

## What Story Will You Tell?

**If you're stumped for storytelling ideas at the office, here's a process for selecting and developing great stories.**

By Andrée Iffrig

If you want to become an effective storyteller in business situations, select content that speaks to your own experience and values. Marketing messages and corporate speak have muddied the waters for most of us by creating confusion about what's believable.

In a world where people often feel they've been manipulated by corporate messages, your story will have to be genuine to overcome doubt and skepticism. Your audience wants to hear a been-there/felt-that/made-that-mistake story, not smooth-talking promotional hype.

### The storytelling cycle

Where do you start? What do you choose to narrate? There's more than one way to develop a story. Here's a simple technique for selecting and developing organizational stories. It's based on a process of reflection and discovery.

The first step is to be clear about your intentions in narrating the story. This is a reflective step, aided by asking and answering questions such as:

- Who's in my target audience?
- What matters to them right now?
- What do they need to know that will help them adapt?
- What's my one main point for this audience?
- What will change if I narrate this story? How might people behave differently?

The second step is to select a potential story that supports your intentions. Consider using the four dimensions of leadership as a starting point for developing meaningful stories. Those dimensions are: strategic, organizational, interpersonal and personal.

- In demonstrating the strategic dimension of leadership, you could choose a story that speaks to a vision for the organization and planning for the long term.
- From an organizational standpoint, you could challenge conventional ways of doing business that are no longer relevant, or you could choose a narrative to help others understand how the current business climate is impacting the organization.
- As a leader competent in the interpersonal dimension, you could act as a Change Champion and narrate a story that helps others to adopt changes that create value for everyone in the organization.
- In selecting a narrative from the personal dimension of leadership, your story might emphasize the importance of being accountable, or of modeling ethical behaviour.

In carrying out this second step, begin by briefly identifying a story for each of the dimensions, and then narrow your selection to just one story for further development.

In the third step, tell the story as you understand it now. Your insights at this first telling may not be profound, but you'll find you gain perspective by saying it out loud to someone else or by writing it down. Do not edit this initial narrative or you will sabotage the creative process involved in story development. Just get the story out there and trust in the reflection and discovery process. Practice will help you appreciate this.

The fourth step requires further reflection. If you have a listener present, that person could reflect back to you the story you've just told. She would summarize what she heard and ask you questions to clarify details of the story, ensuring that her understanding of the story matches what you intended to convey.

If you're working alone, reread the story you just wrote. What can you learn from the story now that you have a chance to step back from it? If the story describes decisions you made or actions you took, what were your intentions with these at the time? Were the outcomes ones you anticipated? How did you react to unanticipated consequences of your actions? Sum up what you've noticed and learned.

In the fifth and final step, you put the pieces of the story back together, enriched by the discoveries you've made earlier in the process. Rewrite and edit the story as necessary. If you have faithfully followed the steps, you'll have moved from a narrative that was initially "all about you" to one that is more outward-looking and infused with an honest self-assessment.

Check your story to ensure that you have a beginning, middle and end that your listeners can easily follow. Structure in storytelling often emerges organically, especially if you follow the Wisdom Story sequence of "what it was like, what happened, and what it's like now."

For another example using a narrative cycle for personal and professional development, I recommend Warren Redman's book, *The 9 Steps to Emotional Fitness*. Warren outlines a storytelling process originally intended for narrating personal stories in coaching and counseling situations. It lends itself to the development of organizational stories as well, [www.innerbalancing.com](http://www.innerbalancing.com).

The June issue of *Find Your Voice at Work* will explore one of the great benefits of narrating stories: finding meaning in the midst of chaos. Until then, go out there and tell stories! Just make sure that fishing pole of yours doesn't have too much line!

Andrée Iffrig loves to make other people more successful storytellers. She is the author of *Find Your Voice at Work – The Power of Storytelling in the Workplace*. Visit [www.find-your-voice.ca](http://www.find-your-voice.ca) to learn more.