

Editors' Choice Article

# Business Storytelling

How to Make Objective Decisions

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How many times have you been enthralled by a good story?

Maybe you stayed up late to read a novel that you couldn't put down, or watched a movie that you couldn't switch off? Perhaps you pushed yourself harder because you heard a story about a colleague's success, or you changed your opinion after reading a distressing story in a newspaper?



*Learn how to tell stories that will help you sell products, build trust, or inspire your team.*  
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Stories can change the way we think, act, and feel. They can form the foundations of an entire workplace culture, and they have the power to break down barriers and turn bad situations around. Stories can capture our imaginations, illustrate our ideas, arouse our passions, and inspire us in a way that cold, hard facts often can't.

Stories can be powerful business tools, and successful leaders use them to engage their teams. So, if you want to motivate others effectively, you need to learn how to tell a good story.

In this article, we'll look at business storytelling - we'll explore when you should use stories, and we'll think about what kind of story you should tell to get the results you want.

## **What is Business Storytelling?**

People tell business stories to communicate and connect with employees, customers, colleagues, partners, suppliers, and the media. Business stories differ from regular stories, in that you tell them with an objective, goal, or desired outcome in mind, rather than for entertainment.

When you tell a story well, it can create an intense, personal connection between your audience and your message. Effective stories can change our opinions, they can inspire us to achieve goals that we didn't think were possible, and they can show us how we can change things for the better.

## When to use Stories

You can use stories to achieve a number of different goals. For example:

- Sundar has just started leading a new team. His team members see him as an outsider, and they don't trust him. He tells several stories about his past leadership roles, and explains why he's enthusiastic about this new position. He also discloses personal information, such as where he grew up and what hobbies he enjoys. His honesty helps his new team to see him as a real person, not as a stranger, and they begin to open up and trust him.
- Amy, a sales rep, meets with a potential client who knows little about what her organization offers. She tells a story about how one of her products helped reduce another client's supply costs by 20 percent. The new client is impressed with the product's effectiveness, and places his first order.
- Elsa asks her team members to attend a workplace safety class, but they're not convinced that this is a good use of their time. She recounts a story from a recent trade journal about an employee at a rival organization who was badly injured using the same machinery that her team members use. The story convinces Elsa's team that the safety class could help prevent injuries.

## Types of Stories

In her book "Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins," author Annette Simmons identifies six structures that you can use to tell business stories. Let's look at each one below.

### 1. "Who-I-Am" Stories

These stories explain who you are as a person. They tell others about your dreams, goals, accomplishments, failures, motivations, values, or history.

"Who-I-am" stories are essential to build trust. Tell these stories when you join a new team, or when you need to establish a connection with a stranger.

### 2. "Why-I-Am-Here" Stories

"Why-I-am-here" stories communicate why you're here, and their aim is to replace suspicion with trust. People want to know, "What's in it for me?" but they also want to know, "What's in it for you?" These stories explain that you don't have a hidden agenda, and that you'll both get something fair out of the situation.

For example, people may be asking themselves if you are passionate about what you do, or are you financially motivated? And are you here for the right or wrong reasons?

You can use "why-I-am-here" stories in fundraising, sales, and situations when you need to

build trust quickly, or where you want to reassure someone that you're on a level playing field.

### **3. Teaching Stories**

Teaching stories create an experience that transforms listeners or readers. They show how a change in their behavior, perspective, or skills can lead to meaningful results.

You can also use teaching stories to illustrate a situation, such as a best- or worst-case scenario.

### **4. Vision Stories**

Vision stories inspire people, and encourage them to feel hope or happiness. Here, you convince your audience that their hard work and sacrifice is worth the effort. You need to link their actions to a specific, valuable, and worthy outcome.

Use vision stories when you need to motivate people to change their behavior. They can inspire people to overcome the frustrations, obstacles, and challenges that come with change, so that they can achieve a worthwhile goal or ideal.

### **5. Values-in-Action Stories**

Values-in-action stories reinforce the values that you want your audience to demonstrate or think about. These stories can be positive or negative. For example, you can tell stories that demonstrate integrity, compassion, and commitment, or tell ones that highlight attitudes that you don't want to see - for example, cynicism, a slapdash approach to quality, or a weak work ethic.

### **6. "I-Know-What-You-Are-Thinking" Stories**

"I-know-what-you-are-thinking" stories allow you to address others' objections, suspicions, questions, or concerns before they voice them. With these stories, you need to anticipate your audience's point of view, so you choose a story that deals with their unspoken concerns.

When you tell this type of story, you validate the audience's perspective or worries. This allows them to feel that you're on their side, and that you identify with their emotions. These kinds of stories are valuable in sales, negotiations, or pitches to key stakeholders.

From "Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact" by Annette Simmons. © 2007 Annette Simmons. All rights reserved. Published by AMACOM Books. [www.amacombooks.org](http://www.amacombooks.org).

### **How to Tell a Persuasive Story**

A good story is like a recipe - certain "ingredients" need to be part of the mix for it to be a success. All great stories have three essential elements: context, action, and result.

In your story, your main character must "do" something. Ideally, he or she will experience a setback, failure, or problem along the way. Obstacles create tension and forge an important connection with your audience, because everyone experiences them daily.

*Example:*

Tony continues, "All of you know how stubborn I am, so I tried to go it alone. But I started to lose clients because I couldn't keep my promises. I didn't have time to bid for work, so my competitors got ahead, and I lost even more clients. This put enormous pressure on my family because I was never home. I knew that if things continued this way, the company would go under in a matter of months, and that I might lose my family. I needed help."

### **Result**

At the end of your story, you reveal your main character's fate. You also need to explain, subtly, what the audience should have learned from this result. What is the moral? Why did you tell this story?

*Example:*

Tony wraps up his story.

"Once I realized I had to ask for help, I did. I put some major projects on hold, and started to look for great people to help me. I handpicked each of you because you're the best at what you do. You have the skills, knowledge, and experience that I lacked."

"This company is the success it is because of all of you. Every company has its ups and downs, just like I did when I first started this business. But I believe in all of you, and I believe that we will turn this problem around next month. So, let's focus on the future, and think about how we can help one-another succeed."

### **Tips**

Great storytellers know that a powerful story is only part of what inspires people to listen. Follow the tips below to become a better storyteller.

- **Listen** - The best storytellers are also the best listeners. Brush up on your active listening skills, and give others your full attention when they tell a story.
- **Practice** - Rehearse your story before you tell it. Even if you practice on your own, just once, in front of a mirror or video camera, this can improve your storytelling.
- **Create an experience** - When you tell a story, you create an experience for your listeners. Appeal to all five senses; don't just tell them.

## Key Points

Business storytelling is the art of using stories to communicate and connect with employees, customers, suppliers, partners, and anyone else involved with your organization. The purpose of business stories isn't entertainment. Rather, they have a specific goal or desired outcome.

To tell a great business story, it's important to be authentic. Use stories that tell other people more about who you are, and why you're here. And, don't be too afraid to tell stories that show failure, poor judgment, or mistakes on your part. When you're prepared to appear vulnerable in front of others, you can quickly establish trust and rapport.

[References](#)

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## A Final Note

It's important to be able to inspire people. When you do this well, you connect with people in a way that motivates and builds trust. You'll change the way that people think, you'll encourage people to take action, and you'll boost your confidence.

Next week, we look at how you can avoid key "diseases of management".

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James".

James Manktelow

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## References

Smith, P. (2012). ['Lead with a Story,'](#) New York: AMACOM.

Simmons, A. (2007). 'Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins,' New York: AMACOM.