

Part 4



THE ROLE OF STORY IN ORGANIZATIONS



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TELLING THE RIGHT STORY

Choosing the Right Story for the Leadership Challenge at Hand

“Storytelling is fundamental to the human search for meaning.”

Mary Catherine Bateson¹

In 1998, I made a pilgrimage to the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee, seeking enlightenment. As program director of knowledge management at the World Bank, I'd stumbled onto the power of storytelling. Despite a career of scoffing at touchy-feely stuff—like most other business executives, I knew that analytical was good, anecdotal was bad—my thinking had started to change. Over the past few years, I'd seen stories help galvanize an organization around a defined business goal.

In the mid-1990s, that goal was to get people at the World Bank to support efforts at knowledge management—the idea of sharing knowledge horizontally across an organization and even beyond. It was an unfamiliar notion at the time. I offered people cogent arguments about the need to gather the knowledge scattered throughout the organization. They didn't listen. I gave PowerPoint presentations that compellingly

demonstrated the value of sharing and leveraging our know-how. My audience merely looked dazed. In desperation, I was ready to try almost anything.

Then in early 1996, I began telling people a story:

In June 1995, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia went to the Web site of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and got the answer to a question about the treatment of malaria. Remember that this was in Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world, and it was in a tiny place six hundred kilometers from the capital city. But the most striking thing about this picture, at least for us, is that the World Bank isn't in it. Despite our know-how on all kinds of poverty-related issues, that knowledge isn't available to the millions of people who could use it. Imagine if it were. Think what an organization we could become!

This simple story helped World Bank staff and managers envision a different kind of future for the organization. When knowledge management later became an official corporate priority, I used similar stories to maintain the momentum. So I began to wonder how the tool of storytelling might be put to work even more effectively. As a rational manager, I decided to consult the experts.

At the International Storytelling Center, I told the Zambia story to a professional storyteller, the late J. G. "Paw-Paw" Pinkerton, and asked the master what he thought. Imagine my chagrin when he said he didn't hear a story at all. There was no real "telling." There was no plot. There was no building up of the characters. Who was this health worker in Zambia? And what was her world like? What did it feel like to be in the exotic environment of Zambia, facing the problems she faced? My anecdote, he said, was a pathetic thing, not a story at all. I needed to start from scratch if I hoped to turn it into a "real story."

Was I surprised? Well, not exactly. The story *was* bland. I did have a problem with this advice, though. I knew in my heart it was wrong. And with that realization, I was on the brink of an important insight: Beware the well-told story!

THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

But let me back up a bit. Do stories really have a role to play in the business world? Believe me, I'm familiar with skepticism about them. When you talk about storytelling to a group of hard-headed executives, you'd better be prepared for some eye rolling. If the group is polite as well as tough, don't be surprised if the eyes simply glaze over.

That's because most executives operate with a particular mind-set. Analysis is what drives business thinking. It seemingly cuts through the fog of myth, gossip, and speculation to get to the hard facts. It purports to go wherever the observations and premises and conclusions take it, undistorted by the hopes or fears of the analyst. Its strength lies in its objectivity, its impersonality, its heartlessness.

Yet this strength is also a weakness. Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart. And that's where you must go if you are to motivate people not only to take action but to do so with energy and enthusiasm. At a time when corporate survival often requires transformational change, leadership involves inspiring people to act in unfamiliar and often unwelcome ways. Mind-numbing cascades of numbers or daze-inducing PowerPoint slides won't achieve this goal. Even logical arguments for making the needed changes usually won't do the trick.

But effective storytelling often does. In fact, in certain situations, nothing else works. Although good business cases are developed through the use of numbers, they are typically approved on the basis of a story—that is, a narrative that links a set of events in some kind of causal sequence. Storytelling can translate those dry and abstract numbers into compelling pictures of a leader's goals. I saw this happen at the World Bank—by 2000, we were increasingly recognized as leaders in the area of knowledge management—and have seen it in scores of other large organizations since then.

So why did I have problems with the advice I'd received from the professional storyteller in Jonesborough?

A "Poorly Told" Story

The timing of my trip to Tennessee was fortunate. Had I sought expert advice two years earlier, I might have taken the master's recommendations without question. But I'd had some time to approach the idea of organizational storytelling with a beginner's mind, free of strictures about the right way to tell a story.

It wasn't that I couldn't follow the Jonesborough storyteller's recommendations. I saw immediately how to flesh out my modest anecdote about the health worker in Zambia: you'd dramatically depict her life, the scourge of malaria that she faced in her work, and perhaps the pain and suffering of the patients she was treating that day. You'd describe the extraordinary set of events that led to her being seated in front of a computer screen deep in the hinterland of Zambia. You'd delineate the false leads she had followed before she came across the CDC Web site. You'd build up to the moment of triumph when she found the answer to her question about malaria and vividly describe how that answer could transform the life of her patient. The story would be a veritable epic!

This traditional, or maximalist, account would be more engrossing than my dry anecdote. But I had learned enough by then to realize that telling the story in this way to a corporate audience would not galvanize them to implement a strange new idea like knowledge management. In the hectic modern workplace, people had neither the time nor the patience—remember executives' general skepticism about storytelling in the first place—to absorb a richly detailed narrative. If I was going to hold the attention of my audience, I had to make my point in seconds, not in minutes.

There was another problem. Even if my audience did take the time to listen to a fully developed tale, telling it in that fashion would not allow listeners the mental space to relate the story to their own very different worlds. Although I was describing a health worker in Zambia, I wanted my audience to focus not on Zambia but on their own situations. I hoped they would think, *If the CDC can reach a health worker in Zambia, why can't the World Bank? Why don't we put our knowledge on a Web site?* If my

listeners were immersed in a saga about that health worker and her patient, they might be too preoccupied to ask themselves these questions—or to provide answers. In other words, I didn't want my audience too interested in Zambia. A minimalist narrative was effective precisely because it lacked detail and texture. The same characteristic that the professional storyteller saw as a flaw was, for my purposes, a strength.

On my return from Jonesborough, I educated myself on the principles of traditional storytelling. More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, said stories should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. They should include complex characters as well as a plot that incorporates a reversal of fortune and a lesson learned. Furthermore, the storyteller should be so engaged with the story—visualizing the action, feeling what the characters feel—that the listeners become drawn into the narrative's world. Aristotle's formula has proved successful over the ages, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to *The Arabian Nights* to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and most Hollywood screenplays.

Despite the narrative power of this kind of story, I knew that it probably wouldn't spark action in an organization. My insight blinded me to something else, though. Believing that this wonderful and rich tradition had no place in the time-constrained world of modern business was as wrongheaded as thinking that all stories had to be full of detail and color. Later I would see that the well-told story is relevant in a modern organization. Indeed, a number of surprises about the use of storytelling in organizations awaited me.

Tales of Success and Failure

In December 2000 I left the World Bank and began to consult with companies on the use of leadership storytelling. The following year, I found myself in London with Dave Snowden, then a director of IBM's Institute of Knowledge Management, teaching a storytelling master class to around seventy executives from private and public sector organizations.

In the morning, I spoke about my experience at the World Bank and how a positive orientation was essential if a narrative like the one

about Zambia was to have its intended effect. But in the afternoon, to my dismay, my fellow presenter emphatically asserted the opposite.

At IBM and elsewhere, Dave had found purely positive stories to be problematic. They were, he said, like the Janet and John stories told to children in the United Kingdom or the Dick and Jane stories in the United States: the characters were so good they made you feel queasy. The naughtiest thing Janet and John would do was spill a bottle of water in the yard. Then they would go and tell their mother about it and promise never to do it again. Janet would volunteer to help with the cleanup and John would offer to help wash the car. These stories for children reflected a desire to show things as they should be rather than as they actually are. In a corporate environment, Dave told his audience, listeners would respond to such rosy tales by conjuring up negative antistories about what must have actually happened. His message: Beware the positive story!

After the workshop, Dave and I discussed why his stories focused on the negative while mine accentuated the positive. I could see he had a point. I'd used negative stories myself when trying to teach people the nitty-gritty of any subject. The fact is, people learn more from their mistakes than from their successes.

Eventually, however, it dawned on me that our points of view were complementary. We were talking about organizational stories used for different purposes: my stories were designed to motivate people, and Dave's were designed to share knowledge. His stories might describe how and why a team failed to accomplish an objective, with the aim of helping others avoid the same mistakes. (To elicit such stories, however, Dave often had to start by getting people to talk about their successes, even if these accounts were ultimately less useful vehicles for conveying knowledge.) It was then that I began to realize that the purpose of telling a story might determine its form.

Granted, even optimistic stories have to be true and believable, since jaded corporate audiences know too well the experience of being presented with half-truths. Stories told in an effort to spur action needed to make good on their promises and contain sufficient evidence of a positive

outcome. But stories intended mainly to transfer knowledge must be more than true. Because their objective is to generate understanding and not action, they tend to highlight the pitfalls of ignorance; they are meant not to inspire people but to make them cautious. Just as my minimalist stories to spark action were different from traditional entertainment stories told in a maximalist fashion, so an effective knowledge-sharing story would have negative rather than positive overtones.

A Collective Yawn

Once I saw that different narrative forms can further different business goals, I looked for other ways that managers could make stories work for them. A number of distinct story types began to emerge—ones that didn't necessarily follow Aristotelian guidelines but were nonetheless used to good effect in a variety of organizations. (For descriptions of some of them and the purposes for which they might be used, see “A Storytelling Catalogue” later in this chapter.) And I continued to come across unexpected insights about the nature of storytelling within organizations.

For one thing, if negative stories have their place, so do apparently boring ones. In *Talking About Machines*, Julian Orr recounts a number of stories that have circulated among photocopy machine repair technicians at Xerox.² While rich in detail, they are even less storylike than my little anecdote about the health care worker in Zambia. Most of these tales, which present solutions to technical problems faced by the technicians, lack a plot and a distinct character. In fact, they are hardly stories at all, with little to hold the interest of anyone except those close to the often esoteric subject matter. Nevertheless, they are compelling even to this limited audience because they are driven forward by a detailed explanation of the cause-and-effect relationship between an action and its consequence—for example:

You've got a malfunctioning copy machine with an E053 error code, which is supposed to mean a problem in the 24-volt Interlock Power Supply. But you could chase the source of that 24-volt Interlock problem forever, and you'd never ever find out what it is. If you're lucky enough, you'll eventually get an F066 error code, which indicates

the true source of the malfunction—namely, a shorted dicorotron. Apparently this is happening because the circuitry in the XER board has been changed to prevent the damage that would otherwise occur when a dicorotron shorted. Before the change in circuitry, a shorted dicorotron would have fried the whole XER board. Changing the circuitry has prevented damage to the XER board, but it's created a different issue. Now an E053 error message doesn't give you the true source of the machine's malfunction.

This story, paraphrased here, doesn't just describe the technician's accurate diagnosis of a problem; it also relates why things happened as they did. This makes the account, negative in tone and almost unintelligible to an outsider, both informative and interesting to its intended audience.

As I continued my investigation, one area of particular interest for me was the link between storytelling and leadership. I already knew from personal experience that stories can be used as a catalyst for action. And I had seen in several influential books—*Leading Minds* by Howard Gardner, *The Leadership Engine* by Noel Tichy, and *The Story Factor* by Annette Simmons—that stories can help leaders define their personality, boosting confidence in their integrity and providing some idea of how they might act in a given situation.³

I also had seen leaders using narrative to inculcate a positive set of corporate values and beliefs in the hearts and minds of employees. Think, for example, of Tyco's effort to repair its battered value system. The company began by developing a straightforward guide setting forth new rules in such areas as harassment, conflicts of interest, and fraud. But Eric Pillmore, senior vice president of corporate governance, soon learned that in this form, the booklet would merely gather dust on people's shelves. So he threw out what he had done and started again in an effort to bring the principles alive through stories. Here is one of them:

The entire team jokes about Tom being gay. Tom has never complained and doesn't seem to mind, but when Mark is assigned to work with Tom, the jokes turn on Mark. Now that Mark receives the brunt of the jokes, he tells his supervisor he wants to be reassigned. His supervisor complies with Mark's request.⁴

This story serves as a sidebar for the section of the guide that deals with sexual harassment and other forms of intimidating behavior. While the company's policy on harassment is clearly laid out in the guide, the simple narrative helps bring the policy to life and provides a starting point for thinking about and discussing the complex issues involved. Dozens of similar stories illustrate an array of company policies.⁵

An Enticing But Hazy Future

Although these types of stories furthered leadership goals in a relatively predictable way, others I came across were more quirky—particularly ones used to communicate vision. Noel Tichy writes about the importance of preparing an organization for change: “The best way to get humans to venture into unknown terrain is to make that terrain familiar and desirable by taking them there first in their imaginations.”⁶ *Aha!* I thought. *Here is a place where storytelling, perhaps the most powerful route to people's imaginations, could prove indispensable.*

But as I looked at examples of such stories in a number of arenas, I discovered that most of the successful ones were surprisingly sketchy about the details of the imagined future. Consider Winston Churchill's “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” speech and Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech. Neither of these famous addresses came close to describing the future in enough detail that it became familiar terrain in listeners' minds.

Over time—and in part through work I did that incorporated scenario planning—I realized the reason. Specific predictions about the future are likely to be proved wrong. Because they almost inevitably differ in major or minor ways from what eventually happens, leaders who utter them risk losing people's confidence. Consequently a story designed to prepare people for change needs to evoke the future and conjure up a direction for getting there—without being too precise. Think of the corporate future laid out in a famous mandate by Jack Welch: General Electric will be either number one or number two in the field, or it will exit the sector. This is a clear but broad-brush description of where Welch wanted to take the

company. Like my Zambia story, it doesn't convey too much information, though for different reasons.

I also came across stories used in somewhat unusual situations that called for reactive rather than proactive measures. These stories counteracted negative ones that circulated like viruses within an organization and threatened to infect the entire body. Dave Snowden of IBM first pointed out to me how stories could be used in this manner. His hypothesis was that you could attach a positive story to a negative one and defuse it, as an antibody would neutralize an antigen.

For example, at an IBM manufacturing site for laptop computers in the United Kingdom, stories circulated among the blue-collar workers about the facility's managers, who were accused of not doing any real work, being overpaid, and having no idea what it was like on the manufacturing line. But an additional story was injected into the mix. One day a new site director turned up in a white coat, unannounced and unaccompanied, and sat on the line making ThinkPads for a day. He asked workers on the assembly line for help. In response, someone asked him: "Why do you earn so much more than me?" His simple reply: "If you screw up badly, you lose your job. If I screw up badly, three thousand people lose their jobs."⁷

Although this isn't a story in the traditional sense, the manager's words and actions served as a seed for the story that eventually circulated in opposition to the one about managers' being lazy and overpaid. You can imagine the buzz: "Blimey, you should've seen how he fumbled with those circuit boards. I guess he'll never work on the line. But you know, he does have a point about his pay." The atmosphere at the facility began improving within weeks.

A STORYTELLING CATALOGUE

Storytelling is an increasingly accepted way to achieve management goals. But leaders need to employ a variety of narrative patterns for different aims. The following sections sketch the kinds of stories I've found, following the general outline of Part Two of the book.

Sparking Action

Leadership above all is about getting people to change. To achieve this goal, you need to communicate the complex nature of the changes required and inspire an often skeptical organization to enthusiastically carry them out. This is the place for what I call a springboard story—one that enables listeners to visualize the large-scale transformation needed in their circumstances and then to act on that realization.

A springboard story is based on an actual event, preferably recent enough to seem relevant. It has a single protagonist with whom members of the target audience can identify. And it has an authentically happy ending, in which a change has at least in part been implemented successfully. (It also has an implicit alternate ending—an unhappy one that would have resulted had the change not occurred.)

The story has enough detail to be intelligible and credible but—and this is key—not so much texture that the audience becomes completely wrapped up in it. If that happens, people won't have the mental space to create an analogous scenario for change in their own organization. For example, if you want to get an organization to embrace a new technology, you might tell stories about individuals elsewhere who have successfully implemented it, without dwelling on the specifics of implementation.

Communicating Who You Are

You aren't likely to lead people through wrenching change if they don't trust you. And if they are to trust you, they have to know you: who you are, where you've come from, and why you hold the views you do. Ideally they'll end up not only understanding you but also empathizing with you.

Stories for this purpose are usually based on a life event that reveals some strength or vulnerability and shows what the speaker took from the experience.

Unlike a story designed to spark action, this kind is typically "well told," with colorful detail and context. So the speaker needs to ensure that the audience has enough time and interest to hear the story.

For example, Jack Welch's success in making General Electric a winner was undoubtedly aided by his ability to tell his own story, which

includes a tongue-lashing he once received from his mother after he hurled a hockey stick across the ice in response to a disappointing loss. His mother chased young Jack into the locker room where the young men on the team were changing and grabbed him by the shoulders. "You punk!" he reports her saying in his memoir. "If you don't know how to lose, you'll never know how to win."⁸

On the face of it, this is a story about Jack Welch's youth, but it's also a story about the Jack Welch of today. From this story, we get a good idea of the kind of person Jack Welch became as CEO of GE—obsessed with winning, strong on loyalty, and with an aggressive style of behavior, someone who is very much in your face.

Communicating Who the Company Is—Branding

In some ways, the stories by which companies communicate the reputation of themselves and their products so as to establish their brand are analogous to leaders' stories of who they are.

Just as individuals need trust if they are to lead, so companies need trust if their products and services are to succeed in the marketplace. For customers to trust a company and its products, they have to know what sort of company they are dealing with, what kinds of values it espouses, and how its people approach meeting customers' needs.

Strong brands are based on a narrative—a promise that the company makes to the customer, a promise that the company must keep. It's a story that the customer has about the company and its products and services. The brand narrative is owned by the customer, not the company.

Once you have settled on the brand promise and made sure that the organization can deliver on it, communicating that to customers is most effectively done not through electronic advertising (which today has limited credibility) but rather through having the product or service tell its own story or by customers' word of mouth.

Transmitting Values

Stories can be effective tools for ingraining values within an organization, particularly those that help forestall future problems by clearly

establishing limits on destructive behavior. A story of this type ensures that the audience understands “how things are done around here.”

These narratives often take the form of a parable. Religious leaders have used them for thousands of years to communicate values. The stories are usually set in some kind of generic past and have few context-setting details—though the context that is established needs to seem relevant to the listeners. The facts of such tales can be hypothetical, but they must be believable. For example, a story might tell the sad fate of someone who failed to see the conflict of interest in not disclosing a personal financial interest in a company supplier.

Of course, narratives alone cannot establish values in an organization. Leaders need to live the values on a daily basis.

Fostering Collaboration

Every management textbook talks about the value of getting people to work together. But most don’t offer advice on making that happen in real-life work environments except for generalities like, “Encourage conversations.” Yes, but how?

One approach is to generate a common narrative around a group’s concerns and goals, beginning with a story told by one member of the group. Ideally that first story sparks another, which sparks another. If the process continues, group members develop a shared perspective that enables a sense of community to emerge naturally. The first story must be emotionally moving enough to unleash the narrative impulse in others and create a readiness to hear more stories. It could, for example, vividly describe how the speaker had grappled with a difficult work situation.

For this process to occur, it is best if the group has an open agenda that allows the stories to surface organically. It is also desirable to have a plan ready so that the energy generated by the positive experience of sharing stories can be immediately channeled into action.

Taming the Grapevine

Rumors flow incessantly through every organization. “Have you heard the latest?” is a whispered refrain that’s difficult for managers to

deal with. Denying a rumor can give it credibility. Asking how it got started may ensure its spread. Ignoring it altogether risks allowing it to grow out of control. Rumors about issues central to the future of the organization—takeovers, reorganizations, major managerial changes—can be an enormous distraction (or worse) to the staff and to outside stakeholders.

So as an executive, what can you do? One effective response is to harness the energy of the grapevine to defuse the rumor, using a story to convince listeners that the gossip is either untrue or unreasonable. This kind of story highlights the incongruity between the rumor and reality. You could use gentle satire to mock the rumor, the rumor's author, or even yourself in an effort to undermine the rumor's power. For example, you might deal with a false rumor of "imminent corporate-wide reorganization" by jokingly recounting how the front office's current struggles involving the seating chart for executive committee meetings would have to be worked out first. Keep in mind, though, that humor can backfire. Mean-spirited ridicule can generate a well-deserved backlash.

The trick is to work with, not against, the flow of the vast underground river of informal communication that exists in every organization. Of course, you can't ridicule a rumor into oblivion if it's true or at least reasonable. If that's the case, there is little that can be done except to admit the rumor, put it in perspective, and move on.

Sharing Knowledge

Much of the intellectual capital of an organization is not written down anywhere but resides in the minds of the staff. Communicating this know-how across an organization and beyond typically occurs informally through sharing stories.

Knowledge-sharing narratives are unusual in that they lack a hero or even a detectable plot. They are more about problems, and how and why they got—or didn't get—resolved. They set out a description of the problem, the setting, the solution, and the explanation. Because they highlight a problem—say, the challenge employees face in learning to use a new system—they tend to have a negative tone.

And because they often focus in detail on why a particular solution worked, they may be of little interest outside a defined group of people. But although they lack most elements of a conventional story, they are nonetheless the uncelebrated workhorse of organizational narrative.

They present a difficulty, however. In a corporate setting, stories about problems don't flow easily, not only because people fear the consequences of admitting mistakes, but also because, in the flush of success, they tend to forget what they learned along the way. As a result, the knowledge-sharing story cannot be compelled; it has to be teased out. That is, a discussion of successes may be needed to get people to talk about what has gone wrong and how it can be fixed.

Leading People into the Future

An important part of a leader's job is preparing others for what lies ahead, whether in the concrete terms of an actual scenario or the more conceptual terms of a vision. A story can help take listeners from where they are now to where they need to be by getting them familiar and comfortable with the future in their minds. The problem, of course, lies in crafting a credible narrative about the future when the future is unknowable.

Thus, if such stories are to serve their purpose, they should whet listeners' imaginative appetite about the future without providing detail likely to prove inaccurate. Listeners should be able to remold the story in their minds as the future unfolds with all its unexpected twists and turns. And clearly the stories should portray that state in a positive way because people are more likely to overcome uncertainty about change if they are shown what to aim for rather than what to avoid.

Note that telling an evocative future narrative requires a high degree of verbal skill, something not every leader possesses. But the springboard story provides an alternative. Hearing about a change that has already happened can help listeners to imagine how it might play out in the future.

USING THE STORYTELLING CATALOGUE

The catalogue of narratives constitutes a handy menu of options that can be consulted by executives weaving together a set of stories for a full-scale presentation. Table 1.1 lays out the uses of the various types of stories.

The point is that there is no single right way to tell a story. Instead, narrative comprises an array of tools, each suitable to a different purpose. Different combinations of story can be woven together as an integrated narrative tapestry. Some examples:

- A presentation to introduce a new idea might first involve telling a story to get the audience's attention by talking about a problem of concern to the audience, followed by a springboard story to communicate a new idea and spark action related to it, and then, if the response is positive, concluding with knowledge-sharing stories showing how to deal with the issues of implementation.
- A presentation about the strategic direction of an organization might begin with a personal identity story ("who I am") followed by the company identity story ("who we are") eventually leading on to a future story ("who we are going to be").⁹

With the catalogue in hand, you can also avoid some of the most frequent mistakes in organizational storytelling:

- Using a story with negative tonality will generally fail to spark action. However useful such a story might be to share understanding, it is unlikely to inspire and move anyone.
- Telling a personal story in a traditional fashion is also unlikely to spark action. It might entertain the audience and communicate who the speaker is, but it is unlikely to galvanize people to action.
- Using success stories typically fails to communicate knowledge because it risks missing the nitty-gritty of how things actually get done in the world.

TABLE 1.1 Eight Narrative Patterns

If your objective is ...	You will need a story that ...	In telling it, you will need to ...	Your story will inspire such phrases as ...
Sparking action	Describes how a successful change was implemented in the past, but allows listeners to imagine how it might work in their situation.	Avoid excessive detail that will take the audience's mind off its own challenge.	"Just imagine ..." "What if ..."
Communicating who you are	Provides audience-engaging drama and reveals some strength or vulnerability from your past.	Provide meaningful details but also make sure the audience has the time and inclination to hear your story.	"I didn't know that about him!" "Now I see what she's driving at!"
Transmitting values	Feels familiar to the audience and will prompt discussion about the issues raised by the value being promoted.	Use believable (though perhaps hypothetical) characters and situations, and never forget that the story must be consistent with your own actions.	"That's so right!" "Why don't we do that all the time!"
Communicating who the firm is—branding	Is usually told by the product or service itself, or by customer word of mouth or by a credible third party.	Be sure that the firm is actually delivering on the brand promise.	"Wow!" "I'm going to tell my friends about this!"

continued

TABLE 1.1 *Continued*

If your objective is ...	You will need a story that ...	In telling it, you will need to ...	Your story will inspire such phrases as ...
Fostering collaboration	Movingly recounts a situation that listeners have also experienced and prompts them to share their own stories about the topic.	Ensure that a set agenda doesn't squelch this swapping of stories—and that you have an action plan ready to tap the energy unleashed by this narrative chain reaction.	"That reminds me of the time that I ..." "Hey, I've got a story like that."
Taming the grapevine	Highlights, often through the use of gentle humor, some aspect of a rumor that reveals it to be untrue or unreasonable.	Avoid the temptation to be mean-spirited—and be sure that the rumor is indeed false!	"No kidding!" "I'd never thought about it like that before!"
Sharing knowledge	Focuses on problems and shows in some detail how they were corrected, with an explanation of why the solution worked.	Solicit alternative—and possibly better—solutions.	"There but for the grace of God ..." "Goshi! We'd better watch out for that in the future!"
Leading people into the future	Evokes the future you want to create without providing excessive detail that will only turn out to be wrong.	Be sure of your storytelling skills. Otherwise use a story in which the past can serve as a springboard to the future.	"When do we start?" "Let's do it!"

- Denying untrue rumors often just accelerates them, although a satire can ridicule an untrue rumor out of existence.
- Using detailed scenarios to instill belief in a different future is generally ineffective. Even if believable when disseminated, such scenarios quickly become discredited as the future unfolds in unexpected ways.

THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT OF STORYTELLING

“What’s the ROI of storytelling?” is a question I am often asked when addressing a business audience on the topic of storytelling. In dealing with such a question, the first thing to consider is whether it is genuine. Often the request to quantify benefits is merely a pretext for taking no action or a polite way of making a negative statement. When the response to a request for measurable benefits is followed by a request for additional measurements and studies, then beware. Measurement has value only when it is prompted by a genuine attempt to achieve understanding and is backed by willingness to act on the basis of the findings.¹⁰

Talk Is Work

Storytelling is about making managers and leaders more effective in what they do. So what do managers do? The first point to realize is that for managers—and indeed most people in the knowledge economy—talk is work. If you can learn how to talk more effectively, you can become much more productive.

The contrary view is of course still prevalent and still emerges today even in leading business publications.¹¹ But it flies in the face of serious research such as Henry Mintzberg’s classic *Nature of Managerial Work*, which showed that talking comprises 78 percent of what managers actually do with their time.¹²

Where storytelling gets the message across more effectively, its incremental cost is zero, or close to zero, and so its ROI is massive.¹³ Moreover, communicating through stories usually means talking more succinctly, so that the cost in terms of executive and staff time is actually lower than for ineffective talk.

Impact of Storytelling on Implementing Change

Assessments of the effect of storytelling on performance have emerged. A study explored the experience of some forty companies undergoing major change, including banks, hospitals, manufacturers, and utilities.¹⁴ Each of these projects was initiated by senior management and involved changes such as implementing a Six Sigma program, optimizing business processes, and adopting a new sales strategy. All the programs could potentially have had a large economic impact on the organization, and all required major companywide changes in behavior, tasks, and processes.

Two things are striking about the study's findings. First, it's remarkable how little success the companies had with their change programs. The team gauged the difference between the expected value of a project (essentially calculated in the business case for it) and the value the company claimed to have achieved when it was completed. In all, 58 percent of the companies failed to meet their targets; 20 percent captured only a third or less of the value expected. And the overall differences between the winners and losers were huge. The successful 42 percent of these companies not only gained the expected returns, in some instances they exceeded them by as much as 200 to 300 percent.

Second, one of the key success factors was storytelling. The study rated each company's strength in twelve widely recognized factors for managing change effectively, including the ability to tell a simple, clear, and compelling story with no mixed messages. The researchers found a high correlation between the success factors, including storytelling, and the outcome of the change program. Storytelling wasn't the only success factor, of course; other elements included the company's project management skills, training, and incentives for promoting change. But without a storytelling capacity, the chances of success were significantly lower.

Narrative Is the Foundation of an Organization's Brand

Some progress has been made in quantifying the impact of narrative in brands. A strong brand generates benefits in terms of raising capital, launching new products, acquiring new assets, or attracting new partners.

Although strong brands reflect the immense value that can be generated by narrative—the top ten global brands are together worth some \$380 billion—the phenomenon of advertising illustrates how extraordinary quantities of money can be wasted in the ineffective use of narrative.¹⁵ And what narrative creates, narrative can also take away: the narrative-generated value of brands is vulnerable to attack by narrative. The advent of social media has led to public relations crises of astonishing scale and rapidity. When companies don't live up to their brand values, the consequences can be devastating.

The Emerging Microstudies on the Impact of Storytelling

Research in speech communications has begun to clarify why stories are effective in stimulating responses from listeners. Stories excite the imagination of the listener and create consecutive states of tension (puzzlement and recoil) and tension release (insight and resolution). Thus, the listener is not a passive receiver of information but is triggered into a state of active thinking.¹⁶ The listener must consider the meaning of the story and try to make sense of it. By this process, the listener is engaged; attention and interest are fostered.¹⁷

Studies in social psychology show that information is more quickly and accurately remembered when it is first presented in the form of an example or story, particularly one that is intrinsically appealing.¹⁸ One study compared the effectiveness of four different methods to persuade a group of M.B.A. students of an unlikely hypothesis: that a company really practiced a policy of avoiding layoffs. In one method, there was just a story. In the second, the researchers provided statistical data. In the third, they used statistical data and a story. In the fourth, they offered the policy statement made by a senior company executive. The most effective method of all turned out to be the first alternative: presenting the story alone.¹⁹

Storytelling Is an Amplifier

How consistently does storytelling work? Is it effective 100 percent of the time? Or 50 percent? Or 10 percent of the time? This question can't be

answered yet because the body of research simply doesn't include enough longitudinal studies. Nevertheless, it is possible to infer the eventual findings by comparison with an area on which a great deal of research work has been done: teams. The amazing reports from the field about the benefits of specific teams contrast sharply with the gloomy picture that emerges from scholarly research on the impact of teamwork on performance across many organizations: overall, no net improvement in performance can be detected. How can the two be reconciled? Richard Hackman makes several helpful points in *Leading Teams*.²⁰

First, in organizations, there is no simple cause-and-effect relationship between introducing a management technique and getting an improved business result. This contrasts with other spheres of activity where simple causal relationships do seem to operate. Hit the nail with the hammer, and it goes into the wood. Show a dog food, and it salivates. This kind of simple cause-and-effect logic can be misleading if applied to the complex world of organizations, where it is difficult to trace single effects to single causes. Uncontrollable outside factors can sink a wonderfully designed team (a hurricane just swept the entire inventory out to sea) or rescue one whose design was so bad that failure seemed assured (the firm that was competing for the contract just went belly-up). In organizations, multiple causes are operating at the same time and interacting with each other over an extended period of time.

Second, the apparent paradox of zero improvement in performance from teams in organizations overall—along with extraordinary gains reportedly made in specific instances—reflects the fact that teams are found at both ends of the effectiveness spectrum. While some extraordinary teams outperform any traditional units, other teams do so poorly that they are easily outperformed by traditional units. So the absence of an overall benefit from the impact of all teams doesn't mean that teams are irrelevant to performance.

I won't be surprised to find a similar result with storytelling. Thus, you may continue to see case studies indicating improved performance in some instances.²¹ You will also see instances where storytelling didn't work

at all: compare, for example, Chapters Five and Six of *The Springboard*, which describe how a story that was highly effective in one context got derailed in a different context as a result of extraneous factors.

It remains to be seen whether overall assessments across many organizations will detect a major correlation between the use of storytelling and organizational performance—or not, as in the case of teams. In any organizational change, many factors play a role in achieving organizational performance: a good story may be undermined by other factors (such as counterproductive managerial behavior in other areas), while a story that appeared to fail with most of the audience may be rescued by external events that make the change inevitable (for example, the firm is taken over by a company that is already implementing the new approach).

The effectiveness of storytelling is related to the nature and consistency of the leadership involved, a point I'll explore further in Chapters Eleven and Twelve. It is by no means clear whether any correlation between storytelling and performance will emerge. Nevertheless, as in the case of work teams, it seems probable that storytelling will operate like an amplifier: whatever passes through the device—whether signal or noise—comes out louder. If care is taken to ensure the quality of the signal, the effect can be extraordinary.²²

2

TELLING THE STORY RIGHT

Four Key Elements of Storytelling Performance

“Who knows why certain notes in music are capable of stirring the listener deeply, though the same notes slightly rearranged are impotent?”

Strunk and White¹

Knowing the right story to tell is only half the battle. The other half is telling the story right. Storytelling is a performance art, and the way a story is performed can radically change its emotional tone, and hence its impact on the listener. Thus, a leader may have an excellent story to tell and may possess highly developed verbal skills, and yet perform poorly as a storyteller because the story is told as a monologue rather than as a conversation. Conversely, a leader may have very limited verbal skills but a firm grasp of the idea of reciprocity that lies at the heart of effective storytelling and so deliver a very effective performance. “Telling the story right” entails having all of the elements of storytelling mesh together to form the social act known as storytelling.²

In performance, the story, the storyteller, and the audience interact to form a meaningful ensemble. In the world of organizations, there’s often

a preoccupation with what is said, while in the world of pure storytelling, the focus is more often on how the story is performed. In leadership storytelling, the story's form and content, the storyteller, and the audience are all inseparably intertwined with each other.

Because storytelling is a performance art, reading this chapter will not by itself enable you to tell a story right. Just as you learn how to ski by actually skiing or to sing a song by actually singing, so you will learn how to tell the story right through telling stories. This chapter can explain to you the principles, but you alone can master them through practice. Nevertheless, a guide can help. By knowing what to look for and which pitfalls to avoid, you can accelerate the learning involved in developing your storytelling skills.

The suggestions fall under four headings:

- Style
- Truth
- Preparation
- Delivery

STYLE

Among the many styles of storytelling, the one most suitable for modern organizations is a style that is plain, simple, and direct. This will be the foundation that you can customize for particular settings and requirements.

DIFFERENT STYLES OF STORYTELLING

The plain, simple, and direct style of storytelling advocated in this book obviously isn't the only possibility. Here are some other styles:

- *The raconteur*: The raconteur is polished, glib, even elegant—someone who is always in performance, someone who looks and sounds so polished that every story comes across

as a performance, not as sincere. In a corporate context, the raconteur is usually too good to be true.

- *The stand-up comedian*: The comedian is crisp, witty, sardonic, and topical, with the principal objective of keeping the audience amused. The organizational storyteller may tell jokes, but the principal objective is not to amuse and entertain.
- *The orator*: The orator revels in the explicit stance of talking to a large crowd rather than talking to an individual—for example: “And so we see, ladies and gentlemen, in this instance, as so many other instances that have occurred and are likely to occur, that what our organization does will improve the lives of billions of people around the world, and so let us pledge our lives to nurturing that cause.” It is a style of speaking that lives on in the political speech, but is out of place in the organizational context.
- *The reflexive, self-conscious academic*: The academic speaks with endless qualifications and reservations, all aimed at protecting against the potential objections of academic colleagues—for example: “Subject to what others have said, and with all due respect to what my colleague has said on the subject, a different point of view can possibly be argued here if we weigh the various conflicting pieces of evidence.” Academics cover themselves against all criticism, but in the end, they often obscure the very message they intend to convey.
- *The romantic*: The romantic storyteller wallows in the explicit emotions of the story rather than simply telling the story. Thus, at the start of the Macintosh era, Steve Jobs used stories based on the conflict of good and evil to invigorate his team, describing the world in terms similar to those used in the movie *Star Wars*: “‘If we do not succeed,’ forecast Steve Jobs, ‘IBM will be the master of the world’” (Roche and Sadowsky, n.d.).

These styles may work in various social or professional settings or for the purposes of entertainment. But in a purpose-driven organizational setting, they often get in the way of the business at hand, which is to reveal the truth of the matter under discussion, simply, clearly, and directly.

Here's an example. It happens to be Lou Gerstner, talking at a press conference in New York City on June 5, 1995, about the events that led to IBM's purchase of Lotus. As a story, there's nothing unusual or remarkable about it. It's a typical example of business storytelling: plain, simple, and direct. As a story, it would not be considered brilliant. Nor is there anything that would draw attention to Gerstner as the storyteller. Listen:

I think it is useful to step back and look at the evolution of this industry to really understand the strategic rationale of this transaction. The industry began as a very centralized model of computing. It was the world of mainframes, large central processors.

And while there will be the need for central processors for many, many years to come, that first phase ended a decade or so ago—and the second phase began, which is the era of the PC.

And so powerful, stand-alone computers were put in the hands of workers around the world, and we had the PC revolution. It provided enormous personal productivity benefits to workers in enterprises, small businesses, and even at home.

But it's clear to me and to many others that the industry is now entering a new phase of the information technology industry. And it is a phase in which all of the computing power of an enterprise is linked together—so that the mainframes or servers and the PCs become linked in a network

. . . but not just a hierarchical network, so that the PCs can talk to the mainframes or servers—but very importantly, a world in which all of the users can talk horizontally to each other, and to work together in what is known as "collaborative" or "team" computing. That is a very, very powerful need of our customers around the world.³

Gerstner's story is not in any way remarkable, yet it illustrates a number of important characteristics of a style of storytelling that is effective for leaders in organizations.

Tell Your Story as If You Were Talking to a Single Individual

Gerstner's idiom is the voice of conversation. The model is that of one person speaking to another. The style appears to be spontaneous and motivated by the need to tell the listeners about something of interest.

It's as if it has just occurred to Gerstner to tell his audience about what has been going on in the computer industry, and so he begins to do so. What he has to say doesn't feel like a set piece. There's no sign that Gerstner has labored over the language beforehand, systematically refining and arranging his thoughts, editing their expression, checking with the corporate lawyers, and then reading the final cleared text aloud. It's as if something has just occurred to him, and so he says it.⁴

As it happens, Gerstner is talking to a crowd of journalists, but he might just as well be talking to each person in the audience, one on one. His voice is the voice of dialogue.

Gerstner says one thing, and after another moment, something else occurs to him, and so he says that too. It happens to be a useful progression from his former thought, so the listeners follow along. His speech has the rhythm of conversation. It's a series of movements, each one brief and crisp, beginning at the beginning and ending with a suitable conclusion.

The appearance of spontaneity is of course an illusion. Gerstner has carefully rehearsed the story and knows exactly where it is heading. In retrospect, the audience may see that these movements of thought are in fact organized into a flawless order, but at the time, the illusion is created that this order is simply the consequence of Gerstner's logical, penetrating, uncluttered mind. His words appear to come out the way they do without any special effort. The order is never referred to. Its existence is not even acknowledged. Everything that is dispensable has been edited out, but the result doesn't sound edited.

Avoid Hedges

Gerstner avoids indicating that he is doing anything other than presenting the situation as it actually is. Thus, he avoids the kinds of hedges that writers often adopt to protect themselves against possible objections.⁵

Gerstner has banished from his vocabulary phrases like, "As we shall see . . ." and "Before I move on to my next point . . ." and "As far as I know . . ." He doesn't bother with disclaimers that he doesn't have time to tell the whole story or that he has skipped over important events.

In telling his story, Gerstner presents the situation as being obvious to anyone who will take a hard look: “It is clear to me and to many others . . .” He refrains from indicating alternative points of view. He doesn’t, for instance, say, “My predecessor in IBM took an entirely different view of the situation and was on the verge of breaking up the company.”

Keep Your Storytelling Focused, Simple, and Clear

The virtues of Gerstner’s story, like most other good organizational storytelling, are clarity and simplicity. These are also its vices. Gerstner doesn’t acknowledge ambiguities, qualifications, or doubts. He has made hard choices silently and out of the listeners’ sight. He presents the story on the basis that this is what happened. Once made, the choices are presented as if they are inevitable.

Gerstner’s language doesn’t draw attention to itself; rather, it serves as a window that reveals the content of the story he is telling. If the audience were to notice Gerstner the person, through a dazzling use of language or some unusual mannerisms or some striking gestures—rather than the content of the story—then he would have been less effective. He tells the story in an understated manner. At the end of his presentation, no one says, “My heavens, that Lou Gerstner is a wonderful storyteller!” Instead, the focus is on what he says. The audience is more likely to exclaim, “How fascinating!”

Gerstner presents his story in a way that is seemingly transparent, as if the listeners are looking at his subject through a perfectly clean and nondistorting window. The window doesn’t draw attention to itself.⁶

Present the Story as Something Valuable in Itself

Gerstner doesn’t spend time justifying the telling of his story. As storyteller, he presents his story as something that is inherently valuable. The value comes from the story itself and from its role as part of a larger whole. He has selected elements that are common knowledge and put them together in a way that gives them broader significance. In so doing, he gives the events a meaning that the audience might not otherwise have grasped.

Be Yourself

Style isn't something separate from the person or detachable from the content of what is said. Gerstner performs his story in a style that lets the content shine through. He stands behind what he has to say because he has seen it, experienced it, and thought it out independently. He may be stating what is a common conclusion among experts in the industry at the time, but in expressing it, he is neither joining a chorus nor embracing a platitude.⁷

Instead, he presents his story as if it has the freshness of a discovery. He talks as though what he is saying doesn't come from following what he has been told to say by his public relations team or from a briefing by his technical experts.

As a storyteller, Gerstner presents himself as a thinking human being, not the head of a large bureaucracy or the construct of his handlers. In the apparent absence of these encumbrances, his utterances have a freshness that no committee of speechwriters can give.⁸

He speaks not as if he is trying to persuade, but rather as though he is presenting reality as it is. The implication is that listeners are free to draw their own conclusions, but if they were to draw any other conclusion than Gerstner's, they would be in error. He is inviting them to conclude, just as he already has, not only that the experience has a bearing on the future but also that there is a need to update their previously held views.⁹

TRUTH

As storyteller, Gerstner proceeds on the basis that all listeners have what is essential to identify the truth, whether or not they have any special education. The implication is that failure to identify truth comes from not seeing reality clearly.

Gerstner places his listeners where he was when he examined what was happening in the computer industry, and he does what he can to make what has happened intelligible to them. He proceeds on the basis that once received opinion, custom, and prejudice have been cleared

away, what is true will be immediately apparent because of its distinctness and clarity.

In telling his story, Gerstner assumes parity between himself and his listeners. Although he may have a wider experience than his listeners and he may have access to inside information, he trusts the listeners to know exactly what he knows as if they had seen what he has seen. His purpose is to put the listeners in a position to achieve that parity.

Proceed on the Basis That It Is Possible to Tell the Truth

Is it possible to tell the truth? In telling his story back in June 1995, Gerstner was proceeding as if it is possible to know the results of disinterested thought and to present them without significant distortion. These assumptions may be hard for a philosopher to justify, but they contribute to a form of communication that is immensely useful. The assumptions constitute in effect a set of enabling conventions. Whether Gerstner believes in the enabling conventions—for example, that truth can be known—telling a story in this way requires no lifelong commitment to the belief, only a willingness to adopt this position for a limited time and purpose.¹⁰

Similarly, playing the game of tennis doesn't necessitate adopting the position that your lifelong aim is to defeat your opponent. But if you want to play a good game of tennis on a particular day, it does require that you adopt the conventions of tennis and try to defeat your opponent on that particular day. You cannot play an excellent game of tennis if you are all the time questioning the conventions of the game. After the game is over, you may sit back and have such discussions. But for the duration of the game, you have to set these questions aside in order to play an excellent game of tennis. Then the game can proceed.

So it is with storytelling. The performance of storytelling requires the storyteller to accept the conventions of storytelling at least for the duration of the performance. In performance, the storyteller is certain, fearless, and relentless in presenting things “as they really are.” The role can be useful and even thrilling, but it can hardly be permanent.

For better or worse, human beings cannot remain in a permanent state of certainty, fearlessness, and relentlessness. No reliable evidence supports the storyteller's claim to the disinterested expression of truth. The insouciance required to ignore what everyone knows cannot be maintained for very long, and master storytellers know the limits. The storytelling performance is thus a sprint, not a marathon.¹¹

Tell the Truth as You See It

Telling the truth as best we can isn't easy. In fact, it's terrifying to think how many things can go wrong in an effort to present something clearly and accurately. Our memory may be playing tricks on us. We may have difficulty expressing what we see. Our insights may lack edge. We may have been misled.

These concerns stop some people from ever opening their mouths to tell an effective story. For others, it causes them to allow the doubts to become the centerpiece of what they say, since the doubts are the only things that seem certain.

The enabling convention that it is possible to tell the truth frees the storyteller from these concerns. Presenting the truth as you see it is a capability that is available to everyone. Such competence is no more problematic than being able to see what you see with your own eyes.

PREPARATION

The preparation for a storytelling performance is laborious and repetitive, but the actual performance is like white-water rafting. In rehearsal, myriad options must be considered, tried out, and evaluated for their possible impact. In performance, you have no time for thought, for reflection, for second thoughts. You hurtle forward, swept on by the rush of events, the thing finished in a matter of seconds, the lips moving faster than the mind. If you have done the preparation and are ready for the performance, then the self—and the story—will flow effortlessly. But if you have not thought through what you are trying to say and are not comfortable with who

you are or how this relates to the story you are telling, then the audience almost certainly will feel those discords, which will get in the way of your performance. Careful preparation is of the essence.

Good organizational storytelling is perfect performance, with no hesitation, revision, or backtracking. Its implicit fiction is that this perfection happens at the first try. The story appears as though it could not have been told in any other way. This is an illusion, but it is powerful. The storyteller may seem to have been born with a unique ability that other human beings lack. As a result, listening to perfectly told stories can be intimidating to a beginner, who does not see the care and preparation that have gone into the presentation.

With effort and discipline, anyone can get the essential things right. Effective storytelling is accessible to all who are willing to make the effort. It is the result not of natural endowment but of meticulous preparation, ending in achievement.

Be Rehearsed But Spontaneous

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of good storytelling is its combination of perfection and spontaneity. The performance has no mistake, no false step or deficiency, and it looks inevitable. And yet it also looks fresh and spontaneous, almost improvised.

How is this possible? The perfection comes from practice, while the spontaneity comes from reliving the story mentally for each retelling. Even if you are telling the story for the seventeenth time, you relive it afresh in your mind as if you were experiencing it for the first time. You feel the emotions of the original participants yet again, and the audience will also feel those emotions. Because the story is fresh each time for the storyteller, it's also fresh for the audience.

Choose the Shape of Your Story, and Stick to It

Design is the backbone of effective storytelling. As the storyteller, you will both build on your design and add to it as a result of the unexpected events that occur with every live performance. The audience laughs, and

you dwell on the point for a moment to take advantage of the resonance. The audience fidgets, and you move on swiftly to an element that is more likely to be appealing. But in the midst of these adjustments, you stick to the basic design of the story.

The key is to get the right balance between structure and spontaneity. If the performance follows a rigid advance plan too closely, then the story will sound false and programmed. If we allow the story to ramble aimlessly as we recall events as they occur to us in a somewhat haphazard fashion, then we risk becoming a garrulous windbag, and the audience will stop listening. To achieve the requisite balance of structure and spontaneity, it's necessary to foresee the overall shape of what is to come and to pursue that shape, no matter how many enticing side roads open up along the way.¹²

DELIVERY

In any oral communication, much depends on the nonverbal aspects of performance—the tone of voice, the facial expression, and the accompanying gestures. Exactly how much do these nonverbal aspects contribute? In 1971, Professor Albert Mehrabian stunned the world of communications with his conclusion that only 7 percent of the meaning of a communication is in the content of the words that are spoken, while 93 percent of meaning comes from nonverbal communication.¹³ His widely cited conclusion was, however, based on artificial laboratory studies involving the use of single, mostly ambiguous words, and Mehrabian didn't claim that his findings were applicable beyond the resolution of simple, inconsistent messages. As L. Michael Hall points out, you can tell that content must be more than 7 percent of communication just by trying to watch and understand movies on planes when you don't have the headphones or by trying to communicate any simple abstract statement nonverbally.¹⁴

But just as clearly, the way a story is performed can radically change its emotional tone in the mind of the listener. So Mehrabian is right in thinking that how an oral communication is performed is important, even

if determining exactly how important would require separating content from performance—which is precisely what cannot be accomplished in the social act of communication, where story, storyteller, and audience are inseparably intertwined.

Be Ready to Perform

Once you have the shape of your story and have made your selections as to what to include and exclude, you must be ready to perform. In writing, you have the leisure of composition over a sustained period of time. If you are not in the mood for writing or have no energy or inspiration on any particular day, you can postpone the act of writing until conditions are more propitious.

As storyteller, you have no such luxury. Storytelling is a performance art, and you must be ready to deliver your peak performance at the appointed hour, without misstatements, errors, omissions, or unintended effects.

When you open your mouth, make sure you are ready to speak—that you are fully there for the audience. You may be suffering from all sorts of worries, tensions, and difficulties. Nevertheless, now is the time to put these out of your mind and make yourself totally available for the audience. If you are there for them, they will be there for you.

If necessary, pause a moment and collect your thoughts. If you're not feeling calm and relaxed, take a few deep breaths before you start to speak. There's no need to rush. An opening pause can be a dramatic focusing of the audience's attention on what you are going to say.

Get Out from Behind the Podium

Because you are presenting your story as an individual in a conversation, the more you can arrange the physical setup of the room so as to reflect that of a conversation, the better.

Don't hide behind podiums or microphones or use notes. In fact, get rid of anything between you and the audience. Notes are a huge distraction for the audience, which will take them as a signal that this is

not a conversation but rather a one-way communication. You risk being seen as uninterested in the people you're talking to.

Connect with All Parts of the Audience

Use body movement to show your interest in the entire audience. Don't always talk to the same part of the audience. Move toward the audience so as to show your eagerness to speak to everyone.

Keep an open body stance, evincing your willingness to be open with the audience. Maintain direct eye contact so as to get attention and facilitate interaction.

Use Gesture

Appropriate gestures can emphasize key elements of your story as well as demonstrate that you believe the story—not just in your mind but with your whole body.

Your gestures should be natural and flowing and communicate your pleasure in speaking to this audience at this time. Avoid abrupt facial expressions or jerky gestures, which reflect lack of composure and a sense of unease in speaking to the audience. If you as the speaker feel unease, your audience will experience an equal or greater unease.

Be Lively

Since you are the one doing the talking, keep the audience's interest. It is through reliving the story that you are telling that will stimulate the audience's interest. Vary the pace and tone of your story to keep people alert.

Raise and lower the tone of your voice appropriately. Figure out the parameters of what is permissible in the specific setting. If you're in a board meeting, the parameters might be quite narrow. But if you are in an off-site retreat or conference, you can establish very broad parameters so as to make what you say entertaining. The parameters that are permissible in any context may be wider than you think.

Use Visual Aids Judiciously

It's fashionable to complain about PowerPoint, but that's like complaining about the English language. PowerPoint is an infinitely flexible tool. What people are complaining about is the bad use of PowerPoint. Use it intelligently: to convey images and support your storytelling. PowerPoint can reinforce the story and serve as a prompt to you as the storyteller so that you don't lose the thread.¹⁵

Remember also that human responses to linguistic and visual messages are not gender neutral. On average, women do better with words, and on average, men do better with the visual. These are averages, and of course there are vast numbers of individual exceptions. But the bell curves of men and women don't overlap exactly.¹⁶ So if you want to increase your chances of reaching everyone in the audience, use both words and images.

Making your slides available electronically to your audience—for example, on the Web or an intranet—at the time of the presentation can be an effective way of disseminating the story. Thus, if listeners like the presentation, they can use the downloaded PowerPoint slides to retell the story to their own teams and communities. In this way, a lively presentation can cascade rapidly through a large organization just like a juicy rumor.

Be Comfortable in Your Own Style

You can present any story in many different ways, but you must feel comfortable in the particular style that you have chosen. You may prefer to sit down rather than stand up. You may prefer to use visual aids or avoid them. These are choices that you make, conscious of the costs and benefits of each. For instance, if you decide to talk sitting down rather than standing up, you may be less mobile in terms of holding yourself accessible to all the members of the audience in different parts of the room, but you may gain the benefit of seeming more approachable and collaborative. And if you decide to forgo visual aids, you may concentrate attention on yourself as the storyteller, but you risk having a less powerful

impact on listeners whose preferred learning style entails the reception of visual images.

These are the trade-offs. In the end, choose a style that is suitable for you. Once you are at ease with your own style of telling the story, the audience will be at ease with you.

Know Your Audience

The more you know about the audience, the better. Mingle with them and find out what makes them tick, what their hopes and fears are, what their current priorities are as opposed to yesterday's news. This information is vital to making your presentation sound fresh and up-to-date.

One key area to focus on is the audience's interests: What's in it for them? How do they stand to gain or lose? When as a leader you come to make a proposal for change, many in the audience will be asking themselves, *What does it mean for me?* It is therefore crucial to tell a story that draws attention to benefits in terms of interests, roles, and goals for the audience and is frank about risks. The audience will want to know what role they are going to play in the change process and how it will affect them. And perhaps the most important question is, What's the audience's story? What's the larger story in which they see themselves living?

In any audience, you will need to take account of the propensities of listeners to certain approaches. Some listeners may prefer numerical results, detailed reasoning, and evidence of what has worked in the past, while others may be more interested in getting the sense of the idea. Some may be attracted to what is new and different, while others may be more concerned about risk.¹⁷

Robert Nisbett has also suggested the presence of geographical differences between audiences, with East Asians (a term that Nisbett uses as a catch-all for Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and others) being measurably more holistic in their perceptions (taking in whole scenes rather than a few stand-out objects), while Westerners (a term Nisbett uses to refer to those brought up in Northern European and Anglo-Saxon-descended cultures) tend to have a "tunnel-vision perceptual style" that

focuses much more on identifying what's prominent in certain scenes and remembering that.¹⁸

More striking, however, than the differences between the listeners are the similarities: in all countries and all cultures, stories have a universal appeal.

Connect with Your Audience

You connect with your audience by approaching the task of storytelling interactively and modeling your behavior on the concept of conversation—a dialogue between equals. You proceed on the basis that the relationship between you and your listeners is symmetrical. You talk as if the listeners could take the next turn in the conversation.

In practice, the differences in status or power between the storyteller and the audience may be vast. You may be a boss talking to your subordinates or a subordinate talking to your boss or bosses. You may be someone with great wealth and power talking to people who have neither, or it may be the reverse—you may be a supplicant requesting the rich and powerful to change their ways. As an interactive storyteller, you ignore these differences and talk to your listeners as one human being to another. In this way, you slice through the social and political barriers that separate individuals and humanize the communication.

Nevertheless, if you are presenting bold new ideas that will turn your listeners' working lives upside down, those ideas will come across as profoundly disturbing. The audience may be skeptical or even hostile. How do you tell a story that will ignite their enthusiasm for doing something radically different? It is to this fundamental challenge of leadership that I turn in Chapter Three.

