

STORYTELLING GUIDE: RESOURCE 1

Storytelling: The Identity of a Leader



Why Stories are Important for Leaders

Stories enable leaders to demonstrate what they believe and where they come from. Instead of only using stories as a way to entertain an audience or hold their attention (although they can be helpful for that too!), stories are particularly effective when they portray a leader's identity. According to anthropologist Dorothy Holland and colleagues, "identities are a key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 5). When leaders clearly communicate their identities, they can inspire a more authentic connection that goes beyond directives and bullet points.

When to Use Stories in Public Speaking

In public speeches, storytelling is about developing a relationship with your listeners, using the personal to communicate about the universal themes that connect us. For speakers, the goal of a compelling story should ultimately be to express your identity through powerful illustrations. These illustrations should allow you

to be real, vulnerable, and put yourself out there by describing your choices and the reasons behind them, and not be used emotionally manipulate your audience. At the same time, stories are not always the best choice for communicating some types of content or may not be the best format for a particular audience.

For instance, stories may be a perfect choice for a speech with uninterrupted time when you need to communicate your values, or an opening anecdote to illustrate why you hold certain beliefs.



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On the other hand, when your audience is impatient or motivated more by research, data, and direct responses to targeted questions, another form of communication might be a better choice. So make an informed decision—don't tell stories just because everyone else is!

The Goals of Purposeful Stories

When a story effectively establishes purposeful connection, listeners:

- Learn lessons and think about similar experiences differently.
- Question their own assumptions and perceptions about the speaker.
- Trust the speaker's remarks.
- Feel moved to act or become part of a similar cause/purpose.
- Seek out follow-up communication.
- Appreciate the story behind the story and the motivations behind decisions.
- Feel a sense of connectedness and familiarity around universal themes.
- Can establish common ground.
- Understand that they are not alone in their struggles and journeys.

While stories are powerful, a speaker's intent matters. An audience can tell when a speaker is using a story to force a connection or masquerade as their kind of people. Instead of thinking about what story is going to be interesting to the audience, first think about what experiences or life moments are deeply important to you. Where did you learn an important lesson that continues to inform your thinking? What struggles changed you? What turning points have you had in your life? What moments serve as an example of important parts of your personality? (For more guidance on how to come up with ideas for stories, see "Getting Stories Started: For Speakers" later on in this guide.) By starting from a genuine place, your story is much more likely to actually connect to your audience. In fact, your authentic passion and feeling will be infectious, even if the audience hasn't had the same experience.

Technical Elements of Powerful Storytelling

Beyond this mindset shift, developing a relationship with your listeners also involves several technical considerations to ensure that the power of your story isn't diminished by unclear or unstructured thinking.

A few things to keep in mind:

- Stories should be specific and focused around concrete, real moments.
- Provide enough context to be clear: confusion kills a story.
- Adapt your story to build upon familiar themes or build upon analogies to what your audience knows.
- Remember that sometimes less is more—you don't have to say everything to get your point across. Similarly, be mindful of your total air time so you don't lose people.
- Hammer home the central takeaway(s) or moral. Repetition can be helpful.
- Quiet the voices in your head that say that no one will care about your story or that it won't be "good enough."
If it is important to you, it is an important story to share.

The Final Takeaway

As with any public speaking, stories help speakers interact with their audience and connect around significant ideas. Stories are distinct in their ability to illustrate emotions, inner thoughts, personal histories, individual values and beliefs, humorous observations, and rationales behind actions and choices. They play an important role in a wide range of purposes, from clarifying information, compelling action, inspiring emotion, and even offering escape through entertainment and humor. But most importantly, stories remind us that every person, regardless of background or circumstance, has a valuable human experience to offer the world.

