



Photograph by Brad Wilson

Once Upon a Time

When a meeting of the minds isn't enough, try a meeting of the emotions: Tell a story.

Knowledge Review by Bill Birchard

A company president faced a familiar dispute between his design engineers and business managers: Should the lion's share of engineering money go into new product design or into current product support? The design engineers were keen on getting cash to invent the next new thing. The business managers wanted money to support existing products. The president wrestled with how to tell the engineers he preferred channeling most money to current products. How could he effectively communicate that message?

It's real-life business. And it's just the kind of conundrum Annette Simmons tackles in her book *The Story Factor: Secrets of Influence from the Art of Storytelling*. Ms. Simmons argues that stories help managers deliver direction, information, and inspiration to their colleagues more powerfully than a pure logical argument. That's a special power to have in a world where managing change and innovation are central to business success.

In the case of the company president, an appeal to reason would not have worked, Ms. Simmons says. Design engineers could

Bill Birchard

(bbirchard@aol.com) is a writer in Amherst, N.H., whose work has appeared in *Fast Company*, *CFO*, and other publications. He is coauthor, with David A. Nichol, M.D., of *The One-Minute Mediator: Relieving Stress and Finding Meaning in Everyday Life* (Perseus Publishing, 2001) and, with Marc J. Epstein, of *Counting What Counts: Turning Corporate Accountability to Competitive Advantage* (Perseus Publishing, 1999).

have responded with charts and statistics advocating their side. Nor would issuing a directive have won the day. The designers, as sophisticated knowledge workers, would have found subtle ways to resist.

To get past this behavior, the president knew he had to play partly to his designers' imaginations and emotions. So he told them the briefest of stories: "The early bird gets the worm, but something that is just as true — and people don't talk about as much — is that the second mouse gets the cheese!"

"The first mouse gets his head squished," he added. "I don't want to be the first mouse. I want to be the second. I want our company to be smart about where we put our resources. Let someone else be first; second is where the money is."

With an image of rodent road-kill, he got his point across in a colorful, amusing, right-brain way. As Ms. Simmons writes, influencing people through scientific analysis is a "push" strategy. It requires the speaker to convince the listener through cold, hard facts. That sets up an antagonistic conversation. Storytelling is a "pull" strategy, coaxing listeners — disarming them, even — into imagining outcomes toward

which facts would not lead them.

Stories, which may embellish or emphasize a certain point of view, are central for making sense of the world around us. Authors like Annette Simmons note that people are raised on stories and see their lives as an ongoing story. As Robert Fulford, author of *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture*, says, "To discover we have no story is to acknowledge that our existence is meaningless, which we may find unbearable."

That's not to reject the value in facts, of course, but simply to recognize their limits in influencing people. Compared to facts, stories often better convey meaning, better create sense out of chaotic experience, better establish rapport among the speaker and listeners. Stories flick a switch in adults that can bring them back to a childlike open-mindedness — and make them less resistant to experimentation and change. Witness the success of Spencer Johnson's *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life*. The messages in the book about the pain of change aren't new. It's how the story is told that keeps this simple book on the bestseller

list four years after its publication.

Stephen Denning, author of *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* and the head of knowledge management at the World Bank, maintains that stories engage listeners as participants, rather than spectators. The story invites them to join the experience, and to grow from it. Mr. Denning argues that listeners co-create the story. They actually visualize themselves acting on the mental stage the storyteller has set up.

In business, stories are useful in many kinds of communication — to explain, inspire, educate, train, convince, schmooze, mentor, and, obviously, entertain. Stories used in a business context are perhaps most widely thought of as a means to sustain company cultures. Hero stories abound in corporations, for example, stressing integrity in the face of an ethical dilemma; extraordinary service that delights and surprises the customer; and empathy and kindness extended to employees by their leaders.

Peg C. Neuhauser, author of *Corporate Legends & Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool*, tells the story of the hospital CEO who visited shivering steelworkers who were erecting an addition to the hospital in the middle of winter. He took pity on their discomfort and installed free coffee and hot-chocolate vending machines at the outdoor work site. In so doing, the CEO reinforced the caring culture he nurtured inside the hospital. Ms. Neuhauser says such stories become part of the "sacred bundle" of tales that guide employees in how to act toward customers, vendors, and each other.

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Yiannis Gabriel, author of *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies*, suggests the power of culture-reinforcing tales. One of his stories goes like this: A new CEO has just joined a struggling corporation. Right before meeting with his vice presidents, he uproots a sign in the parking lot that reads “reserved for the CEO.” He throws it on the table at the meeting and asks who put up the sign — and all the other signs reserving spots for the VPs. “This is not the kind of leadership I will have around here,” he says. By week’s end, he fires the offending executive.

Perhaps the most powerful role of stories today is to ignite and drive changes in management policy and practices. Mr. Denning describes his use of stories — imaginative anecdotes, really — to change his organization from being solely a lender of money to also offering its expertise in project implementation. The World Bank’s clients, the poor nations of the world, need more than loans these days; they need knowledge about how to use those loans wisely. To help staff visualize what it means to provide implementation knowl-

edge to clients, Mr. Denning relied on what he calls “springboard stories” — “sketchy vignettes that suggested a new vision and set of values for future client service.”

Mr. Denning’s goal was ambitious. He wanted the anecdotes he told to stir fresh ideas among the staff about how, placed in analogous situations, they would triumph over problems similar to those described in the stories. Yet Mr. Denning says the story he used in 1996 to launch his change effort was based on the slimmest material. It didn’t even come from the World Bank. A colleague told Mr. Denning how a health worker in Kamana, Zambia, was struggling to find a solution for treating malaria. In this tiny and remote rural town, the health worker logged on to the Web site of the U.S.’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and got an answer.

“This true story happened, not, as if in a fantasy, in 2015, but in June 1995,” Mr. Denning recounted. “This is not a rich country: It is Zambia, one of the least developed countries in the world. But the most striking aspect of the picture is this: [The World Bank] doesn’t have its know-how and expertise organized so that someone like the health

worker in Zambia can have access to it. But just imagine if it did!”

Mr. Denning knew he didn’t have to spell out his entire message. World Bank employees, who work in the most impoverished locales on earth, could picture themselves elbow to elbow with poor professionals like that health worker. They knew what it was like to be asked a question by a local worker and not be able to give the kind of answers expected from a World Bank employee. By helping employees paint this scene in their minds, Mr. Denning made them realize that the status quo was untenable, which encouraged them to take action.

Even when the listeners are adults, all they have to hear are words akin to “once upon a time,” and the judgmental doors of their left brains tend to swing closed. The doors of their right brains — always eager to hear life turned into a story — swing open.

Consider this fable: Once upon a time there was a crow. She was a hot, thirsty crow, and she soared from east to west and north to south in search of water. After many hours, she spied a pitcher full of water in a gravel courtyard. But, alas, the neck of the pitcher was too

narrow for her to insert her beak. What could she do? As her black feathers baked in the sun, inspiration struck. She picked up a bunch of stones from the courtyard, and tossed them, one by one, into the pitcher. As the water rose to the rim of the pitcher, she could drink.

This Aesop fable has a moral: Necessity is the mother of invention. But the moral, however relevant, is not what's most notable to a student of storytelling. What's remarkable is that when listeners hear the start of such a story — whether fable, personal remembrance, or corporate myth — they implicitly agree to a certain set of rules as an audience. Rather than judge the veracity of each fact presented, as they would in a traditional analytical presentation, they tend to let the facts slide (what would be the point of arguing over the reasoning powers of a crow?).

As Yiannis Gabriel says, stories coax listeners into colluding with the storyteller to find meaning, no matter how fantastic or fanciful the story may sound. Squished mice? Thirsty crows? No matter. Stories quiet the nettlesome nit-picking of left-brain thinking and stimulate people's creativity.

You may wonder, if you don't fancy yourself a storyteller, just where do you come up with relevant stories to tell in a corporation? Don't get the impression that most of your tales should come from Aesop or from other fiction. Most come from your own experience. From childhood. From college. From work. From military experience.

Professor Gabriel recalls a story from a naval training camp. Recruits were standing for inspec-

Storytelling Resources

Works mentioned in this review.

Stanley Bing, *Throwing the Elephant: Zen and the Art of Managing Up* (HarperCollins Publishers, HarperBusiness, 2002), 240 pages, \$20.95.

Stephen Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000), 192 pages, \$24.99.

Robert Fulford, *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture* (Broadway Books, 2001), 158 pages, \$11.95.

Yiannis Gabriel, *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 266 pages, \$24.95.

Spencer Johnson, *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life* (Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998), 94 pages, \$19.95.

Doug Lipman, *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work or Play* (August House, 1999), 219 pages, \$14.95.

Jack Maguire, *The Power of Personal Storytelling: Spinning Tales to Connect with Others* (Penguin Putnam Inc./Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1998), 253 pages, \$16.95.

Bill Mooney and David Holt, *The Storyteller's Guide: Storytellers Share Advice for the Classroom, Boardroom, Showroom, Podium, Pulpit and Central Stage* (August House, 1996), 208 pages, \$23.95.

Peg C. Neuhauser, *Corporate Legends & Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool* (McGraw-Hill, 1993), 161 pages, \$18.

Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Secrets of Influence from the Art of Storytelling* (Perseus Publishing, 2000), 272 pages, \$25.

tion before receiving furloughs. They shifted nervously. The commanding officer could cancel their furlough for the least reason. On one occasion, so the recruits said, the officer had asked them to lower their trousers while standing to be inspected. He then canceled every-

one's leave — because the men were wearing a motley selection of briefs rather than the official Navy-issued white boxers.

If you were to recall a similar humorous memory, you could use it, for example, to illustrate the kind of controlling behavior you abhor.

Or you could use a story to show humanness, or even to suggest vulnerability. Alternatively, you could share stories from master management storytellers like Stanley Bing. Mr. Bing, a columnist at *Fortune* magazine (and the nom de plume for Gil Schwartz, a senior CBS executive), is known for mercilessly using edgy humor to expose management truths. His latest book, *Throwing the Elephant: Zen and the Art of Managing Up*, gives self-help advice about managing your boss by telling stories through the eyes of a modern-day Buddah. Mr. Bing uses an elephant as a metaphor for a boss. One tip: “If the elephant can see what you’re doing in its rearview mirror, you are too close.”

You may think that you can’t possibly bring stories into your speeches and conversations, or that you can’t remember anything worth telling. But professional storyteller Jack Maguire, author of *The Power of Personal Storytelling: Spinning Tales to Connect with Others*, documents a variety of means to dredge up, and liven up, such memories. Mr. Maguire suggests listing “story triggers” on a sheet of paper, and then seeing what they conjure up.

One set of story triggers is sim-

ply a set of emotions — pride, anger, fearlessness, joy, masterfulness, amazement. When you feel a particular emotion, what emerges in your memory? Another inspiration is to think backward through five-year phases of your life — 40 to 35, 35 to 30, 30 to 25, etc. Still another is to draw a “lifeline.” On a vertical line, mark branches off each side, like a tree. The branches on one side are choices made and actions pursued (quitting a job, giving a speech). The branches on the other are choices deferred and actions not taken (not quitting a job, not giving a speech). The lifeline depicts the crossroads in your life, which invariably brim with personal drama.

In getting the most out of stories, storyteller Doug Lipman, author of *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work or Play*, advises storytellers to first identify the “Most Important Thing” (or MIT) in the story. That is, what’s so important about the story? Is it about egalitarianism? About decisiveness? About the firm’s willingness to clean out deadwood?

To find the MIT, Mr. Lipman counsels storytellers to ask, “What do you love about this story?” He stresses that an effective telling depends on not letting subthemes muddy the tale’s meaning. The MIT, he says, drives the story’s direction in the same way a strategy drives the direction of a business.

Mr. Maguire says we instinctively follow a four-step dramatic pattern to shape our stories: We find a protagonist with a situation or problem, depict a change that creates drama (a decision, an outside development), highlight a turning point in the drama (crisis, conflict), and describe the aftermath.

You can find all four steps in the story about the CEO who removed the reserved-parking signs and then dismissed the executive who had them installed. Here, the four-step formula gives the story a satisfying sense of closure. But a “story” could simply be an analogy, a joke, or a behavioral snapshot. Fragments of stories spur listeners’ imaginations in the same way.

Storytellers engage people’s imaginations and emotions best when they are working face to face, using voice, gestures, and body language to convey the emotional weight that grabs listeners. Many stories, especially organizational ones, sound flat on paper. That’s why most books on storytelling include several chapters on delivery. *The Storyteller’s Guide: Storytellers Share Advice for the Classroom, Boardroom, Showroom, Podium, Pulpit and Central Stage*, by Bill Mooney and David Holt, features interviews with seasoned storytellers to get at a broad array of insight.

Professional storytellers rarely learn stories by rote. Yes, they do memorize key turns of phrase. But as the storyteller Doug Lipman says, they always have to be “thinking in the present” — making decisions from moment to moment on everything from voice to word choice. Or, as another storyteller reminds us, you can find the secret to live delivery on the back of a sweepstakes ticket: “You have to be present to win.”

No doubt the company president was “present” when he told his story about the mouse. If he hadn’t been, the image and meaning of squished heads — and squashed profits — wouldn’t have sunk in. +

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