

LEADERSHIP
story labSM

LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING
**PRACTICE
GUIDE**

Let's Keep This Going!

Thank you for partnering with Leadership Story Lab! We are delighted that you are intentional about improving your storytelling skills. We're here to help as you keep refining your stories so you can strategically sequence facts and emotions to engage any audience.

This practice guide provides tools and templates you need to keep growing as a storyteller.

Supercharge Your Day-to-Day Work

Whenever you want to connect more authentically—whether in a presentation, interview or when making a case for change—stories are your superpower.

Much like leadership, storytelling is not a mysterious inborn gift. Rather, it is a highly trainable skill that affirms and enhances a leader's presence. You don't have to be a superhero to tell great stories, but you do need the right tools and processes to **mine** ideas, **refine** stories, and **tell** them with passion and authenticity. Let's get started!

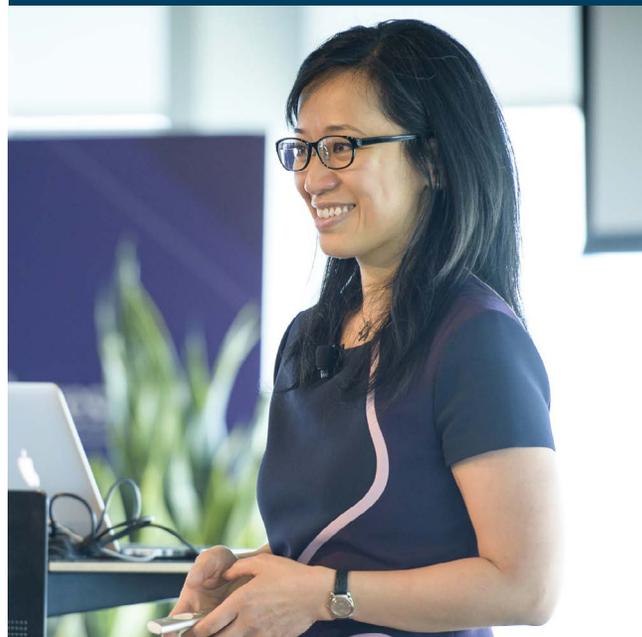
Quick tips on using this digital guide.

This storytelling guide is meant to be used as an interactive digital workbook, where you can enter your answers directly into the editable fields using Adobe Acrobat. If you would like to keep a clean copy for future use, please save a copy before you edit. And if technology is not on your side, feel free to print and use the ol' fashioned way with pen and paper. Enjoy!

LEADERSHIP story lab

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Mining

CRAZY GOOD QUESTIONS

In this exercise, you will practice asking yourself questions to elicit stories. Ask yourself these 10 Crazy Good Questions from Let the Story Do the Work and simply fill in the blanks with your answers. Connect these dots and watch a story take shape on its own. The following is a set of example questions for you to explore as you mine your career story. You may substitute the topic of career with many others. For example: family, work-life balance, ambitions, goals, venture ideas, etc.

1. Origin

How did your career begin?

2. Why

Why do you do what you do?

3. Surprises

What has surprised you the most about your career?

4. Compare & Contrast

How is this year different from last year?

5. More

Tell me more.

6. Meaning

What does your skillset mean to you?

7. The Most

When are you the most 'yourself'?

8. Different Path

What path did you not travel? Why not?

9. Take-away

What are your takeaways from the last conference you attended?

10. The Self

How did your childhood shape who you are today?

Get someone else to ask you these questions. Watch their reaction as you respond.

“Just as almost no one likes the sound of their own voice, when we think about our own experience, we generally lack the distance, perspective, and objectivity to evaluate what story, if any, is worth telling.”

— *Esther Choy, Let the Story Do the Work*



Now that you've used these questions to dig for your own career stories, try using the questions to coax a story from others to make your conversations more interesting. For additional question examples, see pp. 137-140 in *Let the Story Do the Work*.

Refining

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

Whether we are navigating dicey conversations at a family event or persuading a business audience with radically different ideas from us, the ability to shift perspectives is essential.

If we want to persuade others, we've got to see the world from their vantage point. And to do that well, we first have to know the viewpoints our audience has expressed.

Knowing What You Don't Know Exercise

If we're honest, our first thought when we know we'll have to speak publicly is usually "what will I say?"

But there's a better first question: "Who is my audience?"

Use the two columns template below. In the first column, write down everything you know about your audience. Who are they? What keeps them up at night? In the second column, write down everything you don't know. It's just as important to define what you don't know because it helps you steer clear of assumptions.

KNOW

DON'T KNOW

"To make our communications more effective, we need to shift our thinking from 'What information do I need to convey?' to 'What questions do I want my audience to ask?'"

— *Chip Heath, professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business*



Facing a tough crowd? Read this.

10-10-10 Exercise

Respond to the following:

“After listening to my story, I hope my audience will remember up to the following three SPECIFIC points, even if they cannot recall anything else I’ve told them.”

(Each point must be expressed in 10 or fewer words each.)

1.

2.

3.

For additional inspiration, consider the following questions:

1. Why should your audience care?
2. What do you want them to do about it?

“Storytelling is fine as long as you can encourage people to act on the stories.”

— *Karen Armstrong, religious historian*

CAPTURING ATTENTION WITH A HOOK

When it comes to stories, the one thing your audience needs most is a good hook. The hook grabs their attention and promises them that your presentation respects their time.

But because humans are natural problem-solvers, they pay attention when they find themselves needing to put two and two together. Hooking your audience's attention, then, is a matter of giving the listeners a problem to solve or a punchline to wait for.

Hook your audience from the beginning by starting with:

Conflict: The clash of forces or needs going in opposite directions. It can even be a simple conflict. For instance, the mosquito's need for blood conflicts with the vacationer's need to be left in itch-free tranquility.

Contrast: It's the juxtaposition of opposite qualities like heavy and light, plentiful and meager or active and apathetic. For instance, you could describe the one quirky decoration in a leader's otherwise nondescript office, emphasizing the juxtaposition of bland and eccentric.

Contradiction: This goes against your audience's expectations. For instance, you could set up the familiar story of getting ready for a business trip, but then add the one detail that defies the usual narrative arc; for instance: "Did I mention that my 92-year-old grandmother was accompanying me?"

Take the Hook Quiz. Can you tell which is which?

1. When packing for a trip to Australia, you normally think of taking your swimsuit, sunglasses, and sunblock. However, for Mary, who often spends her Saturday mornings planning for her next trip, her prized possession for the trip is a binder.

Check what you think is the right answer:

Conflict Contrast Contradiction

2. Last August, 50 new school teachers sat in their orientation meeting excited to discuss placement within the district. Nine months later, the school district opened new job postings to fill 43 vacancies since all but seven of the new teachers had quit.

Check what you think is the right answer:

Conflict Contrast Contradiction

3. Our new team was created to innovate marketing solutions to help the sales team identify and nurture new leads. But the sales team is having a hard time grasping the value our solutions can bring.

Check what you think is the right answer:

Conflict Contrast Contradiction

4. “Where were you in 1973? (long pause...)”

I was a seven-year-old, living with my family in a working-class neighborhood outside of Cleveland, Ohio. All I cared about was baseball, baseball cards, and when my next meal’s coming. Little did I realize at the time, that my entire career would be intertwined with another working-class community thousands and thousands of miles away, in Australia.”

Check what you think is the right answer:

Conflict Contrast Contradiction

Quiz Answers

1. Contradiction. Mary defies the audience’s expectations. She’s packing for Australia and she brings... a binder? Create contradictions of your own by adding an element of surprise.
2. Contrast. The first sentence talks about the excitement of orientation at a new job. The second sentence starkly contrasts with that: nearly all of those teachers have now quit their jobs.
3. Conflict. In this case, one team’s needs conflicts with the other team’s mindset. It’s a classic case of on-the-job conflict. Though this kind of conflict isn’t pleasant to go through at the time, it is a good way to catch your audience’s attention because they’re sure to relate!
4. Contrast. This hook contrasts a childhood in Cleveland, Ohio with an adulthood in Australia.

Create your own hook!

Conflict:

Contrast:

Contradiction:

“My experience of great storytelling, working with classics, is just finding a way to present it simply but let the story do its own work, or be an invite to the audience’s imagination.”

— *Kenneth Branagh, actor*



Write email subject lines that hook your audience every time.

IRS: THE SIMPLE SHAPE OF STORIES

It's time to pull together the simple shape of your story using the IRS Story Structure. Start with an **Intriguing** beginning, **Riveting** middle, and **Satisfying** end.

I - Intriguing Beginning

What happened? Share key facts and figures. Set up a scene. Extrapolate the Conflict, Contrast or Contradiction buried in the data. Use a **hook**. Intrigue your audience.

R - Riveting Middle

What does it mean? Translate data and information into **meaning**. What does it mean to you? What does it mean to your audience? Transport them on a journey filled with challenges and changes. If challenge is the nerve center of a story, then change is the soul of it. Elevate information to meaning. Make it riveting.

S - Satisfying End

Why should they care? What do you want them to **do about it**? What numbers - up to three - do you want them to remember? Use 10-10-10 as your guidepost. Make the ending satisfying.

Here's an example that uses IRS in just four sentences:

Intriguing beginning: This year, we chose a different path: instead of relying on individual customers, we diversified our revenue by approaching corporate clients.

Riveting middle: I led the effort to serve our first corporate client. The pilot was not only successful as the client has agreed to renew the contract, it also served as a roadmap as we scale our services to corporate clients.

Satisfying end: The company asked me to continue leading the initiative.

THREE BASIC PLOTS

Every person's life is rich with material for stories. When it comes time to share some of these stories, it is helpful for listeners if we structure our stories in a well-organized manner. In addition to the IRS story structure, using one of the following basic plots works best in business contexts. Fill in the fields in the story outlines below to create your own origin, rags-to-riches/underdog, and overcoming the monster stories.

Origin Story Outline

Emotional impact: Finding meaning

(business/career) started when

(interesting challenge,

opportunity, or connection between two previously unrelated ideas).

Because I/we realized

(how you decided this idea was big enough to be a business/that this opportunity fit your vocation).

This idea grabbed me/us because

(how the idea

combined with your own internal drive/came at just the right time).

With the help of

(people or resources),

(company's

initial launch/stabilizing your career).

At first,

(problems).

But then,

(solutions).

Today,

no longer

(what has changed

since the point of origin).

But the same

(vision that guided you initially) now

(how that vision

continues to shape your company/career today).

And that's why

(application to audience).



For examples of the origin plot, see “Leadership is Hard; Crafting Origin Stories Shouldn’t Be.”

Rags-To-Riches Story Outline

(No rags? No riches? Tell a story about a time you were an underdog.)

Emotional impact: Empathy

This year, _____ (current
level of success). But it wasn't always like this.

In fact, _____ (where you
were when your company/career began--or even further back to childhood if applicable).

But even then,
(personal qualities/people who intervened/lessons that guided you).

Finally, _____ (how you got
the chance that led to the "riches").

Just when it looked like
(possible success), I/we still
(further setbacks). But I/we kept _____ (your response to the setbacks).

After

(sum up

past struggles)

(success).

That was when I/we felt like I/we had made it.

And when I look back,

(how the “rags” make you think about “riches”).



For examples of the underdog plot, see [“Been an Underdog? Tell That Story In Your Next Presentation.”](#)

*Overcoming the Monster Story Outline**Emotional impact: Righteous anger*

(Time and place) I was

(describe a normal

day in the life. Introduce the characters).

One day,

(an unexpected

and overwhelming challenge landed on your lap).

At first, I was

(how

you were lost and resisted to meet the challenge).

Then,

(something happened

or someone you met was about to change your mind).

So, I decided to

(a deliberate moment

when you tackled the “monster” head on).

Then,

(the beginning

of your journey of overcoming the monster).

Despite my best efforts,

(setbacks and rebounds).

Finally, when

(final “battle” with the monster. Peace ensued. A new state emerged).

I realize now

(what you learned from this journey).

In fact,

(reasons

your story is relevant to your audience).

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said,
people will forget what you did, but people will
never forget how you made them feel.”

— *Maya Angelou, poet and civil rights activist*



Check out *Let the Story Do the Work*,
pp. 36-43 for examples of how
companies can use this template!

Telling

Get ready to take the stage! (Or tell your best story during an interview, pitch... or just in casual conversation to connect with others better!)

LEADERSHIP STORY LAB'S BEST PRACTICES

Don't memorize the whole story, especially not word for word. Know your story instead. Only remember the key phrases, pivotal moments, and let the actual telling moment be your guide.

Match your tone of voice with the emotional quality of the story.

*You are never off the hook for **planting the hook**.*

*There is a time for everything. But when in doubt, **intrigue and delight** instead of choosing to data-dump. The only exception is when you're being asked very specific questions or when your audience is after the 'hows'.*

*Engage your audiences' **five senses** with your story.*

Looking for the right story can be more time consuming than the time you spend refining and telling the story. But it's time well invested!

*You have a whole arsenal of **non-verbal communication** tools to help you tell your stories. Use them!*

*Leadership storytelling is the strategic sequencing of **facts and emotions**.*

Only tell stories that mean something significant to you. If you are not moved by the stories, you can't move your audiences.

Practice. Practice. Practice.

SEEKING FEEDBACK

Once you have crafted your story, give it a test drive before you take it out on the road. Tell your story to a friend or colleague and ask them the following questions:

1. What information do you recall from my story?

Why it's good to ask: What good will it do if your audience doesn't remember what you just shared with them? On the other hand, people sometimes remember the most random information. So there's no way to find out except going to the sources directly and finding out what stuck with them and what hasn't. Once you've collected the feedback, you're much better informed and positioned to refine your stories so people remember the parts you want them to remember.

2. How does my story make you feel?

Why it's good to ask: The emotion evoked will probably have a much longer-lasting impact on your audience than anything you've actually said.

Does your test audience member feel inspired? Maybe your story reminded her of an experience of her own?

Does your friend or colleague feel confused after your test run? Maybe he has already started glancing at his watch and wondering when the conversation with you will be over?

Or, did your colleague feel curious?

3. After listening to my story, what questions do you have for me?

Why it's good to ask: This is the target at which we should all aim: inspiring the right questions in our audience. Maybe the first or second draft of your story hasn't inspired many questions. But shaping it to the point where your audience begins to have questions is a sure sign that you're on the right track. The next step is gauging whether you're prompting the questions you most want your audience to ask you.

**“Speech belongs half to the speaker,
half to the listener.”**

— *Michel de Montaigne, philosopher*



**Struggling to give
or receive feedback
that's clear and actionable?
Read this.**

Story Collecting

As storytellers, there are only so many stories we can draw on that are based on our own personal experience. Collecting stories, therefore, becomes an ongoing task for any storyteller serious about mastering their craft. Collecting stories regularly must be the professional standard for the expert leadership storyteller.

Start your story library today! Use this space to capture and save notes, story ideas, and thoughts and watch your library grow! It will be a great resource the next time you need a story to share.

“To become a great storyteller, one must first become a great story collector.”

— *Source unknown*

Keep Your Leadership Storytelling Skills Sharp!

Here are some additional resources...

Read *Let the Story Do the Work*, Esther's debut book. It's your storytelling toolkit!

Subscribe to *Better Every Story*, a resource distributed monthly on insights, best practices and examples of great storytelling.

Check out three of our most popular blog articles:

[Don't Overlook These Key Leadership Storytelling Moments](#)

[Ace Your Performance Review with These Three Storytelling Tips](#)

[Don't Start with Your Credentials. Start with This Instead.](#)

Contact us to see how we can help. We'd love to support you as you persuade and engage through storytelling.

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