

# Move Your Story to Action

## SEVEN PROVEN STORYLINES THAT WIN

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### INTRODUCTION

Five years ago last month, I lie heaped in a puddle over the tiny yellow squares of tile on our bathroom floor. I'd quit my stable leadership development job and worked seven months from two in the morning until nine at night writing and designing my personalized children's book and creating the infrastructure for a print-on-demand business.

Launch is a week away and I know deep in my bones. I can't do it. Not only have I used all my wit up in negotiating my book covers and creating the web-to-print database with the right variables to personalize each book, I don't have the courage to show up in this new space -- my book and business out in the world for critique. What if the world thinks I'm a moron? My husband looks down at me and says, "Get up. Honey, get up."

I lie a little longer -- the cold pale tiles feel so good on my forehead. I wobble up and that week I launch *Memoir of Me*. In the next years, I tell the personal stories of 1,500 kids. I meet idyllic people. I win a few awards. I wish I could say I turned my little personalized digital business into a big business, but I can't. I lose both money and time of internal equity in a workplace organization. Again, I lie again on those tile squares -- my very own lemon-shaded checkerboard, and ask myself, "What's next?"

We've all heard them. Stories that hit us, unexpectedly, and resonate somewhere right around our bellybuttons. Gut-clubbing stories are the secret weapon of winning leaders. The example of story weaponry I love is the 1979 American hostage situation in Iran. In the movie reproduction of this situation *Argo*, Ben Affleck, playing Tom Mendez the CIA exfiltration expert, gets into a confrontation with one of the six hostages. The hostage yells, "You're crazy if you think your little story is going to save us!" Affleck responds, "My little story is the only thing standing between you and a bullet in your head." It's true! The phony film project story saves the lives of six Americans smuggled out of Iran that day.



How can a story be powerful enough to be used as a winning weapon? An enormous body of research confirms stories not only activate the language processing parts of our brains, but other areas in our brain that we would use when experiencing actual events. If we are told a story about the zesty, tart juice of lemons dripping over the edge of a cutting board, our sensory cortex lights up. If someone tells a story about running through the open breezes of a soft meadow, scans reveal brain activity in the motor cortex. This means stories activate our minds in ways that make us feel like we are having actual visual, tactile, and kinesthetic experiences. Story experiences make us act and move in directions we otherwise wouldn't be compelled.



So what are the storylines that provoke us to move to action?

A little over 400 years ago, Shakespeare shocked audiences with the unpredictable outcome of two young lovers, innocent and star-crossed, dying for one another. The element of surprise and human failure has made the story of Romeo and Juliet the most well known love story since the late 1500s. This love story resonates as the best love story of all time because of one element – vulnerability – the most critical element in moving people to act. Using Romeo and Juliet story elements as a model, I analyze the seven proven storylines that connect with customers, engage employees, and win more business.

## STORY TRUTH – THE FIRST STEP IN CREATING A STORYLINE THAT WINS

The goal of every story is to create a repeatable drama. The first step in creating a repeatable drama is finding the meaning – the pulpy, vulnerable heart -- or truth of the story. What is the meaning or purpose behind the story? The story truth creates the emotional connection and ignites a greater purpose toward action. In Romeo and Juliet, the story truth is true love overcomes time, space, and hatred and moves the Montague and Capulet families to swear off their generational feud. The story truth is conveyed through the story elements (setup, characters, struggle, finale) and gives the story both a seductive draw and keen physical weight that propels us with momentum to make a change, try a new product, or sign on the dotted line.

For example, the hearty pulp of Apple’s creation story -- Jobs and Wozniak toiling in a garage -- inspires a love connection and champions Apple, not only as a business with products, but as something with a robust and lusty heartbeat. The Apple story jangles in the lower stomach of people everywhere whom everyday toil in the same types of meager digs with the same types of gritty determination as Jobs and Woz have done. Without strategically finding the story truth, it is impossible to create a repeatable drama.

## THREE TYPES OF STORIES THAT WIN

The three types of stories business leaders use to win are creation, value, and vision stories. Ideally, business leaders have a story portfolio of all three stories --creation, value, vision -- that are used interchangeably in conversations and presentations.

**Creation stories** – “Who am I,” and “Who are We,” stories.

**Value stories** – “How I work,” and “What I believe,” stories.

**Vision stories** – “Where are we going?” and “What’s our future?” stories.

A repeatable drama starts with a story truth and selection of type of story -- creation, value, or vision. Next, add the other elements in the story formula -- setup, characters, struggle, arc tension, and finale. Now, within the story formula framework, let’s take a look at the seven storylines that win.

# TELL YOUR BUSINESS LOVE STORY



## SEVEN STORYLINES THAT WIN

### Storyline #1: Against The Odds.

Story Formula Elements: This is a creation story. The characters of hero –an amazing product or an incredibly talented, yet imperfect, founder -- and characters of villain --a big, bad corporate competitor or a horrid production problem -- are central to this storyline. The story setup begins with the ‘aha’ idea moment, supported by 80-hour workweeks, limited resources, and huge gobs of “against the odds” timing and luck. This storyline is driven by conflict and struggle, and finally, depicts the rise to grace due to that singular lucky break that defies statistical improbability. The story truth in this storyline is hard work and a refusal to quit wins “against the odds.”

The challenge in this rags-to-riches storyline is the tension. Imagine the tension as Romeo struggles to climb the vine up the wall to get to Juliet on the balcony. In this same way the tension of the “against the odds” story must continue moving in an artfully upward story arc, complete with the setbacks of turmoil and hardship to keep the suspense growing with enough momentum to compel the audience to want more, hear more, and definitely see more. Think Oprah or Steve Branson.

### Storyline #2: The Comeback Kid.

Story Formula Elements: This is a creation/vision story. The story setup and characters are most important in this storyline. The setup is the hero (person, product, company) describing former incredible success and revealing the gut-wrenching fall from grace such as a declining market share, a blasphemous event, and/or questionable integrity. This character driven story focuses on the original entrepreneur or product – the weaknesses and failures -- and the insights and learnings from the comeback struggle that move the company/product/person toward even greater success.

The challenge in this storyline is the story truth. Has the flawed character evolved to an elevated state of existence and learned from the past mistakes? How have the learnings changed the trajectory of this company/person to make the world a better place? Has the character showed true and believable remorse? Think Robert Downey, Jr. or Martha Stewart.

### Storyline #3: Karma Means Doing the Right Thing.

Story Formula Elements: This story is a creation/value story. The story is driven by the “why” of the story, why the good is important and why the struggle of what it takes to overcome obstacles in “doing the right thing” matters. Today, almost every company has a “doing the right thing” story. However, some companies/products are entirely built on doing the right thing.

The challenge in this storyline is whether “doing the right thing” is a compelling enough story to move people to act. Doing the right thing can be a boring storyline unless an unexpected, inherent flaw or surprise failure makes “doing the right thing” interesting. Environmental, economic, and social stewardship and conscious capitalism is good, but the evil villain in the story is what makes this storyline a winner. Think Prairie Vodka or Paul Newman Salad Dressing.

#### **Storyline #4: Us versus Them.**

Story Formula Elements: This is a creation/value storyline and if a competitor to compare exists -- the inherent conflict of rivalry in this storyline makes it an easy story to tell. Honestly, is there anything better than two rivals slugging it out? The focus in this high-energy storyline is what makes one better than the other. This storyline defines the competing characters (the product, the person, the brand) and the positioning lines between these characters are clearly drawn. The thing that makes this story saga a winner is people get to pick sides.

The challenge in this story is the one-on-one combat can be brutal and provides little or no place to hide. However, in a good “Us versus Them” storyline, no one ever really wins or loses. The story just keeps going on and on. Think Coke vs. Pepsi or Steve Jobs vs. Bill Gates.

#### **Storyline #5: We Have Only One Passion.**

Story Formula Elements: This story is another creation/value story that is born out of one passion and the love of actually doing that passion. The storyline makes the overarching value of the passion the main character and focuses on the struggle of staying true to that passion and what it means to build product/company/service/brand around the zeal for the ideal. This is the kind of story that moves people to action by using the original devotion and fervor such as the passion for customer service like Southwest Airlines and Zappo’s or passion for quality like Louis Vuitton.

The challenge in this story is making the passion palpable. The way to do this is by developing passion as a character and using unexpected human qualities such as fearfulness and uncertainty, lust and desire. Passion is addictive, but only if the story endears us to the cause.

#### **Storyline #6: Sci-Fi Innovation.**

Story Formula Elements: This storyline is straight out of the playbooks of Steven Spielberg and creates a vision. The story focuses on future and sets the story up around mystery and suspense with an endless stream of out-of-this-world innovation. The story struggle is around contradicting known facts based on history and providing a vision of what’s to come within scientifically established laws of nature. The question that needs to be planted firmly in this story is, “What’s next?” This is the question that maintains fierce interest for the next product release.

The challenge in this story is grounding the story in the story truth. Innovation is really a value, and even though the thrill of this storyline is shrouded in mystery and suspense, to make this story work there must be a higher purpose. The underlying value discussion for this storyline is, “How does this innovation make the world a better place?” Think Facebook or Google.

#### **Storyline #7: The Tragic Love Story.**

Story Formula Elements: Every one of us is intimately familiar with this character/conflict driven creation storyline; it’s the story that my story framework is based. This storyline is well suited for personal branding and the key in the tragic love story is having a trio of characters – characters being humans/products/services. An equilateral triangle is undeniably at the heart of all good love stories. In fairy tales, and in Romeo and Juliet, the prince and princess are supposed to marry someone else. Someone of better social standing. Someone prior chosen. The hero and heroine have to fight for true love to win out. And that’s what makes a good love story — the way lovers fight for each other!

The challenge in this storyline is a love story has touch us somewhere deep inside our heart chambers to move us to act in a new manner. Making the tragic love story authentic, surprising, and believable is about as scary as Juliet drinking poison. What makes this triangular story provoke us to root for the hero to kick the villain to the curb? What is it about these characters (even the villain a titch!) that inspire us? Think Two Gingers Irish whiskey. Think Zach Sobiech.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, I started this article with the beginning of my creation story. Which storyline did I use? Let me finish my story. Once again, I lie on those tile squares – my very own lemon-shaded checkerboard, and ask myself, “What’s next?”

This time, I ragefully move up from the bathroom floor and I flounder for a year or so. I beat myself up. I wallow in self-pity. I blame the economy. One day, I have lunch with Archie, my 92 year-old friend. He says, “So you worked hard and it didn’t turn out the way you’d hoped. Your ego’s bruised. Boohoo, kid! What new chances have you missed by staying stuck?”

Within the next few months, I create my [story formula model](#). I write a whitepaper [The Business Case for Personal Stories](#) and a [3 Step Process to Change your Personal Story](#). I do story workshops for fortune 500 companies and get invited to speak at a national conference. I create and coach story portfolios for executives. I finally use both my expertise in facilitation, research, and assessment and my workhorse passion and prowess in finding authentic voice and writing strategic storylines that win. I help people tell their stories in ways they’ve never thought about! I use my gift to help people make their lives and the lives around them better! More authentically me than I’ve ever been.

Which storyline did I use for my creation story? If you think Comeback Kid -- me fighting for my love of story writing to win out and the evil villain being my own inner demons -- I’d say you’re right.

Lastly, the goal of every story, no matter the storyline, is creating a repeatable drama that moves people to act with meaning and clarity in making the world a better place. The seven storylines of creation, value, and vision have proven the test of time that they are weapons used to win. Not only do these storylines connect with customers, engage employees, and close more business, they help move conversations to an exchange where business people have a closer understanding of with whom they are working – what they stand for, but even more, of inspiring the business community to be a part of vulnerability -- intimate dialogue that uses personal stories to promote integrity and responsible leadership.

## Your Story Guide

Need help bringing your story to the surface? I can help. As you can tell I am passionate about stories and improving lives and business through personal stories. I would be thrilled to help you find your stories and develop them. Visit [my website](#) for more information about how to get your stories started or contact me at [michelle.lebow@memoirofme.com](mailto:michelle.lebow@memoirofme.com), 651-271-1438.

## Telling Your Story Online

Need help telling your story online? At 9 Clouds, we don’t make websites but we make websites work and we are passionate about improving digital literacy and marketing. We can help you take the story you have or develop with Michelle and bring it to life online. Remarkable and compelling content is a must to crack through the noise online. Visit our website or contact us at [info@9clouds.com](mailto:info@9clouds.com) for more information.