

# LEADERSHIP THROUGH STORYTELLING

HOW TO *MOTIVATE GREAT WORK* THROUGH STORYTELLING



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# A NOTE FROM BILL

Among all our advances in communications technology, storytelling has endured, because it works. Storytelling has always been the way we most naturally communicate with each other as social, interconnected human beings; and every day, we witness the power of storytelling to influence, persuade and inspire others. Throughout history, storytelling has been used by societies to transmit wisdom, boost understanding and create a sense of belonging. From Steve Jobs to Martin Luther King, individual leaders have always used storytelling to connect people to their work, to each other, and to a vision of the future they want to be a part of and help make real.

For over ten years, we have been strategically bringing the power of storytelling to business, helping managers and executives of such companies as GE, Coca-Cola, Cisco, Hilton and Pfizer understand how they can use storytelling to improve the impact of their communications and, with that, their ability to lead others. Storytelling in leadership communications runs deeper than mere information. It taps spirit, emotion and imagination to connect one person to another in a way that means something to both. And it provides clarity and understanding and removes the friction from a complex system to help create the kind of ripples that make big waves.

What follows is a collection of blog posts that will help you better understand how storytelling works and why it works so you can put it to work to improve the effectiveness of your leadership communications. Taken individually, each of these posts tackles storytelling from a different angle. Taken together, they provide some of the insight and understanding you'll need to make storytelling work for you. You're a storyteller already (we all are). These posts will help you be a more engaging, enlightening, and inspiring one.

Good luck!

Bill Baker  
**Founder, BB&Co Strategic Storytelling**







## & HOW TO THINK STRATEGICALLY ABOUT LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING

**There is no denying that storytelling is on people's minds these days, especially in terms of communication skills leaders need to effectively direct, influence and inspire others.** And while this fervent focus on storytelling warms my heart, I worry that it is generating a lot of unfocused storytelling in the workplace, as leaders feel compelled to just tell a story, any story because some article or speaker or manager told them to.

To make the most of storytelling in leadership communications and derive the greatest impact from it, one must first think strategically about what their story needs to achieve. The type of social storytelling that we practice in our daily lives typically involves telling any ol' story at any ol' time because you think it will entertain and engage people. Strategic storytelling, however, is about picking the right story at the right time, specifically to convey an idea that will in turn shape the way your audience thinks and feels and motivate them towards a desired action.

When I think strategically about the stories I tell in my leadership communications, I don't start with the story; I back into it. Said another way, I reverse engineer the story by first thinking strategically about the objectives I need a story to meet. And I do this by identifying the following:

**FIRST: Desired Action of My Audience** — I first consider my audience (whether its one person, ten, or one hundred) and what actions I want them to take. What do I need them to start doing, stop doing, do more or do less of? For example, we might be facing a major change initiative at work that's going to require a big shift in how we operate, and I need my team to embrace this change instead of shying away from it.

**SECOND: Thoughts and/or Feelings Needed in Order to Take that Action** — Then I consider what my audience needs to think and/or feel in order to take the action I need them to take. These might be new thoughts and feelings I need

to instill in them, or mental and emotional barriers or obstacles I need to help them get around. Continuing with the example referenced above, in order to embrace this impending change initiative, I might need my team to recognize (think) that while it will involve some short-term discomfort, longer term it's going to make us all stronger in our capabilities. I might also need to help them get over feeling overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the change and instill greater confidence and faith in their ability to get through it.

**THIRD: Key Message to Generate those Thoughts and Feelings** — Next I think about what key idea or message I can share to help generate the needed thoughts and feelings to motivate the desired action. Again continuing with the example outlined above, I might want to convey the idea that the way we're going to get through this big change initiative is by leaning on and encouraging each other as a team and collectively taking things one step at a time.

**FOURTH: A Story that Can Foster and Facilitate All of the Above** — After I've thought through these three objectives, then and only then do I consider if I have a story that can bring to life the message or idea I want to convey, and that can generate the thoughts and feelings I want to generate in order to inspire the action I need my audience to take.

So, in the privacy of my head or in my office (often I will take a couple of minutes to map this out on a whiteboard), I think about it in the order outlined above. But nine times out of ten, when I'm walking into a meeting or presentation I will deliver it in reverse. I will start with the story before diving into the main subject matter of the meeting or presentation. And by starting with a story that I have thought strategically about — a story that has a clear point; a story that is appropriate for the workplace situation we're in; a story that is relevant to the mental and emotional state of my audience — I start to indirectly shape the way my audience is going to think and feel about the subject matter that is to follow, enabling them to more fully absorb and embrace it.

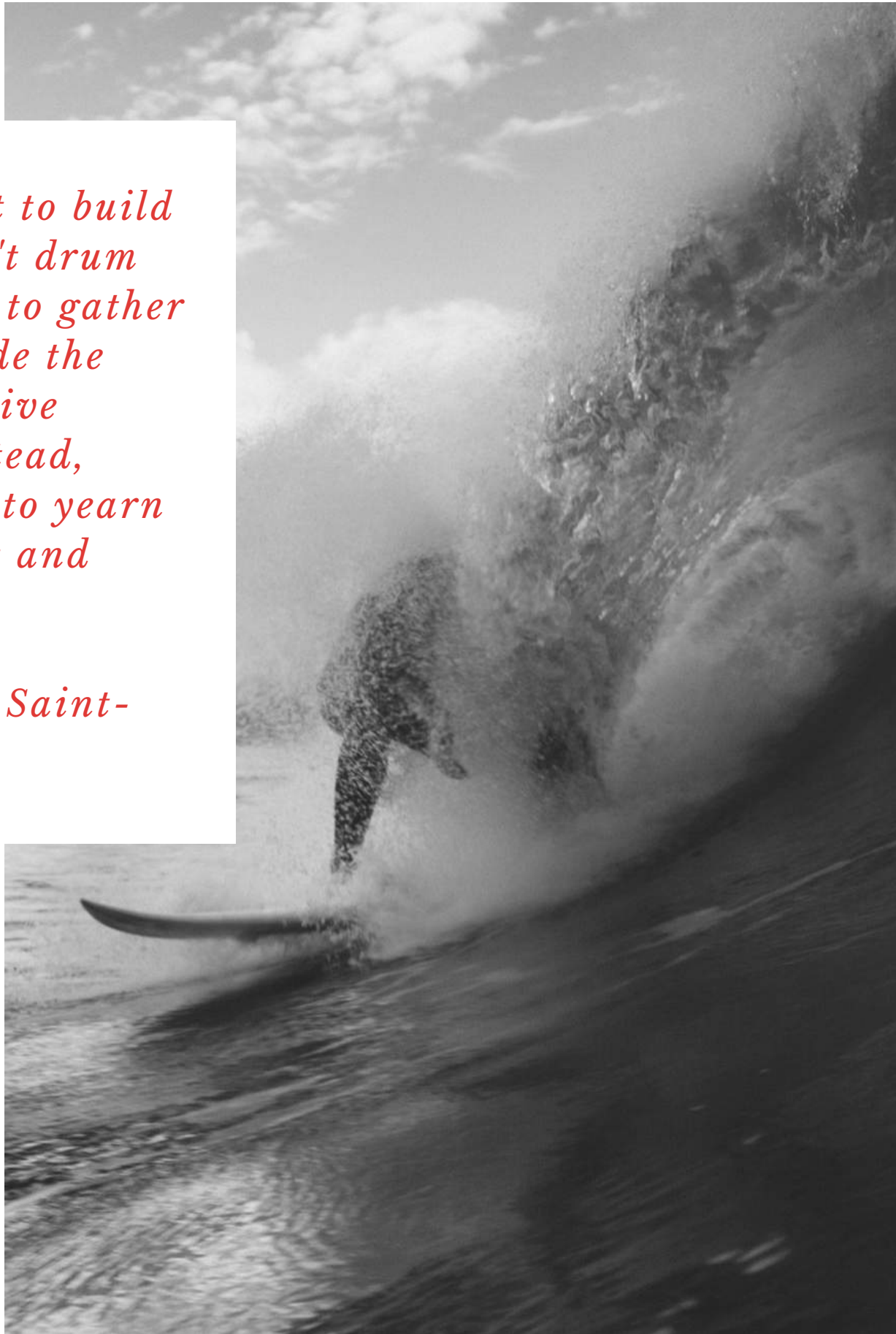


Given the objectives uncovered for the example above, I might determine that the story of running a marathon for the first time (or climbing Kilimanjaro or hiking the Pacific Trail or any other story about reaching a tough, intimidating goal) would be the perfect one to tell at the start of a team meeting in which we're going to go through the implementation plan for this major change initiative. When telling this story, I would make certain it's strategic by indirectly and artfully addressing the objectives I've identified, ensuring it's reflecting the necessary thoughts and feelings and demonstrating the key idea I want to communicate. For example, the plot of my story would acknowledge that I never thought I could run a marathon (or climb Kilimanjaro or hike the Pacific Trail), but through the collaborative encouragement and guidance of others, training to build my strength and abilities, and taking things literally and figuratively one step at a time, I was able to do it.

Starting the meeting with this story would not only engage my audience at a more personal level, but also help them understand how, exactly, we are going to get through this change initiative together and why it's important we do so. Most importantly, because my story is both strategic and human, appealing to the head and the heart, it will remove the mental and emotional barriers that might get in the way and smoothly pave the way to our collective success. And after that, we're off to the races.

*If you want to build  
a ship, don't drum  
up the men to gather  
wood, divide the  
work and give  
orders. Instead,  
teach them to yearn  
for the vast and  
endless sea.*

*Antoine de Saint-  
Exupéry*







## FIVE ELEMENTS OF A STRONG STORY IN LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS

**Of all the communications tools available to a leader, perhaps none is more powerful than storytelling.** From Martin Luther King to Sheryl Sandberg, great leaders have always used stories to connect people to ideas, to each other and to a vision of the future they want to be a part of and make real.

But every great power has inherent risks and rewards in using it, and storytelling in leadership communications is no different. Tell the wrong story in the wrong situation and you run the risk of your audience staring blankly at you, wondering silently (or worse, out loud) what the point of your story was and how they get back the three minutes you just took from their lives in telling it. But share the right story in the right situation and the rewards can be great, specifically in your ability to connect with your audience at a more human level, and indirectly shape the way you want them to think and feel about whatever you're gathered to present, review or discuss.

To reap the greatest rewards from storytelling in the workplace and steer clear of the risks, one must think strategically about the stories they tell, making sure they can first identify what they need a story to achieve so they can then find or develop the right story to achieve it. It also involves building great stories to be told. And while every story is different and unique, all great strategic stories are composed of five essential elements.



**PREMISE** -- This is the context for your story, connecting the story you are about to tell to the workplace situation in which you're telling it and the mindset of the audience who's hearing it. Establishing the premise for your story is a way of setting it up, building common understanding with your audience and helping them better appreciate why they should listen to it.

An example. Let's say you're a manager that has gathered the troops to present a roll-out plan for a major initiative that will require your team to learn a new way of operating. You know that many on your team are quite anxious about this change. You also know that they're not really going to listen to your roll-out plan unless you can deal with this white elephant of nervous energy sitting in the middle of the room blocking the screen. So you've got a great personal story to share with them about embracing change and learning new skills. But rather than just launch into that story, you first establish the premise for it by saying...

*"You all know we're about to implement a big change initiative across the company, and we're here to present the roll-out plan and discuss your roles in it. I know that changes of this magnitude can be both exciting and unsettling. It can make people nervous, especially if they have to learn new skills. I'm sure you're feeling it. Hell, I'm feeling it too. Change is hard. In fact, as I was getting ready for this meeting I was reminded of a big change I had to get through several years ago. So before we dive into the plans, let me just tell you a quick story."*

And then you tell your story, about a time when you (or someone you know, or someone well-known) had to face change head-on and embrace it before they could succeed. Your audience knows this story is going to be about getting through change because you've set up the Premise for it. And in setting up that Premise, you've acknowledged not only how they're feeling, but also the main reason you're meeting (i.e. to present the roll-out plans)...so they'll excuse you while you take a couple of minutes at the start of that meeting to tell a story.

**PLATFORM** -- After you've established the Premise for your story, you then establish the starting point for it by establishing the time and place in which it begins. For example, "Once upon a time in a galaxy far, far away" is the platform for one of the most well-known stories of our time (Star Wars). When a storyteller sets the Platform, it's his or her cue that a story is about to unfold. For example, for the story referenced above it might be...

*"One day, when I was in the second year of my first job at Grey Advertising in New York City, word came down from up high that a major reorg was coming."*

**PEOPLE** -- These are the characters who find themselves in the time and place of the story's Platform and about to be a part of the Plot. Most stories have a main character whom the story is about, with supporting characters having an impact on him or her and/or journeying along with them. Quite often the main character is you, the storyteller, as you share a personal story about something that happened to



you and what you took away from that experience (the Point). But sometimes you can tell a personal story where you are not the main character. Instead, your story is more about someone else and their experience, and you are more of a witness to it. If this is the case, make sure you make the story about that Person and not about you, even if it's told from your perspective.

## **PLOT**

Plot is the driving force of any great story, entailing the series of events that have unfolded. Plot gives your story structure and flow, with a clear beginning, middle and, importantly, end. While there are many Plots a story can follow, the most typical involves a group of people (Person) in a current situation (Platform) who have a goal of achieving a new reality but experience obstacles and challenges in trying to reach that goal, and then somehow manage to overcome them. A story's Plot becomes more engaging when there is tension built up around those challenges and obstacles, and that tension is relieved when the characters succeed by moving past them.

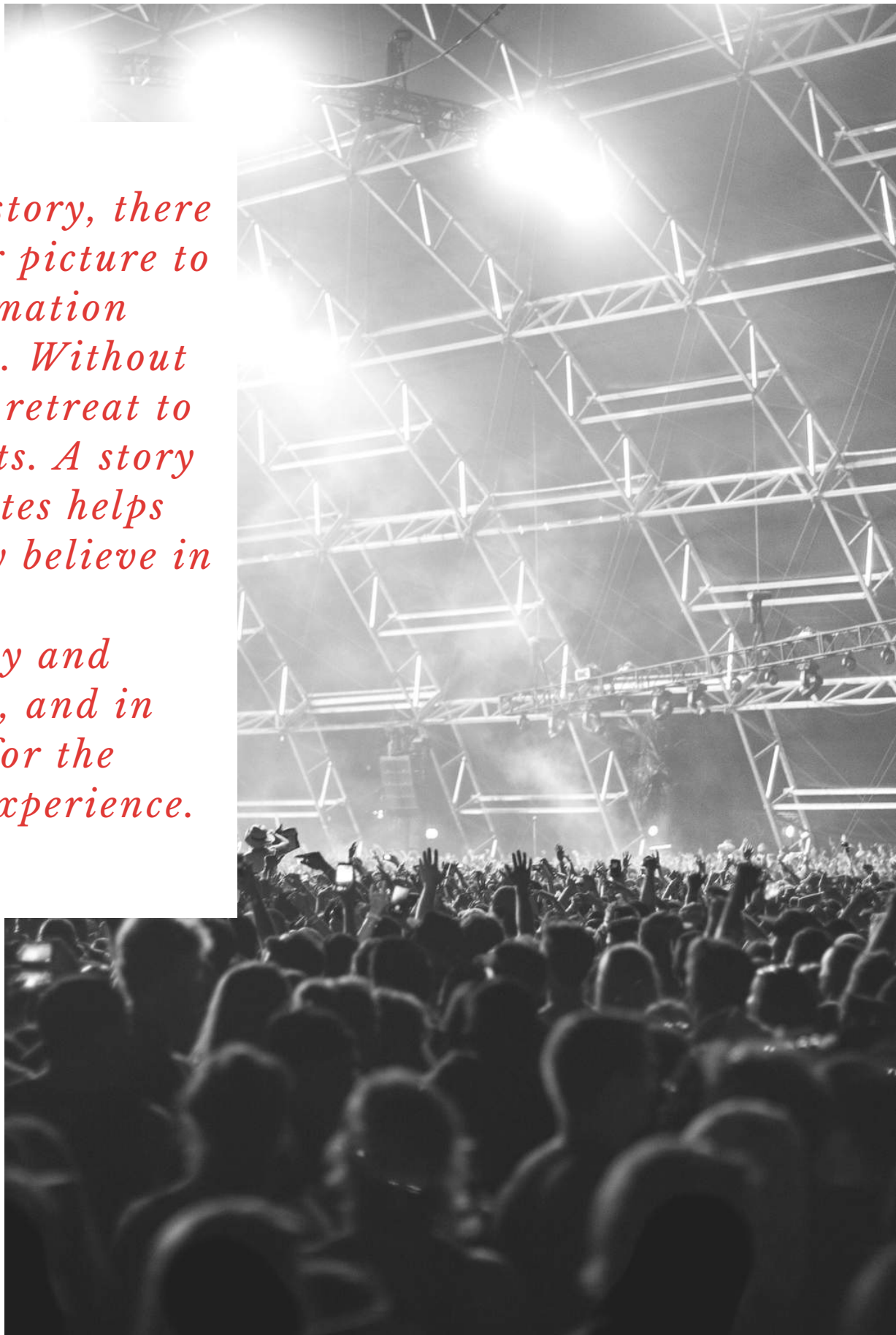
## **POINT**

And of course, every great strategic story, especially those shared in a workplace situation, has a Point to it. There is a key message, learning or takeaway that the audience draws from the story you've just told: one that flows naturally from the Plot of your story and its impact on the Person(s) in it. Because having a strong Point is central to my story's success, I typically don't like to leave its communication to chance and will often conclude my story by driving the Point home — e.g. "The point of this story is..." or "What I learned from that situation was..." or "The reason I shared this story with you is..."

Paying attention to the middle three element outlined above (Platform, Person and Plot) will ensure your story is engaging and captivating and something people will understand and want to listen to until the end. Taking the time to firmly establish the first (Premise) and fifth (Point) elements will ensure your story is strategic: that it's relevant to the workplace situation in which you're telling it, and that the audience is rewarded with something meaningful in hearing it.



*Without a story, there is no larger picture to make information meaningful. Without a story, we retreat to just the facts. A story that resonates helps us to deeply believe in ourselves, individually and collectively, and in the vision for the collective experience.*





## HOW TO BUILD A STRONGER PLOT FOR A STRONGER LEADERSHIP STORY

**Most of us can recognize a struggling leadership story within the first twenty or thirty seconds of its telling.** It feels like it's being composed on the spot, as it wanders aimlessly forward, takes a detour (or six), and never really stays on course. When listening to such a story unfold, you are quickly met with the sinking realization that you better buckle down, because this is going to take a while.

In contrast, a good leadership story has a sense of direction. It knows where it's heading and then heads there. These leadership stories are rich and descriptive, but also efficient, not in the sense of dry or straight forward, but as in being judicious and well-organized. Every element of the story is there for a reason, and those elements are strung together with a strong plot that has structure and flow, transitioning seamlessly from one element to another and driving towards a meaningful point (the "morale of the story" as it were).

Strong plot structures don't happen by chance for great storytellers; they are developed and well thought-through. Outlined below is the diagram we use in our storytelling training to help leaders map out the plot of their leadership story by identifying the various landing points within it. To further explain and demonstrate these landing points, we have included an example leadership story a leader might tell his team: in this case to help them understand how they are going to tackle an aggressive new goal handed down from senior management.

**Setting Workplace Context for Your Story** — Rather than diving straight into a leadership story, it's important to first frame and establish the premise for it by connecting the story you're about to tell to the workplace situation or circumstance in which you're about to tell it.

*Thanks everyone for coming to this meeting. As you know, the head office has set some aggressive targets for next year, asking us to increase our net profitability by 12%: more than double the 5% increase we did this year. That's a big, big goal for us to reach. I'm sure it feels somewhat insurmountable, almost impossible to achieve. But I know we can achieve it, and we're going to use this meeting to set out a plan to do so. When I think about tackling tough challenges, I always remember a time in my life when I had to do the same. So before we start planning, I want to take a couple of minutes to tell you a quick story.*



**Starting Point** — What is the platform for the main character(s) in your leadership story: the time, place or old situation in which your story begins?

*About nine years ago in early January — after two solid weeks of Holiday-induced binging on butter, sugar and the “occasional” drink — I was sitting in the living room grabbing the spare tire around my middle and whining about how fat I’d gotten. My wife, rather than saying what any good spouse is supposed to say in those situations — “Honey, you’re not fat” — asked, “Well what do you plan to do about it?”*

**The Catalyst for Something New or Different** — What was the trigger that sent the main character off on a new path, either because their situation changed, was changed for them, or they had a desire for something new.

*My blank stare told her I (of course) had no plan at all. So she proposed one. “I think you need big bold goal to work towards. How about you run a marathon with me in September? Now I love a challenge as much as the next person, but for someone who had run no more than three miles at a time, the thought of running twenty-six seemed impossible. “That is not going to happen! There is no way I’m going to be able to run that far without dying, killing someone, or some combination of the two.” Ever calm, she replied, “I know you can do it. But you have to want to do it.” So reluctantly I agreed to try.*

**Challenges and Obstacles** — Most great stories have tension in them at some point. What sort of problems, pitfalls or predicaments did the main character experience after setting off on this new path?

*On the outside, I put on a brave face, but on the inside I was skeptical and, frankly, a bit terrified. Twenty-six miles! How was that ever going to happen?*

*One of the first things I did was sign up for a marathon training group. I tell you, I was a bit intimidated that first Saturday morning when I showed up, expecting to have to run with a group of gazelles. But as I walked up to the gathering point, I was pleased to see that everyone seemed to be in the same boat as I was in: a little overweight and, judging by the looks on their faces, a little panicked by the thought of running a marathon.*

*In that early morning cold, we waited for our running group leader. And when she showed up, I held my breath, expecting her to take us immediately out on a six or eight mile run that would most certainly destroy me. But instead, she talked to us for a while about how the next several months were going to unfold – how we were going to start slow and, with each run, focus on a more immediate and attainable goal and not worry just yet about twenty-six miles. And then she set today’s goal of running one mile. That was it. Just one.*

**Turning Point** — When was the tension in the story resolved because the challenges were overcome, problems solved, or obstacles broken down? For more personal leadership stories, often the turning point takes the form of an epiphany, change of heart or perspective on the part of the main character.

*I tell you, that first mile run was not pretty. But I did it. The whole group did it. And as I looked around at everyone, I saw this wonderful combination of exhaustion and pride on their faces, tinged with the slightest glimmer of hope and conviction.*

*And as the weeks and months rolled on, we kept setting new goals and hitting them: three miles, seven, ten. If you had presented each new goal to me on that first morning, I would’ve laughed in your face. But because each goal was positioned relative to the one that preceded it – one we had already reached – they seemed more achievable. And before you knew it, we were up to twelve miles, sixteen, twenty.*



**New Situation and Learning from It** — What was life like after the turning point, and what understanding, wisdom or realization did the main character glean because of this experience? This ultimately becomes the main point of your story: the core idea or lesson your story brought to life.

*And then it's the day of the marathon, and I'm at the starting line with my wife and other members of my running group, and off we go. Twenty-six miles. It wasn't the prettiest marathon anyone's ever run, and I'm sure there were times where spectators on the sidelines were thinking to themselves, "Someone needs to help that man." But I finished. I did it.*

*I think the biggest thing I learned from that experience was that when life throws a goal at you that seems insurmountable, rather than worrying about how you're going to leap from here all the way to there, focus more on the smaller jumps you can take to bridge the gap. For me and all my fellow marathoners, we literally took it one step at a time. We never lost sight of the ultimate goal we were trying to achieve, but each week we focused on a more immediate, more attainable goal that was going to ensure we got there.*

**Reconnecting the Story back to Work** — How can you connect the key realization from the leadership story back to the workplace situation you're in? In other words, what is the implication of your leadership story's main point to your (and/or your audience's) workplace circumstances?

And that's exactly how we're going to tackle this goal of increasing our net profit by 12% this year. We're going to break it down, and we're going to figure out the smaller, little steps we can take to enable us to make this big leap. And most importantly, we're going to do it together.

Having a well-organized plot is important when you are telling a story in any situation, but it is especially important when sharing a leadership story at work. When time is everyone's most precious commodity, you need to make certain your story isn't a waste of it. So take the time to map out the plot of your leadership story before you tell it. Your audience will be more enlightened, inspired, and certainly happier because of it.





*Thinking is easy,  
acting is difficult,  
and to put one's  
thoughts into action  
is the most difficult  
thing in the world.*

*-Goethe*





# & FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF GREAT STORYTELLER LEADERS

**Great storytellers are each as unique as the stories they tell.** And while the strengths of one will most certainly be different than the strengths of another, great storytellers—especially great leaders who use storytelling—do share some common characteristics that they either consciously or subconsciously use when communicating and/or making presentations.

**Great Storyteller Leaders listen, engage and interact with their audience.** They bridge the gap between “you” and “me” to make their audience feel one with them. They understand that storytelling is really a conversation; a dialogue between people; an exchange of meaning. It is not a lecture or a seemingly endless download of information. Rather, it is a shared experience among equals in which the audience is just as active a participant as the storyteller, even if the storyteller is doing most of the talking.

**Great storyteller leaders empower others.** When done well, storytelling enables people to hear what you have to tell them, but then draw their own conclusions from what they have heard. Those conclusions are remarkably similar to what you want them to be; but they are nonetheless their conclusions, not yours. You can guide them down the path, you can get that finish line in sight, but they have to walk over that line on their own to truly make your story, their story. When you entrust them to take those last few steps by themselves, they will respect you for it and become that much more committed to bringing your story to life.

**Great storyteller leaders are generous in spirit.** They understand that storytelling is a selfless gift. It is ego-less. It is not about personal acknowledgement or grandeur. Rather, it's about giving something special to someone else. In fact with great storytelling, the



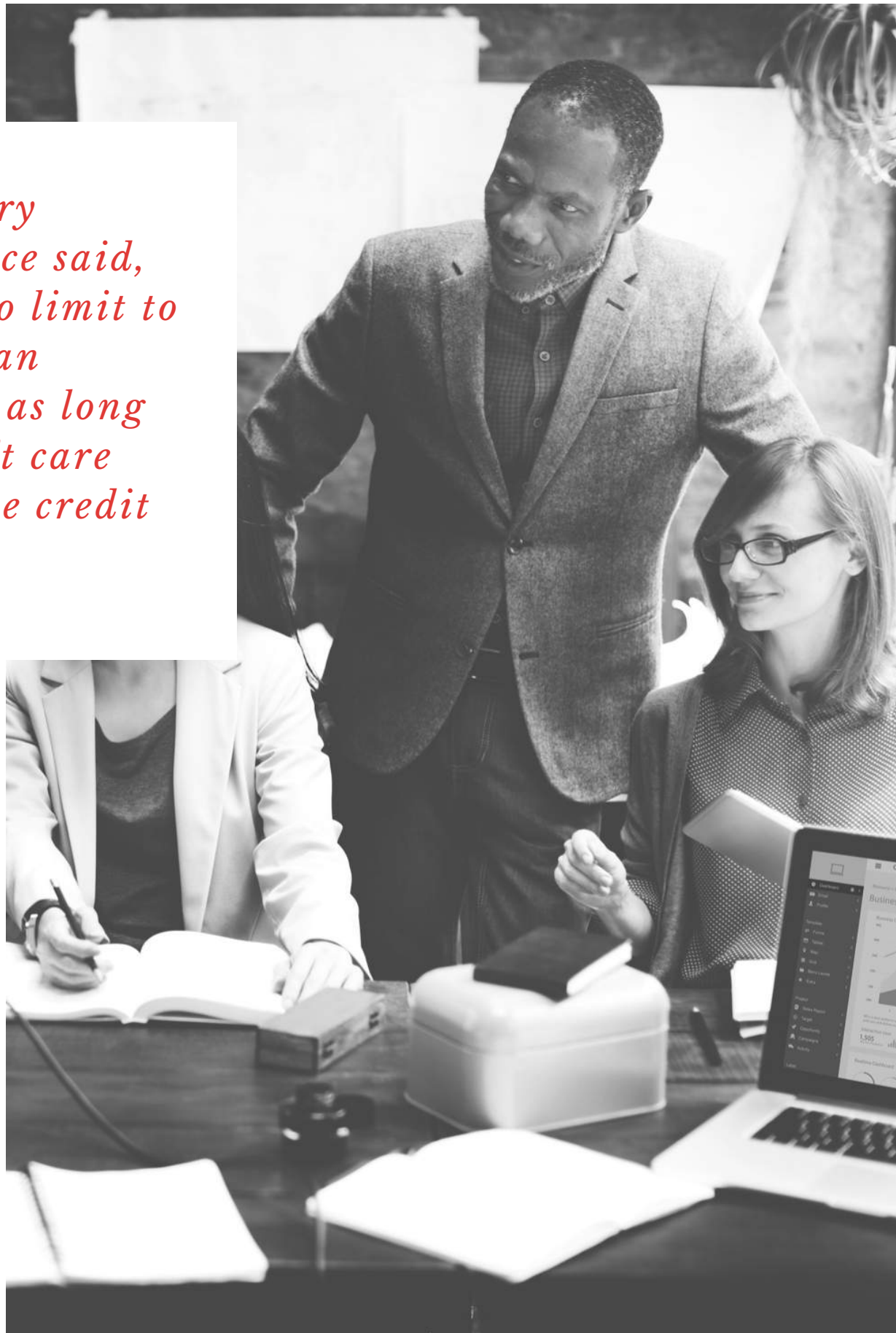
storyteller is not the hero; the audience is. You care more about the story getting passed along than you do about recognition or praise for telling it. For as Harry Truman once said, “There is no limit to what you can accomplish as long as you don’t care who gets the credit for it.”

**Great storyteller leaders are human, vulnerable, truthful and trustworthy.** They are authentic and genuine, not being afraid to admit doubts, confusion or mistakes. They also invite people in and reveal parts of themselves in telling of their stories, and the audience feels closer to them as a result because they relate to the storyteller not just on a professional level, but also on a human one.

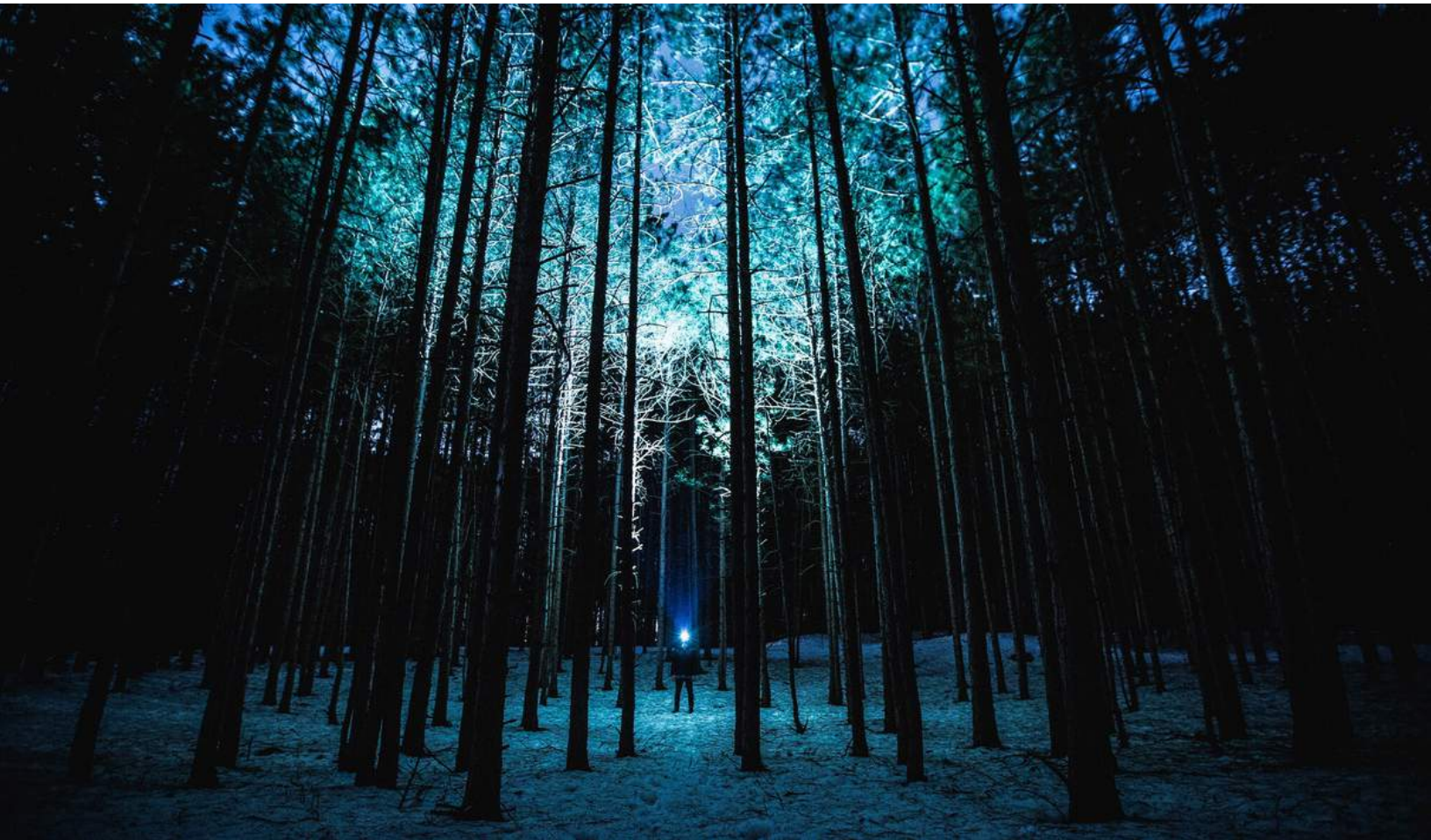
**Great storyteller leaders make sure there is a point to the story they're telling.** They are strategic in their storytelling. Rather than telling any story at any time, they tell the right story at the right time, doing so with intent and purpose and desire to specifically shape the way their audience thinks, feels and, ultimately, acts.

As you start to use storytelling more and more in your communications—and use it strategically—keep these five characteristics in mind. Infusing your leadership communications with storytelling may feel a bit strange at first, but the fact is you already know how to do this because you’ve been telling stories since you first started communicating. Perhaps you just haven’t taken that proclivity and applied it to the workplace...at least not yet.

*For as Harry Truman once said,  
"There is no limit to  
what you can  
accomplish as long  
as you don't care  
who gets the credit  
for it."*







***“Fifteen months ago, my life changed forever when my husband of 24 years committed suicide.”***

So began a story shared by an entrepreneur named Wendy Berger at a gathering of 140 women executives I had the pleasure of providing storytelling training for in early June.

You could feel the air in the auditorium shift immediately after that opening line. Smart phones went down and heads came up as our collective attention focused on this one person opening herself up to us at the front of the room. For the next five minutes, Wendy went on to bravely, and for the first time in public, share her story. She took us back to her humble childhood, talking with love and admiration about her single mother working two jobs to support her family. She talked about the drive and focus with which she approached her education to ensure she could change her circumstances. And she told us how self-sufficient and independent she had always been in her career, relying on little more than her own determination and abilities to succeed.

## HOW A DEEPLY PERSONAL STORY BECOMES A LEADERSHIP STORY

Then Wendy glanced quietly down at her hands, gathering herself for just a moment while we in the audience exhaled and did the same. Looking up, she told us how, in what felt like the blink of an eye, her life was pulled out from under her when her husband decided to end his own. She talked openly of her devastation and feelings of betrayal, and recalled that, “In the weeks and months after his suicide, I had to be vulnerable for the first time in my career, because I had no choice not to be.” But she went on to explain that, in that vulnerability, she realized she lost nothing and, rather, gained much in terms of the more open, trusting relationships she came to have with her employees, clients, and colleagues.



*[AUTHOR'S NOTE: As this story is not mine to give, please know I gained permission from Wendy to share it. Hoping to serve as an inspiration for other suicide survivors, she encouraged me to use her real name.]*

Over the course of our two days together, one woman after another shared their stories: of triumph and tragedy, of personal reflection and leadership insight, of careers unfolding and lives marching onward, often through fields of great personal or professional adversity. As a storytelling coach who had the chance to work with these women, I was proud of how well they told their stories and grateful for the gift of wisdom and meaning they gave in telling them. As a human being in attendance, I was reminded once again about the incredible ability of stories to connect people to ideas and to each other in the process.

As a storytelling coach who had the chance to work with these women, I was proud of how well they told their stories and grateful for the gift of wisdom and meaning they gave in telling them. As a human being in attendance, I was reminded once again about the incredible ability of stories to connect people to ideas and to each other in the process.

With that all said, at one point the question was raised at how appropriate it might be for a leader to tell a highly personal story in a workplace situation. It's a good question. On one hand, I believe that one characteristic of a good storyteller (and, for that matter, a good leader) is his or her ability to be vulnerable and let people in. But on the other hand, I also encourage leaders to, when developing or identifying a story to share in the workplace, ask themselves the tough question, "Just because I have a story to tell, why would anyone care to hear it?" No matter how open and honest a personal story might be, it runs the risk of appearing self-indulgent if there isn't some relevance or purpose in one's sharing it.

In my experience a highly personal story shared in the workplace works on two levels for leaders.

**FIRST — It enables others to know more about you as a person so they can learn more about you as a leader.**

The personal story you share helps your audience understand what makes you tick. In this regard, it's often a good story to share with your team, to enlighten them on something you've been through and how that experience has shaped the way you approach your work, as well as your life. In this same vein, a more personal story can be good to share with bosses, partners, or customers, helping them better understand you as a person and a professional. In sharing your personal story, the focal point is on you and your experience, because either your audience has expressed an interest in knowing more about you, or you feel they should, even if it's not all pretty and perfect. In bravely sharing her story, Wendy gave us all a much richer grasp of the whole person behind the successful businesswoman, enabling us to connect with her in a more meaningful way that could only help, not hinder, one's ability to work with her.

**SECONDLY — It enables others to benefit from the wisdom you have gleaned from your personal experience: leadership lessons that can enlighten, guide and inspire.**

In this regard, the focal point of your story is on you and your experience, but also and importantly what you learned from it. These lessons can be used to help someone think and feel differently about a tough situation he or she might face, and give them the motivation and courage to face it. Opening yourself up and letting people in by sharing a story about a highly personal experience is a gift: of trust, honesty and character. It is also a gift of the insight





and understanding pulled from your experience: wisdom someone can recall and reflect on. While I cannot relate to losing my spouse to suicide like Wendy did, I can relate to the lessons she learned (and continues to learn) from that experience. And in the weeks since hearing her story, I find myself reflecting on those lessons... often...as they continue to inspire me.

The great American poet Maya Angelou once said, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” While Wendy’s story lifted us all in some way, it also lifted something off of her simply by being able to tell it. You could almost see her get lighter. In sharing her story, Wendy gave us new insight and inspiration. In hearing it, we gave her even greater courage and freedom than she had had before. And we were all richer in the end.





## & *THREE LESSONS LEARNED FROM A BROKEN NECK*

**2014 ended with a bang for me; or more specifically, a break; or more specifically still, six breaks in my neck.**

On December 28th, on the first swim of the first day of a much-anticipated vacation in Puerto Vallarta, I got into a fight with a rogue, “Holy crap, that’s big!” wave, and the wave won, picking all 200 pounds of me up like a feather, bending me backwards and slamming me headfirst into the ocean floor. The entire left side of my body from the waist up went immediately numb as I struggled to get my head above water while one thought crept into it: “This is bad.” After a minute of lopsided treading water, I managed to stumble to shore and up to our beach chairs, where my partner, Brent, and a friend had received their first round of drinks.

“I think I just really hurt myself,” I muttered, gently lowering my soggy, sandy self down onto a lounge chair.

“Oh I’m sure it’s nothing,” said Brent. “Here, have a Bloody Mary.”

After sitting for five minutes, I begrudgingly came to the conclusion that I needed to go to the hospital. Brent—respecting both his marital obligations and the fact that it takes a lot to get me off a beach (especially one that serves drinks)—came with me. After X-rays and various scans, it was revealed that I had fractures in five of the seven vertebrae in my neck, most notably the bottom two (C6 and C7), which had clean breaks from one side to the other but somehow by-passed my spinal chord.

When the doctors in Puerto Vallarta started talking surgery to stabilize my spine, our travel insurance company decided it was time to get me back to Vancouver and informed us that they were sending a jet. Admittedly, even in the face of tragedy, flying home on a private plane elicited its own degree of excitement. But visions of Cristal and caviar quickly evaporated when we pulled up to the airport and the paramedics wedged me, Brent and our luggage into a Lear jet that was roughly the equivalent of a Volkswagon Beetle with wings.



Back home on Canadian soil, I spent the next five days at Vancouver General Hospital (VGH) in one of the best spinal wards in the country. Every doctor or nurse who saw me would look at my chart, look at me, look back at my chart, look back at me and say, “You are very lucky,” which I was, and I knew it. On January 3rd, I walked out of VGH, my head held high by a lovely neck brace that will be my constant companion and fashion accessory for the next several weeks.

Without a doubt, this whole experience has been the most traumatic health event in my 48 years on Earth. For someone who had never so much as broken a bone, I guess my body decided it was going to go big with its inaugural trauma. But as traumatic and disruptive as the whole experience has been, I have learned three valuable lessons from it, which I want to share in the hope that they might enlighten others.

**On Stillness** — I am a kinetic person who has been more or less moving non-stop for the past 25 years. So the thought of having to be still, completely still for an indefinite period of time both terrified and challenged me. But when I realized I had no choice in the matter, I was able to quickly and surprisingly embrace the stillness forced upon me. While I had visitors, my iPhone, books and an abundance of trashy magazines to distract me, I spent a lot of time in the hospital just being still: thinking, not thinking, seeing, hearing, feeling and absorbing what was happening around me versus worrying about the future or dwelling on the past.

In embracing stillness versus resisting it, I was able to not only regroup but also restore some clarity and focus that was missing from my life: around what is really important and what is not, around the healthy

forces in my life versus unhealthy ones, around spending less time fretting and more time just being. I have tried to carry this stillness with me since leaving the hospital and intentionally infuse it into my life by starting each day with 10 minutes of meditation; by reading and writing first thing each morning versus compulsively checking email; by turning my phone off when I need to focus on something; or by taking a short walk or playing the piano to clear my head. I have been amazed at how much serenity and clarity a little stillness has brought to my life, both personally and professionally, making me more focused, creative and productive.

**On Dependence** — I’m a control freak and have a hard time relying on others, especially regarding anything that affects me or my surroundings. So it was tough to, in an instant, go from being the guy in charge to being the guy who couldn’t even turn over in bed without three people doing it for him. In the hospital, I needed to rely on nurses for everything; and while that was embarrassing and a bit emasculating at first, I soon surrendered myself to their expertise, their care and their unflinching willingness to provide it. Whether it was getting me water, bringing me happy pills, emptying my urine bottle or coaching me through my first bedpan experience (“Bill, it’s been five days; it’s time.”), the nurses at VGH approached every task with a warm smile, humour and words of encouragement, quickly earning my trust and, with that, helping me let go and let others takeover. Through their remarkable care and the gracious offers of help and acts of support from countless friends and family, I have not only come to have faith that people really want to help, but understanding that I need to be more willing to let them.





**On Gratitude** — In the age-old “glass half full or half empty” debate, I lean towards the latter. So I was shocked at how quickly after the accident my psyche went to a place of gratitude versus despair. I greeted each hour and each day with the profound realization that I was truly lucky to be alive and able-bodied. And while I knew this accident would mean a lot of things would be missing from my life for a while (e.g. exercise, travel, the Whistler ski season, being able to shave my own face...actually that’s an added bonus), I was amazed at how quickly a profound appreciation for all that I still had would drown out those thoughts. This whole ordeal taught me to approach each day from a place of thankfulness, not disappointment; from a perspective of abundance versus want; from a recognition of all that is going well in my life versus the few things that might not be. And if those old demons start to creep back into my head (as they do), I will stop, sit down and make a list of what I am grateful for, quickly righting my outlook on things.

This view extends out across a wide array of areas, but none more clearly than on all the amazing people I have in my life and how much I cherish and value them: friends, family, colleagues, clients and, most notably, my partner of 18 years. In the days and weeks following my accident, the outpouring of love and support flowing in from all corners of the globe was both humbling and overwhelming, filling my heart and strengthening my soul. And while I am eternally grateful for being able to walk, I am more so for having a wealth of loving and caring arms to walk into. That is a richness that will know no end.

As you head further into 2015 and fully re-immense yourself in the hubbub of work life, I encourage you all to bring some stillness into your life, to bravely lean on others when you need to and to be thankful for all that you have versus dwelling on what you lack. Happy New Year everyone!

*SIDE NOTE: I also encourage you to never travel without travel insurance. I buy a blanket policy every year for a whopping \$125. I estimate that, with the hospital care in Puerto Vallarta and the air ambulance home, that insurance saved us around \$75,000.*

## WHAT WE DO

### ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING

Helping clients define the positioning and vision for their brand — and then focusing, inspiring and unlocking the human energy needed to realize it — by blending the rigour of strategic planning with the magic of storytelling.

### STORYTELLING TRAINING

Training managers, executives, sales people and others on how to use storytelling to improve the impact and uptake of your communications and, with that, your ability to influence, persuade and inspire your people.

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