EXECUTIVE ESSENTIALS eBOOK

The Executive Essentials eBook series was created to provide business executives with clear, concise, immediately applicable tips and strategies to improve specific leadership and presence skills.



THE ARIEL GROUP

STORYTELLING

FORWARD >>

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WHY IS **STORYTELLING** AN ESSENTIAL SKILL FOR ANY EXECUTIVE TOOLKIT?

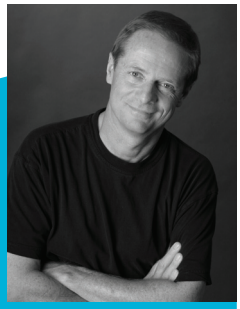
Storytelling is a powerful Leadership tool. Stories may be the most effective way to convey information to an audience while also building a relationship with them. When you tell stories, especially personal stories, it helps people relate to you and allows you to show your vulnerability as a leader. Stories can be used to communicate your values, help to develop trust, inspire your employees and move your audience to take action.

Even simple stories from your childhood can contain universal themes relevant to your organization's or clients' key issues. You can leverage the archetypal nature of stories by cataloguing some of the significant moments in your personal and business life as a resource to draw on when planning any presentation.

Specific business uses for storytelling include:

- **Share Yourself:** Share moments that made you who you are or that clarified your values so that others understand your leadership perspective.
- **Share your Organization:** Share values of your organization. What makes up the DNA of your organization?
- **Teach a Lesson:** How you learned something through failure or success, how you mastered an organizational capability, how you overcame resistance to change.
- **Provoke Change:** Create dissatisfaction with present, share dangerous mistakes in business, establish the case for change, create a vision for future state.
- **Change Perspective:** Allow your audience to see a problem through a different lens, change the emotional climate.
- **Build a Relationship:** Sharing personal or personal business stories with direct reports or clients can highlight the common ground between you.

LET'S START WITH A STORY



Sean Kavanagh, our CEO, recently told this personal story at a learning association meeting about the impact of stress on our ability to listen and how that can undermine our most precious relationships:

It has been a stressful eighteen months. The recession has hit business hard and I'm about to send a second child off to college. I'm working long days and I'm managing tight budgets at the office and at home.

One dark evening in mid January, I'm standing in my kitchen transferring three days of dishes from the sink into the dishwasher. The children have used every cup and bowl we own, including a decorative Bavarian beer stein that is now encrusted with fossilized cereal! I'm muttering bad language under my breath.

"Hey pops whassup? How was your day?" Clare, my 17-year-old daughter enters. I tense, expecting this to be an expensive conversation.

"Sooooo, I wanted to ask you something. Julie's family is going to Vegas and then Miami for winter break and they've invited ME! Can I go?" I explode.

"We've had this conversation! We have a lot of expenses right now and you still owe me money from last summer. You are supposed to be saving for college. I can't believe you're even asking!" She explodes back.

"I can't believe you are yelling at me! You're not even listening to me. Julie's Dad has free tickets. I just picked up more hours at the restaurant. Ugh! You never listen. And you're never around and you're always pre-occupied and we never have any time alone together. You're just mean and grumpy all the time!"

She pauses, picks up a piece of paper and throws it at me. "Oh and by the way, here's my report card. I made honor roll. Again!"

She runs to her room in tears.

What did my daughter teach me here? Well I learned that under stress I have much less patience, I don't listen and I jump to conclusions. And that this behavior can cause a breach in a precious relationship.

The lesson for me is to be sure to take my own emotional temperature at home and at work, particularly in times of stress or extreme busyness. I also learned that it is important to stop, be fully present and truly listen to what others are telling you before answering. This is hard to do when stressed out and in a hurry but not doing these things can cause great damage to relationships and ultimately, to productivity.



GETTING **STARTED**

REMEMBERING AND USING STORIES

You already have dozens of stories at your fingertips—the tricky part is remembering them when you need them. Here are three ways to get rolling:

1. Begin cataloguing stories from your life that might serve as powerful illustrations of your ideas.

2. Keep a journal specifically for stories and enter any interesting daily occurrences.

3. Record other people's stories that you hear or read that might serve to illustrate a point.

TYPES OF STORIES

Begin to think about stories you could tell by jotting down one or two ideas in each of the following categories. Think about when you might use the story.

PERSONAL:

- Moments that made you who you are or that clarified your values
- Moments when you discovered your voice or leadership potential
- "When I was 17…"

I could tell a personal story about…

This would be a great story to tell at the following event/for the following purpose:

TYPES OF STORIES

PERSONAL BUSINESS:

- Heroic moments – difficult but worthwhile struggles or extraordinary feats in business
- Overcoming resistance to change
- Moments of truth
- "When I was working at..."

I could tell a personal business story about...

This would be a great story to tell at the following event/for the following purpose:

TYPES OF STORIES

GENERAL BUSINESS:

- Dangerous mistakes in business
- Stories of how your company has handled these things in the past
- Stories of how the future could look: bright or dark
- "The day Jack Welch started at GE..."

I could tell a general business story about...

This would be a great story to tell at the following event/for the following purpose:

TYPES OF STORIES

UNIVERSAL MYTHS OR FABLES

- The Trojan Horse from Homer's "Odyssey" as a metaphor
- The "Three Little Pigs" fairy tale as an analogy

I could use a myth or fable about...

This would be a great story to tell at the following event/for the following purpose:

USING STORIES IN A **BUSINESS SETTING**

HOW TO INTEGRATE A STORY INTO A CONVERSATION OR PRESENTATION

Now that you have a variety of stories at your fingertips, it's time to try incorporating one into a conversation or presentation. Here is a basic format to get you started:

1.

Introduce the Subject Matter or Business Content

- Conversation example: *"I think you've been doing a great job heading this initiative despite the hiccups you've encountered along the way and I want to make sure you don't beat yourself up over this too much..."*
- Presentation example: *"Today I would like to speak to you about a new marketing strategy for our product..."*

2.

Transition into the Story

- Conversation example: *"In fact, back when I was a team leader, I had a similar experience..."*
- Presentation example: *"Let me share with you a story to illustrate a vision of how we can work together..."*

3.

Tell the Story

- Set the Stage
- Describe the Conflict
- Describe the Resolution
- It's 1982. I'm out on the soccer field with my son when he turns to me and says...

4.

Connect the Story to a Teaching Point or Subject Matter

- Personal Learning: *"What my son said to me reminded me so powerfully that there is always a fresh, new way to look at any challenging situation."*
- Message for the Group: *"Ladies and gentlemen, are we willing to shift our marketing strategy in a whole new direction, to take a risk in the way that my son did? I certainly am."*

GENERAL TIPS FOR **TELLING STORIES**

Take these tips into consideration when practicing your story. Go with your gut in terms of how "big" to make your story depending on your audience. Obviously you'd want to tone it down when talking across a desk vs. presenting at a large conference.

Get in Touch With Your Inner Thespian

- Use your voice and body the way an actor would: be expressive.
- Play the different characters in the story, when appropriate, rather than just talking about them. Let your body and voice change in small ways to suggest how they looked and sounded. Speak as the characters; even a brief dialogue will help capture your audience's imagination.

Make It Happen Now

- Employ a vertical take-off: instead of leading up to the real story with a lot of runway time, e.g., "Before I describe what happened that day, let me give you a little background…". Begin in the middle of the action, e.g. "From the tense look on Rob's face, I can see the meeting is a disaster…".
- Re-experience your story as you tell it — imagine that it's happening right now. Let it affect you emotionally.
- Speak in the present tense, whenever possible, to bring the audience into the action, e.g., "It's the day of the big announcement. I'm nervous as heck.". You can also begin in the past tense and shift to present tense for the climax of the story.
- Tell the story from a "point of innocence" as if you don't know how it will end. This will keep your listeners waiting for the outcome.

GENERAL TIPS FOR **TELLING STORIES**

Excite Their Senses

- Sensory details help people visualize the story. Try "marble conference table" instead of "conference table," or "ten pound computer printout" instead of "computer printout." These examples evoke senses of vision and touch. You can also appeal to your audience's sense of smell, hearing and taste.
- Make sure to be selective with your use of sensory details. One or two are sufficient at the beginning of a story to set the scene; then use them sparingly throughout.

Be Succinct

- Boil it down. It's possible to tell a powerful, complete story in under a minute.
- Use "bullet phrases" instead of lengthy sentences. For example, the word "CRASH!" can be more powerful (when spoken expressively) than saying "Suddenly, the car I was driving collided with another vehicle."
- Have a clear beginning, middle, and end—each can be as short as a sentence or two.

Emphasize the Emotional Impact

- Slow down to accentuate and experience for yourself moments of real feeling: anger, fear, joy, a realization, etc. If you feel something, the audience will.
- Make the conflict clear. No story has drama unless there is conflict. For example, instead of saying "Company X's costs were higher than their profit, underscore the conflict by saying "Company X was on the verge of going out of business."
- Highlight the "emotional arc" of the story. How does the main character change? Is he/she different at the end of the story? What did he/she learn?

REVIEW

Business uses for stories:

- Share yourself
- Share your organization
- Teach a lesson
- Provoke Change
- Change perspective
- Build a relationship

You already have a library of stories at your fingertips:

- **Personal:** Moments that made you who you are or clarified your values.
- **General Business:** Dangerous mistakes, company stories, stories about other leaders.
- **Personal Business:** Heroic personal moments in business or difficult struggles you learned something from.
- **Universal Myths or Fables:** Trojan Horse, The Three Little Pigs, etc.

In telling a good story:

- Re-experience the moment
- Use bullet phrases
- Use sensory details
- Play the roles
- Use present tense
- Be succinct

Format for integrating a story into a presentation or conversation:

- Transition briefly into story
- Tell the story with a beginning, middle and end
- State what you learned (personal insight)
- State what “we can learn” (business message)

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