

When Leaders Tell Stories

Author : Alan Utley

Date : October 10, 2015



Charles wants a boat. Once upon a time Charles wanted to buy a boat. He approached his wife, Emma, with a list of personal expenses he was prepared to sacrifice to afford the boat.

Emma took one look at his list and was not convinced. She was not on board with the boat idea.

Not to be deterred, Charles paused and reevaluated his approach. After some thought he returned to Emma with a new plea.

Here's what he said:

"Emma, I really want to buy a boat. I've been thinking about it for months and I can't sleep at night I want it so bad. All growing up my favorite memories were of the times I was with my family at the lake. You see, my dad owned a boat and every Sunday my parents, my brothers and sisters and I took the boat out. We fished, we played games, we laughed, we cried. Now that I'm married and we have two beautiful kids of our own I want us to make our own memories at the lake. I really want to buy a boat."

That was the day when Emma and Charles bought a boat.

This is a true story and one of my favorites. I love it because, while maybe not obvious at first, it serves as a terrific example of how to flex one's style to an individual and situation in order to gain support for a goal. It is a story about influence, a critical leadership skill.

I Just Love Stories

As a kid you would have found me in the front row at school for story-time. As an adult – have a good story, you have my attention.

But some of my all-time favorite stories are the ones told by leaders who recognize the power of a tale as a leadership tool. Stories are accessible, easy to relate to, readily ignite our passions, and – most importantly – can inspire and rally people around an idea.

Sure, data and metrics drive organizations and make us think. But stories will compel us to think *and* feel. A good narrative will speak to both our reason and emotion.

“People think in stories, not statistics.”
~ Arianna Huffington

Consider the immense popularity of the book *Who Moved My Cheese?* In **Dr. Spencer Johnson's** book he recounts a delightful parable of four mice who care very much for their cheese and react in different ways when it gets moved, i.e. when they are confronted with change. **Dr. Spencer** replaces statistics with anecdotes and he teaches us about change.

As children we told stories with ease. But as adults have we lost the art of story-telling? Impossible. Muriel Rukeyser, American Poet, puts it this way:

“The universe is not made of atoms. It's made of tiny stories.”
~ Muriel Rukeyser

Leadership Stories Are All Around Us

Stories are everywhere, we just have to look for them. Here's how to find them:

- Look for themes while you watch movies, the news and talk to friends
- Ask your children about their classmates and teachers
- Read the biography of a president, famous coach or business leader
- Invite a long-tenured member of your company to lunch and just listen
- Read Aesop's Fables – as one example, the *Boy who Cried Wolf* is a timeless tale of the consequence of lying and the importance of everyday integrity

Leadership Stories Are In You

The most personal stories can have the greatest effect on connecting our audience to us and our ideas. One of the most powerful ways to find a personal story is through reflecting on our unwritten autobiography.

For example, what did you like to do as a kid? Is there a story in there somewhere? Or, was there ever a time when you felt your back was against the wall and all was lost? What happened there?

Here are some questions you can ask to find your personal stories within:

- When did I stick to my values in the face of great adversity?
- How have I fabulously failed?

- Where have I grown the most?
- Why did I choose my current vocation?
- What's something I tried but never thought I would?
- Who were my most memorable mentors? And how did they help shape me?
- What am I most proud of in my career so far? Least proud?

"The greatest art in the world is the art of storytelling."

~ Cecil B. DeMille

When leaders tell stories we listen.

//