

Storytelling for Leaders: A Proven Management Communication Tool

By Evelyn Clark, *The Corporate Story Teller*

Have you ever been frustrated because your financial presentations, memos, or other messages don't seem to be heard—not to mention heeded? Are you tired of reiterating the same policies and procedures to employees—only to have them fall on deaf ears again and again? Do you wish you could find the key to keeping all your employees moving in the same direction? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, take heart: there is a powerful solution to the problem. The solution is innovative, it's easier to implement than writing a policy manual that gets ignored—and it effectively shapes behavior. It is an approach called corporate storytelling, or “managing by storytelling around”.

As discussed repeatedly in *Harvard Business Review*, the use of storytelling in business is more than a valid concept; it's a proven communication practice. Motivating people to reach the organization's stated goals is “a big part of a CEO's job,” says award-winning Writer, Director, and Screenwriting Coach Robert McKee in his *HBR* interview, as reported in the June 2003 issue. “To do that, he or she must engage their emotions, and the key to their hearts is a story.”

In the article, McKee outlines not only the elements involved in developing an effective story, but also discusses why CEOs need to abandon the intellectual approach to persuading their audiences – Wall Street financiers, employees, and shareholders, to name a few critical supporters – and instead use stories that touch the heart.

Many businesspeople may still think that stories are primarily for children, but a number of large, well-known companies have been using stories as a management communication tool for years. For example, the Disney Corporation not only is adept with storytelling as entertainment, but also uses stories to manage its operations. So do companies such as Nike, Costco Wholesale and FedEx. The reason is simple: people are far more easily drawn to – and pay far more attention to – stories rather than to dry, boring facts and figures.

Human beings are social beings, and we naturally share stories as a means of connecting with one another. And every time you hear someone else's story, you identify with a part of it, a part that connects to your own experiences. As McKee points out in the *HBR* article, stories work because they touch us at an emotional level. Stories captivate our attention, they motivate us – and they stay with us.

Armstrong International is one example of a company that has been using stories to convey corporate values and desired behaviors for years -- since the 1980s, in fact – because the approach has proven to be so effective. Employees know exactly how they are expected to do their jobs – and the company has no policy manuals! Stories have proven to be so effective in conveying what management wants, the CEO has issued four books of stories – and people are always eager to hear new ones. In fact, as soon as a new collection of stories is issued, employees dig into them like the latest best seller. They even take them home to read immediately.

McKee points out in the *HBR* interview that most CEOs are prone to sweeping difficulties and challenges under the rug. But instead, constructing an effective story requires you to position “the problems in the foreground and then show how you've overcome them....” He goes on to say, “I know that the storytelling method works, because after I consulted with a dozen corporations whose principals told exciting stories to Wall Street, they all got their money.”

More and more companies are discovering the power of stories to persuade, to motivate, to convey policies and procedures...to achieve a number of their communication goals. Nike employees know they owe their careers to a track coach and a waffle iron, Costco employees know why salmon filets represent their company's values, and FedEx employees understand that the company's success hinges on delivering the packages on time. What do your stories reveal about your organization's values?

Evelyn Clark, The Corporate Storyteller, has introduced the power of story to thousands of business leaders since 1993. A professional speaker, retreat facilitator and communication consultant, Clark works with executives who want to communicate more effectively and become better leaders. Her book, ***Around the Corporate Campfire: How Great Leaders Use Stories to Inspire Success***, contains the stories of companies such as Nike, Costco Wholesale FedEx and Armstrong International. To purchase the book and learn more about Evelyn Clark's Corporate Storytelling™ system, go to www.corpstory.com.

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