Story Dash

Tags: #storytelling

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Dialogue

The 4 biggest mistakes leaders make with storytelling.

1. Not telling stories! (it's the problem all of Story Dash is written to correct.)

Neural coupling.

People say:

Objection: I'm not a storyteller.
Objection: I don't want to sound like I'm performing.

2. Not connecting to a strategic intent. "Why am I telling this story?"

> There is the most important element of your story. At the end of the story, the leader says, "There's a reason I told you this. I think it says something important." Then you have to say with your words what that thing is. You can't trust that your audience has landed on the conclusion you wanted. They won't. Stories are so rich in meaning, your audience's minds are spinning toward infinitely unpredictable conclusions, until you bring them all together.

What does this sound like?

3. No emotional content.

> Organizations are emotional systems. If you are seeking to influence people to action by using data, you've grabbed the wrong tool from the toolbox. You need another language.

Story is the language that engages and influences the emotional system.

Objection: My boss/customer is a numbers person.
Objection: I don't want to be emotional. It's not me.

4. Expecting it to "just happen." (It won't just happen! All of "Story Dash" is suggesting that you institutionalize story as a capability, and develop it as a team capability.)

Example: Jeff Bezos at Amazon

Quotes

Highlight [page 17]: Data doesn't move people, especially in a world that has become infinitely noisy. In fact, attempts to influence people with data usually backfire and make people dig in their heels even more.

Highlight [page 19]: Organizations are emotional systems. If you are seeking to influence people to action by using data, you've grabbed the wrong tool from the toolbox. You need another language. Story is the language that engages and influences the emotional system.

Highlight [page 24]: You may even come to the same conclusion as Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, who has institutionalized the capability at the highest levels of the organization. Bezos has famously outlawed PowerPoint slides in his meetings with senior leaders and demanded that they instead show up prepared to tell meaning-generating stories about the state of their businesses. "It's the smartest thing I ever did," Bezos said.

Highlight [page 25]: "I'm not a storyteller." This one is easy to address because it's the most demonstrably false. Yes, you are a storyteller. If you had drinks or dinner with friends or family last night, you told stories at the table, and then they jumped in and responded to your stories with more stories. You didn't even have to think about it. Story is your brain's natural operating system for making sense of the world. All we are doing is taking this most-human capability that you already have and connecting it more intentionally to the work that you care about.

Highlight [page 26]: "I don't have any good stories." / "I can't think of any stories." Hogwash. You are made of stories. Tonight when you go to sleep your brain will keep telling stories to you because it can't stop. Your problem is not that you don't have any stories; it's that you have so many that you don't know which ones to isolate and tell. The very next chapter will be revelatory for you.

Highlight [page 27]: "I don't want to be all emotional; it's not my style." I know some leaders who like to maintain a certain stoic presence. They don't want to become "all emotional" by telling a story that is, after all, a container for emotional content. But there's a difference between displaying emotion and describing it. I've seen leaders tell moving stories about the team's courageous or inspiring actions without ever changing their expressions, and it still creates powerful engagement. Again, this work is not about changing your voice or style. It's about amplifying it.

Highlight [page 66]: I've seen leaders step up to tell a story … and they somehow don't quite get there. One of my program participants stepped up in front of the group and said, "I value open communication. I always have. Ever since I started working here, it has always been a part of my leadership style, and I want you to know you can always drop by my office. I have an open-door policy. So come talk to me whenever you wish. That's my story!" No, that's not a story. I mean, it's a great thought. But it's not a story.

I see this a lot. Getting into a story space seems like a hard chasm for some leaders to cross. But it doesn't need to be hard it all. Here's my number one tip for ensuring that your story is, in fact, a story: Start with a time and a place marker. I've done this multiple times throughout this book: I was with Jeanette's team in Boston last year ... A few months ago, I was working in a coffee shop when I received a message on LinkedIn ... This language, which is temporal and spatial, signals the mind that we are in a narrative space. It is compelling. Think of the times you have been bored by the speaker's endless slides of data, and then he says, "That reminds me of something really wild that happened last week. I was at the airport when ... " that language pulls you back in, right?

Highlight [page 73]: There is the most important element of your story. At the end of the story, the leader says, "There's a reason I told you this. I think it says something important." Then you have to say with your words what that thing is. You can't trust that your audience has landed on the conclusion you wanted. They won't. Stories are so rich in meaning, your audience's minds are spinning toward infinitely unpredictable conclusions, until you bring them all together.

Highlight [page 91]: Don't say the "S" word I'm glad to get this one out of the way first. This isn't just feedback for Sherry; almost everyone makes this mistake. Don't say the word "story." It surprises groups when I tell them this, because we've been talking about stories all day long and I've probably said the word "story" hundreds of times. Have you ever heard a speaker step up to begin their presentation and they say, "I just want to begin with a little story ..." and you think, Ugh, okay, sure, whatever, let's get on with it. I do. There's something about saying "I want to tell you a story" that breaks the spell. It calls attention to the device. On the other hand, if Sherry had simply started her message by saying "Last week I was at the Global Quality conference in Singapore ..." no one would have thought, Oh, she's hoping to create engagement with narrative! It would sound like she was just talking to us. When you do it right, story is invisible. It's stealth technology. It's the most natural way of speaking and no one knows you're using a device unless you tell them you are. So don't say the "S" word.

Highlight [page 99]: How much story is too much? Of course story isn't the "answer to everything." Yes, it is possible to overdo this. How much is too much? I have long held it as a rule of thumb that around 30 percent of your communication as a leader should be story. I'm not even sure where I got that number. It always felt "about right" to me.

Highlight [page 103]: I've analyzed many other examples of persuasive communications from organizational, political, and system transformation contexts ... and (Sir Ken Robinson aside) "30 percent story" receives validation, over and over again. It may indeed be the golden ratio.

Highlight [page 105]: I maintain that the 30 percent hypothesis, while not proven as an axiom, stands as a plausible way to approach your most important communication. My point here is not to convince you that you should analyze the content and count the words of your messages like I did so you can hit an ideal of 30 percent stories. Rather,

it is to give you confidence that you have a lot of room to experiment with this! Most of the leaders I work with are somewhere between 0 percent and 5 percent story in their messages. For those of you who are worried about "overdoing this stuff," my prediction is that you're nowhere close to a 30 percent threshold. You have plenty of room to work with. So, play. Experiment. Tell one story. See what kind of reaction you get. If you don't get the response you hoped for, don't conclude "it doesn't work." Instead, ask for feedback and update your story. Then try it again. Keep going. Add another story.

Highlight [page 109]: Here's where we've landed As you think about creating engagement and belief in your message to motivate people to act, consider: What are the two or three points you want your audience to remember? You're thinking, But I have eleven important points! Nope. If your goal is message retention, three is all you get. How can you breathe life into each of those points with its own story? You can use a Story Dash to identify and develop your narrative assets that animate those few points and move the audience to the outcomes you desire. How will you alternate "blue bars" and "gray bars?" Alternate stories and data. Put your slides, data, theory, and didactic/ "telling"/"gray bar" content in between the stories. How will you manage content so that you do no more than nine minutes of "telling"? Test your message by saying it out loud. Use a timer. Are you in theory/ data/didactic for more than nine minutes? You risk losing your audience. Find a story. Then practice. Exercise your voice. Show us who you are. Make us believe.

References