



Stories are fundamental to the way we learn and to the way we communicate. They are the most efficient way of storing, retrieving, and conveying information. Because hearing a story requires active participation by the listener, stories are the most profoundly social form of human interaction and communication.

Power of Stories

Terrence L. Gargiulo

Organizations must constantly change and adapt. It is tempting to believe that the tools of technology can meet today's market challenges head on. But unless an organization can communicate and learn, there is very little that technology can do. Leaders need processes and strategies to get an accurate read on their companies and to communicate new visions and missions to employees.

Stories can be used strategically to galvanize an organization in many different ways. Stories are everywhere, but not all stories look like stories. If you look at a story as a previously prepared gist of something to say, something that you have said before or heard another say, then a great deal of conversation is simply mutual storytelling.

One of the common misconceptions about stories is that they are used only to convey an intended message. Certainly, stories can communicate a predigested message

such as a moral, but to limit stories to such simplistic forms of communication is to miss out on a whole array of nuances and possibilities. Stories interplay with one another. The same story can evoke totally different responses in different people. The point is not to control what people take away from a story but to engage their imaginations.

Stories do not always begin with the words "once upon a time." Stories can be as short as one or two sentences. They may not even be expressed in words. In fact, a basic premise of stories is that through them we "enact," rather than "announce," our intentions, thoughts, values, or knowledge. Essentially, stories allow us to model what we want to communicate instead of having to explain it.

Here are nine key ways that stories function:

- Stories empower a speaker.
- Stories create an environment.

Table 1

When Are Stories Applicable in Business?	How Are Stories Used in Business?	Who Uses Stories in Business?
Presenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Animating talks and presentations • Anchoring a message • Potentiating a message 	Leaders Public relations Sales Marketing
Imaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product positioning • Appealing to an audience • Dialoguing with customers • Innovating 	Marketing Advertising Sales Customer service Research & Development
Connecting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacing/getting in sync with others • Recruiting • Discovering talents of employees • Problem solving • Finding the critical point in a system 	Sales Market research Human resources Managers/leaders
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training • Developing staff • Knowledge management • Change management 	Trainers Human resources Organizational developers Managers/leaders
Leading/Staff Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building and managing corporate culture • Mentoring and coaching • Engendering loyalty • Cultivating diversity 	Trainers Human resources Managers/leaders
Team Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energizing employees • Creating synergy • Collaborating • Partnering 	Team leaders Managers

- Stories bind and bond individuals.
- Stories engage our minds in active listening.
- Stories negotiate differences.
- Stories encode information.
- Stories are tools for thinking.
- Stories serve as weapons.
- Stories bring about healing.

Table 1 summarizes how organizations can use stories.

People find common ground through stories. Because stories require active listening, people are able to share a depth of experience otherwise not possible through normal dialogue. Stories can emphasize shades of meaning and feelings often left hidden or inadequately expressed in didactic forms of communication. As one person shares a story the listener finds a similar correspondence from his/her experience.

Leaders know that an essential part of their jobs is to initiate and nurture connections between people. Stories facilitate the development of bonds between people, thereby maximizing informal channels of communication. As people overlap in crisscrossing patterns with one another, leaders can leverage these relationships to move information, manage change, promote new understandings, encourage people to take ownership of the organization's success, and catalyze action.

More and more organizations are becoming purposeful in how they use stories. Organizations are going beyond the superficial application of stories and discovering ways to make them a central part of new management practices. Stories have a front seat in discussions about how to transform the cultures of organizations. Leaders start by listening to stories from their employees/customers and in the process

Table 2

1. SIZE “How many people will hear your story?”	Intimate Usually a conversation involving two people, the nature of the exchange is personal.	Small Several people who share good relationships with one another.	Meeting A more formal setting, there is structure to the group interactions; people may or may not know one another well or have good relationships.	Presentation Very formal setting, usually large group.
2. INTENTION “Why do you need to select a story?”	Connect You need to build stronger relationships and bond with your listeners.	Teach You need to elucidate, explain, or help others conceptualize new ideas or concepts.	Transfer You need to communicate key pieces of information.	Entertain You need to break the ice, empower yourself as a speaker, or make people laugh.
3. TRIGGER “What is prompting you to select a story?”	Listen You want to hear what a person is thinking or feeling, so you share a personal story to create an opportunity for reciprocity.	Insight You need to share an epiphany or, while you are listening, you suddenly realize something new.	Reaction You need to respond to another person’s story or comment; you may also be responding to group dynamics.	Plant You need to deliver a very specific message or invoke a specific mood.
	COLUMN VALUE = 1	COLUMN VALUE = 2	COLUMN VALUE = 3	COLUMN VALUE = 4
SCORE 3-6 6-9 9-12	What Kind of Story to Select Personal Story Other People’s Personal Stories Stories From Other Domains		Guide reprinted with permission from M.E. Sharpe’s <i>Strategic Use of Stories in Organizational Communication and Learning</i> .	

realize a whole new way of thinking about their companies.

The simple act of making time for people to share their organizational stories and encouraging them to actively listen yields tremendous results in people’s level of engagement and excitement. As the stories unfold, a tapestry of key stories emerges. These stories define the company’s strengths and become central beacons of purpose and motivation for people. There are additional benefits of informal learning. As the stories spread through the organization they produce new networks of learning and information exchange that might otherwise remain dormant or never discovered.

Stories play a central role in leaders’ relationships by promoting healing. Like muscles that rip under the duress of heavy exercise, relationships are torn by the natural rhythms of people coexisting with one another. Without proper healing these tears cause long lasting damage that can be difficult and even impossible to heal. Stories open channels of communication and allow people to meaningfully converse about the experiences and perceptions that can get in the way of trust and positive energy.

Stories and a Little TLC Produce Business Results—Three Practices to Start Using Today

Tell Stories

Start sharing your personal experiences and ideas in the form of stories. Use every opportunity to enrich your communications by becoming more mindful and purposeful in using stories. Good leaders have a rich index of stories. They find the right story to tell at the right time. For example, stories can enhance the following situations:

- Open meetings with an internal or external customer story.
- Use stories during action reviews.
- Incorporate stories into employee orientation programs.
- Set aside time during all-hands meetings for sharing stories.
- Weave stories into corporate communications.
- Add stories to intranet sites.
- Strengthen business cases with stories.
- Make stories a core part of leadership development and coaching processes.

- Integrate the telling, collection, and analysis of stories into strategic planning.
- Increase the quality of dialogue by using stories to facilitate continuous performance improvement.

Table 2 provides a decision matrix that can be used to determine what type of story to select for a given situation. There are three steps to the process for selecting an appropriate story.

- First, select the word that best describes the size of your group from the row entitled “Size.”
- Then, select the appropriate word from the row labeled, “Intention.”
- Finally, select the best fitting word from the row titled, “Trigger.”

At the bottom of each column there is a number indicating a value. Add up the values of your choices from each row to determine your overall score and recommended storytelling approach, as follows:

- “Personal stories” run the gamut from very recent experiences to experiences deep in our past. There is often a quality of vulnerability associated with sharing a personal story, especially ones from our past. We often relate personal stories in the form of a collage. Stories that are well indexed in our mind are tightly interwoven with one another, and we may feel the desire to share a series of linked stories.
- “Other people’s personal stories” may come from ones they have shared with us or they also may be events we have observed. The major defining characteristic of these stories is that they describe things that have not happened to us.
- “Stories from other domains” can come from any source. Some good examples are books, movies, history, or science, etc. Although that is not an exhaustive list, it gives you the sense that these stories are drawn from many different disciplines.

For example, if you selected *intimate* for size, *connect* for intention, and *listen* for trigger, your total score would be three because each selection’s column score is one. The best category of story to select from would be “personal story.”

There is some overlap between the story and the selection categories’ scores to account for situations that naturally could fall into more than one approach. Remember that this selection grid is meant as a guideline. You may end up with a score of 12 and decide that selecting a personal story is still the best option. As a general rule, personal stories often provide the

greatest value; however, they are not always the most appropriate choice.

Learn From Stories

Tell stories to elicit others to tell their stories, and then learn from them. The more you can get others to share their stories, the more in tune you will be with their needs, ideas, and concerns. Even our own stories have the greatest value when we reflect on them. To paraphrase a famous adage: “An unexamined story is not worth having.” Make the time and space to explore the stories you hear by asking questions and making people feel safe so they are open and willing to share their stories.

Sharing stories promotes healing when there is tension or conflict between people in organizations. These strained relationships require the attention of a leader who can introduce healing. The fact that stories involve active listening means that leaders can encourage people to share them so that people can enter a perspective different from their own. By doing so, misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication can be overcome. Healing becomes possible when we are willing to embrace others’ perspectives.

Connect Stories to Guide Your Actions

Stories yield tremendous insights and opportunities when we connect them to one another. Stories in isolation are not particularly valuable. Viewed as a collection, however, we can discern patterns and relationships. Our knowledge of other people, situations, and ourselves is dramatically increased. Turn these insights into actions, and then watch, as these actions produce great business results and generate a whole new slew of stories of their own.

Editor’s Note: Portions of this article have been adopted and reprinted with permission from the author’s upcoming book, Stories at Work: Using Stories to Improve Communications and Build Relationships, which will be released by Praeger Publishing in May 2006.



Terrence Gargiulo is an international speaker, author, organizational development consultant, and group process facilitator. He is a six-time author, including three books on the role of stories in business. His most recent book is *On Cloud Nine: Weathering the Challenge of Many Generations in the Workplace*. He can be reached at terrence@makingstories.net, 781-894-4381, or <http://www.makingstories.net>.