



WHY STORIES ARE IMPORTANT FOR LEADERS



GREEN
INDUSTRY
FOUNDATION



Co-funded by
the European Union

Storytelling is part of the human experience. When people share their stories, listeners naturally focus their attention, engaging with the storyteller's experience. There emerges a connection and synchronicity between the speaker and the listeners. Storytelling is a powerful tool in leaders' communication. Leaders who master the art and discipline of storytelling can communicate who they are and what they represent, connect with stakeholders, enable them to imagine new perspectives, communicate complex messages and initiate action. Stories are also an essential part of effective management discourse. They help to communicate ideas, build values and trust, and convince the hesitant and sceptical. Storytelling is a tool that complements rational, fact-based communication because stories go beyond rationality, appeal to feelings, emotions and shape people's sense-making.

Stories allow leaders to show what they believe in and where they are coming from. Rather than using stories solely as a way to entertain audiences or capture their attention, stories are particularly effective when they portray a leader's identity. According to anthropologist Dorothy Holland and colleagues, „identity is a key means by which people care about what is happening around them and care about it“. When leaders clearly communicate their identity, they can inspire a more authentic connection that goes beyond directives and top-down guidance.

In public speaking, storytelling is about developing a relationship with the audience and about the use of what is personal to communicate universal themes that connect us. For speakers, the ultimate goal of a compelling story should be to express their identity through impactful illustrations. These illustrations should allow the speaker to maintain authenticity, a kind of vulnerability and also to present themselves by describing their choices and the reasons behind them, rather than serving to emotionally manipulate the audience.

At the same time, stories are not always the best choice for communicating certain types of content or may not be the best format for a particular audience. For example, stories may be the ideal choice for an ongoing speech when you need to communicate your values, or an opening anecdote to illustrate why you hold certain beliefs.

For speakers, the goal of a compelling story should ultimately be to express their identity through strong illustrations. On the other hand, if your audience is impatient or more motivated by research, data and direct answers to targeted questions, a different form of communication may be a better choice. So make a conscious decision - don't tell a story just because everyone else is doing it.

When the story effectively comes together, listeners:

- draw conclusions and think about similar experiences in a different way
- question their own assumptions and perceptions about the speaker



- trust the speaker's comments
- will feel motivated to act or become part of a similar cause/goal
- will seek further information on a given topic
- will appreciate the story behind a particular tale and the motivations behind decisions.
- will feel a sense of connection and community around universal themes
- will establish common ground
- will understand that they are not alone in their struggles and journeys

While stories have great power, the speaker's intentions matter. Audiences can recognise when a speaker is using a story to force a connection or pretend to belong. Instead of thinking about what story will be interesting to your audience, first consider what experiences or moments in your life are extremely important to you. Where did you learn an important lesson that continues to influen-



ce your thinking? What struggles have changed you? What turning points have you had in your life? What moments exemplify important parts of your personality?

If you start with authenticity, it will be much easier to create a story that really connects with your audience. In fact, your genuine passion and feelings will be contagious, even if the audience hasn't had the same experience.

In addition to this shift in thinking, developing a relationship with your audience also involves a few technical issues to ensure that the power of your story is not diminished by unclear or unstructured thinking. A few things to bear in mind:

- Stories should be concrete and focus on specific, real moments.



- Provide enough context to be clear: confusion kills the story.
- Adapt your story so that it is based on familiar themes or relies on analogies to what your audience is familiar with.
- Remember that sometimes less is more - you don't have to say everything to make your point. Similarly, be mindful of your total airtime so you don't lose people.
- Get the most important conclusion or moral into their heads. Repetition can be helpful.
- Silence the voices in your head that say no one will care about your story or that it won't be „good enough“. If it is important to you, it is worth sharing the story.

As with any public speaking, stories help speakers to interact with the audience and make a connection around an important idea. Stories are distinguished by their ability to illustrate emotions, inner thoughts, personal experiences, individual values and beliefs, humorous observations and justifications for actions and choices. They play an important role for many purposes, from clarifying information, encouraging action, evoking emotion and even offering escape through entertainment and humour. But most importantly, the stories remind us that every person, regardless of background or circumstances, has a valuable human experience to offer the world.

