



Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise

Leaders Know How To Tell A Good Story

Leadership is about *movement* - moving from one place to another, moving from one mind-set to another, or motivation to act in some constructive way. I know of few better ways for leaders to do that than to tell a good story; a well-told story can literally *move* us because it engages our heart and emotions as well as our heads. We all likely know of leaders, historical and contemporary, with tremendous capacity to motivate by telling stories - about the past; present or future. The stories can be about themselves, their organization or community, whomever is listening or others; many of our most revered historical figures and leaders used parables, fables or fictional stories that have moved civilizations for centuries.

We follow leaders that we trust and the greater our trust the farther we follow them. A powerful way to generate trust is to share stories that reflect who we are - where we've been, what we believe and how we came to be who we are. I am more inclined to trust those who share authentic stories about overcoming personal hardships, sacrifice, loss, acting in the face of danger or fear and hard lessons learned than to trust others who simply state "trust me" or imply that I should given our roles.

What is most important for those you lead or want to influence to know about you? What story(ies) can you share that will help them understand that?

Cultures and communities, including organizations, have stories too; their leaders are usually the best keepers and story-tellers of those narratives. Hearing about the origins of an organization, its founders' vision and values, challenges and stories of its "heroes" help remind everyone about what's most important and infuse their work with meaning. Hearing stories about how an organization adapted and overcame adversity can provide the means and spirit to overcome new challenges. Hearing graphic examples of how refusals to accept bribes were costly short-term but led to long-term success makes the importance of ethical business dealings come alive. Hearing the story of an observant and courageous nurse who saved a life by putting patient safety before protocol helps everyone understand that patients really do come first.

What stories can you tell about your organization or community, its history or some of its "heroes" that will clearly convey a message that members need to here?

Knowing each others' stories can build or repair relationships and advance a community's work in powerful ways. For example when I know that a colleague's reluctance to engage in what I see as

"constructive confrontation" stems from immersion in a dysfunctional family or an alcoholic and abusive parent, my view changes. Others knowing that my "stubbornness" and "go-it-alone" nature may reflect needs from early-on to prove myself competent and responsible can lead to better understanding and strengthen relationships.

Think of a meaningful relationship or group that you are part of. What part of your "story" could you share that would likely lead to greater understanding?

I admire the work of an associate and best-selling author (*The View From Delphi*), Jon Odell, who masterfully helps leaders and community members use the power of their stories to build stronger relationships and communities. I encourage you to visit his web site: <http://www.jon-odell.com/>

We need to not only know good stories, but tell them effectively. In The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, Stephen Denning reminds us that "storytelling is a performance art" (p. 25.) In The Story Factor** Annette Simmons tells us that in a way we already are stories to those we meet (p. 78;) the challenge is whether the story they get is the one we want to convey. Three connections are important for leaders to tell a good story:

- We need to connect with our *stories*. For what we intend, which story(ies) will convey the most meaning?
- We need to connect with our *listeners*. What do they want or need to hear; what will resonate with listeners? What answers, gaps or needed assurances might a story address? How do they need to hear it? What parts of a story, and what ways can I share it, will mean the most to listeners? How can I help listeners see themselves in the story?
- We need to connect with *ourselves*. Technique (voice, posture, timing, etc.) plays a role, but most important for telling a good story is authenticity. Jokes, parables or fairy tales notwithstanding, an authentic story must of course first of all be true. We also need to be clear about the story's meaning for ourselves; if it doesn't have personal meaning and doesn't move us, it won't move anyone else either.

If we're reading the signals today, our communities, organizations and their members seem to collectively be saying: "Tell me a story." They are seeking meaning, models, connection, inspiration and reminders of what's important. What story will you tell?

* Denning, Stephen. The Leader's Guide to Storytelling; Jossey-Bass, New York, NY. 2005 (Available at [inTEgro's Bookstore](#))

** Simmons, Annette. The Story Factor; Basic Books, Cambridge, MA. 2006 (Available at [inTEgro's Bookstore](#))

"Stories tell us of what we already knew and forgot, and remind us of what we haven't yet imagined."

-Anne Watson

"There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories."

-Ursula K. LeGuin

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AI Watts
inTEgro, Inc.
www.integro-inc.com
ph: (612) 827-2363