



Storytelling as an Influence Strategy

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In the space of a work week we may find ourselves having to shift from trainer, to facilitator to keynoter to consultant; making allowance for varying paradigms of power, presence and expertise and perpetually judged by how well we do that. Yet with the challenge, the responsibility, the skills, patience, energy and empathy required comes an extraordinary privilege. Whether it is a two-hour SIG session or a certificate program, those participants entrust their learning to us. We know they are ultimately accountable for their own development. Yes, we could theoretically do a brilliant job with a closed learner and make no difference to their lives. However if we can't establish credibility, an open safe environment, if we create confusion rather than clarity, we have abused the privilege. Thus it behoves us not to be good, but great.

Greatness in the training room is not about the quality of the materials or technological wizardry but the ability to capture interest, create relevance and insight and develop "skills for Monday" – sure signs of learning.

One way to stimulate learning is to use story. Every participant comes with a story. Some of the most vivid stories are the ones that bring them to us cynical and dejected, even fearful of what they might learn. And if we are apathetic towards their stories we are throwing mud against the wall in the hope some of it will stick. We will use story to establish credibility. Even self-deprecating facilitator introductory stories are designed to break down barriers and demonstrate self-awareness and humility such that groups will warm to us.

Participant introductions, however unimaginative, are opportunities for them to share some small figment of their personal and professional story. Twenty participants may come from 20 organisations and that number of professional backgrounds. How do we help them find common ground and shared meaning? We can tell stories and encourage them to do the same such that they can place themselves in the stories and find inspiration and discipline to try new things. Analogy, metaphor, values through action and third person stories are subtle and indirect ways of asking people to confront fears, change attitudes and behaviours without platitudes or bullying.

How often have we done our homework on a group and told stories that packed a punch "without looking at anyone in particular". How easily could we otherwise sell messages like: "We think your boss probably sent you because you have poor people skills" or "You are so arrogant, it's no wonder the older experienced staff in your workplace won't share anything with you". Far better to tell a story about some mythical person out there and weave a spell around a situation that punches participants in the stomach without any risk of an assault charge!! We don't need them to own up to us but to themselves.

So that stories are not accompanied by a cringe factor, they must be authentic. One way to do that is to make sure they're our own. And if ours aren't good enough, only use the best! By incorporating story telling into our repertoire we further the possibility of being true unlockers of (not onlookers to) human potential.

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