

A Lesson from the Bard

By Andrée Iffrig

Have you ever found yourself debating with a colleague or customer which of two courses of action to take, yours or the other person's? Chances are you were unwittingly using an approach perfected by William Shakespeare in his tragedies. Shakespeare was a master at swaying audiences and it is to the Bard we turn in this article to learn more about the art of business narrative.

Storytelling in a business situation is often about convincing someone else to see your point of view. Dry sermons do not speak to people's emotions, and most of us connect better with someone when that person uses an emotional appeal rather than a rational one. Shakespeare created convincing speeches by using storytelling devices. He would turn a speech into a little battlefield where opposing forces fight it out. There are conflicts of words, ideas, and intentions as the protagonist debates which of two actions to take.

One of Shakespeare's greatest speeches is in the play *Julius Caesar*. Mark Anthony is mourning the death of Caesar at the hands of Brutus and the other conspirators. He is addressing the crowd, notorious for being fickle in its support for Caesar. With the intention of getting the crowd onside and defaming Brutus, Mark Anthony says these classic lines about Caesar:

"He was my friend, faithful and just to me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious
And Brutus is an honorable man."

In their book *A Shakespearean Actor Prepares*, authors Adrian Brine and Michael York call this contrasting of two options "Black vs. White." Notice how the little hinge-word **but** indicates the switch from one to the other.

Debating the best course of action to take has applications in a business setting. Let's say you want to help a prospect make a decision about a product or proposal.

There's more than one choice, but you'd like this person to work with you on a particular one. You explain two options. She could do this (use left hand, sound less than enthusiastic) and get this result, BUT if she does your option (other hand, with conviction) she'll experience a different result. One choice is black, the other is white. The black option is the equivalent of supporting Brutus. By becoming the white side of the equation, you create a sympathetic connection with the client.

Perhaps you have to explain the merger of your company with another firm. Managers and employees are anxious to know leadership's intentions. What are the implications of the merger, and will they lose their jobs? You explain that you have their best interests in mind and would like to safeguard their jobs, BUT the parent company will make the final decisions regarding any layoffs after the merger. You're white, a foil to the parent firm which is cast in the Brutus role.

Of course, telling stories is not a license for being deliberately deceitful. You will destroy your credibility if you're caught out in a lie. On the other hand, nowhere is it written that you aren't allowed to draw your audience into a story that's about them. They might even thank you!

The next issue of *Find Your Voice at Work* looks at a powerful way of connecting with your audience. It's a technique that is (almost) as old as the hills and which even the novice storyteller can master for maximum effect. Until then, "break a leg!"

Andrée Iffrig delights in educating others in the art of narrating stories. She is the author of *Find Your Voice at Work – The Power of Storytelling in the Workplace*. Visit www.find-your-voice.ca to learn more.