

Storytelling Sins

In a follow-up to her article in the August issue of *Management Today* on the value of trust in leadership – and using stories to gain it – **Gabrielle Dolan** outlines seven key mistakes that leaders commonly make when using organisational storytelling as a leadership skill.

Can you imagine your business world without email or the internet? Before the information age the role of leader was very much the provider of information. Now employees, customers and potential customers have access at their fingertips to vast amounts of information.

However, this information age is coming to an end. Rising in its place is what is known as the 'conceptual age', representing a new way of thinking for businesses and business leaders.

Traditionally, a large part of a leader's role was to provide information, but now in the conceptual age,

the role of leader is much more to help people make sense of this information.

Organisational storytelling is emerging as a key skill to help leaders with this challenge. When performed well, it enhances employee engagement, improves the success rate in influencing people and increases overall business performance.

But there are seven common mistakes that leaders make when they are constructing and delivering their stories. Fortunately, while these mistakes are common, once you know what they are, they are fairly easy to avoid.

1 No clear business purpose

Steven Denning, former World Bank executive and author of *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative*, believes that "having a clear purpose is one of the principal differences between organisational storytelling and entertainment storytelling". It is the most critical sin to avoid. The business purpose is the foundation block of your whole story, without a clear purpose you will have extreme difficulty in finding the right story.

A past client of mine was faced with a situation where he knew his team did not need any more information on the importance of meeting weekly targets; they had been inundated with data. What he needed to do as a leader was to make the data resonate with them in a personal way; he did this successfully with a story.

His story involved his childhood and his dislike for brussels sprouts. He explained how he had always left them aside until the end of his meal, but his mother never let him leave the table until he ate them. But one day he decided to eat the brussels sprouts at the beginning of his meal and then sat back and enjoyed the rest of his food.

He narrated this to his regional team by connecting his brussels sprouts experience to how everyone in his team viewed their weekly sales leads targets, something they all knew they had to do but hated doing. He asked the team if they could approach their weekly sales leads the same way he approached brussels sprouts; hitting them first and early in the week.

The following week he witnessed his team achieve the best week ever for the number of quality sales leads generated. The term 'brussels sprouts' soon became shorthand within the team for meeting their weekly targets.

2 No one story solves everything

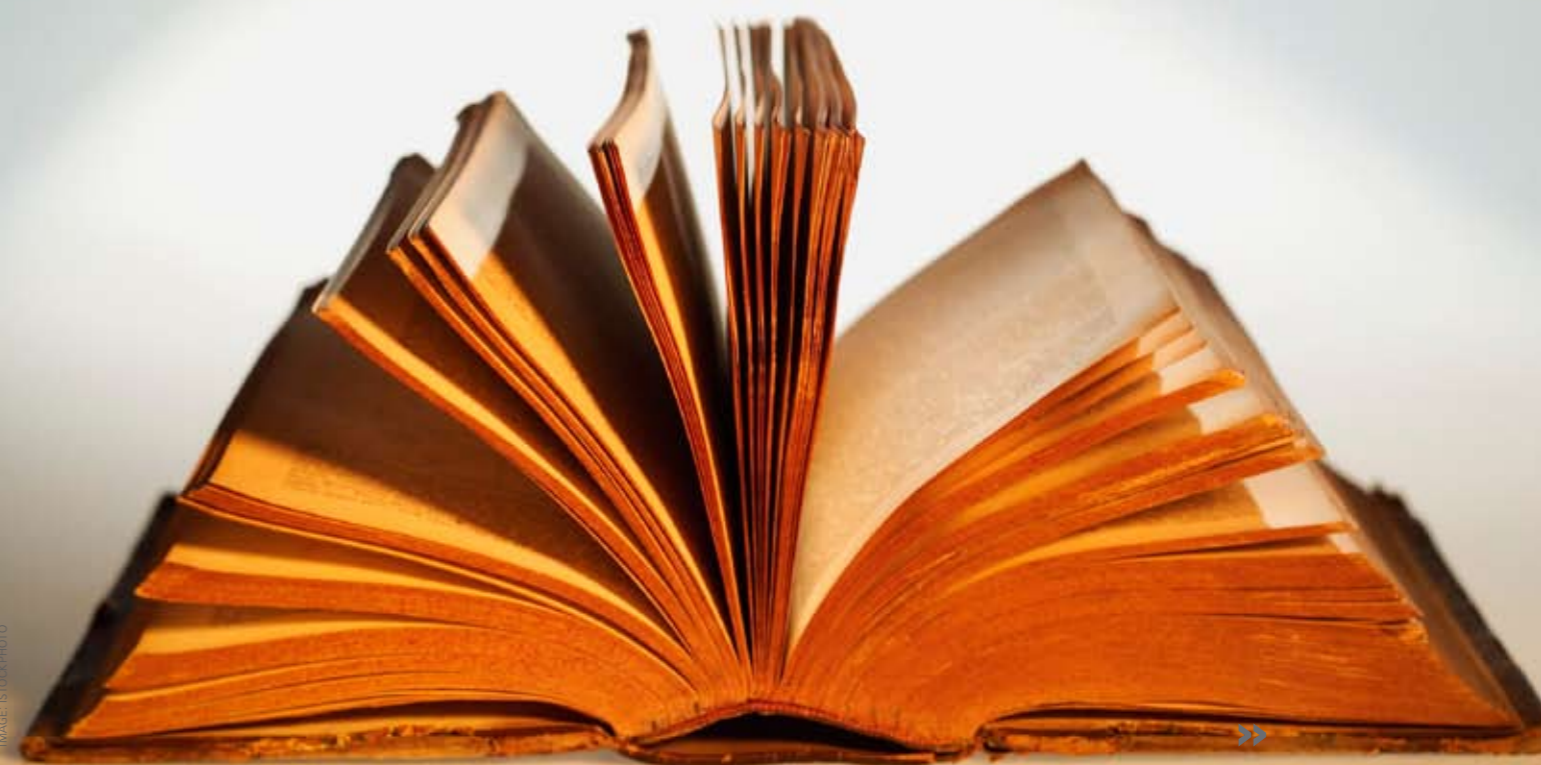
You will never solve all your business issues with one story, no matter how compelling or intriguing it may be. There are some leaders who are so convinced of the power of storytelling, they want to implement a story to explain their overall strategy. This does not work.

Why? Because it is not a story but simply a lot of facts in a row. Data combined with a story creates emotional connection for your audience. It is the organisational stories that the leaders are telling day in and day out that will bring understanding and engagement in a strategy. Storytelling is a skill that can be taught and learned, and with practice and coaching everyone can get better at it.

The brussels sprouts manager did not try to change an entire service culture to a sales culture with one story. He began to chip away, a story at a time.

3 Not authentically true

Have you believed in a story and then later found out that it wasn't true? In the business world, for your stories to be effective and resonate with your audience, they need to be authentic in every sense of the word. By this, we mean first of all that your story needs to have actually occurred. This will increase the credibility of the story and will also allow the





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Gabrielle Dolan, One Thousand & One

audience to trust in your message. Telling inauthentic stories will blow your credibility to pieces.

Irrelevant hero

Organisational stories work best when they are based around an individual (not a single department or one organisation). The individual needs to be relevant and typical to your audience. As a rule of thumb, telling stories about the efforts of a former CEO to your frontline customer service staff will have very little impact at all.

I committed this sin before discovering organisational storytelling when I was the change manager of a major departmental restructure. We attempted to engage our employees by explaining the journey that the department had been on. That we had centralised and decentralised and centralised again, that we had looked at outsourcing but decided we could do it ourselves. The reality is people don't care about a department, or an organisation, or an industry. People care about other people that they can relate to.

Unbalanced detail

An organisational story is a fine balancing act of including enough sensory aspects to create the emotional connection and enough concrete data to ensure the business purpose is not lost. And this all

needs to be done in a preferable time frame of no longer than a couple of minutes.

A typical area where people include too much detail is at the beginning of a story. When telling a story, your aim at the beginning is to capture your audience's attention. With too much irrelevant information at the start you have lost your audience before you even begin. So if you find yourself starting your story with "Last April, we had an interesting situation. Actually I think it was May, no it was April because I remember it was after the March parade, so it was definitely April. So anyway, as I was saying..." Please spend some time practising your stories in the shower.

Descriptive ending

Leaders new to the skill of organisational storytelling often don't trust the process and the power of story. They usually feel that they need to be very descriptive at the end of their story to ensure that their people will 'get it'. But if all the above sins are avoided, your people will get it.

Organisational storytelling does a lot of heavy lifting for you as a leader. A good organisational story allows your listeners to create their own stories in their mind and to connect with the message you are trying to communicate. It is about engage and enrol as opposed to command and control. If you are being descriptive at the end of your story you are still operating in a command and control mode and you will not reap the rewards of your storytelling efforts. Telling people the moral of the story is like having to explain a joke.

Not everything is a story

The overuse of the word 'story' can create confusion for your people around what a story is. We see all too often organisations replacing the word strategy with story; we hear people talk about their leadership story or wanting a brand story. You don't have a retail story, you have a retail strategy that you can bring alive through the use of real stories. You don't have a leadership story, but you have many stories that, together, build a picture of the type of leader you are. So remember, a story is not a story just because you call it one. **VI**

Gabrielle Dolan is Co-Director of One Thousand & One, a company that specialises in organisational storytelling.

