

The Power Of Stories In Communication & Management

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The challenges of managing people and processes are mitigated by the power of stories. Communication is the foundation for managing, and stories are one of the best ways to understand the mechanisms of effective communication. Our pursuit of better management practices can be achieved if we learn to listen actively to the stories around us, and if we use these stories to negotiate our differences.

So much has been written about the “art,” and “science,” of management. In our heart of hearts we know there are no ten steps to becoming a better manager. We are guilty of gobbling up whatever latest quick-fix fad is out there while we console ourselves for falling short of finding the holy grail of management. People are not simple. When you put lots of them together with the aim of rallying around an organization’s mission, everyone’s needs, desires, and fears muddy the waters. Complicated theories will not lift the shroud of mystery, but simple principles out of which very complex behaviors emerge are our best hope. Stories are not the unified theory of management but they do offer us some important clues about communication and relationships.

Do you ever feel like you are not heard or understood? It’s no surprise that our relationships at work and at home are often riddled with problems. We do a horrible job of listening to each other. To make matters worse, we do not treat our experiences with circumspection, therefore we fail to garner insights and learning from them. We stumble along oblivious to other people’s perspectives and unaware of what experiences have contributed to the development of the perceptual filters that color each person’s world view. If it were just our own world view we might not care, but this inaccessible, foggy filter also guides the behavior affecting others.

The following short story provides a glimpse of the problems that occur when we become engrossed in our own perceptions:

The Train Story...

Four travelers shared a train compartment: a beautiful young woman, the young woman’s grandmother, a distinguished general, and a young officer. As the train sped along at night, the lights in the compartment suddenly turned off. In the darkness two distinct sounds could be heard from the compartment – the sound of a wet juicy kiss and the sound of a hand slapping the side of a face. When the lights turned back on, the faces of the travelers told a story. The young woman’s face was red from embarrassment. She was mortified to think that the young man had kissed her in the dark. She was very thankful that she was traveling with her grandmother who slapped the young man. The grandmother’s hands were clenched in fists of rage and she was fuming. She could not believe that the general would try to take advantage of her granddaughter, but she was glad she had taught her granddaughter to never let a man touch her without permission. Her granddaughter had done the right thing to slap that dirty old man. The veins in the general’s neck were bulging. He was furious. He had tried to teach the young officer about respect and discipline. The general couldn’t believe that the young whipper-snapper had kissed the beautiful woman who then mistakenly had slapped the general. The young man was grinning from ear to ear. He couldn’t believe his good fortune. How often do you get to kiss a beautiful young woman and slap your boss at the same time?

Everyone is mixed up in this story except for our friend the young officer. Emotions run high and the characters are operating literally and figuratively in the dark. Isn’t this story representative of how we are guilty of acting sometimes? We seldom know the “real story” behind someone’s feelings, beliefs, or actions. Worse yet, we do not make the effort to discover their story. Convinced of our opinions we prefer to keep our mental model of the world neat and

orderly by staying focused on our perspective rather than entertaining another point of view. While these natural proclivities of our mind are assets intended by evolution to equip our species with the ability to act independently and decisively, they are also liabilities when it comes to relationships. When we actively listen to other people's stories we do not need to abandon our ideas; instead we can enter a new frame of reference by reconstituting the story being shared with us in our minds and hearts. Stories allow us to move in and out of a different frame of references. We are in essence, "standing in someone else's shoes."

Management has come to mean control to many people. If we cannot control something or someone how can we manage it? Relationships cannot be controlled. We have to learn how to get in pace with each other, and we have to work at it. Yet managing is all about relationships and relationships depend upon open lines of communications. We cannot enact a policy to ensure people take the time and effort to hear one another. We must model these behaviors and invest a tremendous amount of energy and patience into sustaining these fragile conduits. Stories turn out to be a great tool to do this.

Hearing someone else's story may not change our perspective but it opens up dialogue and increases the chance of a mutually satisfying resolution. While we may not become expert listeners overnight, stories help us understand another's perspective because they require active listening. Stories catapult our imaginations into new directions. Many of our habitual ways of looking at things can be altered by a story's capacity to engage us. Our connection to others and our understanding of their perspectives is deepened by a story's ability to inform us in ways that words by themselves cannot do.

I was introduced to the concept of "active listening" by my father, Theodore, who is a conductor and composer. I love sitting by his side while he pores over an orchestra score. Of course, to me the notes on the page are little more than an abstraction. But to my father, they are a rich sea of sound and emotion. With his eyes, Theodore "hears" all of the instruments playing the music perfectly. He is quick to remind me that Beethoven wrote his Ninth Symphony when he was deaf. Theodore insists that not even the greatest recording of the Ninth Symphony can come close to what Beethoven must have heard in his head.

I remember watching my father conduct orchestra rehearsals. He begins his first rehearsal with any orchestra by saying, "If I cannot speak to you with this baton, we're both in trouble!" And while my father said very little, he communicated a lot, and he listened intently. Even during the loudest section of music, when all of the instruments are playing *forte*, my father can isolate the sound of one violinist playing the wrong sharp or flat. Communicating with one another would be a lot easier if we all had such exceptional listening skills.

Before we move away from music, take a moment to consider why the same piece of music evokes different emotions in different people. Could it be that the emotive power of music is tied to people's memories, stories, and the associations they make? In this respect, stories and music are very similar. I am reminded of the wonderful cliché:

"A wise old owl, lived in an oak; the more he saw, the less he spoke; the less he spoke, the more he heard. Why can't we all be, like that wise old bird."

Stories have multiple threads. Stories do not grow old. However, our imagination grows lazy. We need to challenge ourselves. Is it possible for us to find a new nugget of gold each time we hear or relay a story? Can we find an unturned rock, a new nuance? To do so, we must develop the capacity for active listening.

What we need is less doing and more listening. But the amount of each is a hard thing to quantify. The results are undeniable but they somehow evade direct observation. Like a tree that changes color in the fall and loses its leaves in winter, the transformations are imperceptible on a daily basis but when viewed from a seasonal perspective the results are staggering. Managing through stories built on the functional requirement of active listening is like our analogy of a tree.

Managing is an art of bringing our attention into the moment. Like the wise old owl, the more we strive to hear people’s stories the more we will be able to manage by not managing. Put another way, as we listen to each other’s stories it becomes possible to negotiate differences. More often than not, our conflicts are a function of not hearing and understanding one another. Spontaneous solutions and resolutions arise when we enter someone else’s frame of reference. Sharing our stories generates vivid pictures for others because when we listen actively we bring our experiences to their telling. Therefore, a bridge of understanding is constructed between two or more people. Our greatest challenge as a manager is to create an environment of genuine interest, trust, openness, and reciprocity where people willingly share their stories.

More Traditional Forms of Communication	Story-Based Communications
<u>Explicit</u> – information is presented in a direct, precise and clear manner.	<u>Implicit</u> – information is encoded in packets of compelling and memorable nuggets.
<u>Logical</u> – information is organized in an easy to follow linear fashion.	<u>Evocative</u> – information is more emotional in nature and lends itself to less structured types of presentations (including non-linear threads that can be followed and navigated based on people’s needs and interests).
<u>Controlled</u> – information is structured to leave as little as possible to people’s interpretation.	<u>Emergent</u> – information is meant to trigger people’s experiences, personal associations, and linkages.

<p><u>Sense Giving</u> – information is used to minimize uncertainty by offering tangible and discernable chunks of meaning.</p>	<p><u>Sense Making</u> – information requires people to generate more of their own meaning and in some instances may leave people feeling uncertain as to the nature of the information until they do make sense of it for themselves.</p>
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Bear in mind both buckets are critical to the success of effective organizational communications. It's just we tend to think of stories as another tool in the first bucket; we need to understand that stories operate best when they act as stimuli as opposed to information containers.

Stories achieve their greatest punch when they are used to create interlocking webs of meaning. A story used as a solitary chunk of communication is far less effective than when we find innovative ways to string associations of stories together. If one story paints a powerful picture what will several well integrated stories do, especially if we invite people to co-create them with us? Although this may seem counter intuitive, stories used to stimulate the storytelling of others yield the best results.

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