

# Engaging and Forging Bonds With Employees Through Storytelling

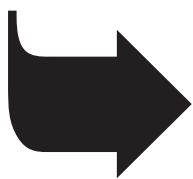
By Matt West

**A**n engaged workforce is the holy grail of every organization. Employees who understand where their company wants to go and who willingly perform their best to get there are the most valuable source of competitive advantage. And yet, how often do we, as leaders and communicators, rely on cold research, hard data and dry content in the hopes of engaging employees and persuading them to take action?

True engagement requires an emotional connection. Employees want to feel that they're a part of something. They need purpose, personality and perspective. And while there's a time and a place for facts and figures, there's also a need for personalized communication that resonates and connects on a deeper level.

## The Art of Storytelling

When used effectively, stories do just that by delivering an emotional context that goes beyond logical analysis. Where facts simply deliver content, stories change attitudes and behavior. And in the workplace, great storytelling can capture employees' attention, illustrate difficult or abstract concepts and convey meaning in a personal, powerful way.



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Take core values, for example. It's one thing to tell employees that one of your values is integrity. It's another to tell the story of Dale, a 14-year veteran in your Texas plant who happened upon a shipping discrepancy and immediately took steps to

correct it, saving the supplier hundreds of thousands of dollars and strengthening a significant business relationship in return. Putting a face to the value takes it from being just a word to something that's true to life and relatable.

By its very nature, storytelling is an art. Reducing it to a science would be like painting by numbers: soulless and systematic. But how you use stories within your organization can be a planned, strategic effort. It requires recognizing the characteristics of great stories, finding the best ones and sharing them to their greatest benefit.

## The 5 C's of a Great Story

There are many types of stories. And every story is unique. But the ones that work best for engaging employees share five characteristics.

- ▶ **A Clear Objective** — The kind of story you tell and how you tell it depends on your purpose. What do you hope to accomplish? Although listeners will interpret stories differently based on their personal circumstances, it's best to have a clear objective and craft your story accordingly.
- ▶ **Sympathetic Characters** — Great stories include individuals who are believable and widely relatable. Stories should be framed so that employees can see themselves in the situation and reflect on how they would react.
- ▶ **Context** — While we often forget points on a slide or data in a speech, we remember sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures, even if they are only imagined. An effective story provides just enough specifics to ignite imagination and familiarity.

## Using Stories in Speeches

Storytelling is as much about the delivery as the story itself. Whether you're writing a speech for someone else or preparing your own, keep these tips in mind:

- **Keep it simple:** Most great stories are simple and don't require a lot of detail or scene setting. You should only use supporting media, such as pictures, slides or objects, if they will provide context and connection but will not distract from your objective.
- **Be authentic:** You must be genuine and emotionally connected with the content. Your everyday actions must be consistent with the lesson or moral of the story. If you are not naturally a funny person, for example, don't try to be.
- **Show passion:** Storytellers must show passion and personality, acting as if they are speaking with one person. If the story is your own, try "re-living" and telling your audience what you are seeing and feeling as you experience it again. If you're using a story from another source, make sure it means something to you personally.
- **Mind your expressions and gestures:** Make sure your body language is consistent with the tone of your story. If you're smiling as you explain an especially difficult conflict, you may seem too disconnected to be credible.
- **Be prepared but spontaneous:** If you are under-rehearsed, you run the risk of going off on a tangent or missing the objective; if you are over-rehearsed, you run the risk of seeming "canned" and insincere. Effective storytellers find the right balance between structure and spontaneity. Make sure you've outlined the main points you need to explain, but don't follow a word-for-word script.

- ▶ **Conflict** — An essential ingredient to a great story is the contrast between a challenge or an obstacle and its resolution. Conflict evokes emotion and stirs reaction. Rather than avoid it, let conflict shape your story and drive your call to action.
- ▶ **Connection** — Great stories help bridge a connection between the actions and behaviors of your employees and your objective. They bring people together by establishing a common ground and providing them with a shared experience.

## Gathering Stories

How do you gather great stories in your organization? They already exist: It's up to you to find them. Here are some tips:

- ▶ **Open call** — One of the most effective ways of gathering stories is simply to ask for them. Tell employees what you're looking for and why. Is it for a larger internal branding initiative? An anniversary celebration? Put the word out, provide a method for submitting stories—an intranet form, for example—and return the favor by recognizing those who contribute.
- ▶ **Research** — Look for opportunities to re-purpose existing stories to meet your needs by sifting through existing information. Read through newsletters archives, annual reports, award announcements, blog posts, etc.
- ▶ **Roving reporter** — Put your journalist cap on and search for story leads through contacts, opinion leaders and other influential individuals. Use employee gatherings and events as opportunities to gather leads.
- ▶ **Structured exercises** — Lead employees through story gathering exercises by providing them with a framework for brainstorming, discovering and capturing stories.
- ▶ **One-on-one interviews** — Sit with all kinds of employees—executives, long-tenured

employees, front-line workers—and let them do the talking. Ask the question, “Tell me about...,” and then give them your undivided attention.

- ▶ **Examples** — If employees are having trouble thinking of stories, prime the pump by telling an example story.

## Sharing Stories

Once you’ve gathered stories, it’s time to tap into their power and bring them to life by sharing them.

- ▶ **Create a series:** Focus on one objective—to encourage safety, for example—then share a number of stories over time that reinforces that objective through the eyes of various employees. A series increases shelf life and broadens your reach. Chances are, while some stories may fall flat, others will resonate and engage.
- ▶ **Liven up one-time communications:** Use stories to add color and emotion to speeches, presentations, meetings, one-on-one conversations, press releases, e-mails, memos, articles, letters, blog entries, posters, etc.

- ▶ **Know your environment:** Effective storytellers consider the setting and the other information that will be shared. A story may not be as effective in a different environment.

- ▶ **Align stories across different channels:** Consider using variations of the same story in different media to create a common and shared voice. An employee might be interested in a brief story told by an executive, and then seek out a longer account in the employee print publication.

Are stories appropriate for every situation? No—sometimes facts are just facts. And if stories are overused, they will lose their impact and become predictable and gimmicky. But when used effectively, storytelling can be one of the most powerful ways to engage, touching the very heart and soul of an organization and its people. **PRN**

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*Matt West is a vice president at Insidedge, an employee communications consultancy whose clients have included Dow, Siemens and Kraft.*