

Risk-taking with Stories

**Some workplaces are hostile to any kind of sharing
and some storytellers are tripped up by their own inner doubts**

By Andrée Iffrig

No one said narrating stories at the office was risk-free. It all depends on the circumstances in which you tell the story, your motivation, and your sense of self.

Hidden within the question, "Is it safe to tell my story?" are three other questions:

- Will I get into trouble with this story?
- Will storytelling shame me in front of my peers and superiors?
- Will anyone like my story?

Let's say you attend a meeting called by a senior division manager. You're a mid-level manager and new to your position. You haven't quite figured out yet how to fit in with the other managers in the group. The chair for the meeting is trying to understand the reasons for constant friction between sales agents and administrative staff. Your own observations have led you to believe that as long as sales people treat the admin employees as though they were a burden to the company ("not money producers like the sales staff"), hostilities will remain rife. There's a metaphor you remember that would shed light on the problem. As a relative neophyte, do you share this metaphor with a group that includes the managers for sales and marketing?

Perhaps you find yourself in a conversation over coffee with another employee who is feeling overwhelmed by professional and personal circumstances. You've been down this road before and have scars to show for it. Do you share your stories by way of connecting with this person and helping him with his impasse, or are you careful to avoid discussing your own experience lest it be used against you at some future date?

Fear is a powerful deterrent to sharing a story that would bring retribution or ridicule at work. Sometimes fear is entirely reasonable, and you would be wise to listen to your instincts. Your story might bring to light behaviors that reflect

badly on the organization, with a subsequent backlash from people who preferred to hide that behavior.

Other times, the question, "Is it safe to tell my story?" is a reflection of a different kind of fear: your dread of losing face or of failing to please someone. What if you were found wanting and it hurt your career? What if others ridiculed you for your honesty?

This second kind of fear is like a nasty bird sitting on your shoulder, chattering in your ear, "You fool! You're not really going to say that, are you? Who gave you permission to tell that story?" It's an inner voice conspiring against your insight and authentic expression. While it may be noisy and persistent, that doesn't make it right.

The senior manager's groupthink about animosity between sales and admin functions may not be a safe place to narrate stories, not yet anyway, but if you look around you will find people to support and listen to you. Stuffing your concerns and stories is not the answer. Find a safe place to air your stories and write them down for yourself. If your concern is that storytelling at work will land you in trouble, share your tales first with people you trust. Examine your motives for storytelling and make sure they're appropriate to the situation. What results do you want from sharing a particular story? Write your objectives down and take time to reflect on them.

Whatever you do, stop carrying your stories around in your head. They deserve to be narrated and your taking a risk with a story could bring clarity and hope to someone else.

Andrée Iffrig is the author of *Find Your Voice at Work – The Power of Storytelling in the Workplace*. When she isn't narrating stories, she delivers programs in leadership development. Visit www.find-your-voice.ca to learn more.

