

# FIVE REASONS TO USE STORIES TO MAKE A POINT



By Lori L. Silverman

Ever wonder how to best communicate an idea? Or reinforce a core company value? Or introduce a key business concept? Why is it that we often rely on email, reports, or lists on PowerPoint slides to relay critical information to others? Our lives are full of stories.

Yet while they are integral to our conversations with family and friends (How was your day? What did you do this past weekend?), they often are not strategically used in the workplace. Here are five reasons you need to add more stories to your daily work communications.

## STORIES ARE MORE MEMORABLE

In many ways, stories are like ballads (think songs by Elvis Presley, the Eagles, and Jimmy Buffett). They have a beginning—words that paint the context (the who, what, where, when and why), a middle—a statement of the obstacle, conflict, or challenge which builds to a climax, and an ending—how the situation was resolved and what was learned in the end. Because of their structure, stories are easy to remember and to retell, thus reinforcing the story's message over and over again.

## STORIES MAKE FOR ATTENTIVE LISTENING

Recently I attended a local professional association meeting. The speaker's topic was on the key components of leadership. The presenter was very credible and a good speaker, she had flash animation and quotes from famous people on her slides, and she shared examples from well-known organizations. Yet, ten minutes into her talk, I noticed people looking at their watches, checking their Palm Pilots, browsing through other materials, and having side conversations. However, when she began to tell a story about her

five-year-old son, audience members stopped what they were doing and gave her their full attention.

Stories captivate us. One might suggest it is a learned trait from childhood when our parents told us bedtime stories. Or perhaps we merely find stories more interesting than other forms of communication because they grab hold of our imagination.

## STORIES ALLOW PEOPLE TO DISCOVER

Read through the following story. As you do, note to yourself what thoughts come to mind.

## FOR LACK OF A SYSTEM

Contributed by Larry P. English,  
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The insurance company needed to understand its risks—exactly what it was paying for through its claims. Employees were downloading claims data so the information could be examined in this manner. As they started analyzing the medical diagnosis codes, they uncovered what appeared to be a problem. One region had a high incidence of hemorrhoid codes—so high that it was way outside the normal distribution. We wondered, "What's going on? What's causing this problem? Is there some sort of an epidemic we don't know about?"

Several of us got in touch with the regional claims supervisor. We explained that other departments were using the data, including the actuarial staff, and asked her what she knew about the situation. She exclaimed, "Oh. That's our data that we use to pay claims. I didn't know anybody else saw it. We use that particular code to identify claimants who are PITAs—you know—a 'pain in the ass.' How else are we to identify problem customers who we need to approach with special caution? If we have to get back in touch with them, this code helps us recognize that there was some sort of problem. This way we're better prepared to deal with the situation."

No matter what the problem may be, all "problems seek solutions." The challenge that comes with this is that the solution may have surprising consequences. So, whenever your problems go in search of a solution, consider whom else the solution may impact.

Did you recall similar situations in your life? Or notice how frequently the wrong solution to a problem is often implemented at work? Or observe how creative the regional claims staff was in generating a way to recognize difficult customers? Stories allow those who hear them to draw personal insights and conclusions, even if the point of the story is given. In this way, stories have the power to teach and inform far beyond the obvious.

## STORIES TOUCH US IN FOUR WAYS

When you read Larry's story, did you laugh? What sort of emotion did you experience? And did it touch the human spirit within you? In addition to making us think, stories have the unique ability to connect with our physical being, our heart and our spirit. They often have greater impact on the listener's behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes than other communication mediums. In fact, many suggest that all stories at their very core are about change. As such, they can inspire people to change—to try a new behavior, to let go of an old attitude, to embrace the future, and to take action.

## STORIES FORGE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE TELLER AND THE LISTENER

Because of the myriad ways stories touch us, they can foster empathy on the part of the listener to the storyteller. If the story is a personal one and is similar to a work or life situation listeners have experienced, they will more closely identify with the teller. In addition, the storyteller may appear to be more of a peer than a

powerful figure, especially if the story that is told speaks to his or her vulnerabilities. While these connections may occur at a subliminal level, they can serve to build rapport and enhance relationships and to bring human connections back into a high-tech world.

## CALL TO ACTION

When given the choice of telling a story or presenting the same information in a more cognitive manner, opt for telling the story. You will command attention and bring about a more significant impact on those who hear it. In the process, you will strengthen your abilities to influence and lead.

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