

STORYWORK BOOK

HOW THE POWER OF STORY CAN CREATE A CULTURE OF SAFETY

A Program Designed for the
Quality Healthcare Network



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WHY STORIES ARE IMPORTANT TO ORGANIZATIONS

- √ Stories aid comprehension because they integrate that which is known about an event with that which is conjectural.
- √ Stories suggest a causal order for events that originally are perceived as unrelated and akin to a list.
- √ Stories enable people to talk about absent things and to connect them with present things in the interest of meaning.
- √ Stories are mnemonics that enable people to reconstruct earlier complex events.
- √ Stories can guide action before routines are formulated and can enrich routines after those routines are formulated.
- √ Stories enable people to build a database of experience from which they can infer how things work.
- √ Stories transmit and reinforce third-order controls by conveying shared values and meaning.
- √ What is interesting about stories is that they may “rehearse” implausible sequences. They thus provide tools for diagnosis.
- √ Actions are fleeting. Stories about action are not. If organizations are social forms distinguished by their capability for coordinated action, and if the distinguishing character of those forms disappears the moment it occurs, then we must be concerned with what persists when actions keep vanishing.
- √ People think narratively rather than argumentatively or paradigmatically. Most organizational realities are based on narration.

- √ Telling stories about remarkable experiences is one way people try to make the unexpected expectable, hence manageable.
- √ Ideologies, paradigms, and traditions are known by their examples, not their abstract framing principles.
- √ Actual threats narrow perception; if imagined threats are less stressful than actual threats, they should induce less narrowing, meaning that threats can be examined more thoroughly and comprehended more fully as stories.
- √ While stories are not necessarily accurate, but important for people to make sense of their environment, they are so because they preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to construct. A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking. A good story, like a workable cause map, shows patterns that may already exist in the puzzles an actor now faces, or patterns that could be created anew in the interest of more order and sense in the future. The stories are templates. They are products of previous efforts at sensemaking. They explain. And they energize.
- √ Stories involving action are crucial because this content is so difficult to transmit. Cultures that have a well-developed folklore of action should survive longer than those that do not.

WHY STORIES ARE IMPORTANT TO LEADERS

“. . . the basis of leadership is the capacity of the leader to change the mind-set, the framework of another person.”

—Warren Bennis

Leaders:

- Provide a clear reference map—a vision—for the organization and its members. This map provides a framework for all activities of the organization, and gives all tasks a sense of overarching purpose. A clearly articulated vision lets people know what is important and valued. The reach of this vision is dependent upon the status of the leader. The higher up in the organization, the further the vision must project into the future to ensure success.
- Help every person in the organization stay on-purpose.
- Consciously think about their experiences, analyzing and drawing lessons from them, storing them in the form of stories that they can use to guide decisions and actions and to teach and lead others.
- Have a teachable point of view in the specific area of ideas and values.
- Clearly articulate a set of values through the stories they tell and their behavior for the entire organization or team.
- Embody their teachable points of view in living stories about their past that explain their learning experiences and their beliefs.
- Recognize the definable moments in their lives and communicate these lessons through words and actions.
- Create stories about the future of their organization that engage others emotionally and intellectually to attain the winning future that they describe.

Leaders & Storytelling, continued

- Know how to effectively communicate with the staff as a group, and with individuals. They also know how to listen well.
- Shape people's opinions and win their enthusiasm, using every available opportunity to send out their message and win supporters.
- Operate on three distinct levels-the organization's technical, political, and cultural systems.

Adapted from "Twelve Principles of Powerful & Effective Leadership" by Robert Earl Staub, II, *Women and Power* by Nancy Kline, and *The Leadership Engine* by Noel Tichy

STORYTELLING AND PATIENT SAFETY

1. Improving Outcomes Through Listening and Informing—Patients who are well informed about their treatment tend to be more satisfied with the outcome or results of treatment. Studies also show that patients who have the opportunity to fully discuss their symptoms, problems, and concerns in the initial visit (i.e., tell their story) are more likely to improve within six months as opposed to patients who do not.

2. Knowing the Organizational History Can Lead to Safer Environments—In aviation, it's been found that understanding the organization's history and issues can create an important context for the organization's ability to reduce errors. Listening to the prevalent stories in the culture will reveal issues that are currently affecting the organization's values, beliefs, and trends that can mitigate against the success of a patient safety initiative. Following this, changing a culture to a safety culture is crucial. Patient safety initiatives are to succeed. Storytelling can help organization's reinforce new values.

3. Storytelling and Teamwork—Another point found in the airline industry that seems to be applicable to healthcare: training staff in effective teamwork, decision making, and error management was as important as training in the technical aspects of the job. Storytelling can be used in scenario rehearsals and desktop interactive learning, as well as be a profound tool for building teamwork. Learning Histories can also serve as a powerful learning tool, especially as it relates to decision making. In addition, helping to create Thinking Environments™ for these teams can profoundly affect the team's ability to think together and solve problems more effectively. This model is based a fundamental observation: *The quality of everything we do depends on the thinking we do first. And, our thinking depends on the quality of our attention for each other.*

4. Management Feedback—In the aviation industry, they discovered that effective teamwork and error management requires providing feedback and reinforcement. Here's where the StoryWork method can turn feedback into a profound learning experience.

5. Patient Safety Education—There is a dearth of targeted, well written educational materials that focus on patient safety. There needs to be packets

of info targeted to the following four audiences—leadership, clinical staff, patients, and family. We know that if this literature is story/narrative-based, it will have the greatest impact.

6. Celebrating Patient Safety Heroes—We know that quality improvement efforts that are grass roots, and initiated and carried out by those who provide the “hands on” service, are more likely to succeed. The question is: what are organizations doing to celebrate these “heroes.” It is an important activity because it helps to instill QI into the organization’s culture. One important way to do this is to create stories about important and remarkable achievements in this regard, and disseminate and tell these stories in as many venues as possible.

7. Creating a Safety Environment—How do we create a “safety environment?” Need to be sharing stories of near accidents and accidents. Need to teach healthcare professionals thinking environment tools; put stories of successes and failures in public spaces for learning and discussion.

8. Learning, Storytelling, and Reflection—Lessons devoid of stories do not lead to learning. Learning comes from hearing the story, reflecting upon the lessons it holds for you, taking action, then reflecting on what is learned.

9. Storytelling, Relationship & Safety—We need to create an environment of intimacy between the patient and caregiver. David Taylor says, “There is a direct correlation between seeing people as storied creatures and how we treat them, and medical error and safety. If the system tends to dehumanize the staff, the staff will tend to dehumanize the patient.” One way to do this would be to include facets of the patient’s story patient’s chart so that any professional who comes in and does not know this person can take a moment to get to know them and have a basis for seeing this person as more than just a bundle of symptoms. Likewise, I think it is important that patients know who is caring for them and know a little of their story. This could be accomplished through the creation of a small booklet that has stories about the staff members and is put on the beside table of the patient. I believe that patients and staff knowing each other’s stories will enhance attendance to safety with a different level of care.

10. Physician-Patient Communication—Adopt SPIRALS to the teaching of healthcare professionals an approach to communicating with the patient. SPIRALS is a query/discussion process that allows the patient's story to be fully explored (S), including all of the problems (P) and issues that result (I); motivates the patient to comply by asking the patient to imagine the ramifications (R) in her life of not doing anything; provides a rough answer (A) or description of the course of treatment that the doctor is recommending; asks the patient to imagine the lasting benefits (L) for her future with her health restored or her symptoms in check; and, concludes with the healer sharing a success story about a similar patient.

11. Disclosure Policy—How do we overcome fears and concerns regarding adopting these principles? We need to create positive role models that demonstrate the benefits of this new cultural approach, and the best method for perpetuating the changes is stories.

12. News Media Relations—Train healthcare professionals how to be more effective with the news media through the telling of stories. They need to know how to better influence the story that is going to be told by the reporter.

13. Patient Illiteracy—21% cannot read, 48% cannot decipher messages with words and numbers. Let's teach clinicians to instruct patients using story. We know that narratives increase comprehension, attentiveness, and recall.

14. Reporting—Don Berwick says, “reporting that loses the story is mostly a waste. We need firesides, not spreadsheets. The question ‘how many’ isn't powerful. The question should be ‘What happened?’” We need to train professionals in the methodology of storytelling to make their stories about what happened more compelling. We know that there are mental schemata that when information best matches the structure of a story, there is greater comprehension and retention.

15. Thinking Environments—Don Berwick says, “Conversation is the mainstay of safety, not technology. Safety requires the continual exploration of meaning.” How do we create an environment for more effective, innovative conversations and thinking to occur? Healthcare professionals and leaders must learn how to create a Thinking Environment, one which supports the best thinking of everyone in the organization, and teaches people how to think for themselves.

STORYWORK IN THE WORKPLACE

Finding the right time and place to use stories in the workplace is an art. As with most aspects of management, timing is everything. Here are some guidelines for when to use a story.

When Someone Makes a Mistake:

1. To be effective in any job, we each must be open to learning from our mistakes as well as from our successes. When you identify a situation in which an employee does not seem to have learned an important lesson, first clarify what exactly happened. What went right? What went wrong? Be certain that you have heard your staff member, and why he did what he did. Remember, assume that the employee was doing what she thought was best at the time, and that their desire was to do a good job. Only in hindsight was it clear that their judgement was inappropriate or faulty. Most important of all, try to understand the situation from their perspective.
2. Assume that every situation is an opportunity for learning and growth. Convey this attitude to your staff member.
3. Just as you learned to give stories titles, consider what the title of this particular problem would be. Or, how would you describe this situation in ten words or less.
4. Can you identify in your repertoire titles of stories that contain lessons relevant to this problem, or, have you had any experience relevant to this situation? If yes, then proceed to tell the staff member that he or she is not unique in having made this mistake. Then, tell them the story and use it as a basis for exploring learning and alternative behaviors in future situations.
5. If you cannot identify any stories or experiences that are relevant, recognize that this particular situation has offered you a story opportunity that

can be used for future teaching with other staff members. Proceed with discussing the problem and exploring alternative ways that the staff member could have handled the situation. At the conclusion, let them know that you also learned something from this, and ask them if they would mind if you use the story in the future to help others who make the same mistake. Always be certain to give them the opportunity to say no. If no, then ask if you can use the story anonymously. It is rare that anyone will object. Thank them for making a contribution to the future learning of other employees.

Teaching New Employees the Ropes:

1. In addition to technical mastery, every new employee must become a master of the values and guiding principles of your organization.
2. While training the staff member, do not hesitate to liberally use stories to illustrate how to do something as well as to communicate appropriate attitudes and values.
3. At least once a week, ask the staff member to share what has been the most significant learning of that period, and which of the stories she has heard that left the most important impression. This will let her know that listening to and remembering stories is an important aspect of learning the job.

Reinforcing the Organization's Values:

1. Every staff meeting is an opportunity for sharing a story that reinforces important corporate values, such as commitment to service. Not only is it a good way to kick off a meeting, but it can give you the opportunity to solicit from your staff stories that fit that theme.
2. With staff members who need encouragement to proceed to the next level of success, try this: During supervisory meetings tell him or her specific stories of how you and others have succeeded. At the conclusion of the story, be certain to always ask: "What can you learn from this?" Then,

be quiet and let him struggle with the meaning and importance of the story and its implications for future behavior.

Story Buttons:

As storywork becomes a strong component of staff development, often repeated stories can be effectively told in abbreviated form. Sometimes a moniker or title is all that need be mentioned to effectively convey the relevant learning of a well known story. For example, if I mention to you “Wolf” now that you have heard the story of “Who Speaks for Wolf,” all the relevant learning of that story can be instantly recalled, and its relevance to a particular situation can be readily understood. We call these “Story Buttons.”

A word of caution--never use a Story Button if there are staff members present who do not know the story. They will feel excluded and alienated by not understanding the significance of the “SB.” In the worse case, they may feel stupid or turned off to the storywork process.

HOW TO CREATE A GOOD STORY

There are many things to consider when taking a raw experience and turning it into a teaching story that can be told and shared with others. First of all, you must establish the time of the story in order to facilitate transporting your audience to a different world, with different values, and a different place. For example, “When I was a boy, my father and I set out on a trip across the country in our old Model T Ford” Or, “When I worked in Uganda, there was health worker named Kato. I never met anyone more committed to helping people. In fact, once he”

It’s also important to establish the place of the story and the personalities involved. And what’s the mood of the story, e.g., distant, intimate, humorous, wishful, fanciful, suspenseful, etc.? Also, to turn good anecdotes into stories that can enable learning requires that you convey events through conversations and actions rather than straight narration. Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Start with a dramatic opening** or an heroic deed. Few listeners can resist a story with a good beginning.
2. The best teaching stories are usually true. **Try to verify your facts.**
3. Expand on the anecdote and develop it into an extended story. But **keep it succinct and short**, something you could tell in two or three minutes.
4. Try to have your story **illustrate one theme or idea.**
5. **Have your story unfold according to events**, not explanations, descriptions or summations.
6. **Keep plot details simple and easy to remember.**

7. Remember that **a character is best revealed through his or her actions.** Also, use real names.
8. Remember that the story itself is the important thing—**let events speak for themselves.**
9. Give the anecdote an **ending that satisfies the listener's sense of justice.**
10. **Give it a good title.**
11. **Project the image like a film in your imagination.**
12. **Share the story with a friend or colleague** and evaluate what worked and why. What didn't work? Why?
13. **Refine the story based on these evaluations.**

CREATING A GOOD STORY, CONTINUED

Story Development as Dictation

When we write or develop a story for telling, it should feel like taking dictation. Some may think of this as being seized by the inspiration of the Muses, or centering in the heart, or relaxing into a state of heightened creativity. Whatever it's called, the experience is characterized by listening, alertness and receptivity, an awareness of entering into relation with something greater than our conscious will. In this sense, we don't have to make ourselves write as much as let ourselves write. Whatever this something greater is, it is the source from which the vision, the understanding, and the words finally flow. Developing a story, then, is more an act of following than leading, the vocation not of the demagogue but of the scribe.

The Story's Predicament is the Material for a Good Story

A story has a precipitating event, a conflict, a resolution of conflict, and a point. But what precipitating event? Which conflict, and how to resolve it? And what is the point? Whatever form the story takes, it must be imbued with the life you or the story's contributors know, the life that has moved you or them to this point, or it most assuredly will not move the reader. You don't need to fabricate drama. Every life has drama; the gift you can bring to the story is to discern this drama and expand, accentuate, and articulate it in an edifying way.

Conflict: An Essential Ingredient

A story needs a through-line that's anchored in a central conflict or predicament. This conflict should build, as opposed to being random or episodic. Someone offered this formula for plot structure: Get a hero. Get the hero up a tree. Throw rocks at the hero. Throw bigger rocks at the hero. Get the hero out of the tree. The resolution of the conflict (hero comes out of tree) gives the story a climax. Without a through-line, a story wanders aimlessly, somewhere between the living and the dead. Without conflict that builds, the emotional impact is as flat as last year's seltzer. Come from somewhere. Go somewhere. Make a lot of trouble along the way. Get there.

At the Heart of Things: The Universal in the Particular

The art of developing or writing a story is a matter of vision—specifically, the ability to recognize the universal in the particular. Imagine being almost run over by an ambulance that came tearing down the country road. The ambulance could represent, in a sense, the double-edged sword of technology. How ironic it is irony that the very things that we depend on to save us may end up killing us. Can you see how this “point” goes even beyond the context of technology, to a farther reaching import. This is a good example of the universal in the particular.

Because the universal resides in the particular (holographically), your predicament is your material, and if you can make your vision coherent enough, like the laser light used to create a hologram, you will discern the universal theme or themes in your particular experience, or that of someone whose story you are creating. You have to learn to listen for the truth-currents coursing through people’s experiences. A good story beats with its own life; it has heart, rhythm. You find this rhythm by looking honestly and willingly at the here and now, and reporting what you see with as little judgment or censorship as possible. Forget all the lofty and “important” ideas and words. In this sense, all good writing is journalism, even if it takes the form of poetry, fiction, an essay, a screenplay, or a children’s book. The life you or someone else really lives moves through what you write or tell, which is why it can move your readers, leaving them glad that they read what you wrote.

Listen for this heartbeat while you’re writing, and keep true to its simple rhythm, always moving forward, on to the next beat. Don’t let yourself get stalled in images or judgments about “writing” or “the truth.” “The truth” is not the truth. Real truth—the truth that touches the reader because it conveys something universally human—is always at the “heart of the matter,” which means always in the relevant particulars. From this angle of vision, everything is mirror and metaphor.

The Story is Contained in the Details

Forget about grand ideas. Don't give me profound; give me valuable detail. Focus on the nervous tic of your math teacher in the third grade. Or the way you used to cook corn right out of the field in an open fire on your

uncle's farm--the way that smelled. Or the fear of waiting for test results from the lab and being put on hold for three minutes. Once you're on track with the details, the particulars of experience, see if you can arrange them to capture something universal. The framing of the valuable particulars so as to convey the universal is the art of writing.

Valuable detail is the key, as distinct from meaningless trivialities that don't contribute to the general sense of direction and purpose of the piece. Avoid the "fly on the salt shaker" syndrome.

Find a balance between grandiosity (macroscopic) and irrelevant detail (microscopic) to hold the reader.

The Story's Structure

Every story has a premise. For example, what would happen to the use of the internet if the government decided to tax all transactions as well as place a tax on every email that is sent? This could lead to a story reminiscent of the Boston tea party, or could go down very different imaginal pathways.

A good story also has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The Beginning, or the Precipitating Event: Something happens to launch the series of events that unfold in the forward motion of the story (plot). This event should be identified early in the piece. In a short story, usually the first few paragraphs establish the precipitating event or situation, sometimes the first few lines. It can be subtle, a precipitating psychological shift, or more obvious, triggering some external change. This is called the "beginning."

The Middle, or Character Arc: The Precipitating Event sets into motion a chain of causes and effects that carry the protagonist seamlessly through some significant change or changes. This is called the "middle." In this sense, the main character is a living map of the plot, the medium in which the story is humanly impressed. If a character does not "arc," does not go through some important change, the story is likely to leave the reader flat.

The End, or Resolution: Resolution does not mean that everything gets wrapped up neatly in a forced conclusion that leaves the reader without

questions or wonder. Resolution does mean that the vision being presented, the premise, the theme, the point, have been presented fully. Resolution will rarely be philosophically or morally conclusive, but will instead offer a dramatic conclusion. This is an important difference. While dramatic resolution brings the conflict to completion, it also may raise questions for the reader that remain unanswered by the piece. When the writer does this skillfully, she has come upon the part of the story called the “end.” It is important to recognize this and not write past it.

HOW TO LEARN AND TELL A STORY

- 1. Learn the plot first.** Fix in your mind the major sequence of events. Visualize the events, the scenes, the characters.
- 2. If it helps, write out the story first, in outline or finished form.** Your Story Prompter sheet can provide all the information you need to map out the story in preparation for telling.
- 3. Some people find it helpful to create a storyboard of the main action in order to better learn the sequence of events.** We call this “comic strip memory.” Take two 8½ X 11 sheets of paper and using both the front and back divide each side into four squares. You’ll have sixteen total squares. In each block draw small stick figure sketches of the major scenes. In this way you will be able to see the story from beginning to end in just a glance, and you will have developed iconic or picture images in your brain that are easier to remember than verbal or scripted forms.
- 4. Try telling the story in rough form, using your own words, and not paying attention to details, and the smoothness of telling.** Do this with a friend, colleague, or into a tape recorder. It sometimes helps to record the story verbatim on a tape player and listen to it several times before attempting to learn it. Keep your rough storyboard in front of you, and glance at it from time to time if you need help remembering where you are in the story. Ask your partner for feedback at the conclusion. (Below are some suggestions for how to give feedback. You may want to coach your telling partner in how to give constructive feedback before you begin.)
- 5. There are no prescribed ways to tell a story.** The same story can be told many different ways, all effectively. A lot depends upon your audience. I recommend that you **experiment to find what is both most comfortable for you and best fits your own personal style;** and, what is best received by your audience.

6. Start off at a walking pace. That way you've got room to speed up and slow down, as the story requires. Loudness, or softness of voice, can be used for emphasis at times, in addition to changing the pace or interjecting pauses, but be careful not to overuse it.

7. After getting feedback you might want to cut out certain parts of the story and embellish other parts. A rule of thumb is to **cut tedious lengthy descriptions of thoughts or emotions. Use metaphors to describe emotions instead of technical, psychological words.** Those parts that your listener particularly enjoyed, stretch out. Notice which sections of the story need further development. Avoid side-trips unless they add suspense or help to paint the picture of an important character.

Guidelines for Feedback:

- 1. Give positive, specific feedback** about: Parts of the story you liked and the parts that you thought were very clear; and, ways the person told the story, e.g., their voice tone, use of eye contact, use of appropriate emotion, etc.
- 2. Ask for clarity** on points you didn't understand. For example, "I didn't understand what happened when"
- 3. Suggest parts they might want to cut or stretch.**

HOW TO CRAFT A SPRINGBOARD STORY

1. What is the specific change in the organization or community or group that you hope to spark with the story? What actions would you want people to take?
2. Think of an incident (either inside or outside your organization, community or group) where the change was in whole or in part successfully implemented? Describe it briefly.
3. Who is the single protagonist of the story?
4. Is the single protagonist prototypical for your special audience? If not, can the story be told from the point of view of such a protagonist?
5. When did the incident happen? Give the date.
6. Where did the story happen? State the place.
7. How fully does the story embody the change idea? Are there hidden aspects to the story?
8. Can the story be extrapolated to embody more fully the change idea?
9. Does the story make clear what would have happened without the change idea?
10. Has the story been stripped of any unnecessary detail? Are there any scenes with more than two characters?
11. Does the story have an authentically happy ending? Can it be told so that it does have such an ending?
12. Does the story link to the purpose to be achieved in telling it?
13. What is the incisive question that you can link with the story that is a spark to action? Would usually be formulated like this: "If we could (refer to protagonist and the change idea), imagine with me what it could mean"

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RESOURCE LIST

The Healing Art of Storytelling: A Sacred Journey of Personal Discovery by Richard Stone

Through the Patient's Eyes: Understanding and Promoting Patient-Centered Care by Margaret Gerteis (Editor), et al (Paperback - May 2002)

Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work or Play (American Storytelling (Paper)) by Doug Lipman

The Storytelling Coach: How to Listen, Praise, and Bring Out People's Best (American Storytelling (Paper)) by Doug Lipman

The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations by Stephen Denning

Managing By Storying Around by David M. Armstrong

The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling by Annette Simmons

Listening to Life Stories: A New Approach to Stress Intervention in Health Care by Bruce Rybarczyk and Albert Bellg

Telling Your Own Stories by Donald Davis

Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart by Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield

How Can I Help? by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman

Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends by Michael White and David Epston