

# RICK'S TIPS

***Rick's Tips* explores the competencies necessary for successful leadership and provides activities to assist with the development and mastery of these skills.**

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# THE ART OF STORYTELLING

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## STORYTELLING AND LEADERSHIP

Most great leaders are also excellent communicators and the ability to effectively communicate is the most important leadership competency. Stories can be entertaining, memorable, motivational, educational, and are undoubtedly one of the best ways to make a point and/or deliver a message.

One of the best examples of how storytelling impacts leadership is found in the book [The Story Factor](#) by Annette Simmons. In one chapter, she outlines the seven stories that every leader should be able to tell and provides an example of each. However, it is the “Who I Am” story with which she opens the chapter that has the most impact.

Skip looked into the sea of suspicious stockholders and wondered what might convince them to follow his leadership. He was 35, looked 13 and was third generation rich. He could tell they assumed he would be an unholy disaster as a leader. He decided to tell them a story:

“My first job was drawing the electrical engineering plans for a boat building company. The drawings had to be perfect because if the wires were not accurately placed before the fiberglass form was poured, a mistake might cost a million dollars, easy. At 25, I already had two masters’ degrees. I had been on boats all my life and frankly, I found drawing these plans a bit ...mindless.

One morning I got a call at home from a \$6/hour worker asking me, ‘are you sure this is right?’ I was incensed. Of course I was sure—‘just pour the damn thing.’

When his supervisor called me an hour later and woke me up again and asked ‘are you sure this is right?’ I had even less patience. ‘I said I was sure an hour ago and I’m still sure.’

It was the phone call from the president of the company that finally got me out of bed and down to the site. If I had to hold these guys by the hand, so be it. I sought out the worker who had called me first. He sat looking at my plans with his head cocked to one side. With exaggerated patience I began to explain the drawing. But, after a few words, my voice got weaker and my head started to cock to the side as well. It seems that I had (being left-handed) transposed starboard and port so that the drawing was an exact mirror image of what it should have been. Thank God this \$6/hour worker had caught my mistake before it was too late. The next day I found this box on my desk. The crew bought me a remedial pair of tennis shoes for future reference. Just in case I got mixed up again—a red left shoe for port, and a green right one for starboard. These shoes don’t just help me remember port and starboard. They help me remember to listen even when I think I know what’s going on.”

As he held up the shoebox with one red and one green shoe, there were smiles and smirks. The stockholders relaxed a bit. If this young upstart had already learned this lesson about arrogance, then he might have learned a few things about running companies, too.

Through storytelling a leader develops trust and creates faith in his ideas and goals by providing relevant information in an interesting and meaningful fashion. Telling an authentically persuasive story is a powerful influence that can have a lasting impact.

"Stories are the single most powerful weapon in a leader's arsenal."  
– Howard Gardner, Harvard University

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## HOW TO USE STORYTELLING

In business, storytelling can be effective when it is used for things such as managing conflict, convincing others, interpreting the past, predicting the future or in the explanation of complex situations. Stories help people cope with change, fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Stories persuade where facts fall short by producing mental images and providing a visual context for the situation being addressed.

If your story is good enough, people of their own free will come to the conclusion that they can trust you and your message. Storytelling allows the listener to determine if they want to be part of the story and to evaluate its merit and value as it pertains to them.

Storytelling helps you connect something relevant and meaningful to your listeners and gives them a taste of who you are in a non-threatening, casual way.

*Following are "The Seven Stories Every Leader Should be Able to Tell" by Annette Simmons:*

### 1. The "Who I Am" Story

The first question people ask themselves the minute they realize you want to influence them is, "who is this person?" A story helps them see what you *want* them to see about you.

I recently had the privilege of listening to Robert Cooper, author of *Executive EQ*, address an auditorium of 900 people. The audience greeted him like just another consultant who had written a book. Crossed arms and cynical looks indicated suspicious opinions about emotional intelligence being "a bunch of touchy-feely stuff" or that he might be yet another consultant jumping on the latest bandwagon. However, the story he told in the first ten minutes of his speech answered the unspoken questions, demonstrated his authenticity and told these 900 people at a very deep level who he was, what he believed, and why.

He chose to tell us "who he was" by telling a story about his grandfather who died when he was 16 years old. His father's father had four major coronaries before he succumbed to the fifth. During that time, he had taken great care to assist in Robert's development as a young man. He invested long talks and personal time with him. We could see the love Robert felt for his grandfather when he used words to help us see this man as he saw him back then. He said, "If you could measure intelligence in the quality of intensity in a man's eyes, he surely must have been a genius." He described the decline in his grandfather's health and how after each major heart attack his grandfather would call Robert to his side, burning to share his latest near-death insight. Robert had us leaning forward in our seats, as he recounted his grandfather's words "I've been thinking about what is most important in life, and I've concluded that the most important thing in life is..." We wanted to share this great man's insights. By the fourth time he had us laughing at the old man's revisions and Robert's adolescent fear that he was going to be tested on remembering what last heart attack's "most important thing in life" was.

As we still smiled, he told us about his grandfather's last revision, "My grandfather said to me 'give the world the best you have and the best will come back to you.' Then his grandfather said, 'I have asked myself—what if every day I had refused to accept yesterday's definition of my best? So much would have come back to me...to your father...to you. But now it won't, because I didn't. It is too late for me. But it's not too late for you."

I held my breath along with everyone there at the somber power of a man's regret at the end of his life. "It is too late for me." Our common humanity is to know that we too, will die. Every person in that audience flickered an awareness toward our own deaths and our own potential regrets. He didn't pull any punches with this story but Robert glows with the intensity of total authenticity and his integrity gave him the right to tell such a powerful story. Only a cynical bitter person could have heard that story and continued to doubt that Robert Cooper is a man you can trust.

I've seen many leaders use the power of a story of a personal flaw to great effect. The psychologists call it self-disclosure. One theory about why this works is that if I trust you enough to show you my flaws, you will trust me enough to show me yours. The experience of vulnerability-without-exploitation helps us conclude that we can trust each other in other ways as well. For example, a new manager meeting his staff for the first time might choose to tell about his first management job when he spent all of his time telling people what to do and ended up getting reprimanded for driving them crazy with his controlling ways. It is a bit of a shock to hear your new boss talk about having been reprimanded. At a deep level we know that true strength is found not in perfection but in understanding our own limitations.

## **2. The "Why I Am Here" Story**

A "Why I Am Here" story usually reveals enough for people to make a distinction between healthy ambition and dishonest exploitation. If your goals are selfish, people don't mind as long as you are up-front about it, there is something in it for them, and you frame your goals in a way that makes sense to them.

I know a businessman who often tells the story of why he likes being rich. He came to America from Lebanon when he was 13. He didn't speak English, had no money and worked as a busboy in a restaurant. Every day he would teach himself a few words of English. He admired people who had beautiful clothes, big cars and happy families and he wondered if he could ever work hard enough and be smart enough to earn those things for himself. Ultimately, he has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams and with a glint in his eye he will tell you that he has "new and improved" dreams. Yes, his goals are selfish, but they are selfish in an understandable way and he isn't hiding anything. His story makes him trustworthy.

A CEO who makes ten (fifty?) times the salary of his subordinates is foolish to begin a company meeting about an upcoming merger with a "We are doing this for you" speech. People will not be influenced by someone who treats them like they are stupid.

Sometimes you genuinely want nothing for yourself other than the feeling you are making a contribution to others. If you are on an altruistic mission, you need to tell a story that gives solid evidence of that. I met a successful businessman from a big city who spent much of his time volunteering for an AIDS hospice and his city's ballet company. He told me a story that he uses when he visits other businesspeople asking them to contribute their money or time to these causes. He tells them that when he was in the Holy Land someone explained the difference between the Dead Sea and the very much alive Sea of Galilee. The Dead Sea has no outlet. Both are fed by the same source but the Dead Sea can only receive an inward flow. The Dead Sea is prevented from flowing outward and the accumulation of salt has killed it. The Sea of Galilee is alive only because what flows in can also flow out. For this man, the metaphor of the Sea of Galilee demonstrates his experience that for him, giving is a necessary function of thriving and feeling alive. His message not only explains "why I am here" to the person he is visiting, but it begins to give a glimpse of his "vision" of how alive we feel when we give to others and let our wealth flow both in and out.

### 3. The "My Vision" Story

If your listeners are comfortable with who you are and why you are here then they are ready to listen to what you think is in it for them. You have to take the time to find a story of your vision in a way that connects—a story that people can see. One of the difficulties in telling an authentic vision story is the fear that detractors can take it out of context and make us sound sappy. Vision takes courage.

A CEO of a small start-up created his own version of the story of the artist Van Gogh, to communicate his vision. The idea of Van Gogh appealed to his 20-something staff's self-perception as "a bunch of crazy lunatic software artists." Van Gogh may have been nuts, but his dedication and genius resulted in art now worth millions. This CEO also knew that millions of dollars would strike a chord as well. He told about Van Gogh's brother supporting him even when he had no money and had been institutionalized. The unspoken message in the story was that their sacrifice, his dedication, and the lack of public recognition would all make sense (and be very profitable) in the end.

Granted he didn't talk about the fact that Van Gogh was dead and gone by the time his work was recognized but that's not the point. The story delivered to his troops a moving vision. It worked for them. It made the invisible visible, at least in their mind's eye. They had Van Gogh prints all over the office. Many of the staff members had a favorite print that spoke to them and kept them going when they felt like quitting. A real vision story connects with people in a way that shrinks today's frustrations in light of the promise of tomorrow.

A dear friend of mine told me a good vision story. (Neither of us remembers where we first heard it.) A man came upon a construction site where three people were working. He asked the first, "What are you doing?" and the man answered, "I am laying bricks." He asked the second, "What are you doing?" and the man answered, "I am building a wall." He walked up to the third man, who was humming a tune as he worked and asked, "What are you doing?" and the man stood up and smiled and said, "I am building a cathedral."

If you want to influence others in a big way, you need to give them a vision story that will become their cathedral. A vision story weaves all the pieces together—particularly the struggles and the frustrations—so that they make sense.

## 4. Teaching Stories

Whatever your role in life, you have certain skills that you want others to have, too. Teaching stories help us make sense of new skills in meaningful ways. When skills become a part of a story, everything is linked together and our memory works better. Most people agree that Plato was a pretty good teacher. He frequently used a story to teach people how to think (still an underdeveloped skill). One story Plato used to teach about the limitations of democracy was about a ship in the middle of the ocean. On this ship was a gruff burly captain who was rather shortsighted and slightly deaf. He and his crew followed the principles of majority rule on decisions about navigational direction. They had a very skilled navigator who knew how to read the stars on the ship but the navigator was not very popular and rather introverted. In the panic of being lost, the captain and crew made a decision to follow the most charismatic, eloquent and persuasive of the crewmembers. They ignored and ridiculed the navigator's suggestions, stayed lost and ultimately starved to death at sea.

Often the message you want to send is less about what you want them to do and more about how you want it done. This story is perfectly suited to combine both what with how.

I would tell you the story about my first job at a telecommunications company where I was asked to price a product that was, basically, a room full of shelves and circuit boards. After hours pricing each customer request—one option at a time since I almost always made errors—I'd just cringe when the customer decided to change specs from eight incoming lines to ten. I'd have to start all over again from scratch. One afternoon around 4:00 p.m. I started playing with this spreadsheet software and spent eight straight hours finding a way to get it to calculate prices for me. Late that night, I succeeded. I started using it and two days later my boss noticed how quickly I could respond with quotes and asked to see it. He made copies for all of the sales people. They loved it and I felt like a hero.

Notice that in the story is the unpleasant fact that it took me eight hours to learn how to write one application. However, in the context of saving three hours each and every time any of us priced a product, saving mistakes, and getting recognized for doing a good job, it was worth it. Once I've told that story, I can then move on to the cells and formulas because now they make sense.

## 5. "Values-in-Action" Stories

Without a doubt, the best way to teach a value is "by example." The second best way is to tell a story that provides an example. "We value integrity," means nothing. But tell a story about a former employee who hid his mistake and cost the company thousands or a story about a salesperson who owned up to a mistake and earned so much trust her customer doubled his order and you begin to teach an employee what integrity means.

Dr. Gail Christopher of Harvard's Kennedy School, tells a story that breaks through the "do more with less" mantra. She points out that few people are willing to publicly challenge the idea of "do more with less" and face the reality that at some point we can only do less with less. "Responsible stewardship" is a difficult value to communicate to people mindlessly chanting "we need less government." She did it, though. And she used a story.

She told a story about when she was co-chair for the Alliance for Re-Designing Government one of her staff interviewed a 45-year-old man who had been in the service of the government for his entire career. She was glad he was being interviewed for this position, not only because of his obvious dedication to his job but because he was an African American and she was hoping to create more diversity on her team. He described working long hours and many weekends. His accomplishments were impressive. During the interview conducted a few doors down from her office, he grabbed his chest and had a heart attack. They immediately called '911.' The entire office was stunned. She said by the time the EMS people came, she knew that he had "already passed." This man, a government employee dedicated to doing more with less, died during an interview for a job that would have potentially been even more stressful than the one he presently held.

We sat stunned. Her story illustrated a value in action in a way that forced us to consider its implications, question our own mindless application of that value, and consider more important values. She did not have to say we need to take better care of our people. She let us see for ourselves, through her story that we are literally killing people if we endlessly demand more for less. Without that story her message could not have reached the hearts of the people in that room. You can be sure that I am not the only one who remembered this story or chose to re-tell it.

Efforts to articulate "our values" often end up laminated onto a card, posted on the wall, or recounted mindlessly like 4th graders reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. It's not that we disagree with things like integrity, respect, and teamwork but the height of these ideals make them invisible to us when Bobby is shoving Susie, and Rick has a frog in his pocket (or a dinner date with the budget committee chairman). We say we believe in these things, but until they are woven into the story of our daily lives they don't mean anything.

If you wish to influence an individual or a group to embrace a particular value in their daily lives, tell them a compelling story.

Marti Smye, Ph.D., author of [Is it too Late to Run Away and Join the Circus? A Guide for Your Second Life](#), tells a wonderful story that illustrates the often professed, yet neglected value of "having fun" at work. During a speech, she introduced us through story, to her father...named Marti, and her brother...also named Marti.

While she let it sink in that her dad obviously had a few eccentricities, Marti explained to us that her mother (Doris) was a little more grounded in reality—except for the abiding belief that both of her children would, eventually, learn to play the piano. Their piano sat on the back porch and practice time for both children was not the highlight of their day. Her brother even wore his football helmet in silent protest as he slumped over the piano. Months of piano practice torture ensued until the day when Marti and her mother were in the kitchen and her brother ran screaming in the door, "Mom, come look, COME LOOK!" Both of them tore out to the backyard where they saw first, flames leaping high in to the air and then, the source of those flames...the piano. As they turned their shocked faces to him, her Dad calmly explained to them both, "I want my children to know that if it ain't fun, don't do it."

Her story is laced with the shared humanity of love, humor, and risk and when she told it to an auditorium of 800 listeners there wasn't a person there that wasn't engaged. The piano lovers were probably a little freaked out, but they were engaged.

Values are meaningless without stories to bring them to life and engage us on a personal level.

## 6. “I Know What You Are Thinking” Stories

When you tell a story that makes people wonder if you are reading their minds, they love it. If you have done your homework on the group/person you wish to influence, it is relatively easy to identify their potential objections to your message.

One of the stories I use fairly often is about a CEO who did not want me consulting within his newly merged organization. The new CEO was pretending that he agreed with the idea of introducing dialogue to his senior team. His behavior told a very different story. He made remarks about “manipulation” and “cheap psychological tricks”. His resistance was beneath the surface. He did not choose to openly question my value to the organization so I had no opportunity to answer openly. My strategy was to meet him where he was. One of the things that I did was adopt his terminology and use it to explain every step of the process, the psychological reasoning behind the steps and what emotions people might experience as a result of choosing to participate in dialogue. I explained that my job is to “manipulate” the group, but that I intended to do it in as transparent a way as possible, out of a deep respect for the wisdom of everyone involved. I even made jokes about learning new methods for self-manipulation. I explained how the managers might want to use several of these “cheap psychological tricks” themselves, but to be sure to always be open and honest about what they are doing and why. The term “cheap psychological trick” began to take on a new meaning. Ultimately, we would both smile at each other when we used the term. It began to symbolize the successful testing of each other’s intentions and the trust that we developed.

As you speak to individuals or groups that you wish to influence it is common for one or more of the group to seek to discredit you or your message. This is rarely done overtly. Your best defense will be equally subtle. Telling an “I know what you are thinking” story can neutralize concerns without direct confrontation. The goal is to be transparent at all times. I have used it here, however, because I anticipate that for some of you the idea of using an “I know what you are thinking” story might feel manipulative or deceitful. Trust is very important. But a hammer is a hammer, you can use it to build up or tear down.

One of the best ways to use this kind of story is to dispel fears. Before you facilitate a committee meeting, tell the group about the time you were on the “committee from hell” that was more like a dodge ball game than a work group. Tell about the specific behaviors and characters. Like the Napoleon looking guy who cut everyone off, and the sweet Southern lady whose charm did not quite hide her insincerity. Whatever your story is, and we all have one, your story will let them know that you want to avoid the same things they want to avoid. Once they know that, they can relax and listen.

A speaker I heard recently started his speech with, “I am a statistician and this will be the most boring one hour of your life.” He then told some silly story about how his last group needed resuscitation. We loved it. He read our minds, zeroed in on our major fear—“this is going to be boring”—and dispelled that fear with a story.

## 7. The Humor Story

One of the most compelling and perhaps most difficult to learn, is the humor story. Too many speakers and presenters, executives and scientists, are “closeted” stand-up comedians. Or so they think.

The humorous story has to be natural, spontaneous, and still has to have a strong point. It also has to be brief. The shorter the better. People are conditioned to expect a punchline at the end of a story that’s intended to be humorous. The longer they have to wait for it, the more you are in danger of flopping.

To learn this type of story, study the great comedians listen for the timing, the pauses, the intonation and the wit between the lines. In comedy and humor, timing is everything. Once you’ve learned the mechanics, insert the words.

Almost everything, including the most mundane situations can be presented in a humorous way. That’s how Seinfeld became famous; by pointing out the ridiculousness of daily life. And by presenting it with exquisite timing. With this type of story you can build rapport, teach, explain, criticize, praise, bond, inspire and on and on. It’s why everyone loves a funny story. If it’s funny, that is.

Now that you know the seven, you might ask yourself...are you a good storyteller? Chances are, you don’t think so. This is unfortunate but not unfixable. Storytelling is the most valuable skill you can develop to help you influence others.

“Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today.”  
– Robert McKee

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### WHAT STORIES SHOULD BE TOLD?

The values, lessons and history of an organization can all be told through stories enabling employees to gain insight as to the inner workings. How and why things are done the way they are can also be explained through the telling of stories. Just as it is with families; traditions surrounding organizations are passed down through stories.

An organization’s stories are used in the public relations and marketing materials supplied to the masses to brand and promote the company, but it is the personal telling and details provided by leadership that make these stories part of the culture of the organization.

Other types of stories that leaders should be able to tell include:

- Life experiences – these humanize the leader and help others understand how he came to be standing before them
  - Someone else’s story – tell someone else’s story if it supports the message and makes the point, but it must be based in fact
  - A fictional tale – it’s okay to make up a story as long as everyone knows it is an illustrative example
- Regardless of the source of the story, it must support the overall purpose or reason for telling it.

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## ACTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

**Read as much as you can on how to be a good storyteller.** Fortunately, there are many books, magazine articles, blogs and posts that provide insight into the various aspects of storytelling. Make a point of reading as many of these as possible. A few good suggestions are made at the end of this newsletter.

**Develop a few good stories.** Think about situations you most commonly find yourself in that could benefit from a story, determine what type of story and presentation works best for each of these situations, and develop a story for each that will make your point and deliver the appropriate message.

**Practice, practice, practice.** Use business colleagues, friends and family to practice your stories. Focus on relevance of the story to the message you wish to deliver, appropriateness of story for the audience, entertainment value, length of story and presentation including body language, voice inflections and ability to stay on topic.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[The Story Factor](#) by Annette Simmons

[Leading Minds](#) by Howard Gardner

[The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Arts & Discipline of Business Narrative](#) by Steve Denning

[Story: Substance, Style and The Principles of Screenwriting](#) by Robert McKee

**So...what’s your story?**