Excerpted from

Lead with a Story

A Guide to Crafting Business Narratives That Captivate, Convince, and Inspire

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Introduction

“Long before the first formal business was established . . . the six most powerful words in any language were Let me tell you a story.”
—MATHEWS & WACKER, WHAT'S YOUR STORY

WHEN JAYSON ZOLLER WAS A COLLEGE STUDENT, one of his favorite professors told the class a story so compelling Jayson is still retelling it two decades later. Apparently the professor’s students from a previous class had an unusual project working for a local district judge. The assignment: Investigate the jury deliberation process and determine how to improve it. As young, idealistic college students, his young team was excited to tackle such a noble mission.

The students interviewed dozens of judges, attorneys, former jurors, and other court officials around the district. They asked all the questions you would think a smart group of would-be consultants should ask. How many men were in the jury versus women? What was the mix of ethnic backgrounds? How many older jurors were there versus younger ones? Were there differences in the instructions given the jurors, or what kind of information they were allowed to have in the jury room? Did the trials last days, weeks, or months? They even asked how late the jurors were made to work into the evening and what kind of food they were fed.

To their surprise, none of those things seemed to matter much. What did matter, it turned out, was the shape of the table in the jury room! In courtrooms where there was a rectangular table, the juror sitting at the head of the table (even if that person wasn’t the jury foreman) tended to dominate the conversation. This kept some jurors from sharing their points of view as openly. But in jury rooms that had a round or oval table, the jurors tended to be more egalitarian and their debate of the facts was
more thorough and robust. The team concluded it was those juries with round tables that came to the most accurate and just verdicts.

The students were excited about this finding for two reasons. First, they felt like they had really nailed the key to improving the jury deliberation process. And second, it was such an easy thing to change. Imagine, instead, if their conclusion had been that the jury needed to be seated with more intelligent, open-minded, better-educated jurists. That’s much harder to do.

They were proud of their success as they presented the results to the chief judge. He was just as excited as they were, and for exactly the same two reasons. The judge immediately issued a decree to all the courthouses in his jurisdiction. Effective immediately, “All jury rooms that have round and oval tables are to have the tables removed. Replace them with rectangular tables.”

Read those last two sentences again. That wasn’t a typo. In direct contradiction to their recommendation, the judge removed all the round and oval tables and put in rectangular tables. Why? Because the judge’s objective in improving the jury deliberation process wasn’t to make it more robust, fair, or even accurate. It was to make it faster. He wanted to reduce the backlog of cases clogging up his court docket.

The students were mortified. They thought they were single-handedly fixing the sometimes-brutal consequences of an imperfect judicial system. Instead, they were unwittingly responsible for making it, in their eyes, a little bit less perfect. They may have finished the year with an A on their report card, but they felt completely defeated.

Twenty years later, Jayson is now a professional market researcher. He tells this story to new researchers to teach them the importance of being clear on objectives before they embark on a research project. Instead, he could simply tell them, “Experience suggests it is very important to be clear on your objectives before you start your research project.” But that wouldn’t be nearly as effective, would it? By telling a story, Jayson lets his audience learn a lesson almost firsthand and experience what it would feel like to not be clear on objectives up front—and suffer the consequences.

Experience is the best teacher. A compelling story is a close second.

This account illustrates the power of storytelling in business. But until recently, storytelling was about as welcome in the workplace as a
crayon doodle on a napkin. It was considered too imprecise and trite for professional dialogue. Not so anymore. Like the personal computer—once considered a toy and unworthy of a place on any serious leader’s desk—storytelling has come of age.

Today, many of the most successful organizations on the planet intentionally use storytelling as a key leadership tool: Microsoft, Nike, Motorola, 3M, Saatchi & Saatchi, Berkshire Hathaway, Eastman Kodak, Disney, Costco, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Southwest Airlines, FedEx, Procter & Gamble, Armstrong International, Mary Kay Cosmetics, Kimberly-Clark, The Container Store, REI, Northwestern Mutual, NASA, and The World Bank.3

Many of these companies have assigned a high-level “corporate storyteller” to capture and share their most important stories. At Nike, all the senior executives are designated “corporate storytellers.”4 Several companies actively teach storytelling skills to their leaders. Kimberly-Clark, for example, has held two-day seminars to teach its 13-step program for crafting a story and structuring presentations using them.5 3M banned bullet points years ago and replaced them with a process of writing “strategic narratives.”6 Procter & Gamble has hired Hollywood movie directors to teach its senior executives storytelling techniques. And some storytellers at Motorola participate in outside theater and improvisational groups to hone their story skills.7

Some forward-thinking business schools like at Notre Dame and DePaul University have even added storytelling courses to their management curriculum.8

So how did we get here? How did storytelling go from an office obscurity to a defining characteristic of leadership? The short answer is that it was simply returning to the natural order of things. The better question might be, “Why did it take a temporary hiatus to begin with?”

To answer that question, consider the role of storytelling before the printing press—a time noted by professional storyteller Jack Maguire when communication among people almost always went directly from mouth to ear. Back then, telling stories was a major means of conducting day-to-day business. After all, when human beings themselves are the medium, even work-related messages tend to be narrative in style and experiential in content.9 Actually, for most of man’s history on the earth, storytelling was a natural part of leadership.

Training coach and bestselling author Margaret Parkin points out that before the printed word, storytelling existed in every nation, each
with its own traditions: The Celtic culture had its bards and Druids, the Norsemen of the Scandinavian countries told sagas, the Islamic countries listened to teaching from Sufi masters and dervishes, the people of Mongolia and Siberia were influenced by the tales and medicine of the shamans, and the Ute tribes of Native Americans made their best storytellers their tribal leaders.

Storytelling was popular because before writing was developed, the success of communication was measured largely by how much of it was remembered by the audience. They couldn’t just go write it down. So a high value was placed on techniques that helped people remember things, like the rhythm of song, the rhyme of a poem, or the engagingness of a story.

Eventually, after several millennia of success, storytelling in business began a gradual decline. The advent of writing, the printing press, and organized business practices made business communication far more technical in style and databased in content than it used to be. Storytelling slowly gave way to formal reports, memos, and policy manuals. The professionalization of business in the early 1900s accelerated this trend. Business schools churned out thousands of bright, analytical management professionals trained to look at a business like a machine that needed to be finely tuned. Telling stories would have identified someone as old school—certainly not a member of the new avant-garde of business leaders.

That explains storytelling’s originally lofty status, and its eventual fall from grace. But when did it start its comeback? According to professional storyteller Doug Lipman, that began in the 1960s and 1970s, when people around the world started to rediscover storytelling. Then, in 1973, the movement gained national attention when the first National Storytelling festival was held in Tennessee.

But it wasn’t until the early 1990s that storytelling moved back into the realm of business in any serious way. This was fostered by three concurrent forces:

1. Several academic studies reported the effectiveness of storytelling in the workplace (like those by David M. Boje).
2. A number of successful trade books explored the topic (the earliest being Management by Storying Around, by David Armstrong, and Corporate Legends & Lore, by Peg C. Neuhauser).
3. Leading storytelling practitioners emerged in the corporate world, such as Stephen Denning at The World Bank.
That’s the short history. Over the last 20 years, and especially the last decade, storytelling has retaken its rightful place in management’s bag of leadership and influencing tools.

What this book adds to the growing body of literature consists of two things. First, it extends the usefulness of storytelling to a much wider range of leadership challenges. Instead of only six or seven of the most common situations a leader faces, this book covers 21 of the toughest leadership challenges, with a handful of insightful and inspiring stories to help you navigate each with success. There are over 100 stories in total. A matrix in the appendix will help you locate exactly the right story at the right time.

Second, it offers more thorough and practical advice for how to craft your own stories for any leadership challenge. That starts with a simple structure for a good business story. But it also includes advice on six other key elements you’ll need to turn that good story into a great one: metaphors, emotion, realism, surprise, style, and how to put your audience into your story.

There are two kinds of stories in this book. Some are ready-to-tell stories that can be retold, as they are written, by anyone when the situation calls for it. Others are intended as a springboard to provide inspiration for creating your own similar stories. Many can serve both purposes. All the stories, however, teach critical lessons in leadership worthy of learning. That can be beneficial for your own leadership skills, or for teaching others how to be better leaders.

In addition to learning from them, I hope you enjoy the stories. Some will make you laugh, some might make you cry, most will make you think. More important, I hope this book makes you do something—start crafting, collecting, and telling stories today.

* * *

How should you read this book? Many will want to read straight through, chapter by chapter. And that’s what I recommend. Some of the later chapters refer to stories earlier in the book to illustrate a point. But it’s not crucial that you read in that order. The “how-to” chapters are interspersed throughout the book. If you’re eager to learn how, you can read those chapters first. If you’re already an accomplished storyteller and are mostly looking for stories to add to your collection, start with the “leadership challenges” chapters. And of course, anytime you find yourself in one of these tough challenges, refer back to the appropriate chapter.
Chapters are grouped in five leadership themes: Envision success, create an Environment for winning, Energize the team, Educate people, and Empower others. Even the how-to chapters are included in the same groups, based on the role they play in creating the story. Story structure is how you should see your story in your mind’s eye before you create it (Envision). Realism and appropriate writing style should be pervasive throughout your entire story (Environment). Emotion and surprise punctuate your stories with excitement and interest (Energize). Metaphors are the most efficient literary device to teach lessons in stories (Educate). And recasting your audience into your stories, instead of just telling them stories, takes the power of storytelling to a completely new level (Empower).

There’s something about leadership that lends itself to the letter e. Jack Welch at GE espoused the four E’s of leadership (energy, energize, edge, execute). Procter & Gamble teaches five E’s of leadership (envision, engage, energize, enable, execute). Many others have their own similar multi-E leadership philosophy. I don’t claim any superiority of my five-E structure over the others. In fact, I don’t intend to create a new leadership philosophy at all, I’ve only chosen five logical groups of the 21 leadership challenges I believe storytelling is required to navigate. And they happen to be nicely described in five words staring with the letter e.

Most chapters have a brief summary and exercises to help you leverage the stories and begin to develop your own. Use them. You’ll get much more out of this book if you do. There are also two templates in the appendix to help you when crafting your own stories. Use them every time you need to develop a new story or improve an existing one. Make as many copies as you need. I give you permission.

Let’s get started.

Notes
5. Silverman, p. 165.
CHAPTER 1

Why tell stories?

“Every great leader is a great storyteller.”
—HOWARD GARDNER, Harvard psychologist

I’VE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to deliver a presentation to Procter & Gamble’s then-CEO A. G. Lafley four or five times in the decade he held that position. The first time was unforgettable. That day I learned a valuable lesson—the hard way—about how not to present to the CEO.

I’d been given 20 minutes on the agenda of the Executive Global Leadership Council meeting. This group included the CEO and a dozen or so of the top officials in the company. They met weekly in a special room on P&G’s executive floor designed just for this group. It’s a perfectly round room with modern features, centered on a perfectly round table. Even the doors are curved so as not to stray from the round motif. My presentation was the first item on the agenda that day, so I arrived 30 minutes early to set up my computer and make sure all of the audiovisual equipment worked properly. I was, after all, making my first presentation to the CEO. I wanted to make sure everything went smoothly.

The executives began filing into the room at the appointed time and taking up seats around the table. After half of them had arrived, the CEO, Mr. Lafley, entered the room. He walked almost completely around the table, saying hello to each of his team members, and—to my horror—sat down in the seat immediately underneath the projection screen—with his back to it!
This was not good. “He’ll be constantly turning around in his seat to see the presentation,” I thought, “and probably hurt his neck. Then he’ll be in a bad mood, and might not agree to my recommendation.” But I wasn’t going to tell the boss where to sit, so I started my presentation.

About five minutes in, I realized Mr. Lafley hadn’t turned around even once to see the slides. I stopped being worried about his neck and started worrying that he wasn’t going to understand my presentation. And if he didn’t understand it, he certainly wouldn’t agree to my recommendation. But again, I wasn’t going to tell the CEO what to do. So I just kept going.

At 10 minutes into the presentation—halfway through my allotted time—I noticed he still hadn’t turned around once to look at my slides. At that point, I stopped being worried and just got confused. He was looking right at me and was clearly engaged in the conversation. So why wasn’t he looking at my slides?

When 20 minutes had expired, I was done with my presentation, and the CEO hadn’t ever bothered to look at my slides. But he did agree to my recommendation. Despite that success, as I was walking back to my office, I couldn’t help but feel like I’d failed somehow. I debriefed the whole event in my head, wondering what I had done wrong. Was I boring? Did I not make my points very clear? Was he distracted with some billion-dollar decision far more important than whatever I was talking about?

But then it occurred to me. He wasn’t looking at my slides because he knew something that I didn’t know until that moment. He knew if I had anything important to say, I would say it. It would come out of my mouth, not from that screen. He knew those slides were there more for my benefit than for his.

As CEO, Mr. Lafley probably spent most of his day reading dry memos and financial reports with detailed charts and graphs. He was probably looking forward to that meeting as a break from that tedium, and as an opportunity to engage someone in dialogue—to have someone tell him what was happening on the front lines of the business, to share a brilliant idea, and to ask for his help. In short, for someone to tell him a story. Someone like me. That was my job during those 20 minutes. I just didn’t know it yet.

Looking back, I realize it was probably no accident Mr. Lafley chose the seat he did. There were certainly others he could have chosen. He sat there for a reason. That position kept him from being distracted by the words on the screen and allowed him to focus on the presenter and on the discussion.
Mr. Lafley taught me a valuable lesson that day, and probably didn’t even know it. My next such opportunities involved fewer slides, used more stories, and were far more effective.

In fact, storytelling has become so impactful at P&G that for many years we had a person whose job title was “corporate storyteller.” The history of that role is a story in itself.

Forty years ago, a young mathematician named Jim Bangel was hired by P&G in the research & development department. Like all R&D employees, Jim wrote a monthly memo to his boss detailing the results of his research over the past 30 days. These memos are usually dry and detailed and filled with the kind of language only a fellow chemist or engineer would appreciate or even understand.

After many years of writing the same type of memo as all of his colleagues, Jim decided to do something different. He decided to write a story. He named his main character Earnest Engineer. In the story, readers got to see and follow along as Earnest learned something. It included dialogue between Earnest and his boss and peers. And it always concluded with the lesson learned. The lesson was the same as the conclusion Jim would have written about in the more traditional memo. But the story was much more compelling—and certainly more readable. As a result, other people started asking to read his memo—even people working outside his department.

After several such monthly memos, Jim’s cast of characters began to grow. Each had an admittedly cheeky, but telling, name. Characters like Ed Zecutive the president; Max Profit the CFO; and Sella Case the sales director. With the growing cast of characters, the circulation grew wider as people in other functions began to see themselves in the story and learn something relevant to their work.

After five years of storytelling, Jim was appointed the company’s official corporate storyteller. He continued to write one memo a month. But he spent much of his time searching the entire company for the most impactful idea he could find and then writing a story around it—a story that would captivate an audience and effect a change in the organization. Until his retirement in September 2010, his memos were eagerly read each month by between 5,000 and 10,000 people, including just about every senior executive in the company. Sometimes the CEO would even ask Jim to write a story on a certain topic because he knew people would read Jim’s stories. This statistician had arguably become the single most
influential person at P&G. All because one day Jim decided not to write a research report, and instead, wrote a story.

* * *

So what is the answer to the question posed in this chapter’s title, “Why Tell Stories?” The simple answer illustrated by the two stories in this chapter is this—because it works! But why is that? Why is storytelling so effective? Here are 10 of the most compelling reasons I’ve encountered:

1. **Storytelling is simple.** Anyone can do it. You don’t need a degree in English, or even an MBA.

2. **Storytelling is timeless.** Unlike fads in other areas of management such as total quality management, reengineering, Six Sigma, or 5S, storytelling has always worked for leadership, and it always will.

3. **Stories are demographic-proof.** Everybody—regardless of age, race, or gender—likes to listen to stories.

4. **Stories are contagious.** They can spread like wildfire without any additional effort on the part of the storyteller.

5. **Stories are easier to remember.** According to psychologist Jerome Bruner, facts are 20 times more likely to be remembered if they are part of a story. Organizational psychologist Peg Neuhauser found similar results in her work with corporations. She found that learning derived from a well-told story is remembered more accurately, and for far longer than the learning derived from facts or figures.

6. **Stories inspire.** Slides don’t. Have you ever heard someone say, “Wow! You’ll never believe the PowerPoint presentation I just saw!” Probably not. But you have heard people say that about stories.

7. **Stories appeal to all types of learners.** In any group, roughly 40 percent will be predominantly visual learners who learn best from videos, diagrams, or illustrations. Another 40 percent will be auditory, learning best through lectures and discussions. The remaining 20 percent are kinesthetic learners, who learn best by doing, experiencing, or feeling. Storytelling has aspects that work for all three types. Visual learners appreciate the mental pictures storytelling evokes. Auditory learners focus on the words and the storyteller’s voice. Kinesthetic learners remember the emotional connections and feelings from the story.
8. *Stories fit better where most of the learning happens in the workplace.* According to communications expert Evelyn Clark, “Up to 70 percent of the new skills, information and competence in the workplace is acquired through informal learning” such as what happens in team settings, mentoring, and peer-to-peer communication. And the bedrock of informal learning is storytelling.\(^{10}\)

9. *Stories put the listener in a mental learning mode.* Listeners who are in a critical or evaluative mode are more likely to reject what’s being said. According to training coach and bestselling author Margaret Parkin, storytelling “re-creates in us that emotional state of curiosity which is ever present in children, but which as adults we tend to lose. Once in this childlike state, we tend to be more receptive and interested in the information we are given.”\(^{11}\) Or as author and organizational narrative expert David Hutchens points out, storytelling puts listeners in a different orientation. They put their pens and pencils down, open up their posture, and just listen.\(^{12}\)

10. *Telling stories shows respect for the audience.* Stories get your message across without arrogantly telling listeners what to think or do. Regarding what to think, storytelling author Annette Simmons observed, “Stories give people freedom to come to their own conclusions. People who reject predigested conclusions might just agree with your interpretations if you get out of their face long enough for them to see what you have seen.”\(^ {13}\) As for what to do, corporate storyteller David Armstrong suggests, “If there was ever a time when you could just order people to do something, it has long since passed. Telling a story, where you underline the moral, is a great way of explaining to people what needs to be done, without saying, ‘do this.’”\(^ {14}\)

That answers the question, why? Next we begin our journey through stories for 21 leadership challenges, and the art of crafting compelling stories of your own.

**Notes**


3. Ibid., p. 7.

4. Ibid., p. 7.

5. Maxwell and Dickman.


Encourage collaboration and build relationships

“Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.”
—Henry Ford

It happens so often it’s almost cliché. A department in a small regional operation is reorganized, and a new big-city manager is transferred in. The previous department manager, who’s held the position for years, is now the new appointee’s assistant. The new manager hasn’t even arrived and the team already doesn’t like him—especially the assistant manager. “He’s probably an arrogant, fast-talking know-it-all who doesn’t have a clue how we do things out here!” This was the case for a Washington State organization that sent the department on a two-day team-building and strategic-planning retreat. Fortunately for them, the facilitator they hired was the same Evelyn Clark you met in chapter 4.

Evelyn decided to have them tell their life stories to each other, but in a playful and creative way. She provided dozens of magazines, construction paper, scissors, and glue, and asked them to create collages that represented their past, present, and future. Despite being adults, they embraced the exercise like excited schoolchildren, chatting the entire time. Once complete, they each took turns telling their stories to each other in words and pictures. Of course, everyone got to know each other much better. But the biggest impact was on the two would-be adversaries. Despite their apparent differences, they discovered they had some im-
important things in common. When they learned they shared the same faith, tension between the two started to ease. When they learned family was their top priority, they actually started to warm up to one another. As the storytelling continued—and they learned the many values they shared—an amazing transformation took place. Over lunch they talked one-on-one and got to know each other even better. By the start of the afternoon session, they were working together as old colleagues.

The rest of the retreat was extremely productive and exceeded everyone’s expectations, including the CEO’s. It was also productive for Evelyn. It confirmed to her that when people have the opportunity to discover common values, they’re able to build more productive, collaborative relationships. The previous example illustrates how personal storytelling can help them discover those common values. Try it in your next team-building activity and see what happens.

* * *

Finding common values is one way storytelling can help build relationships, but not the only one. The next story shows how personal storytelling can create caring, emotional bonds between employees. It also explains why those bonds help the leader be more effective, and why they result in better performance from the team.

Starting a new job is one of those infrequent occasions where you can remake yourself into a better you. Working with new people who don’t have any preconceived notions about you is a gift of a blank canvass to paint the new you on. Everyone has some part of themselves they think could be better—even hardworking people with a good reputation. That’s exactly what Jamie Johnson was thinking in 2008 when he joined Seek, a research firm in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Jamie is a talented consumer researcher with a strong work ethic. He’s quick to laugh and has a warm smile—the kind of guy everyone likes. But by his own admission, he was somewhat robotic in the office, preferring not to mix business with his personal life. “I’m not here to make friends so much as to get my job done,” he thought. As a result, the relationships he had at work were cordial, but superficial. His hallway conversations were shallow—the weather or the football game last night. On his first day at Seek, he vowed to himself to change that. He wanted to have more meaningful connections to the people he spent eight hours a day with. With the best of intentions he started his new job with a friendly attitude and a welcoming personality.
How did Jamie assess his progress? “A year in, nobody liked me.” That, of course, was a humble exaggeration. But the truth is, his relationships were no deeper than at previous jobs. “Why isn’t this working?” he wondered. “I’m a professional consumer researcher. I spend every day getting people to open up to me and tell me their innermost thoughts and feelings, their hopes and their dreams. And these are complete strangers I met 20 minutes earlier! What am I doing with them that I’m not doing with my coworkers?”

That turned out to be the right question to ask. Indeed, Jamie did have several techniques he used professionally to get people to open up to him. Self-deprecating humor always worked well. “Did I ask you that already? Sorry, I’m a slow learner.” Sometimes he would find a common interest. “Hey, I have that same Beatles record. I stole it from my mom!” But the most effective technique was opening himself up, and letting himself be vulnerable—sharing a weakness or an insecurity.

All these things Jamie did with the people he was interviewing for research, but never with his coworkers. So he decided to give it a try. A few weeks later, Seek was celebrating its tenth year in business. After a tour around the city, visiting their previous office locations, they settled into a meeting room for the rest of the afternoon for team building. That’s when Jamie got his chance. The founder of the company said, “Share something about yourself. As much or as little as you’re comfortable with.” Jamie took a risk and shared a very personal story.

He told them about him and his younger brother, Steven. Both had been raised by the same parents and grew up in the same house. While nobody’s life is free of turmoil, Jamie had a good childhood. He had a loving family and nice friends, did well in school, and generally felt good about himself. His brother, on the other hand, suffered from an undiagnosed case of bipolar disorder. Sometimes called manic-depressive disorder, his brother’s condition meant he suffered through extreme swings in mood and demeanor. One day he could be on top of the world with unbridled excitement. The next day he could be paralyzed with depression and anxiety. Untreated, the emotional roller coaster was more than his brother could handle. On April 16, 2001, at the age of 19, Steven got in his car and drove west. After crossing two state lines, he ran out of gas and pulled over to the side of the highway. He then took out a gun and shot himself in the head. Jamie describes Steven’s drive that day as a final act of respect from a fantastic young man. He wanted to spare his parents the graveness of finding his body near home.

While the tragedy was certainly painful for Jamie, there was some good that came from it. He told his coworkers, “I realized I had been
taking everything in life for granted. I stopped doing that.” Now Jamie makes it a point to appreciate the many blessings he has. He also spends more of his time volunteering. He coaches both volleyball and football for local kids, and belongs to a group that supports families during the holidays when they can’t make ends meet. Not surprisingly, he also works with suicide prevention organizations around the country to help them raise money and awareness for their cause. “It helps me remember and honor my brother in a positive way.”

By the time Jamie finished telling his story, half the room was in tears. When the meeting was over, instead of a high-five on the way out, several people stopped to hug him. Some of his colleagues commented to each other later that they didn’t know Jamie had so much soul and emotion. “All of a sudden,” one of them commented, “Jamie had depth!” His story even earned him the respect of the most stoic men in the office. A gentle punch in the shoulder, an admiring nod, and a brotherly, “Solid, man,” told him he was now in the inner circle. Within days, he realized his shallow hallway conversations had turned from the weather and sports to genuine interest in his family, his life, his dreams.

Certainly Jamie enjoys his work more now that he’s better connected to his colleagues. But how has his new acceptance impacted his ability to lead? “My team performs much better now. People stop watching the clock as much when they’re working with someone they care about.” He knows firsthand now that it’s easier to get the best out of people when you have a meaningful relationship with them. And for him, that meaningful relationship started with a single story.

As Jamie’s story illustrates, one of the most effective team-building activities you can construct is also one of the simplest. Have people sit around in a circle and talk about themselves—the more personal the story, the better. And as Jamie learned with both the consumers he interviews and the colleagues he works with, the most effective will be the stories that create vulnerability by showing an insecurity, or describing a painful time in your life or a costly failure. They’re exactly the kind of stories people don’t want to tell to a bunch of strangers in the office—and that’s the point. It’s a vicious circle. We don’t tell our personal stories because we work with strangers. They remain strangers because we don’t tell our personal stories. You have to break the cycle. Challenge people to tell their stories, and you’ll never work with strangers again.

* * *

Chapter 10 Encourage collaboration and build relationships
So we’ve established the value of sharing personal stories at work. But those aren’t the only kind of stories that foster collaboration and build relationships. Our work stories can have a similar impact on relationships, plus deliver a direct benefit to the bottom line. Tom, a partner at a major global consulting firm, knows the value of those stories first-hand, as illustrated in his story.

“I’m sorry, Tom. We’re going to have to cancel your retainer—at least for a little while.”

To a consultant like Tom, those are about the worst words you could ever hear from your client. It’s the equivalent of an employee being told he’s being laid off. Except in this case, it didn’t just mean Tom was getting laid off. It also meant his entire team of 15 consultants.

“What’s wrong?” Tom asked. He assumed it must be serious to warrant this kind of reaction from a Fortune 100 company. And he was right. It was serious. His client was going to miss its quarterly profit estimates, and not just by a little—enough to raise major concerns on Wall Street.

His client explained the troublesome details. In his 20-year professional career, Tom had never encountered this particular problem. But he knew in a situation like this, his client needed help. Packing up his team’s things and walking away was not an option. Clearly the company needed to find people who’d been through this before. But it was an unusual problem—the kind companies don’t publicize. So finding examples would be difficult.

That’s when he told his client about the “monthly challenge”—a friendly competition among the consultants at Tom’s company. Every month, all the partners are presented with a particularly challenging client problem, without naming the client. They’re encouraged to take their teams out for a lunch or dinner, discuss the problem, and develop recommendations. Just for that hour, tens of thousands of consultants are working on exactly the same issue. But with only an hour, they don’t have time for research or analysis. All they have time for is to share a few stories and brainstorm ideas. The stories they share are of when they encountered similar problems in the past, what they did about it, and how it turned out. When the meal is over, they go back to working on their own clients’ projects. The winning teams and their solutions are recognized in front of the whole company.

The competition has many benefits. The client with the problem gets the collective brainpower of the entire company working on an issue. The consulting team supporting that client gets to deliver a solution and move on to the next challenge. But the competition also helps foster more col-
laboration and better working relationships among the consultants. The lunch or dinner events are an opportunity for team members to stop working on their separate part of their client engagement and all work together on one issue. Psychologists have long known this to be one of the quickest ways to create human bonds. And swapping stories for an hour does just as much to bring adults together as it does for children around the summer campfire. It also helps create better connections between consultants in different offices around the world. Cooperating on the same problem through the competition creates common experiences and insights they can talk about and refer to for years to come. Think of that. This consultancy has employees spread out across dozens of countries around the world. Most of them will never see each other, or ever even work with the same client. To that rich diversity of people and experiences is now added the strength of a common set of consulting challenges and solutions. It’s really quite brilliant when you think of it.

Tom immediately posted his client’s problem to every partner as a monthly challenge. Within 48 hours, tens of thousands of consultants began working on it. Within three weeks, they identified two other non-competing clients that had experienced the same issue and had three creative solutions offered from across the globe. Tom presented the solutions to his client and worked with the client to implement the best one.

Tom’s challenge and winning solution was added to the long and growing list of monthly challenges that makes his consulting firm stronger as a company. As for his client, it still had a tough quarter. But it wasn’t nearly the Wall Street debacle it would have been without his help. And Tom never heard another word about needing to cancel his retainer.

Although new business challenges certainly pop up every once in a while, most everyday problems are ones that someone, somewhere, has experienced before. Tom’s monthly challenge is a global story hunt for the best answer regardless of whether it’s a new problem or an old one. Establishing a regular time and place to swap stories on just about any business challenge is sure to surface wisdom. You don’t need to be in the consulting business to benefit from swapping stories with your coworkers. No matter what business you’re in, it’s sure to lead to new ideas, and a more collaborative, cohesive workforce.

* * *

The previous examples illustrate how you can use storytelling to create a collaborative environment. The final one here shows you how stories
can convince people outside your organization that a collaborative envi-
ronment exists on the inside; it’s not so scary and neither are the people 
you’ll find there. The problem isn’t an uncommon one, but it’s most fa-
miliar to those near the top of the company org chart.

Hierarchy in a large corporation is a very serious affair, just as it is in 
the military, which all modern corporate leadership structures are pat-
tterned after. The higher the rank of the officer, or level of the manager, 
the larger the group of soldiers or employees led. With each higher level 
also typically comes more authority, a bigger paycheck, and a higher de-
gree of respect from junior officers or employees. At the most senior lev-
els, those differences led to the observation that it’s lonely at the top. 
That’s because out of deference to the boss—and fear of saying the wrong 
thing—senior managers are often viewed as unapproachable and imper-
sonal. In a military setting where senior officers have to send troops into 
deadly combat, that irreproachable stature is necessary. In a business en-
vironment, however, it can do more harm than good. Executives not 
viewed as accessible to the organization find it more difficult to lead.

So it was for Carol, a strategy director at a global Fortune 500 com-
pany and part of the company’s strategy leadership team reporting di-
rectly to the global strategy officer (GSO), Ben. She was incredibly 
bright, hardworking, and ambitious. But to many she was an intimidating 
figure. Success in her role, however, required that she influence thou-
sands of managers in the company to adopt the new business models she 
was developing. Deploying those new tools meant traveling around the 
globe to regional offices teaching the local business teams how to use 
them. A successful training session generally meant a successful deploy- 
ment. One particular trip, however, it was the journey back, and not the 
training session itself, that made the biggest impact on the GSO’s team 
and its ability to lead in the organization.

As a senior officer of the company, Ben was afforded one of the most 
visible trappings of high office in the corporate world—access to the com-
pany plane. Instead of flying on a commercial airline, these executives, 
and anyone they choose to bring with them, fly in style on a Gulfstream 
G-4 corporate jet. This particular trip was overseas, to the company’s Eu-
ropean headquarters. The topic was a controversial one, so they were all 
nervous going in. By the end of the day, however, it was obvious the train-
ing was a huge success. Feedback was phenomenal, with high praise for 
all the trainers.

That evening, Carol and her three peers decided to celebrate their 
success with a night on the town. They stayed up half the night gambling
at the hotel casino and enjoying the finest French wines. Morning came early. As they settled into their comfortable seats on the jet, Ben wanted to debrief the prior day’s training. He hadn’t noticed the telltale signs of a hangover on the faces of his team. “Ben, we can’t do that now. We’re exhausted, and we won’t do a quality job of it. Can we do it tomorrow in the office?” To some, that refusal would have bordered on insubordination. But his team had done a good job, and Ben graciously agreed.

Shortly after takeoff, the four night owls were sound asleep, while the boss stayed up to work. Halfway through the return flight home, the plane stopped in Nova Scotia for fuel. After the second takeoff, it was Ben who was ready for a nap, while the other four were just waking up. Here’s where the hierarchy is important. The company plane is an asset at the disposal of the company officer high enough to warrant it—in this case, the global strategy officer. Anyone else on board is a guest. If the boss wants to sleep on his plane, protocol dictates you let him sleep in peace. But Ben’s guests were now wide awake and were still feeling the lure of the casino from the night before. So they decided to continue their celebration with a game of poker—a loud game of poker.

Despite his restless sleep, Ben never complained or even said a word about it. But his four direct reports had plenty to say about it. Word spread quickly of their flight home—how they respectfully declined Ben’s request for a debrief, and then probably kept him awake with their boisterous card game. The story conveyed three key messages to the organization. First, it showed the four senior leaders as regular people, with the same desires and frailties as anyone else. They were no longer stuffed-shirt corporate types. It humanized them. Second, it showed them treating their boss respectfully, but no differently than they would have treated anyone else. If four people want to play poker while one wants to sleep, they play poker. Majority rules. Third, Ben let them treat him as an equal and didn’t complain or mete out any consequences for it.

In short, that one story reframed the equity of those intimidating strategy gurus into a fun, approachable group that didn’t take themselves too seriously. Other managers were quicker to want to work with them and accept their guidance and counsel. They couldn’t have crafted a better message if they’d tried—which is actually the point. You don’t need to stage situations like the one just described. They will happen naturally. The point is that when they do, tell people about them. There were only five passengers on that plane, and Ben certainly wasn’t telling this story to anyone. It got out because the other four must have. But imagine if they hadn’t. Imagine if through their own sense of decorum, they’d kept...
their evening’s excursion and airborne nap a secret. The story would never have gotten out, and their entire department might still be viewed as a haven for unapproachable corporate elite instead of a collaborative place to get some great strategy advice.

Yes, corporate hierarchy is based on a rigid military structure. But with stories like these, yours doesn’t have to feel like it.

**SUMMARY AND EXERCISES**

1. We generally don’t tell our personal stories at work because we work with strangers. They remain strangers because we don’t tell our personal stories. You have to break the cycle.

2. Have people sit around in a circle and talk about themselves—the more personal the story, the better. When people discover they have common values, they form more collaborative relationships. Sharing personal stories brings out those personal values.
   a. In your next team offsite, plan time to tell such stories. Consider how well that worked with the new boss from the big city.
   b. Another way is to share a weakness, an insecurity, or a painful experience. Let yourself be vulnerable in front of others, the way Jamie Johnson did at Seek. (Jamie has depth!)

3. Sharing work stories can build collaboration, too, like it did for the global consulting company Tom works for (e.g., canceling your retainer). Hold a similar challenge at your company. Your business and clients will benefit, while you’re building a more collaborative team.

4. Stories can also convince people outside your organization you have a collaborative environment on the inside. That can help with recruiting and retention. Share stories such as the one about the P&G marketing managers on the corporate jet that illustrate collaboration, and you’ll get more of it.

**Note**

Encourage innovation and creativity

“If people aren’t laughing at your ideas, you aren’t being creative enough.”
—David Armstrong

A manufacturer of window-unit air conditioners wanted to know how much more consumers would pay for a unit that was significantly quieter than traditional ones. Of course, it couldn’t just ask, “How much more would you pay for a unit that only produced 35 decibels of sound? What about only 20?” Only an acoustical engineer would know how loud that was. What the company needed were several prototypes with different noise levels to put in front of consumers to listen to. The problem was, it hadn’t actually invented any of these quieter units yet. Hence the challenge to the consumer research people.

What it decided to do was simple yet creative. Employees installed what looked like a regular air-conditioning unit in a window at a test facility. Only in this unit, they had taken the guts out, leaving only the outer shell. They ran a four-inch-diameter flexible duct out the back of the unit to a room down the hall, where it was connected to a real air conditioner (the loud kind). When consumers in the test lab turned on the window unit, crisp cold air came out, but almost without a sound! And by varying the distance to the real air conditioner, the loudness of the sound could be varied.
I heard this story years ago, from a source I can’t remember. I’ve been unable to track it down to any published source. But it’s a classic outside-the-box story, like the kind you read about in chapter 22. Such stories are worth an additional mention here because of their value in evoking creativity from an organization, not just problem solving. Use any of them when you’re trying to encourage your team to think more creatively.

* * *

Sometimes getting your employees to be more creative isn’t the problem. The problem is getting their less-than-imaginative boss to give them the space to invent. Innovation isn’t a linear process. Inventors need the freedom to play with ideas to see what fruit they will bear. A well-meaning boss might think he’s doing his job by keeping his team focused on the most productive areas to explore. But when you insist on knowing what the fruit will be before allowing the play, many of the most revolutionary discoveries might stay undiscovered. The following story illustrates that point in a way even the most controlling of bosses will understand.

One evening, young James was sitting with his aunt in the kitchen having tea. Frustrated with his apparent laziness, she barked out at him, “James, I never saw such an idle boy! Take a book or employ yourself usefully. For the last hour you have not spoken one word, but taken off the lid of that kettle and put it on again.” It seems he was fascinated with the steam coming from the kettle. He held a silver spoon over the jet of steam and watched as drops of water formed on the spoon and ran down the handle. Over and over again he studied this simple phenomenon. “Are you not ashamed of spending your time this way?” she scolded.

Fortunately, the boy was undaunted by her admonishment. Two decades later, in 1765, he was still fascinated with the phenomenon he discovered in his aunt’s kitchen. It was that year the 29-year-old James Watt invented a new kind of steam engine that helped usher in the Industrial Revolution.

This story is helpful in coaching the manager of a group to give his or her inventors room to invent, to explore. It even works if that manager is you! What they’re doing might seem like idle play, just like it did to James Watt’s aunt. But it could start a revolution.

* * *

Another way you, as the boss, can foster creativity in your organization
is illustrated in this next story. It can be very effective but is shockingly counterintuitive. Judge for yourself.

Many companies have a policy against moonlighting, even if it doesn’t directly interfere with your main job. Most of these companies argue that holding down a second job drains you of energy and creativity that would otherwise accrue to the company. I once heard of an HR manager who explained why even having a temporary job while you’re on vacation is bad for the company. “Vacation time is a benefit the company gives you so you can relax and recharge. That way you come back to work ready to be productive. If you spend your whole vacation time working somewhere else, the company isn’t getting the return it deserves on that cost.” I suppose that’s one way to look at it.

Here’s another. Blackbook EMG has a very different policy about outside jobs and interests. Every employee is strictly required to have one!

Blackbook helps companies retain good employees by getting them connected to the most relevant social and professional networks in town, even if that means they have to create them. Let’s say you’re a 32-year-old single female engineer from Saudi Arabia now living and working in a midwestern U.S. suburb. Let’s face it. It’s going to be hard for you to fit in. How are you going to find restaurants and grocery stores that have the kind of food you like; bars that play the kind of music you like; clothing stores that suit your taste; and social events where you can meet people who share your background, culture, beliefs, and values? Studies show if you don’t, you’re likely to quit your job and move back home. That’s where Blackbook comes in. It finds all those things for you. And if it can’t, sometimes it even creates them.

To be successful at this, Blackbook has to have creative, resourceful, and well-connected employees. And that’s exactly why founder Chris Osstoich requires his employees to moonlight. “To be as creative as we need, everyone that works here must have something else in their life they are as passionate about as they are about working here.” He believes outside interests increase creativity and energy, not diminish it. Chris saw this himself when he joined the board of directors of the local fine arts fund. During one of his first board meetings, he realized there were many similarities between running a fledgling business and running a volunteer organization. After debating solutions for the arts fund’s challenges for three hours, he looked down at his notebook. He had filled up the left page with ideas for the arts fund, and the right page with ideas for Blackbook.

An even more telling example is what came of the moonlighting of
one of his employees, Stephen. The local city council had recently approved construction of a casino downtown, not far from where Stephen lives. Several local civic groups came out against the idea. Stephen knew it was going to be built whether he joined the protests or not. So he decided to take a different approach. He started an organization to help turn the impact on the community into a positive one. For example, casinos are typically built with restaurants, bars, and retail shops in the center of the building. That way, shoppers have to walk by the gaming tables to get to them—which will hopefully lure some of them into the game. One of Stephen’s ideas was to put the shops on the outside, facing the street. That would create foot traffic along the street, not hidden deep inside a windowless building, and contribute to a vibrant downtown atmosphere.

As Stephen’s organization grew, the employees of many of his Blackbook clients joined the cause. Some even took on leadership responsibilities in the organization. The more committed they became, the more attached they became to the city. Before he realized what was happening, Stephen’s outside interest started furthering Blackbook’s business objectives. Remember, its mission is to connect its clients to the community. Stephen’s moonlighting effort had suddenly become one of the connection points.

So, how much moonlighting are employees required to do at Blackbook? At least 25 percent of their time. And as long as they’re getting their job done, it can be during their regular workday—which for most employees, it is. It’s one of the first questions Chris asks in a job interview. If people don’t already have that outside passion, they won’t get the job offer. And if they lose it after they get hired, it could be grounds for termination.

The counterintuitive lesson is that if you want people to be more creative, tell them to spend less time at the office, not more. Tell them to get involved in something they’re passionate about. They’ll think you’re crazy at first, and so might your boss. Start by telling them Chris’s story. Then give it a try. My guess is, you’ll be rewriting your company policy on moonlighting.

***

Being creative and innovative would seem, by definition, to involve coming up with something entirely new. Innovation is a forward-looking endeavor, is it not? Usually. But the last lesson in this chapter is that some very profitable creativity involves not creating something new but rethinking something old. The following story from David Armstrong’s book *Once Told, They’re Gold* illustrates how.
In 1979, Armstrong International acquired Hunt Moscrop, Ltd., a manufacturer of heavy-duty unit heaters. Picture in your mind an electrical space heater that you might have under your desk at work. Then imagine it much larger, and working with steam or glycol instead of electricity. Now you’ve got a good mental image of these unit heaters that are used to heat a much larger space like a factory. A key component of these enormous heaters are the baffles. These strips of metal look like the blinds on your home windows and are used to direct the flow of hot steam or glycol in the core of the heater.

Thirteen years after the acquisition, two Armstrong engineers named Carl Looney and Chuck Rockwell were reassigned to the Armstrong-Hunt division that still made these unit heaters. As most Armstrong employees do at least once a year, Carl and Chuck set out to find cost-savings opportunities. With their fresh set of eyes, they began to question things others took for granted. “Why do we do it this way?” And “Why is this part needed?” Soon they discovered the baffles were only necessary on the heaters that used glycol. They served no purpose on the steam units. When Armstrong acquired Hunt, it assumed the baffles were required on both kinds of heaters. Ironically, only 10 percent of the unit heaters sold were the glycol kind that really needed the baffles. So for 13 years, the company had been unnecessarily installing baffles on 90 percent of the unit heaters it produced.

Of course, it immediately stopped installing baffles on steam heaters and saved a considerable sum. But there was no way to recover the past 13 years’ worth of wasted expense. Importantly, can you imagine how many times a new production worker at Armstrong-Hunt might have been taught to put baffles on the steam unit heaters because “that’s the way it’s always been done”? Sometimes being creative doesn’t mean thinking of something new. It means thinking of something old, and asking why. If “What if . . . ?” is the most powerful question you can use to encourage creativity and innovation, “Why?” is a close second.

**SUMMARY AND EXERCISES**

1. As with problem solving, outside-the-box stories help people be more creative. Use the story about window units and the others in chapter 22 to spark creativity whenever needed.
2. Innovators require time and space to play with ideas. A boss who thinks she’s keeping the staff focused might be squelching the creativity of the entire team. If you think that’s happening in your department, share the story of James and the teakettle with your boss.

3. Passion fuels creativity and innovation. How can you increase passion in your people? Try moonlighting. Chris Ostoich at Blackbook EMG found outside interests increased the creativity and energy of his team, not diminished them. Is moonlighting not allowed at your company? Share Chris’s story with the boss and ask for a change.

4. Innovation doesn’t always involve creating something new. Sometimes it means rethinking something old. As “baffled for 13 years” shows, asking why in long-established practices can sometimes bear profitable fruit. The next time you’re looking for hidden opportunities, tell the baffles story and see what creative ideas come up in your organization.

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from the full version of *Lead with a Story*

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