesman, to craftsman and finally to artisan. If you use this skill it will sharpen. The more you take time to craft your message into a story the easier it will become. Fortunately, there are untold opportunities for messaging for the leaders of most organizations. Talk about the company vision and visioning process, share the company strategy, talk about new initiatives, talk about your personal leadership development journey, and above all else get out of your office and talk to people.

Storytelling is one of the few ways we can effectively connect facts, figures, and knowledge with emotion. Stories help all of us make sense of the information being shared through a narrative. We are hard wired to consume the message in the narrative. The best stories are those that can capture the head and the heart of the listener. There is in fact no better way to transfer information, appeal to peoples' natural curiosity, and most importantly, motivate people to act.

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