

NextGenLeaders

Storytelling – A Powerful Way to Connect

By Allen Hirsh¹

Setting Context

Leaders in complex organizations are working hard to put their strategies into action. Often pulled in multiple directions by the stakeholders and communities of interest they serve, leaders are striving to deliver on their mission, meet changing needs and deliver results today.

There is also a pressing need to develop our next generation. Leadership supply hasn't kept up with demand. We need to invest in individuals who will be ready to fill mission-critical roles and lead our organizations.

How can the leadership pipeline be developed? How do we engage the head, heart and guts of leaders?² One of the ways to accomplish this is to harness the power of high-impact learning and use it to transform the way leaders lead. High-impact learning situations can be created to:

- ó Accelerate development and provide situations where leaders will be "tested."
- ó Engage those who are trusted and well respected as role models for transformational learning.

NextGenLeaders learn best from other leaders. When high-potential people are immersed in a learning environment that enables respected senior executives and "tribal elders" to serve as mentors or role models, it can be a powerful vehicle for building leadership capability.

By exposing emerging leaders to meaningful stories they can be guided through those stories to understand the values, attributes, and behaviours that enabled success or that contributed to failure. Meaningful stories are often centered on difficult dilemmas, business decisions the leaders had to make, or a critical career passage point. It is through sharing these personal stories with others that important and enduring lessons can be learned.

What Makes a Story Compelling?

A compelling story combines ideas with emotion; facts with feelings; aspiration with dejection; hope with fear. In identifying stories that touch on these universal experiences, leaders can impart values, wisdom and successful practices that have worked for them. The story can

¹ This paper has evolved from various earlier versions over the years. Fellow **NextGenLeaders** colleague **Anita Shilton** contributed many of these ideas from an earlier project we did together at Bell Canada. I've lost track of some of the other contributors so a general thank you to the various story tellers and colleagues who have helped influence these thoughts.

² See [Head, Heart and Guts](#) by my former Oliver Wyman Delta partners David Dotlich, Peter Cairo and Stephen Rhinesmith. John Wiley & Sons 2006

become a vehicle for imagining a shared vision of the future and can convey a meaningful message. It can break through barriers by putting information into context and by building a bond between a leader and the audience. A key purpose of a compelling story is to communicate insight in a way that helps the leader connect with people.

By probing universal themes such as facing ethical dilemmas or making tough choices that have long-term impact on people, the story teller can engage the hearts as well as the minds of the audience in the learning. Stories that illustrate the link between the human and business dimensions of decisions are powerful. Such stories create high-impact learning that can change behaviour or make an important difference to a leader's effectiveness as a champion for change.

What Topics Might Make for a Good Story?

Meaning can be gained through a range of personalized stories. If delivered well, sharing insight behind a failure or missed goal can actually demonstrate a leader's strength. By demonstrating a willingness to be vulnerable, a leader can send the message that he/she is confident and open to learning. This can provide as much food for thought as sharing a success story.

Here are some examples of topics that could lead to a compelling story:

- ó Living/working in a different culture or country
- ó Finding or losing faith in something
- ó Facing a major conflict in values (with a boss, company, friend, etc.)
- ó Joining something (like a new job or organization)
- ó Facing personal life passages (illness, divorce, death of someone close)
- ó Shutting down an operation; dealing with layoffs and redeployment; firing someone close
- ó Getting fired yourself
- ó A significant project/stretch assignment (like bringing a new product or service to market)
- ó Facing significant failure where you were responsible
- ó Being promoted too quickly and dealing with knowledge or experience gaps
- ó Dealing with a crisis in the full eye of the media
- ó Living through a merger or acquisition
- ó Taking on a new leadership role
- ó Juggling multiple demands and creating the right blend in your life
- ó Being ignored or passed over for an assignment or promotion
- ó Dealing with difficult and highly competitive peers
- ó Listening to tough feedback and making personal changes

What Criteria Can Be Used to Select a Story?

1. Audience specific, meaningful and relevant

- ó When stories are linked to the specific challenges that have strategic value to the organization, they will have immediacy and relevance. By making a direct connection to the challenges faced by the **NextGenLeaders**, the story will have more impact and increase the likelihood that the learning will get embedded and lead to action.
- ó For a story to be meaningful to the audience, it has to be anchored in experiences that resonate with the listeners. Developing leaders must be able to grapple with the level of complexity of the dilemma that is being described.

2. Respected role models

- ó Storytellers who are authentic will engage their audience, even if their personal public speaking skills are not highly polished. Watching many storytellers over the years, I conclude that it is “difficult to hide your act.” Disingenuous storytellers are transparent to their audience, and less successful at connecting with people.
- ó The relationship and rapport with the storyteller or mentor is critical to the engagement of **NextGenLeaders**. The relationship must be based on mutual trust and respect. That is why most storytelling should not be “farmed out” to the training department or to an external consultant, no matter how able the individuals may be. It is the trust, respect and credibility vested in the storyteller that brings magic to the storytelling experience.

3. Great stories have drama

- ó Compelling stories often involve high-risk decisions which draw in the listener and grab their attention.
- ó The storyteller entices the developing leader to go on the “journey” with them; to ponder what he/she would do in a similar situation; to empathize with the protagonist in the story; to question what his/her own motives would be in handling a similar issue.

4. Enable action to follow reflection

- ó When **NextGenLeaders** are able to connect the messages in the story to the specific attributes, skills, and behaviours that are expected of them, they are more likely to successfully put strategy into action.
- ó For this reason, it is important (ideally) to follow up the storytelling and debriefing with developmental activities such as action learning projects, special assignments, individual assessment feedback, coaching, etc.

Questions to Help Develop the Storyline

The following questions will help you get started to develop your story.

1. Set the stage

- ó When did the event happen?
- ó What was your role at the time and how long had you been in your role? How well were you performing?
- ó What were the pertinent conditions at the time (strategic objectives, issues, opportunities, risks, threats, key people involved)?
- ó What was your personal support network (family or other relevant support) at the time?

2. Identify the dilemma

- ó What was the problem you had to solve? Describe the dimensions of the dilemma.
- ó Describe the pressures you were facing at a day-to-day level because of this situation.

3. Clarify your choices and decisions

- ó Describe the choices that you faced.
- ó What were the potential rewards if you made the right choice?
- ó What was at risk for you if you made the wrong choice?
- ó Describe how you assessed the trade-offs involved in each choice you considered.
- ó What was the toughest part of making the choice? What were your hopes and fears?

4. Reach conclusions

- ó What did you decide?
- ó What happened?
- ó What were the implications?

5. Reflect

- ó What inner resources did you discover that you didn't know you had? Strengths? Weaknesses?
- ó What did you do differently in this situation from most other situations?
- ó How did this experience change you (the quality of your relationships, your views about the organization, your level of confidence)?

Delivering the Story

Early in my career, I remember (radio personality and Touche Ross colleague) Lyman MacInnis telling our group of aspiring public speakers that if we followed three golden rules we couldn't help but succeed as story tellers. So I'm passing the secret along!

1. Earn the Right to Talk

- Know your topic
- Tell your story (not someone else's)

2. You Must Want to Talk

- It's hard to fake it when you don't want to be there

3. Be Enthusiastic

- Demonstrate energy and passion

Summary

Fundamental components of the job of leaders are to role model, mentor, share insights and develop people. Leaders who put these practice into action are able to accelerate the creation of a learning culture and grow their leadership pipeline. Helping **NextGenLeaders** step-up can also generate immense personal satisfaction, forge valuable bonds and sometimes create a legacy for the leader. Through storytelling, respected leaders can make a huge difference.

Final Words

- Story telling has been around forever & it's powerful!
- It's a terrific way of building connections with people.
- As a leader, you'll likely gain as much from telling your story, as the listeners will benefit from hearing it.³

³ I'm interested in your feedback. You can reach me at allen@nextgenleaders.ca