

## The Executive Storyteller

In 2002, my partner and I were working on a project in Singapore. We had about a week break in between training sessions and decided to take a short flight to Thailand. The evening we left, there was a huge rainstorm passing over this corner of southeast Asia. We had worked for 12 hours and were sitting on the tarmac for another 2 hours. *Finally*, the plane takes off, and about an hour-and-a-half later, we land. De-boarding the plane was like entering a different planet. We were the only white people in sight, nobody in the vicinity spoke English, and around us was the complete chaos characteristic of undeveloped nations. I was feeling both very charmed *and* disoriented.

We collect our bags and after awhile, find our driver holding a sign “Jakson”, and follow him out of the airport. After a harrowing ride through the streets of Phuket, in which I was sure we were going to have a wreck, he stops near a boat dock and signals us to get out of the vehicle and follow him down the dock (NO English). Now I’m starting to question: What the *heck* is going on? Can we really trust this guy? My partner made all the arrangements, but there was no discussion about a boat transfer! Should we follow the guy down the dock or were we being duped into some kind of foreign disaster?

### How many of you have been to a foreign land, and felt this type of experience? What would you do?

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This was excerpted from an actual story we used to open a training on transformation and change. Instead of the typical introductions, we used this to set the mood and stage. What did it do for your level of interest and engagement?

We encourage you to spend time planning a few messages you can get across using story and metaphor. Even if you’re not a “great storyteller” – take the time to craft a few. It’s worthwhile! Even a good one-sentence analogy can strengthen the impact of your message.

#### Ten tips for building a good story:

- 1) Begin by writing down the message you want to get across, in its simplest form. In our case, it was this: We all have times when we are asked to do things we don’t understand. We wanted people to remember those times for themselves – to evoke that sense of “what and who can I trust.”
- 2) What do you want people to DO with the message? Do you want them to discuss something? Take action? Write down the clear “call to action” at the end of the story.
- 3) How do you want people to FEEL about this message? Write that down too. If you are trying to get people to act on something, you’ll have a far better chance if you create a story that taps emotion. The magical three: Inspire them, make them laugh, and create a sense of urgency (ie, pain).

- 4) Think of a personal experience from your life that illustrates this message. In the Thai situation, I had trepidation, uncertainty, and a little fear because I didn't know what was going to happen. I have several stories like that to illustrate the message, but Thailand had the added element of intrigue – another good element of a story.
- 5) Make it PERSONAL. People love to hear about the lives of the leaders they work for. Don't tell about someone else. A bit of literary license is OK...If you're telling about yourself, you can embellish it to weave in your points, but the main ideas should be truthful – people will remember the craziest details and ask you about them later!
- 6) It doesn't have to be perfectly literal. In fact, metaphor and analogy create better meaning and connection for people. EX: "We need to be more watchful of our competitor's product development cycles; they are encroaching on our space" versus "Our competition is becoming a bigger predator in a small pond. We need to explore whether we should fight for the same bait or move to a new pond."
- 7) Look online for great quotes, an interesting piece of trivia or fact – these can be a good start-up to a meeting.
- 8) Be concise. Don't overload people with Powerpoint slides and long-winded embellishment. I was invited to a gathering recently in which the theme was to write a 7-word memoir. We each got 1 minute to explain it. The shorter you are, the more impact you'll have. Even better, skip words. A picture really is worth 1000 words. We knew a CEO who took a picture of the "beer wall" at a liquor store to illustrate the market share issue their micro-brew was having. It was like "Find Waldo" to locate their brand in the picture.
- 9) If your message is about a change that you are making to the business, follow your story with simple answers to these five important questions people ask during change:
  - Why this change, and why now?
  - What happens if we don't make this change?
  - What will this change look like?
  - What's in it for me?
  - What can I expect from leaders ... and what is expected of me?
- 10) Practice and test. Unless you're a masterful storyteller, test the reactions on a few people first to ensure they don't fall flat or miss their mark. Because stories are such powerful communication vehicles, it's hard to "un-do" the impression they make.

In business, we usually take ourselves too seriously. Lighten up and have more fun!

As leaders, people will be far more amendable to following you if you think of yourself as The Pied Piper, versus someone like .... Napoleon Bonparte.

Start telling more stories and watch the magic happen.