

flash on the screen behind the storyteller? Which approach would be more appealing and more influential?

Telling stories allows listeners to connect stories to their own experiences. In many ways, stories allow listeners to crawl inside the story and begin to feel and experience information on an emotional level - and from the storyteller's point of view. Stories also create relationships between storytellers and their audience, as audience members empathize with the struggles described as if they, too, have wrestled with those struggles.

Further, storytelling is a vital means of sharing tacit knowledge within schools. Think of all the people in your school or district who are retired or may soon be leaving. A lot of important learning walks out with veteran educators. How will your school retain its history? How will your school capture and share the important lessons learned? How will you orient new staff to the student-focused culture you've worked so hard to create as a team?

Sharing stories about those who live the lessons learned is a powerful way to create local heroes that others want to emulate. Here's a story recounted by author Nick Forster (1999) about Dave Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard:

...new recruits to the company often hear about the time when Dave Packard awarded a "Medal of Defiance" to house engineer Chuck House in the late 1970s. This was awarded because House had persisted in working on a new monitor despite being told to drop it by Packard. The monitors were a huge success in the 1980s. Today, all HP staff still look for ways to innovate new ideas before senior management tells them what they should not be doing (as quoted in Forster, N. et al., 1999, 15).

Forster also recalls a story shared by a Ford executive that shows how hard it can be to change:

...a senior executive told a story about Willie B., a majestic silverback gorilla who for 27 years had lived in isolation in a dismal bunker at the Atlanta zoo. The executive had helped raise money for a new state-of-the-art habitat, where Willie B., for the first time in his life, would regularly feel the sun on his shoulders and the rain on his head. But it took him several days of venturing a few small, tentative steps at a time to fully explore his new domain.

A photographer caught the moment when the gorilla gingerly tested the grass with a toe, and the portrait hangs in the executive's office today. It's there to remind me that no matter how attractive the new surroundings might appear, it takes time and courage to leave the comfortable security of a place—even an ugly, cramped space—that you know well (as quoted in Forster, N. et al, 1999, 15).

Communicating examples of times when hard decisions were made in the best interest of students, despite the fall out, clearly sets expectations for new and veteran staff alike and communicates deeply held values. While posting the vision, mission and goals may be important, sharing stories of living the values is more likely to influence behavior, weave values into the fabric of the organization, and create a shared vision of the future.

Stories can also be utilized to help people unlearn old ways and embrace new approaches. Take this story shared by Heifetz and Laurie on the need for adaptive change:

When a leopard threatens a band of chimpanzees, the leopard rarely succeeds in picking off a stray. Chimps know how to respond to this kind of threat. But when a man with an automatic rifle comes near, the routine responses fail. Chimps risk extinction in a world of poachers unless they figure out how to disarm the new threat. Similarly, when businesses cannot learn to quickly adapt to new challenges, they are likely to face their own form of extinction (Heifetz and Laurie, 1997).

#### What Stories To Share

Annette Simmons, author-consultant, notes, "People are up to their eyeballs in information. They want *faith* – *faith* in you, your goals, your success, in the story you tell." She outlines six persuasive story types to consider: 1) *Who I Am* Story – authentically demonstrates who you are and why you deserve the trust of your audience; 2) *Why I Am Here* Story - honestly shares what's in it for you to be in front of them telling your story; 3) *The Vision* Story – conveys what's in it for them to listen and creates a compelling future state; 4) *Teaching* Story – combines both what and how, sharing and making sense of lessons learned; 5) *Values-in-Action* Story – provides a clear example of values in action; 6) *I Know What You Are Thinking* Story – lets the audience know you are aware of their concerns, fears or "yes, buts" (Simmons, 2002).

Similarly, author Noel Tichy (2002) asserts that leaders must create their *teachable point of view*, one that embodies the leader's view of why the organization exists and how to deploy its resources, then influences this view into others through three basic types of stories: 1) *Who I Am* Stories explain the leader's fundamental mental model of how the organization will succeed, including the leader's values that shape that viewpoint; 2) *Who We Are* Stories affirm shared beliefs and experiences as a team or organization; 3) *Future* Stories help others break from the past and embrace a new and better state. According to Tichy, leadership is about change – taking people from where they are to where they need to be. Thus, storytelling can be useful as a catalyst for helping people change their behaviors as well as their points of view. Tichy insists, "The best way to get people to venture into unknown terrain is to make it desirable by taking them there in their imaginations."

#### How To Tell Stories That Influence

*Using Leader Stories to Build Shared Vision and Commitment* (Page et al., 2006) provides step-by-step guidance for how to create the *Who I Am* Story by reflecting on lessons learned that have shaped beliefs, reflecting on those lessons and applying them to your beliefs about your school. For the *Who We Are* Story, would-be storytellers gather materials and resources related to student demographics and status, improvement needs and school culture, identify what is to be communicated about these, then brainstorm and illustrate the plan for how the storyteller and team will achieve the desired end. In crafting the *Future* Story, writers jot notes about the storyline, cast self and others as protagonists and heroes in the story, and illustrate the challenges, vision and victories of succeeding together in the future.

Across all three story types, storytellers keep the intended audience in mind, thinking through how to pitch the story, get and stay clear on their purpose in telling the story, practice telling it, and seek feedback for improvement. Clear criteria for each story provide templates for drafting, assessing, and delivering each story type.

Jeanine Pinner, a parent leader, shares these strategies for how to craft compelling stories to influence decision makers on issues related to children with disabilities: focus on the outcomes (results) you want to achieve; keep your story simple and short, repeating key

points frequently; make it personal; choose an effective way to share your story; be clear on your purpose; practice before a friendly audience and seek feedback (Pinner, Fall 2006).

When developing a story, consider the central elements of a story: 1) including protagonists the listeners care about; 2) providing a catalyst that causes the protagonist to set things right; 3) identifying obstacles, conflict, or barriers that test the protagonist's character; 4) establishing a turning point where the protagonist must make a decision, realizing that doing things the same way is no longer an option; 5) resolving the conflict where the protagonist succeeds heroically or fails miserably (Herminia and Lineback, 2005).

Who tells the story is also critical. Storytellers have to be credible or possess the ability to build rapport through the telling of the story. In the opening *State of the School* example, the principal might be the first person imagined as the storyteller, but a teacher who shares stories of guiding struggling students who ultimately achieve success may have even more influence with audiences. When crafting stories, both the teller and the tale are essential ingredients for evoking desired story outcomes.

#### Conclusion

Storytelling has a rich history in human experience. Because stories are a natural part of our lives, storytelling offers a powerful way to inspire, influence and persuade those around us to embrace a shared vision. By telling and sharing stories, educators can personalize lessons, ignite passion around school issues, transfer tacit knowledge, and generate emotional connections that motivate action to create a desired future. As Warren Bennis (1996) reminds us, "Effective leaders put words to the formless longings and deeply felt needs of others. They create communities out of words." ■

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## Further Reading

The publications and websites below contributed to the information presented in this issue brief and provide additional information to readers.

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Page, D. et al. (2006). *Using Leader Stories to Build Shared Vision and Commitment*. Atlanta: Georgia’s Leadership Institute for School Improvement. Downloadable and available free of charge to all Georgia educators under Performance-based Modules at [www.galeaders.org](http://www.galeaders.org)

Pinner, J. (Fall 2006). *Telling Your Story: What’s the Point?* Retrieved on May 19, 2007 at <http://www.tsbvi.edu/Outreach/seehear/fall06/telling.htm>

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# Issue Brief

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## Telling Your School’s Story Through Storytelling

**I**ndividuals grow up telling and listening to stories. Storytelling connects with people. Storytelling helps people make emotional connections to abstract ideas, enabling them to relate to and make sense of complex issues. Stories can communicate hopes, dreams, aspirations and organizational knowledge. Skillful educators utilize storytelling in schools and districts as a powerful communication tool to inspire, persuade and engage others in embracing a shared vision and creating their future together.

### Storytelling

As children, many youngsters were rocked and cuddled while parents read spellbinding stories or shared fascinating fairy tales. At an early age, children begin to create and consume stories. Some of the stories children hear are simple, containing one story line, while others are complex, interwoven tales. If the tales are clear and compelling though, children understand and relate to stories. They often ask to hear the same story again and again. Because of such early, positive experiences, people have good feelings about stories. Thus, storytelling holds promise as a powerful tool of influence with adults as well as with children. But will adults listen to stories?

“Once upon a time in the great state of Georgia, a group of leaders began to worry about Georgia’s educational leadership...” So began the history six years in the making of a public-private collaborative at its recent anniversary celebration. Because everyone in the room had played a part in the organization’s success, partner organizations, collaborators,

fundors, sponsors, and K-12 stakeholders were featured as characters, protagonists, heroes and heroines in a shared story of barriers, solutions, successes and lessons learned. Adult audiences, it seems, will listen to stories that have relevance to educational objectives and that feature their roles in achieving those objectives (Page and Hulme, 2007).

### Why Storytelling in Organizations

It’s time to share the *State of the School* report - first with faculty, then with parents, and finally, with the community. Your principal announces she wants to conduct a dry run with a small group of teacher leaders to get feedback. You settle in to hear the report. She announces that she has a list of data-driven actions for which the school needs the buy-in of all audiences. Your principal explains that you will be listening to the results of the data analysis, the list of ten actions required, and, in the process, review a pie chart, four graphs, and three tables.

Sharing the entire report and call for action can be accomplished in just under 75 minutes. You and your colleagues smile politely, then glance left and right looking for the nearest exit. How can important information be conveyed to constituents in a way that will engage their hearts and minds and influence them to support and lead the changes required?

Individuals often err by expecting others to be as fascinated with facts and figures as they are simply because the message they want to convey is important. People, however, are only human. They don’t want to be bored. In the scenario above, the audience might be just as satisfied with a high level executive summary, but there is a compelling story to be told around student needs. Why not tell it and provide listeners with a handout on the facts and figures? Or, why not skillfully pepper the story with a few well chosen facts and pictures of students that