



Leadership Through Storytelling Training

Workshop Content Summary



Table Of Contents

The Timeless Power of Storytelling.....	3
Why Stories Work with Our Brains.....	4
The Journey of the Leader Storyteller.....	5
The Strategy behind the Story.....	5
The Content of Strategic Stories.....	6
Developing Stronger Story Plots.....	7
The Delivery of Strategic Stories.....	8
Developing a Library of Strategic Stories.....	9
To Be Human is to Have a Story.....	10
About Your Instructor: Bill Baker.....	11



The Timeless Power of Storytelling

Nitin Nohria, former Dean of Harvard Business School, once described communications as “the real work of leadership.” Indeed, of all the skills required by today’s leaders—today’s managers, executives, sales people, etc.—perhaps none is more important than their ability to communicate effectively.

Skills, however, do not operate at peak performance without tune-ups and maintenance. We use tools to keep our skills sharp and increase their potency. It’s the same with communications, especially leadership communications, on which more responsibility and importance is placed. As managers and directors, our communications must consistently operate at a higher level. They must inform, but also inspire. They must convey important facts and information, but also vision and perspective. They must help people not only understand what they’re doing, but also why it is worth doing.

There are many tools available to today’s leaders and professionals to increase their impact as a communicator. There are also increasing arrays of technologies through which we can now communicate, reaching people in ways we wouldn’t have though possible ten years ago. Yet

amidst all these advancements and technologies, there is one timeless communication tool that has endured: storytelling.

The great Danish author Isak Dinesen once said, “To be human is to have a story.” Indeed, storytelling is one of the most human of activities. In fact our history, our persona, our very identity is the sum of the stories we hear and tell about. We are all, inherently, storytellers; and there are few things we love more than to hear a great story and pass it along to others. Time and again we witness the power of storytelling, having experienced how a well-crafted story, well-told can literally get us to see and hear things in our minds and feel things we hadn’t anticipated feeling.

Once, long ago, there was nothing but stories. Before there was television, blogs, movies, emails, podcasts; newspapers, Facebook, books or even written

language, there were stories. Stories were used by civilizations and societies to build culture and transmit hard-won knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next.



Today, companies and organizations—and more specifically, their leaders—are recognizing the power of storytelling and understanding the rightful place this timeless craft of humanity has in the cold, hard world of business. For storytelling has a way of reaching through to the most important asset any organization has today: people, touching them in ways that the typical advertising campaign or mission statement cannot. Stories help a leader connect us to a larger vision and sense of purpose and, in doing so, connect us to others we work with. Personally and professionally, we all inherently want to be part of something that is bigger than ourselves, and a great leader telling a great story can make that happen.

Why Stories Work Well with Our Brains

In many ways, leadership is about managing change. In fact these days, leadership isn't just about managing change; it's about creating transformations in the way a team thinks, feels and ultimately acts. And to affect this transformation, a leader has to take people from where they are now to where they need to be in the future to make that change happen. It's about taking people into unknown terrain: and one of the best ways for a leader to take his or her team there is to take them there in their minds and hearts first, to get them to imagine, to envision, to see this future they need to be a part of and make real.

This is where storytelling comes in. Because telling the right story at the right time can get people to those different, unfamiliar places in their minds and hearts *first* so that they can go there in person *later*.

Transformative leadership is about taking people from where they are to where they need to be.

Stories work because they are in our nature. We are all hard-wired to tell them, to hear them and to comprehend them. They help us process information and make sense of things better, and when that happens, we are infinitely more likely to recall that information and act on it.

Dr. Howard Gardner—a thought leader in the way people think and a professor at the Harvard School of Education—has done a lot of work to connect leadership to the way we cognitively process information, and he says, “The single most effective tool a leader has to persuade and influence other people is story.” Here’s why.

Many years ago, Dr. Gardner pioneered a theory around multiple intelligences, the thought being that we don't just have one type of intelligence that is tested on the standardized IQ test, we actually have eight different types of intelligence (see diagram below). We use all eight of these intelligences all the time, but when we become an adult our brain gravitates to one or two ways of thinking it prefers over all others. We use all eight ways of thinking, but we have one preferred way. As adults, we recognize this diversity of thinking in our friends and colleagues.



For a leader to come in and try to transform a business situation, they must first transform the way they think and feel about it. To think that a leader can

create that change by simply delivering a message once, in a straightforward way, and that it will get through and really resonate with everyone is mistaken. Some might get the message if the way that leader delivered it synchs up with the way those people are already used to thinking. However, the chances of that message getting through to everyone on a team are slim to none.

When a leader wraps his or her message in a story—using that story to bring their message or idea to life—it dramatically increases the chances of their message getting through to a diverse group of people because it serves up that message from a variety of different angles appealing to a variety of intelligences.

Stories are richer and more layered than pure information or directives. They use a variety of different stimuli and paint bigger pictures so they tap into and use more parts of our brains and appeal to many different ways of thinking. They surround the brain instead of just attacking it from one direction and therefore make our whole brains more active, more open, more like a sponge to absorb things and remember things.

The cold hard fact is that we remember stories. And the simple reason is because stories use more of our brains. Always have. Always will.

The Journey of the Leader Storyteller



To use storytelling effectively in leadership communications—to use storytelling to effectively persuade, influence and inspire others—one must approach the stories they tell through three different and complementary steps:

- The Strategy behind their story,
- The Content of that story, and
- The Delivery of the story.

A fourth step involves building up a library of strategic stories so that a leader is better able and equipped to always have the right story to tell at the right time.

The Strategy behind the Story

We define storytelling as an exchange of something meaningful shared from one person to another. But we add to that definition the phrase, “for a purpose,” because in our world it’s not just storytelling, it’s strategic storytelling: storytelling with intent, with objectives, with goals, working towards a desired impact and outcome.

Storytelling = An exchange of meaning shared from one person to another...for a purpose.

Social storytelling is telling any story at any time. Strategic storytelling is about telling the right story, to deliver the right message, at the right time to shape the way your audience thinks and feels and moving them towards a desired action.



When a leader thinks strategically about the stories they use in workplace communications, there are two paths that person can take. On one path, the leader starts with a need for a story, and tries to find the best story to fit that need. On the other path, the leader starts with a story and determines if it might be relevant or appropriate for a workplace situation.

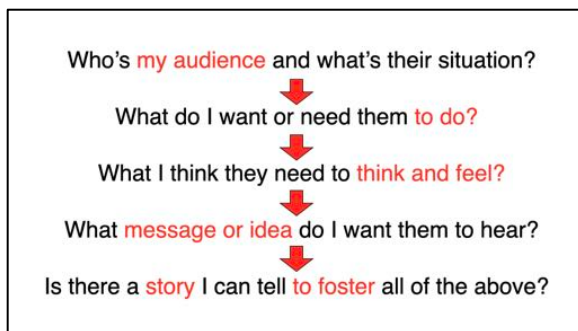
Whether starting with a need or a story, they both go to the same place, and that’s creating a desired impact in an audience. That’s what makes that storytelling strategic. Let’s look more closely at these paths one at a time.

Starting with a need is when a leader is going into a communications situation (a business case

presentation, a team meeting, a one-on-one), and he or she thinks they'd really like to have a good story for that exchange. Here, it is best to think deductively about what do you need a story to do, so you can find the best story to do it.

Looking at the situation strategically, I...

- Think first of your audience and their current situation, but also and importantly what you want or need them to do: what action they should take
- Then you consider what you need them to think and/or feel to compel them to take that action
- Then you determine what message you can share to get them to think or feel that way
- And finally, you find or develop an appropriate story to help foster all of the above: a story to deliver that message, to shape those thoughts and feelings, to motivate that action.



On the flip side of that coin, as your consciousness of storytelling gets raised, you will recognize that you have lots of compelling stories in your life: of your experiences or someone else's, or stories that you hear, read, or watch. To determine if any of those stories are strategic and good for your library, start with the story in mind and then ask...

- Is there a key message or lesson I can draw from this story? If yes...
- Might what thoughts and feelings might that message shape in others?
- What action or change in behaviour might those thoughts and feelings inspire ?

Then you have a good story for your library. You just need to find the most appropriate time, place or audience with whom to share it.

Beyond thinking strategically about the stories you select, it is good to understand the larger, holistic impacts that well-crafted stories well told can have.

- **Great stories tap into emotion** – They break down cynicism and make an emotional connection. They make us laugh; they make us cry. Importantly, they make us feel; for when we feel something with a story, we are infinitely more likely to recall it and act on it.
- **Great stories are universal** – Great stories appeal to many. They transcend different demographics or cultures to mean something to a lot of different people. They have themes that we can all relate to, like going through chance, or overcoming a tough challenge, or never letting go of a dream.
- **Great stories are relevant** – They don't just mean something to you. Because you think strategically about them, you make very sure they mean something to your audience. They take your audience to places they've always wanted to go or answer questions they've always had.
- **Great stories are never completely told** – As you build up your library of stories, you will have stories you tell again and again. Don't get self-conscious about that. Great stories are worth repeating (as long as you're repeating them in front of different audiences).

The Content of Strategic Stories

Part and parcel of great storytelling is first building great stories to be told: ensuring those stories have great content that flows seamlessly. And while every story is different and unique, all great strategic stories are composed of five essential elements.

- **Premise** – This is the context for your story, connecting the story you are about to tell to the workplace situation in which you're telling it. It frames the story and sets it up, ensuring it is not only relevant to that situation, but also to the audience. In explaining the premise, you help people understand the reason you are sharing this particular story at this time.
- **Platform** – This is the stage upon which your story is set. It establishes the time and place for your story (e.g. "Once upon a time in a galaxy far, far away...") and helps people understand the old situation in which your story begins.

- **Person** – These are the characters in your story who find themselves in the time and place of the story's Platform. Most often, the characters include you, the storyteller, as you share a personal narrative from your own experience. But other characters may be part of that experience as well, journeying along with you and/or affecting your journey in some way. Ideally, your audience can see themselves in your characters and relate to the journey they're on.
- **Plot** – Plot is the backbone of any great narrative or story, entailing the series of events that have unfolded, are unfolding or have yet to unfold. While there are many plots a story can follow, the most typical involves a group of people (Person) in a current situation (Platform) who have a goal of achieving a new reality, and experience obstacles and challenges in trying to reach that goal, but somehow manage to overcome them. A story's plot becomes more engaging when there is tension built up around those challenges and obstacles and that tension is relieved when the characters succeed by moving past them.
- **Point** – And of course, every great strategic story, especially those shared at work, has a point to it. There is a key message, learning or take-away that the audience draws from the story because there is a strategic reason the storyteller shared it with them in the first place.

When you start infusing storytelling into your presentations or communications, think about these five elements and make certain you are hitting on each one, especially the first and fifth one, for those are the key elements that make that story strategic.

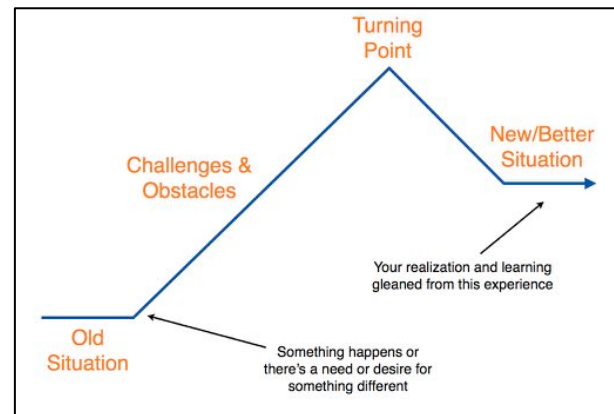
Developing Stronger Story Plots

Plot is a key thing that distinguishes a report from a story. Plot gives a story drama and tension, not just describing what has happened, but also and importantly, what has happened to someone: what that person thought, felt, said, heard, experienced, even if what happened to them was at work.

There are lots of different plot structures that authors have used throughout history. But there is one single most common plot structure that gets used again and again, and it is this — There is a person or group of people, who find themselves faced with a problem or

in a tough situation, and then somehow solve that problem or get out of that situation. It's a formula, but it works, because in that problem or tough situation, tension is created. And we, as an audience, want to see that tension resolved. So, we will hang on until the end of the story to make sure it does get resolved.

This typical plot structure follows what we call the "arc of a story," and that arc looks like this.



As you develop the plots of your story, there are a couple things to keep in mind:

- **Find the tension and amplify it** — Stories involve tension. If there's no tension of some sort, it won't feel like a story. So, find the tension in your story and increase it. It will make your story more compelling and engaging for your audience. Tension is often between two contrasting forces, like the tension between comfort with the old ways versus discomfort with the new; between doing what's right versus what's easiest or cheapest; between speaking up versus remaining quiet; between one voice in my head versus another voice in my head or in my gut telling me something different.
- **What if there is no turning point?** — Not all stories have a happy ending. Sometimes in life or in work things don't work out or the tension doesn't get resolved. For example, we all have stories of mistakes we've made that, although we can't go back in time and correct them, we have learned from them. If your story does not have a turning point, there is still the sense of a turning point in the way you deliver that story; it being your resolve or counsel to not let the bad situation continue or to change something to ensure it doesn't happen to the audience.



- **What about telling a story about someone or something else?** — The stories you tell don't always have to be about you and your own experiences. You can share stories from history, cinema, literature, sport, the news: stories you heard, read or watched. But when the story is not about you, you still need to wrap yourself around it. More specifically, after sharing the story, you need to be very clear in communicating the impact that story had on you, as well as what you want your audience taking away from it.
- **Focus your storytelling by keeping the point of your story in your sight** — Storytelling at work needs to be tight, efficient and worth people's time. Everything in the story should be there for a reason: to set-up and demonstrate the point of your story. When developing your plot, keep the point of your story in mind, thinking of it as the target that your story is shooting for: the verbal destination your story is going to end on. With that target in mind, then make sure the plot, the drama, the tension of your story is setting up your point and be willing to sacrifice or eliminate anything that is not doing that.



The Delivery of Strategic Stories

Truly great storytellers are each as unique as the stories they tell. And while the strengths of one will most certainly be different than the strengths of another, great storytellers do share some common characteristics that they either consciously or subconsciously use when making communicating.

- **Great storytellers listen, engage and interact with their audience** – They bridge the gap between “you” and “me” to create a shared experience in which the audience is just as active a participant as the storyteller. They make their audience see the storyteller as one of them. They understand that storytelling is dialogue between people; an exchange of meaning. It is not a lecture or a seemingly endless download of information.
- **Great storytellers empower others** – It's about facilitating the way people think about a situation versus trying to force the way they think. When done well, storytelling enables people to hear what you tell them, but then draw *their* own conclusions from what they've heard. Those conclusions are similar to what you want them to be; but they are nonetheless their conclusions, not yours.
- **Great storytellers are generous in spirit** – They understand that storytelling is a selfless gift. It is ego-less. It is not about personal praise or seeing credit. Rather, it's about giving something special to someone else. In fact, with great storytelling, the storyteller is not the hero; the audience is.
- **Great storytellers are expressive, animated and highly descriptive** – They paint verbal pictures in the minds of their audience, using detailed and visual language to do so. In doing that, they transport the audience to the place and time of the story, pulling them into it. And they aren't afraid to act things out and use their bodies to further enrich the story and its telling.
- **Great storytellers are human, vulnerable and truthful and trustworthy** – They are authentic and genuine, admitting doubts, confusion or mistakes. They let down their armour and open themselves up, revealing the parts of themselves that are most human. In turn, the audience connects with them at a human level and trusts them as a result.

Developing a Library of Strategic Stories



Having a robust library of stories not only enables a leader to prepare for a communications situation and use a great story in it; it also enables a leader to be in a situation, read their audience, and realize “I’ve got the perfect story to tell, right now.” However, this is not a story the leader is making up or “winging” on the spot (as that rarely goes well). Rather, it’s a story the leader has developed in advance (perhaps for some other situation), and has mentally put up on the library shelf to have ready.

The more robust a leader’s library is, the more story options they have to pull from. Building up a library of strong, strategic stories happens one story at a time. And it also happens quicker than you might think as you develop stories of your own, but also pull relevant, meaningful stories from other sources (e.g., history, media, sports, movies, etc.).

Key Stories to Have for a Robust Library

In the world of workplace storytelling, there are lots of different strategic stories a leader should have in his or her library. However, for the time being, we are going to focus on three areas of stories that every leader should develop.

Your Story – We all need a CV, but your story is different and can be a powerful tool, whether you are transitioning to a new job or just want to present who you are in a more compelling fashion. While your story certainly conveys *what* you have done and *how* your career has unfolded, this is the opportunity to emphasize *why* you do what you do: the passion that

drives your work, the change you want to make in the world, the things you are fighting for and against. It may be appropriate to bring in some personal aspects of your life that further illuminate your human side. Regardless, your story can be an effective way to give people a snapshot of who you are and a more accessible way of knowing you as a whole person.

Your Organizational Brand Stories – These are the stories you tell about your organization, its culture, its brand, and what makes it a special place to work. These stories could be used in interview and/or recruitment situations, but also with key customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. These stories could also convey why you, personally, love working for the company or organization. Importantly, these stories will often take key organizational messages (e.g., vision, mission, values, etc.) and bring them to life for others by showing them in action. Doing so will make those messages real for others and prevent them from just being “organizational rhetoric.”

Transformative Stories – Transformative stories are the many different stories you use, as a leader, to shape the way people think, the way they feel, and motivate them towards a desired action. These are your stories of influence, persuasion and inspiration and might cover a wide variety of themes, such as:

- Embracing change vs. fighting it
- Overcoming a tough, intimidating challenge
- Doing what’s right vs. what’s easiest or cheapest
- Being a leader versus a follower
- What really partnership and teamwork look like
- Never losing sight of the goal...or your dreams

How to Add Stories to Your Library

To build up your library of stories, you need to think strategically about the stories you *need* for it. You do this by consistently going through the strategic story planning model shared earlier (on p.6), identifying what you need a story to do and hopefully identify a great story to do it.

However, if you can’t identify a story to fit the need, don’t give up. Instead, recognize you still need that story. Plant that seed in your head and don’t forget it. Raise your consciousness of that needed story, and it will roll across your radar screen before you know it. You might suddenly remember a story to fit the need, or see a story in the news, or something on social media, or on the sports channel, etc.

In building up your library of stories, you can actively go out and try to find the right stories. But what is more effective is simply opening yourself up and letting those right stories find you. There is a big, beautiful river of stories flowing past us every single day. You just need to dip a net in there to capture the stories you need, or stories that speak to you.



Some different places that you can fish for great stories for your library include:

- **Your own life experiences.** As kids and parents, athletes and coaches, travelers, volunteers, citizens, or neighbours.
- **Your own work experiences.** We all started somewhere. We've all made mistakes and had success. We've all had good bosses and bad bosses. What stories might you tell about those situations, especially if you see someone struggling with something you've struggled with?
- **Your consumption of media.** We are bombarded with stories each and every day, and a lot of them flow in one ear and out the next. But every once in a while, you might see something that speaks to you, in the news, in sports, on Facebook or YouTube. Grab onto it, even if you don't have a use for it right away.

Whether you're finding great stories or letting great stories find you, it's important to remember that a story, an exchange of meaning, can take many forms. It can be a more traditional narrative with a beginning, middle and end, but it can also be a great quote, an engaging video, a captivating image, a funny cartoon, a headline, a metaphor, etc. All of these can help you exchange meaning with others, and you would be wise to make your library of strategic stories rich and eclectic in its make-up.

To Be Human is to Have a Story

Leadership is so often about affecting and managing people through change; and communications is one of the most powerful tools a leader has to do that. With this in mind, however, it is always important to remember that, at the end of the day, people follow people. They do not follow PowerPoint presentations. They do not follow emails. They do not follow reports. They follow the people behind those things.

So let your communications let others see some of who you are as a person in addition to as a leader. Let them see the person behind the leader. Whether you're making an important presentation to a room full of people or having an intimate one-on-one with an employee or customer, make certain you are doing so as one person to another. Find your message; make it clear; but make it human as well. Take off your armour, let down your defenses and open yourself up to your audience, revealing the genuine human being behind the message being conveyed.



Storytelling may not be right for every single situation or for every single audience. But it can be right for a lot of them. So, practice it. Try to use some of the ideas from this class in your next presentation. Try to use even more of these ideas in the presentation after that. Be brave. Be bold. But more than anything, be yourself. Your audience will respect you, admire you and follow you all the more for it.

"We live by stories. We also live in them. We are living the stories that are planted in us or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted in ourselves." — Ben Okri, Nigerian Storyteller

About Your Instructor, Bill Baker, and BB&Co Strategic Storytelling



Since Bill first learned to talk, he has been telling stories: to grandparents, teachers, bus drivers, that nice lady at the grocery store... anyone who would listen. Early on, Bill recognized the profound impact that stories had on people as well as the fact that different stories would generate different responses. This penchant for storytelling continued into his career as Bill started using stories in his day-to-day communications with colleagues and clients. With storytelling in his blood, Bill founded BB&Co Strategic Storytelling specifically to help companies and their leaders bring more meaning, focus and productivity to their work, and therefore their workforce... using the power of storytelling to do so.

BB&Co is a boutique strategic storytelling consultancy who works with clients all over the world to help them uncover the unique story of their brand or branded initiative, define a strategic vision for its future and then engage, align and inspire employees around both. An American by birth (a Canadian by choice), Bill spent the first 10 years of his career working in New York City managing global accounts for large multinational agencies such as Grey and Saatchi & Saatchi. Before starting BB&Co, Bill was part of the Global Planning Group of DDB Worldwide where he helped redefine and deploy the suite of strategic planning tools used across the agency's 205 offices across the globe.

There is barely a category of industry that Bill and the BB&Co team has not worked in, having collaborated with respected clients of all shapes and sizes, including GE, Coca-Cola, Relais & Châteaux, Hilton, Prudential, Cisco, Adobe, Travel Alberta, Pfizer, Vancouver Aquarium, Dell, Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, and Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Lab. Bill is a regular presence on the public speaking circuit, an avid blogger and sits on the board of the Alzheimer Society of British Columbia. He is also a fervent skier, an aspiring jazz pianist and a self-proclaimed Netflix addict.

Please stay in touch and sign up for my blog!

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