

Using stories for advantage: the art and process of narrative

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Effective stories that win both the listeners' hearts and minds are critical communications tools that can enable leaders to achieve difficult strategic goals. When crafted with emotion and logic, potent stories not only help make sense of disparate facts, but they can also motivate people to undertake a formidable challenge or make consequential changes in behavior.

But too often, leaders wing their way through their communications, only to find that they aren't getting the results they want. For example, a leader presents a new strategy to his employees, but middle managers don't enthusiastically support implementation. Or, a leader presents an innovative plan to the board, but the resulting board discussions don't produce decisions that support the plan. In such situations, even if the ideas were sound, the audience wasn't motivated to take action. The problem was that the message leadership delivered was not convincing or clear.

What makes such a situation worse is that most employees do not provide leaders with authentic feedback. Instead, leaders may see a skeptically raised eyebrow, or eyes glazed over, or not-so-subtle thumb typing on phones held under the table. Or people may voice vague discontent that a presentation didn't quite "hang together." Leaders often move on after a less than satisfactory performance, thinking they were not to blame. Often their excuse is that "organizations resist change." But that's not the whole problem.

What if the reason a leader is not persuasive lies in how they are telling the story? Whether you're giving a presentation, writing a proposal, or just having a conversation, certain timeless elements of storytelling – we refer to it as "narrative" for this purpose – are just as important in the boardroom as they are in the movies.

Effective narratives are largely the product of discipline and structure, not merely art or creative serendipity. And discipline and structure can be enhanced by learning how to present them using story-telling techniques. Leaders can learn to be better storytellers and in doing so, increase the likelihood they will achieve their strategic goals.

Three narrative traps

Most business messages fail because they fall into one of three common traps:

1. **The empty message.** This speech doesn't meet the audience's needs. For instance, a leader talks only about a product's features, but forgets to tell customers how the product can help them be successful. The audience walks away without knowing how the product can solve their problems.
2. **The scattershot message.** The analysis is full of so disjointed examples and anecdotes that the audience doesn't know where to focus or how to act. The speaker has given the audience lots of details in isolation, while failing to put them in the context of an overall



narrative. The storyteller hasn't answered the key question: what is the essential story I need to tell, and how will my audience absorb it?

3. **The dissonant message.** The presentation contains inconsistencies – the images jar with the meaning, or the story may subtly conflict with what people know to be true. For instance, a leader offers an innovative process for solving problems, but then explains the process in an unclear way, undermining the very point intended. Consciously or subconsciously, the audience loses trust.

These communication pitfalls distract the audience. As a result, the message doesn't get through because the audience can't focus its attention on what you want them to do or think. In the best case, such cognitive dissonance simply causes confusion. In the worst case, the listener believes their leader is not telling the truth. In either case, people are not absorbing the message.

How to construct effective narratives

In our practice, we have found that skilled leaders focus on four elements when crafting effective narratives:

1. **Audience.**
2. **Purpose.**
3. **Acts.**
4. **Flow.**

Effective storytellers know and understand their audience. They have a well-defined purpose for communicating with that audience. Together these insights influence the narrative choices they make about what to say and how to say it. Effective storytellers also choose the relevant building blocks of information to include – what we call the “acts” of the story. Then they create a flow that sequences these acts into a narrative arc. They connect the ideas, layer in key themes and imagery, and pace the delivery. Taken together, this process can create an engaging and coherent story that communicates a well-conceived purpose to a particular audience. This greatly increases the likelihood that the result will be a desired change in audience behavior.

Each of these four elements involves a fundamental choice for leaders. Understand these elements, and you'll be able to get your message across using the right architecture for persuasion.

Element 1: audience

The first element focuses on understanding the audience you're trying to reach. Effective leaders know what different key audience members care about and what moves them. They see things through the audience's eyes.

The audience could be one person or many. It could be someone you present to all the time or someone new to you. The audience receives your story, and so the burden of a successful narrative is on you, the creator, to transfer meaning rather than on the audience to receive and interpret it.

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Ultimately, the success of your presentation depends on your ability to reconcile how you convey a particular message with how your audience understands the exchange, processes the information, and feels about the experience. All audiences have a rational and emotional side. On the one hand, the audience is looking for a rational explanation for the things they care about. On the other hand, the audience will be influenced by experiences, biases, and feelings.

Narratives are most powerful when they play to both rational and emotional desires. They can convey data, offer analysis and satisfy people's need for sound reasoning, but they also can create emotional involvement. Some audiences are more receptive to rational appeals, while some are more receptive to emotional appeals. It's helpful to know which side your audience generally favors.

You can develop an audience profile by finding out in advance the answers to a few key questions:

- **Status questions:** What is the formal role and position of the people you're trying to persuade?
- **Experience questions:** What background, knowledge, and assumptions does the audience share?
- **Comprehension questions:** Do they prefer the big picture or the details? Do they respond more to sight, sound, or emotion? Do they tend to be persuaded by practicalities versus vision? Do they tend to avoid problems or work toward solutions? Do they prefer continuity or change? Do they like formal or relaxed environments?

Answering these questions leads to a deeper understanding of your audience and a more flexible and adaptive narrative style, both essential for successful communication.

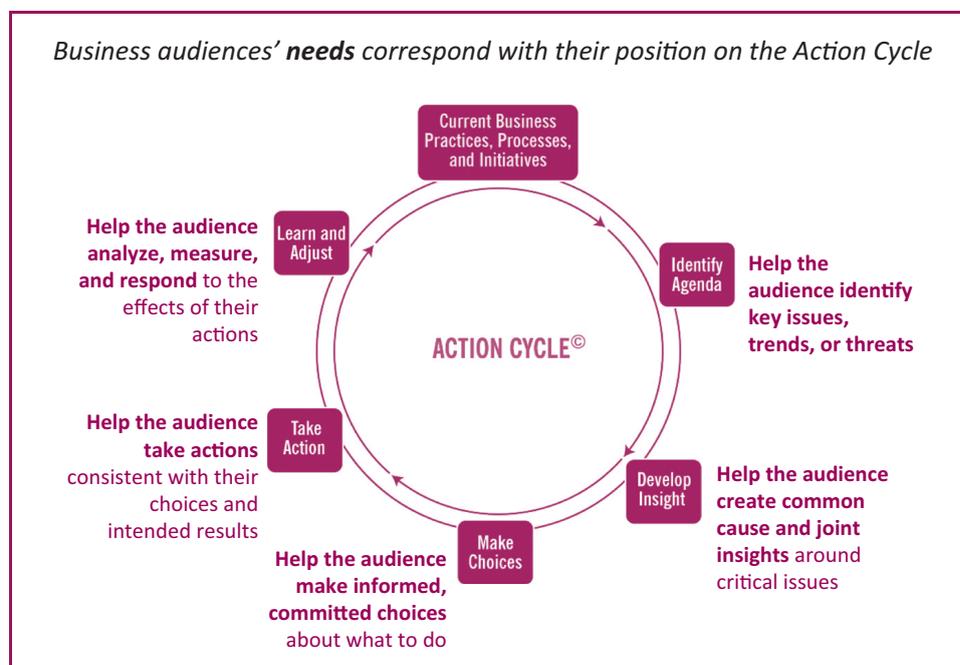
Element 2: purpose

Powerful stories can achieve significant purposes. Persuasive leaders have a concrete picture of what they are trying to accomplish with a story, and the actions they want the audience to take. Then they make sure that the story convincingly advances that purpose.

The purpose of a story represents your reason for telling the narrative to this particular audience, at this particular point in time, and on this particular subject. What does what you have to say effect your listeners? What do you want them to accomplish as a result of your story?

Your purpose will change based on the information your audience needs prior to its members taking action. These needs correspond with the audience's position on the Action Cycle (see Exhibit 1). We have identified five main steps groups take along the path toward a course of action. Know where your audience is in the Action Cycle, and you can better define the purpose of your narrative:

- **Identify the agenda:** target key issues, trends, opportunities or threats.
- **Develop insight:** create a common cause and joint insights around critical issues so that the audience is prepared to make some choices.
- **Make choices:** help the audience make informed choices about what to do.
- **Take action:** clarify actions that are consistent with the choices and intended results.



- **Learn and adjust:** explain how the listeners can analyze, measure, and respond to the effects of their actions.

Element 3: acts

Just as a play or movie consists of a series of acts, so too does an effective story. Acts are the component parts of a story that help you determine what you're trying to achieve with each section of the performance. Each act has a specific role, and they combine in different ways to form a narrative.

The first step in using acts effectively is to be able to identify them. Ten common acts form the building blocks of most business narratives:

- **Approach:** Outlines the method used to conduct the analysis.
- **Call to action:** Compels specific and unambiguous behavioral or attitudinal change.
- **Coming attractions:** Previews what is coming later in the narrative.
- **Context:** Establishes a common understanding of relevant information, but does not introduce new insights.
- **Credibility:** Gives the audience a reason to trust the story.
- **Evidence:** Offers data or other forms of analysis and information to support the narrative.
- **Future:** Provides a look at the way forward and a vision for a successful future.
- **Context:** Extends the meaning of the narrative by setting it in a broader framework.
- **Need:** Explains why the audience should pay attention to the story.
- **Payoff:** Highlights an intellectual or real reward for changing.

Effective narratives have simple and elegant structures that don't cram too many acts into the story, and don't jump back and forth between acts in a confusing manner. Every message should support exactly one act.

These acts provide you with the building blocks that are necessary to become a narrative architect. And so, as a narrative architect, you're faced with design choices: does my narrative need an act on credibility? Do I need to build towards a call to action, or should I save that for the next meeting? Can my audience be inspired to think about the larger picture, and if so, should I close with that, or open with it? How can I express the need behind this narrative in such a way that it truly connects with my audience, and shows them that I see the problem or opportunity through their eyes as well as my own?

Element 4: flow

Some people are natural storytellers. They are a small minority. The rest of the population needs explicit guidance to make their storytelling flow.

Everyone can learn from those effective communicators whose presentations routinely employ a logical sequence of appropriate acts. When joined together in a purposeful way, with thought to the flow and pacing of each step, a series of well-chosen acts can create a compelling and clear narrative structure.

Exhibit 2 shows two common combinations of acts in a traditional business presentation. In our experience, the most persuasive business communications feature just a few acts.

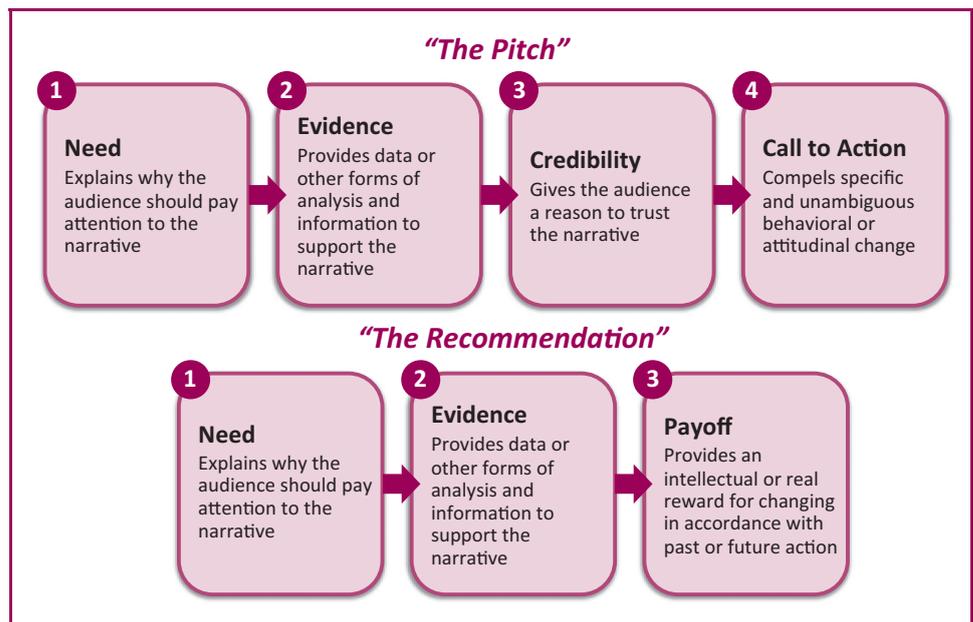
As you're deciding on which acts to include in a narrative and how to sequence them, you'll be considering the supporting messages that bring the act to life. Combine supporting messages within each act, and you begin to have the makings of a basic storyline.

Once you've gotten this far, however, there's no formula. As you weave together a sequence of acts and supporting messages, ask the following questions along the way:

Employ foreshadowing and echoing:

1. Are complex ideas presented gradually to hint at what's to come?
2. Are key ideas repeated in ways that are thought provoking and memorable?
3. Are images and themes repeated to emphasize key messages?

Exhibit 2 Two standard combinations of acts



Balance foreground and background:

1. Are the main messages unambiguously in the foreground?
2. Do the details support the main message?
3. Do you have one major idea in each section of the story?

Maintain internal consistency:

1. Are definitions, numbers, and units of analysis expressed consistently throughout the narrative?
2. Is the perspective and voice the same throughout?

Create a deliberate rhythm:

1. Does the pace allow information to be delivered at different speeds?
2. Does the writing employ diverse methods to express the message – from complex to simple, short to long, factual to anecdotal?

Incorporate tension:

1. Are contrasting ideas, perspectives, or images presented to elicit an emotional response?
2. Are conflicts introduced and resolved?

The combination of these and many other storytelling techniques adds up to the difference between an argument that gets politely heard and one that forcefully persuades.

Putting it all together

As you integrate these concepts into your speechmaking, remember a few key things. Storytelling is as much an art as it is a science. Successful storytelling requires both structure and creativity.

With some practice, leaders can learn to construct effective stories (and how to improve their own presentations by deconstructing the effective stories that they hear). Ultimately, this systematic approach promises to illuminate the choices a leader faces prior to making a presentation and provides a proven structure to make them. A deeper understanding of audiences, a more thoughtful and methodical purpose, and a clear and deliberate narrative structure consisting of carefully chosen acts and inspired flow all combine to yield purposeful results – a powerful message effectively delivered, received and acted upon.

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