
RITA'S CORNER

Communicating through storytelling

Posted by Chad O'Connor

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Rita's Career Corner ...With Rita B. Allen

Storytelling is the most compelling way to communicate an event and specifically its results or impact. Whenever I conduct presentations or workshops, I always use storytelling as a way to get my point across - and inevitably the moment I begin a story, you can hear a pin drop in the room. It's a sure way to get and keep people's attention rather than citing a multitude of facts, figures and details. Think of the people you listen to more readily - are they able to capture your undivided attention due to the storytelling nature of their communications?

I think Ken Kesey, author best known for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* says it best (let me say in advance, excuse the French!) - "To hell with facts! We need stories!"

Whether you are a leader trying to inspire and motivate others or a professional at any level aspiring to pursue your goals within or outside of your organization, the best way to influence others and talk about your accomplishments is through storytelling. The key is in capturing the essence of any event and turning it into a story. We may think of it as an art but in reality, there are three easy steps in crafting and communicating your story.

Three Easy Steps of Storytelling:

1. Describe the situation - set the stage by identifying the issue at hand
2. Actions taken - outline the specific actions you took to address the issue
3. Results - explain the ultimate impact and outcomes achieved

We all want to make a difference and not only communicate more effectively but to be able to influence others in a way that yields results. Practicing the art of storytelling builds leadership capabilities by emphasizing your value-add while engaging others to follow your lead.

- Articulating your vision, strategy and actions by way of stories is memorable and allows your listeners to be able to truly relate to you more effectively and intimately.
- Crafting your story is half the equation and the other half is delivering your story.
- Do you deliver with passion, enthusiasm and expression? We've all been told the following phrase at one point or another, "it wasn't what you said but how you said it" that made all the difference and can have either negative or positive consequences.

One of my favorite successful businesswomen is Barbara Corcoran, the real estate guru in New York City, who is also an author, entrepreneur, television personality and motivational speaker. One of the books she has authored along with Bruce Littlefield, "Use What You've Got...& Other Business Lessons I Learned from My Mom", exemplifies the art of communicating through storytelling. She offers what amounts to a sales manual through life lessons she learned from her mom growing up in a family with ten children! It's humorous, memorable and substantive - an easy read that leaves you with effective tools, strategies and tips.

Other books that will help in building this important skill include:

- "The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative" by Stephen Denning
- "Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work and Play" by Doug Lipman
- "Power, Influence and Persuasion: Sell Your Ideas and Make Things Happen" by Harvard Business School Press

Some of the most successful leaders have left their mark with their stories. They may have created and built successful businesses, discovered cures for diseases, led our country during difficult trials and tribulations or brought joy and happiness into the lives of others. When we remember incredible people who have influenced others and/or accomplished great things, their legacy is left through the stories told about how they did so - the situation at hand, actions they took, and results they achieved.

Every day, at work, home or play, we encounter and experience these stories. How well do we exchange these stories when we replay the events of our day to others? The truth is we don't have to wait to leave our legacy to tell great stories! Every day we have opportunities to relay our accomplishments through the art of storytelling. Practicing this skill will yield strong results in our ability to influence others and leave lasting impressions.

Anyone who has children appreciates how impactful it is when you try to make a point to your kids through your own childhood stories. We can preach the dos and don'ts of life or tell them a story about a time when we learned a lesson the hard way especially when it was through a difficult experience! The same can be said about the workplace. We will be more successful communicating with our colleagues, peers, team members and managers when we articulate our message with a clear road map via storytelling.

Most importantly, a great story is only great when it is delivered with authenticity - keep it real, be sincere and genuine in order to build and earn trust!

What are some of your favorite stories that you have heard from individuals about themselves, their organizations and/or challenges and successes OR that you have told about your own accomplishments and/or aspirations? Please be sure to share them with me and others. As you do so, practice the art of storytelling in your daily communications as you carry out your role and influence people every day to achieve your goals and objectives.

Ask Rita...

Question: I am getting ready to interview for a new position within my organization and would like to further develop my ability to talk about my accomplishments. How can I sell my experiences in a way that I'm comfortable discussing while making sure I really stand out?

Answer: I'm sure you have heard this many times throughout your lifetime, first and foremost, be yourself. Do not try to 'sell' yourself but shift your mindset to one of telling a story. Think of all of your contributions, experiences and accomplishments as different chapters of your story. Depending on the skills and background necessary for the position you are applying, focus on the chapters that are most relevant and then the specific stories that will showcase your talents and achievements the best for that position. Keep it real, show your passion and tell your story! Good luck!

Rita Balian Allen is the President of Rita B. Allen Associates, a provider of career management/talent management consulting and executive coaching services located in Waltham and the President of ACPI – NE (Association of Career Professionals International – New England).

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