



National Managers'  
Community

La communauté nationale  
des gestionnaires



# Get Real



THE ART AND POWER  
OF **STORYTELLING**  
IN WORKPLACE  
COMMUNITIES

Canada

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# Foreword

As Champion of the National Managers' Community, I am proud to present the first edition of *Get Real*. This book highlights the *power of storytelling in the workplace*, as illustrated by our leadership stories.

This little book is the third in a series that has set out to document and explore our leadership practices in the areas of learning and communication. It will support the ongoing learning and development of practitioners and leaders who are bringing this work into ongoing organizational change in the public service.

The National Managers' Community is committed to ensuring continuous learning and providing practical tools. Stories are a powerful communication tool. They are a core element of conversation, conversation is a core element of communication, and communication is a core element of organizational effectiveness. *Get Real* illustrates the storytelling concepts, our learning and our experiences.

One of the principles we live by as a community is that we need to widely and freely share what we know. We hope that, as you read what follows, you will rediscover your natural gift for storytelling and seek out the countless stories rich with knowledge and learning that are just waiting to be discovered in our workplaces.

*Ric Cameron*

*Senior Vice-President, Canadian International  
Development Agency, and Champion,  
National Managers' Community*



# Acknowledgements

First and foremost we would like to extend our appreciation for the continuous support of the National Managers' Community under the direction of Jill Lang Ward, for the leadership of the National Managers' Champion, Ric Cameron, for the National Managers Community Council and for the ADM Advisory Board in producing this publication *Get Real*.

We are also grateful for the space they have created for our work and their leadership in growing communities of practice across the country in Learning Organization, coaching and facilitation. It is in community that stories have their greatest impact. It has been a privilege to be part of this journey which has helped unlock our own stories and to be able to bring these stories to you. The practice of storytelling is emerging into the larger communication context in the Public Service. This book is written to share what we are learning in hopes that you can benefit from our experience as you work towards improving communication in your organizations.

We are appreciative of the ongoing support from our home departments: in particular, Gilles Lemieux, Executive Director, Learning Services and the Human Resources Services Directorate, Health Canada; Geoff Munro, Director General, Science and Programs Branch, Canadian Forest Service, Natural Resources Canada; Carolyn Davis, Assistant Deputy Minister, Indian and Northern Affairs; and Keith Hillier, Assistant Deputy Minister, Veterans Affairs Canada.

We also want to recognize the contribution of our community storytellers, Scott Serson, Geoff Munro, and Kathleen Libelt (formerly Keenlyside) for bringing this work into real time change in organizations.

Special thanks to Natural Resources Canada's Martin Durand (Senior Manager, Communications) and his team, as well as to Catherine Carmody, Julie Piché, and Francine Bérubé (Canadian Forest Service) for their help in producing this book.

Our heartfelt thanks to our Project Manager, Karen Bonner, for her unfailing "can do" attitude that has sustained this work.

We would like to dedicate this book to all the "red tomatoes". Red tomatoes are those of you who are open to change and possibilities. We found them in our practitioners who want to do this work, we found them in leaders who want to support this work and we found them in friends and family who gave us the space for this work.

*Bob Chartier*

*Sylvie Lapointe*

# Introduction

## A difference

*Strolling along the edge of the sea, a man catches sight of a young woman who appears to be engaged in a ritual dance. She stoops down, and then straightens to her full height, casting her arm out in an arc. Drawing closer, he sees that the beach around her is littered with starfish, and she is throwing them one by one into the sea. He lightly mocks her: “There are stranded starfish as far as the eye can see, for miles up the beach. What difference can saving a few of them possibly make?” Smiling, she bends down and once more tosses a starfish out over the water, saying serenely, “It certainly makes a difference to this one.”*

— Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander,  
*The Art of Possibility* (2000)

## Why this book?

Simply put, we want to make a difference in your lives as public servants. Along our journeys, we have been discouraged at times and elated at others. We have trusted our intuition and relied on our knowledge and passion to propel us forward. We have also dared to make mistakes, sometimes proceeding by trial and error. We have shed a few tears and jumped for joy. More than once, we have found ourselves floating on cloud nine with a beatific smile of satisfaction on our faces!

We want to share these stories with you. How do you put storytelling concepts into practice in the workplace?

How do you use the storytelling approach as a way to facilitate learning and transfer knowledge? What does this look and feel like in the “real world”? What would we do the same way? What would we do differently?

This little book may not have the look and feel of your typical government publication. This is intentional. The authors and their supporters and colleagues have been engaged in some quite non-traditional approaches to leadership and learning over the past few years, and describing that work sometimes requires new language as well as new techniques.

One huge breakthrough was our rediscovery of the art of storytelling. As we used it in a natural way in our work, we studied other practitioners and found a body of theoretical work and practice that seemed to make a lot of sense.

We have since been inundated with requests for storytelling seminars and help in integrating storytelling into the larger communication context in organizations.

We have always found that making up or using other people’s stories does not have the power of telling one’s own story, so we chose to use our own personal stories to build this work of learning. This book is about developing our own capacity to find and tell our own stories.

As Ric Cameron said in the Foreword, one of the principles we live by as a community is to share widely and freely what we know. So we decided that the time had come to put our storytelling knowledge and experience in writing. And what better way to teach storytelling than to use real-life stories?

In this book, we review the theory and concepts of storytelling and at the same time, we tell a few stories. We hope that you will find the book both informative and enjoyable.

Let us just say that our message is this: we can most definitely change the way we see the world and how we have an impact on it we can make a difference! And we are....

Dare to dance on the edge of your comfort zone, because that is the only way to learn and grow.

*Sylvie Lapointe*

*Bob Chartier*

*Karen Bonner*



## CHAPTER 1

# What is storytelling?

by Sylvie Lapointe

*We remember the stories a long time after the theories are forgotten.*

— Debahsis Chatterjee

Storytelling is at the centre of human experience. It is a compelling form of communication, a way to interact with each other. Storytelling is as ancient as humankind — it predates the written word and even the spoken word! Through stories we let people know what is important to us: our struggles and our life lessons, our beliefs, our values, our traditions, our hopes and our dreams. Telling stories is a way to honour our past, describe our present and shape our future.

Stories are a window into the personal world of the storyteller. The story he chooses to tell and the way he tells it reveals something about who he is. Stories are also a reflection of the storyteller's social world. They can promote and strengthen the social bonds of a family, institution, community or culture.

Stories are an interactive and dynamic experience between the storyteller and the listener. Every time a story is told it changes because the teller tells it in his unique way while tailoring it to his audience.

1

Stories are all around us. Each of us has a story to tell. In fact, some would argue that life experience is one huge story made up of thousands of smaller stories. No one can experience “reality” in exactly the same way as another person – we all have our own stories to explain what is around us and what is happening to us.

Stories are a powerful communication tool because they are a bridge between the head and the heart. Stories bring together images and words. They can convey information, build relationships and ignite people into action. That is why organizations all over the world are looking at storytelling as a promising tool for organizational change.

## History of storytelling

*An elder is sitting on the ground by the fire, surrounded by the people of his clan. He is speaking with assurance in a quiet voice. He communicates with gestures and sounds. People watch and listen intently because they know he is a wise man. He is telling the story of the great mammoth hunt: the trek through new lands, the strategies they used to follow the beast and trap it, and the bravery of the many men who helped in its capture. Some members of the clan were inspired to draw that story on the walls of their cave as a message for future generations.*

Stories have been told since the beginning of humanity. Stories have taken many forms: spoken or written, sung or drawn. Stories are a way to teach and to learn. Through stories we can share wisdom and knowledge gained through life experiences. We can offer an explanation of the mysteries of life, as in Aboriginal legends about the creation of the earth or the tales of the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology. Stories can also establish codes of conduct for living in a family or a community to ensure harmony and cooperation.

Every culture has its own set of stories that have been passed on from grandmothers to mothers to daughters – the oral tradition. Every generation

nuances and colours the myths and the folktales they retell – the stories are alive in the telling.

Stories are told because they have meaning – the storyteller wants to convey a message to his audience through the story. Meaning is a social phenomenon according to Stephen Denning, author of *The Springboard – How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (2001). Meaning is produced by individuals, groups, communities, societies and culture through language and agreed understanding. Meaning is dynamic in the sense that new meaning can evolve through new contributions from members or meaning can disappear from lack of use. There are typical narrative meanings found in a culture's myths, fairy tales, legends, histories and stories.

## Types of stories

- **Narrative:** a more formal term, referring to the prose that recounts happenings
- **Tale:** a somewhat elevated or poetical term usually suggesting a simple, leisurely story, especially a fictitious or legendary one
- **History:** an account of what has happened in chronological order – a record
- **Anecdote:** a short, entertaining account of a single incident, usually personal or biographical
- **Joke:** an amusing story told with the purpose of arousing laughter or an amusing trick played on someone
- **News:** reports of recent happenings, especially those broadcast over radio or TV, or printed in newspapers
- **Fable/Parable:** a fictitious story meant to teach a moral lesson

## Stories as a vehicle for learning

1  
Stories are a powerful communication tool because they enable listeners to make connections between what is said and their own experience; this helps create meaning and can trigger people into action. It is practically impossible to listen to a story passively without having related thoughts or, even more likely, emotions. Like it or not, stories will pull you in — they will elicit some kind of reaction from you (consciously or unconsciously):

“Well, what do you know, I have been through something just like that!” or

“Hmm, interesting ... never thought about it quite this way” or

“Wow! That was truly inspiring” or even

“Don’t believe it for a minute — it will never work here!”

In the context of organizational change, stories can act as “springboards” to accelerate understanding. In his book *The Springboard*, Denning explains how he came up with this concept of springboard stories. He was struggling to get his organization excited about a new knowledge sharing initiative he was responsible for at the World Bank. At first, he made the traditional PowerPoint presentations with graphs and analytical pie charts to support what he was proposing, but he was dissatisfied with the lack of sympathetic attention. One day, a colleague told him the story of a health worker in Zambia who logged in to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site and got the answer to the question on how to treat malaria. The colleague was using this story to make the point that knowledge sharing across organizations is already working. Denning started to use this story in his presentations and he noticed positive body language, heightened attention and even some excitement. People came to him afterwards asking questions focused on how

to implement the ideas, rather than questions that were meant to challenge and debate. Denning says:

*What is amazing to me is that the success in communicating the idea of knowledge sharing, ... and in re-energizing a huge group of people comes not from crafting a superior chart (for his PowerPoint presentation), but rather from throwing the chart aside and simply telling a story. (p. 51)*

The more he relied on analysis (rational and logical thinking) to make a point, the more resistance he faced. When instead he told a story, things became easier. What Denning learned is that a story can be used as a springboard to help the audience make leaps in understanding. A springboard story is not a long elaborate tale meant to convey large amounts of information. It is rather a short and to-the-point narrative that triggers a new story in the listeners' minds. The springboard story is an impetus for listeners to unconsciously reorganize tacit information (knowledge, attitudes and perceptions) into new patterns and create new insights.

Denning warns us, though, that culture, being what it is, will generate “anti-stories” in opposition to the springboard stories – negative stories that are cynical counters to the “good” stories. Anti-stories can be seen as opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue.

## **Why tell stories?**

**Denning (2001) gives three reasons to tell stories:**

1. Telling stories builds trust because you are sharing a bit of yourself. The story you tell says something about what you value, what you find inspiring, what you find humorous, etc. Telling a story is a social phenomenon that overlooks status or rank. It is non-hierarchical.
2. Telling stories can unlock passion because it sparks feelings and emotions such as interest, curiosity, fear, amusement, puzzlement or anger.

Stories help connect the head to the heart — they are a bridge between the ideas and the feelings.

3. Telling stories is a dynamic process. Storytelling is a collaborative effort between the teller and the listener. New meaning emerges from the telling and retelling of stories.

## Key elements of a good story

### To be a good story it should

- Be brief and simple
- Be told from the perspective of a single character
- Describe a dilemma that is familiar to the audience
- Have a degree of strangeness or peculiarity to capture the audience's interest and stimulate the imagination
- Be at the same time plausible and oddly familiar
- Be true (or have an element of truth)
- Have a happy ending (or give hope)
- Be told with a bit of flair and passion

## How to tell a story

Be reassured, you don't have to be a wannabe Hollywood actor to deliver a good story!

If there is one magical key to a good performance, it is to tell the story in your own unique way. You have got to be authentic in your delivery — people will sense an “act” from a mile away, and it could backfire. Before listeners consider seriously what you are saying, you have to gain their trust. They have to believe you and they have to believe that you have something important to say. Just be yourself.

On his storytelling Web site, Tim Sheppard ([www.timsheppard.co.uk/story/faq.html](http://www.timsheppard.co.uk/story/faq.html)) gives this advice about performance:

- Pretend that you are confident – don't make apologies as you start, either with your body language or your words.
- Relax, breathe and play – this is meant to be fun!
- Don't memorize it. Tell it with your own words and your own images.
- If you get stuck, keep going. There are no mistakes, because no one knows what you were going to say, so they can't tell if you've messed up. Think on your feet and improvise – sometimes you will stumble on real gems.
- Keep your stories short (10 minutes or less).
- Pay attention to pacing. Use moments of silence.
- Take time to finish well. Don't rush through the punchline.

**Here are a few suggestions of our own:**

- Develop your own style: some can pull off being a bit abrasive, others are better at telling the inspirational stuff.
- Self-assurance comes with practice. Start small with a few kind friends. Then move to larger groups. Ask for feedback. Be willing to make a few mistakes along the way.
- Learn to project your voice. It's all about breathing and using your diaphragm.
- As the drama teacher would say, ar-tic-u-late.
- Use your body. Some stories are well suited to movement or gestures. Your facial expression can help convey emotion.
- Be daring. Sometimes props can add a lot of entertainment value to the storytelling. Some

props may even help create meaning and increase the chances that the message will be remembered.

- Tell a story that has meaning for you, or else it will feel empty or superficial to the listeners.
- Above all – BE YOURSELF!

## Collecting your stories

Telling stories is how we share experiences, understand each other and create community. Every conversation is full of stories. Listen and read. Be on a constant lookout for compelling stories to tell. Build your own “library.” Create a file folder of stories. Or write them in a notebook. You can even record them on a cassette tape.

### For inspiration you can look at:

Your own personal and professional lives for material:

- Good boss/bad boss stories
- Coaching stories (e.g., soccer, hockey, baseball)
- Family stories
- People you have met who inspired you or made you determined to be a better boss, colleague, employee, etc.
- Your personal trials and tribulations and the lessons learned
- Travel stories – the adventure, the unexpected, and the different cultures encountered
- Books you have read that had an impact on you
- Movies you have seen
- News – stories you have seen or heard in the media
- “Stealing” and borrowing from others

# Ethics of storytelling

Here are a few pointers on the ethics of storytelling:

- **Preserve anonymity and confidentiality.** You have to be the judge of what is right and what is wrong. Use your judgement. For example, if you are telling a “bad boss” story, it is wise and kind to not name names or give any other telltale details about where and when it happened. Enough said.
- **Know your audience and adapt the story to their culture.** Do a bit of research beforehand to find out who is in the audience and to get a sense of how they look at the world. What is fair game to poke some fun at? And what is off limit – what are their sacred cows? You probably don’t want to tell a story that criticizes the federal response to the SARS crisis to a group from Health Canada, for example.
- **Know how to dance the line between political correctness and a humorous poke at the status quo.** Sometimes it is okay to push the envelope a bit by telling a story that would invite people to look at themselves in another light, as long as it is done with respect and with good intentions.

# The power of storytelling

by Sylvie Lapointe and Bob Chartier

*It is faith that moves mountains,  
not facts.*

— Annette Simmons

## A critical value

Have you ever worked with someone who particularly prided himself as being the “action person”? You know whom we mean. They fly into the meeting room, scowl at those doing a little catch-up visiting, and fidget in their chair until things get started. They immediately grab the airspace and let us know right away how busy they are these days. All this is a lead up for them to pound the table and announce that they are fed up with any yakking and messing about and they are ready to get right into action.

Yes, the “action” people — they can be quite intimidating, especially in organizations that have a culture that, at best, feels a bit sluggish, slow to make decisions and perhaps just a tad bureaucratic. For many of us, the “action” people often seem like a breath of fresh air. Great, we say, let’s get going on this and get it off our plate. For others, these people seem just a tad “bullish.” Often you could see that the action people were getting their way, but the arms folded in front

of chests around the room were a strong indicator of the future commitment to the reluctantly agreed-upon action.

Here is one of Bob's famous stories to make a point about getting to action the "right way":

*I recall an incident back in 1992 when I was a graduate student at the University of Toronto. I was taking a course in consultation skills and I was partnered with another member of the class. Our final objective was to get an agreement and a contract signed between the two of us. Sounded pretty straightforward to me. My partner was a doctoral student from Hong Kong, a smart, focused and generally nice guy. The course progressed quite well and we were getting near to being able to close it out with a signed contract.*

*Except that we were not anywhere near getting that signature! My partner seemed to be stalling. Every time I proposed clinching the deal, he seemed to wriggle away. My frustration grew. Finally one day we met in the hall. "Can't we get this darn thing done?" I implored, anxious to get my "A" and move on. "Not right now," he always insisted, but this time he followed up with an invitation to lunch.*

*I agreed and the next day he took me deep into Chinatown for what turned out to be an extraordinary lunch. After introducing me to some Chinese food that I had never had the pleasure of eating before, after the telling of all sorts of stories about who we were, where we came from and such, he stopped me cold as we sipped green tea with a "Why don't we sign that contract now?"*

*I was, to say the least, a little baffled.*

*"What is going on here?" I insisted.*

*"Well, Bob," he replied, "I am just trying to teach you a lesson."*

*“What sort of lesson?” I asked.*

*“Well,” he said, “if you ever plan to do business with Asian people in the future, you must understand that before we can do business or finalize a deal we must feel secure in knowing you. We must establish a relationship with you before we can commit to the deal. Up until we ate together, told stories together and really got to know one another, we did not have a relationship. Now we do, and now we can complete our work.”*

*It was a wonderful lesson. I am forever grateful that he took the time to teach me so well. But you know, I still love those “action people.” I guess I didn’t make the full connection.*

## **A coaching model to storytelling**

Annette Simmons, in her book *The Story Factor* (2001), makes a point that really resonates with us. She says:

*People don’t want more information. They are up to their eyeballs in information. They want faith—faith in you, your goals, your success, the story you tell... Facts do not give birth to faith. Faith needs a story to sustain it. (p. 3)*

When you share your stories, you share a bit of yourself—you share the truths that you value. A good springboard story is grounded in reality. It feels real to people. You need to help them uncover their own interpretation of the story so that it starts to feel real to them. Simmons says, “Once people make your story their story, you have tapped into the powerful force of faith.” (p. 3)

But before they will give you and your story any attention or value, you have to build a relationship with them.

Paul Lefebvre, our coaching elder, taught us that there are three conversations in coaching:

- There is a conversation for relationship.
- Then there is a conversation for possibility.

- And finally, there is a conversation for action.

This model suggests that before we can move to action, it is wise to build relationships through which we can explore new possibilities.

## 1. Relationship

*I come from a family of teachers and inherited a deep desire to facilitate learning. My grandmother taught in a drafty log cabin in northern Quebec in the early 1900s; my father and mother volunteered their time, evenings and weekends, to teach health education to young married couples; my brother and sister are primary school teachers ... well, you get the picture. For me, life can be distilled into two essential things: learning and teaching. And that is why I am here today ... to share with you what I have learned and to learn from you!*

Sylvie has used this bit of intro as a way to break the ice before giving a workshop. How would you react? Would you listen differently to what follows? Simmons calls this story a “Who am I?” and a “Why am I here?” kind of story. It demonstrates who the speaker is and it provides an explanation of his or her intentions.

Simmons reminds us that in order for our stories to make an impact on the audience, we need to let them know who we are first. People need to answer the question “Can I trust you?” before they allow themselves to be influenced by a story.

Personal stories allow you to share something about yourself that may not otherwise be visible. But personal stories are not the only way to reveal “who” you are to your audience. You can share some of yourself by telling fables, parables, historical stories or even someone else’s personal story, because the story you select, the way you tell it, the emphasis you give to one aspect or another of the story are all windows into who you are. Your audience will listen if they think you are authentic – if they sense that you care. They

will turn off if they sense that you are just going through the motions, as if reciting lines from a teleprompter.

This is true in teams and organizations as well. If there is no relationship, you have to build it. If there is a relationship, you have to strengthen it. Don't make the mistake of assuming the relationship is strong without testing or practicing relationship-building tools. Many teams believe they have solid relationships ("after all, we work together every day"), and then they start doing something simple like a morning "stand-up". It soon becomes apparent that their relationships needed a little work, a little conversation.

In a meeting, putting the relationship first could be as simple as using a "check in" at the beginning of the meeting to give everyone a voice right from the start. A committee or work team might solidify existing relationships or new ones by building a team charter together. A "team charter" pulls together the "who we are" (values, skill inventory, code of conduct) with the "how we want to work together" (vision, service standards, protocols, roles and responsibilities).

## **2. Possibility**

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.*

— Marcel Proust

So the relationship is strong ... now can we finally get to some action? Not so fast. Let's say you are buying a car. You have a pretty good relationship with the salesman; actually he is your brother-in-law. He has the car for you. You are never going to find another car like this, at this price in this town. So, are you going to buy it? Somehow, I don't necessarily think so. You may still want to look at other opportunities. Will this price match with one you could get in the

small town an hour north of here? Will this price match other dealers who may have special offers on right now?

Let's face it, jumping into action before exploring possibilities is perhaps not the wisest strategic move. If you are working around a table, on a team or in a larger system and you push or get pushed into action without opening up and exploring all the possibilities, the action you choose might not only be inferior, but it could also create problems.

2 Albert Einstein said: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." How can we expect to get to a new and exciting destination if we always drive the same car, on the same route at the same speed? In other words, we need to step back from what we "think" we know and have the self-discipline to look at things differently if we wish to make some new discoveries and some progress.

We have learned from coaching that it is human nature to form habits and to have set patterns of behaviour. This is our comfort zone. Teams and organizations have comfort zones too. We sometimes call these comfort zones "the culture." The culture is a set of rules, formal or informal, that determines what is possible or not. The challenge therefore is to create the conditions for creative thinking and problem-solving within a team (or an organization), in order to help them uncover alternative solutions that may reside outside the culture.

So how do we open our minds (and hearts) to new possibilities? Get people talking! Actually, more than that, get people thinking together rather than talking at each other! William Isaacs, author of *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (1999), makes a distinction between discussion and dialogue. Isaacs says that "discussion is about making a decision: unlike dialogue, which seeks to open possibilities and see new

options, discussion seeks closure and competition.” Dialogue, on the other hand, is about exploring the nature of choice – reordering our knowledge through new insights.

There are many simple tools that help create space for new conversations and, at the same time, engage both sides of the brain (the logical left side and the creative right side) to elicit new possibilities. This is why we love brainstorming in meetings, using “work-outs” in problem-solving meetings and utilizing large group processes like “open space” and “courtyard cafés” to allow whole systems to explore greater possibility. (See Chartier, 2002, for more information.)

Meaningful conversations will unveil possibility stories that can be retold throughout the organization and inspire the troops. Possibility stories are simply stories that inspire one or many to dream about a different future, much like Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous “I have a dream ... ” speech which outlined a new world vision where everyone is truly equal.

One of the best ways we know to use stories to help create an inspiring vision is the “appreciative inquiry” process, where you ask people to tell each other a personal story about a peak moment in their career when they felt true leadership or effective teamwork, for example, was demonstrated. From these real stories from real people living and working in the same organizational culture, dreams can flourish. These are dreams that envision taking what is working well in some pockets of the organization and expanding it to the rest of the organization as a whole. The stories of past successes and best practices become the impetus for imagining an exciting future.

In many ways our ability to see new possibilities depends on our mindset, our personalities – whether we see the glass half full or half empty. Have you ever heard the story about the three bricklayers? It goes something like this:

Three bricklayers are busy at their craft when a man stops by and asks the first one, "What are you doing?" The man replies, "Can't you see? I am laying bricks on top of one another with some mortar!" The second man replies, "I am just building a wall." The third man says, beaming, "I am building a great cathedral!"

2

A few years ago, Sylvie spent a whole day learning with Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989). Covey explained how important it was for leaders to develop personal mission statements and be clear about the values and principles they hold dear, because that should be a compass for how they lead their lives. One man stood up and said, "That is all well and good, but in my organization I keep hearing 'We are doing it this way because we have always done it this way,' and people have resigned themselves to the status quo — many of them are just counting the days to retirement!" "This is a very common complaint," Covey replied, "and here is my answer: 'Be an island of excellence in a sea of mediocrity.'" In other words, it is up to you to "be the change you want to see in the world," as Mahatma Gandhi said.

### 3. Action

Okay, so now that you've got a vision ... it's time to move to the action we all crave. Keep in mind, we never suggested that building relationships and exploring possibilities had to take a long time. If you use good tools and practices and encourage the storytelling, things can move along speedily. The action plan born out of the fire of relationship building and the creativity and innovation that comes from exploring possibilities will have a much greater chance of success than actions that are simply meant to extinguish fire(s) with pure speed and power.

Action, of course, implies that there is commitment on all sides. Commitment seldom comes without a relationship. An action plan without committed relationships around the table, within the team or through-

out the organization, is doomed to bureaucratic compliance.

So what kind of stories can lead people to action? A classic example is President Kennedy's "Man on the Moon" speech given on May 25, 1961:

*I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth.*

That part was the vision ... and then he went on to make a call to action:

*No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish.*

For a story to become a springboard to action, it needs to suggest a direction through the strength of its message rather than dictating a step-by-step approach. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry summarizes this point beautifully in this quote: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to go to the forest to gather wood, saw it and nail the planks together. Instead teach them the desire for the sea."

Finally, let's recall why we tell stories. We tell stories to connect with others, to touch them, to inspire them to find their own stories and to build a bridge between the head and the heart within individuals and within organizations.

In our workplace, stories are a way to relate, a way to learn from each other, a way to dream together and a way to create momentum towards action!



# Storytelling in the workplace

by Bob Chartier

*We all love a good story, and in a heavily structured, rule based environment, it is one form of communication that does not preach. Perhaps stories strike such a deep chord because each of our lives is a story, and it is our stories that play themselves out in the work place, whether we are aware of it or not. Our work adds to our stories and provides fertile ground to transform and grow.*

— Catherine Auger, Health Canada

Consider this, should you find yourself in a room full of employees. Ask them to write on the flipchart their top issues in the workplace today. It is a fairly sure bet that communication would be among the top five or, at the very least, the top ten of those listed.

Try as we might to get better at it, communication, it seems, is still the weak line on the hockey team. We have already addressed the issue of how the organization tends to see our communication departments and efforts as “managed communication,” with a strong

emphasis on speaking points, key messages and briefing notes. We hold seminars on “listening skills,” business writing and improving presentations. This is all well and good, but we might want to consider some benefits of also going back and revisiting some of the more basic forms of communication.

Most would agree that storytelling is probably one of the oldest and most well known methods of communicating with other human beings. One can easily imagine the news of the day being told through stories around the fire in a prehistoric cave. Oral histories were of course primarily focused on the story. Storytelling continues to have a huge presence in contemporary life. The news networks use the storyboard as the core business tool for their operations; the best music and art, some would argue, is still based on a storyline; and the transmission of values and spiritual ideas in our societies still relies heavily on the use of storytelling and narrative.

3 Storytelling in the workplace is another matter. “Give me a break!” you can hear a certain executive blurt, “We’re busy people here, with lots to do, we have a great need for more focus, and I have no time to deal with a bunch of stories.”

In the world of organizations and work, the word “storytelling” is seldom heard and, even if it is heard, it probably does not have the same impact of, say, “budget projection.” One might argue that it is time to reconsider our priorities.

There are three specific areas where storytelling already exists in our organizations, but in times such as these, this technique is perhaps not acknowledged, encouraged or mastered. These three key areas are leadership, continuous learning and organizational pride. One might make a good argument that storytelling is as fundamental to leadership as hotdogs are to baseball. It is memory, it is connection, it is essence and it is perhaps even ... soul.

## Leadership

One of the key elements to achieving personal mastery and leadership ability is the degree to which one's true self grows and, in essence, becomes stronger and more visible than the persona in which we cloak ourselves to conform with the world around us. It appears that modern leadership in today's corporate and public worlds would have the persona trumping the self in the interests of a leadership driven by the persona-cloaked version of managed corporate communications.

How many of us have sat in the room as the CEO, the Deputy Minister or the Director stands before us preparing to speak. Perhaps it is in the middle of tough times, our hearts are in our hands and we need to hear a vision of success, be given a true sense of purpose and maybe even just have a glimmer of hope.

She reaches down and flicks on her PowerPoint presentation.

We are now "on message," keying into the twelve speaking points, and our hearts sink deep into our chests in order to avoid further damage.

When did our leaders stop speaking to us and start presenting to us instead? It is hard to say, but we might finger the dominating emergence of technology in the workplace as one major factor.

It is no secret that public speaking is a critical aspect of leadership. If you want people to follow you, an ability to speak with them is important. It is also no secret that public speaking is right up there, along with jumping off a bridge with a rubber band tied to your leg, in the top fears of normal human beings. Get over it. Commuting, eating fast food and Internet dating are all much more scary, and people are doing them every day. If you are a part of the leadership world, however, you have power, people and toys to protect you from this scary monster.

When we have some power, we can choose to speak to these people or we can choose to look busier in our corner office and pretend that speaking to people is not real work.

We also have elves. These are the people who put the words in our mouths. They draft the speech, they write the briefing note, and they get the message. They want to please. They want to protect and they want no mistakes. They live in a black-and-white world of managed communication, and they don't want you to get hurt.

And we have technology. "Sir, we can put this whole thing together for you in a great PowerPoint presentation." We will make sure it is all there, and you can be assured that as you stand there in the dark and hit the button (or have an elf hit it for you), that there will be no mistakes, the 'i's will be dotted and the 't's crossed and the font will be your favourite. The message will flow.

3  
*Susan (not her real name) was working for a director general who needed to talk to a large group of partners. In an ironic twist, the talk was to be about leadership. Her director chose to deliver a presentation instead of talking to them. Susan and a colleague drew the short straw and were given the assignment to build the PowerPoint presentation. It just about put them under. Every day, their efforts would be bounced back to them with frustration and anger. After three weeks, it was reduced to: "This font will never do, and I hate that background colour." Susan was near tears when the draft was thrown back at her with the snap, "This thing has no passion, get some passion into it!"*

*She wanted to let out a career-limiting scream, "Of course there is no passion in it, you idiot, it's a PowerPoint presentation! Passion can only come from you, your commitment, your heart, your vision, your values, your energy, and your character—your true self."*

*Instead, she went back and added a Dilbert cartoon—they always like that.*

Leadership just may require something more than perfection ... the honesty of warts and all.

Imagine a rancher trying to communicate better with the people who work with and for him. Perhaps he is dealing with his youngest son, a daughter and son-in-law, three hired hands and a ranch foreman. Can you imagine him coming up with six speaking points for this year's feed management project, and a presentation on the policy implications of federal changes to the size of new cow-calf operations? I suspect that most ranchers in their non-MBA leadership way would sit down with the staff and engage in a vigorous, straightforward conversation on where the ranch was going and what they all have to do to get there. The conversation, I'll bet, would be peppered with stories. Great grandfather's standoff with the eastern bankers at the turn of the century would rekindle the vision of a business worth fighting for. The neighbour's upcoming bankruptcy auction and the plans to buy some of their old machinery at an inflated price speak more eloquently to our values than does a framed list on the barn wall. A funny story about Carter and the calf that came too soon and ruined the first date he'd had in six months states clearly our response to reward and recognition.

We might want to ask ourselves why communication looks and feels so much different in a boardroom than in a tack room.

We may have to consider that as we "progressed" along the evolutionary path of communication, we may have let slide a few of the basic necessities. I would argue that one of those essentials could be the art of storytelling.

The whole concept of storytelling in a corporate setting is probably as welcome as ending a financial planning meeting of the Board with Kumbya. Let's just say that storytelling may have an image problem.

- It's for kids, right?
- It's not relevant to business.
- It's not professional.
- It sounds pretty touchy-feely to me.

Let us pry open our spring-loaded corporate minds for just a moment and consider the possibilities.

I remember listening to a speaker who was trying to help the audience understand the nature of the paradigm or “mental model.” He related the old story of a group of primitive people who were hunting a large animal and had it trapped in a corner. They were throwing rocks and such at it, to no serious avail. Along comes a Michael J. Fox type of character from the future, who hands them a big modern gun with which to finish the job. They immediately throw the gun at the animal. In their mental model of the world, you kill animals by throwing things at them, and until they agreed to “unlearn” the old mental model, they could not make use of the new technology and make the change needed to do the job better.

I don't know about you, but that little springboard story helped me “get it” immediately. Good stories are a powerful key to new learning.

Leaders have always used the story to make a point. This example is a vague recollection of an old Tommy Douglas story.

*Years ago, the mice got tired of being pushed around and decided that they needed some leadership. A huge black cat got wind of it and began to campaign for the job. He was a slick talker and a cool cat, and the mice voted him in. After a few years, it became apparent that nothing had changed. Mice were still disappearing. They decided to hold a vote this time. A very hip white cat ran against the black cat and won handily.*

*Mice still continued to disappear. In the next election, there was a vicious battle for leadership between the black cat*

*and the white cat, each vilifying the opponent and arguing for its own moral superiority.*

*The third candidate, a mouse, struggled to be heard. He was asking the mice to consider an alternative to cat leadership.*

The art and practice of classical oration was fundamentally based on the art of storytelling. If one wanted to be a good communicator and a respected leader, one studied and learned the art of the story.

So what happened? Why are there no storytelling courses in the Queens MBA program? Why is there no great demand for executive storytelling sessions?

## **Continuous learning**

The second place where storytelling lives in organizations is in the practice of continuous learning, the transmission of knowledge.

*Imagine yourself in an immigration office at a small border crossing somewhere on the 49th parallel. It is two in the morning, traffic is slow and a couple of officers are shooting the breeze, sipping high-test coffee and keeping an eye on the window. Outside a small, white SUV pulls up and is proceeding through the line. The older officer turns to the younger and starts in: "See that little Bronco going through? It was almost two years ago now, three o'clock in the afternoon, when we pulled over the same model; we had a tip-off on the two guys and we decided to take a closer look. We went through that car like a rat through a dumpster. It felt rotten but we couldn't find anything. Even the dog came up cold. We were about to give it up when I caught the one guy sneaking a glance at the left rear fender, a 'sure tell.' I went back again and got down a whole lot deeper and wouldn't you know it—there is an interesting space back in that model just behind the spare wheel carrier. Two litres of crystal meth in a leaded envelope. A clean bust."*

So what just happened here?

Nothing special, you might say. Two guys chewing the fat on a night shift. It happens every day in the workplace. Anytime, anywhere – on the edge of the desk, in the hallways, coffee shops, lunchrooms and cubicles. Somewhere, someone is likely telling a story. At first blush, one might tend to see all this story-telling as somewhat counter-productive, but given a closer look we realize that there is much more going on. As the story unfolds, the listener is indeed being entertained but, at the same time, he is being informed. He is learning some new material, knowledge is being transferred, and innovative thinking is in progress.

I sat in a coffee shop in Sidney, B.C., last week over-hearing a conversation in the next booth. It appeared to be a group of heavy-duty equipment mechanics on a break, but the story being told was deeply rooted back in the workplace. The whole story revolved around their repairing some sort of hoisting device on a large fishing boat, and the best part was the moment when they almost lost the whole thing in the drink. There was laughter, terror and thoughtful analysis as the story was spun out. It is interesting to think about how we approach learning.

Teachers and trainers who are still primarily in the industrial age mode tend to transmit knowledge through lectures, note taking, curriculum, exercises and evaluations. Regular human beings tend to teach and learn through the art of conversation, which relies heavily on the telling of good stories. It happens everywhere: in the workplace, in the corridors, on the edge of the desk, and on long trips in cars and airplanes. Training lives in boardrooms and training rooms. Continuous learning lives in the heart of the workplace and is primarily transmitted through our stories. We ignore it or disrespect it at our peril.

## **Organizational pride**

The third important area where storytelling lives in organizations is, of course, in the organization's story

itself. Every organization has a story. If you go to work for Apple Computer, you will soon know by heart the story of Steve Jobs and his buddies, hunkered down with the dogs and cans of soda in the family garage, stealing computer components from the big guys, the rock and roll cranked up, and fully determined to build the best, easiest-to-use computer in the world.

However, one wonders if the young woman recently hired by Health Canada knows the stories of the brave federal public service nurses who would fly critically ill babies out of Tuktoyuktut in a whiteout blizzard, risking their lives to save others. What about the Natural Resources Canada scientist who worked for years in a windowless lab, charting the critical indicators that would lead to our first hints of global warming? Every public service organization has a story. They actually have many, but somehow the stories have faded and have been replaced by policies, briefings and strategic plans.

It might not hurt to try and find these stories. It might not even hurt to start telling these stories and to start honouring our own workplace histories in even a small way.

We know:

- Our family values come from our family stories;
- Our spiritual values come from our stories of faith;
- Our community values come from the stories we hear where we live; and therefore
- Our workplace values have to come from our workplace stories.

Let's go find them. Then tell them.



# Storytelling from the field

*Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.*

— G.K. Chesterton

## **At least it got us up from the boardroom table: a deputy's story**

*by Scott Serson*

*I just wanted to make a difference. When I accepted the position of Deputy Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in 1995, I knew I had to hang on tight as it was going to be an interesting ride. On the policy front, we had treaties being negotiated, land claims to settle, residential school residuals and self-government negotiations occupying all four burners on the stove. On top of all that, the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was imminent.*

*The organization was committed but a bit weary. My sense was that we were burning the candle at both ends. Our feedback told us that our staff were not energized and*

that many felt disempowered as well as disconnected from First Nations as devolution created changes to the relationship. They felt alienated from a management style that was too much command and control, they saw internal communication as weak, workload was high, and morale after all the downsizing exercises was, to say the least, quite low. And finally, my own management team was in some need of refreshing. The veterans were tired, the rookies anxious and I was an unknown quantity.

So I had my work cut out for me.

But I had been left an idea by a predecessor, Harry Swain. He had undertaken a large effort to consult staff on the organization. The staff I talked to were disappointed by the results but they were excited when they talked about the empowering nature of the process.

I decided to see if I could recapture that excitement, and called for a massive new look at the organization. My Deputy's Council for Change was, for the times, a unique approach. I took a cross-section of people from the organization and had them make recommendations as to how we should proceed. They recommended a number of areas, from internal communications to rewards and recognition. We pulled together national teams in each of the areas and turned them loose to study, consider, consult and make recommendations.

It was a good effort and many changes and innovations came out of that process.

One of the characters that popped out of the system at that time was Bob Chartier. I knew we had supported his return to graduate school but he didn't really show up on my radar until the Council for Change. He was a participant in the early talks, he sat on the Internal Communications team and he, as many of you know, didn't hesitate to offer his opinions and ideas.

I was intrigued by some of what I heard, especially his ideas on system tools to get teams and systems talking

*together in different and perhaps more focused ways. It seemed like a way to give employees a greater chance to participate in the decisions that affected them.*

*My first test of these learning organization tools came about on a frosty –40-degree evening in Winnipeg. We were in a windowless room in a hotel basement having a three-day management meeting. There was concern that as a management team we had to take a cold, hard look at ourselves and how we would respond to the critique that we were in need of a new approach to leadership.*

*I remember Sandy Thomson and Bob being introduced to the rather imposing senior management team who were very comfortably ensconced around a huge boardroom table. The two didn't compromise. "We can't work with you around this table," they insisted. "If you want to have a really good conversation about leadership, you're going to have to get out of your chairs tonight!"*

*All I recall is an evening of chatter, people in motion, Post-it notes flying around, and the walls getting seriously repapered with flipchart material.*

*Out of that pretty exciting evening came a draft of our new Leadership Profile. Six themes—communication, team building and facilitation, ability to see the big picture, risk taking, flexibility and innovation, and win-win negotiation—became the cornerstones of a new mental model for how we would approach leadership in the organization and, most critically, on our own senior management team. Later, we would replicate this exercise with groups of employees to ensure the work resonated with them. To my knowledge, the work in that hotel basement still drives the leadership efforts in the department.*

*Later on, Bob was to push us even further as a management team when we called him to help us build what he called a team charter. I was in the middle of an exciting but challenging experiment in public service management. There was much talk about women in the boardroom, visible minorities in the boardroom and, of course, we*

had always talked of Aboriginal representation in the boardroom. Trouble with all of it is that one day you have to do more than just talk. I looked at number four in our Leadership Profile, risk taking, and decided to jump into the deep end of the pool. It didn't take me long and soon I had almost 50% of my management team made up of First Nations executives. It looked good at the table and on paper, but was a bit of a challenge to manage. Once again, I considered those learning organization tools and principles and considered that the team charter might be helpful.

I remember pushing Bob off an already crowded agenda, and then finally agreeing to meet with him in the evening. My managers were tired, not impressed with an evening meeting, and demanding that we finish by nine o'clock.

Bob suggested having pizza and beer, and we once again walked into a room devoid of the comfort of tables and comfortable chairs. Four flipcharts in each corner of the room and the chairs arranged in a circle were our introduction to the interview matrix tool. The beauty of this tool was in the democratic quality of allowing everyone to have a say on each of the core questions. Our questions were based on what we felt were our charter issues: our values, how we wanted to work together, and what we needed to learn and improve to hopefully become a truly one-of-a-kind, cross-cultural senior management team.

4 Again, all I recall is a flurry of interviews, intense questioning, small groups talking, and intense but emotional and exciting conversation. At five minutes to nine, Bob walked out.

I couldn't get them to stop talking. They kept going and going. In fact, one of my First Nations regional directors suggested that, back home, they would all get into a circle to have a real honest conversation about what wasn't working. For us, that problem turned out to be our communications. We "white folks" were too cautious for fear of saying something stupid or offensive to our First Nations colleagues. Our First Nations colleagues were being cautious

*because they were new to the public service and were concerned about their lack of experience.*

*We didn't solve the problem that night, but we opened up with each other so the problems could be identified and we could begin to address them. We broke through some real barriers that night, and the team charter we built kept us honest and direct with each other for the rest of my term.*

*In addition to my immediate management team, we had over 400 managers across the country. They had just been through some hard changes in both policy and reorganization. The federal Program Review had just hammered the whole public service and we were all a bit worn down. I decided to hold an all-management meeting in Cornwall and, once again, I thought of Bob and how we might use his work at this meeting. I had heard of the term "open space" but had no experience of it; yet it sounded like it might work. Bob pitched it as a tool that would put over 8,000 years of public service experience together in the room, in conversation about their work, with no talking heads.*

*We bought it. People still remember that session. Again there were no tables, 400 of us in concentric circles, balloons in the air, and a prevailing aura of scepticism and hope.*

*At the end of the session, the room was crackling. The energy was up, we had identified critical areas of necessary response, and the walls were filled with ideas and great recommendations. The whole meeting seemed to go from humdrum to humdinger. First Nations guests commented that, for the first time, they felt a part of the whole, there for their intelligence and input and not for show. It had a profound effect on our managers, and we gained new respect for these systems tools.*

*For me the process of becoming a learning organization is just that—a process. You can't buy it or lease it from a management company. In fact, I'm not sure you can ever become one. It may be one of those things, like a cultural*

*process, that you just keep working on and searching for. It seems to work best by just doing and then doing again and again until it becomes nothing special, just what you do.*

## **Bob's response to Scott's story**

*There is a footnote to this All-Managers Meeting story. Some of the readers are familiar with my infamous "deck" story (I was making my first presentation to Scott Serson and the management team.) My "Hello, my name is Bob and I am a recovering overhead abuser," led to a few laughs. It also led to a lot of subsequent conversation with that team about the incessant use of decks and PowerPoint presentations in their meetings.*

*Apparently, Scott had been a bit influenced.*

*That evening in Cornwall, after the "open space," Scott was scheduled to give his first major speech to the whole management group. For weeks, the elves had been preparing the classic PowerPoint presentation. We had pages and pages of data and material on all the necessary, important, arcane issues of the day.*

*The presentation was planned for after dinner, and late afternoon found Scott, a number of assistant deputy ministers and, strangely, myself going over the body of his speech. As he pored over the pages and pages, he softly complained, "I'm just not sure this is what they need to hear from me right now."*

*"Yes sir, it is," was the quick reply. "It's all here: speaking points, strategic objectives and key messages. Stick to the script, sir, and you will be fine."*

*He didn't seem convinced. So some of us used this window of opportunity to suggest that maybe he was right; the PowerPoint could be given out later, but maybe he should just talk to them.*

*"What do you mean, talk to them?" he muttered.*

*“Well sir, just tell them your story.”*

*“What do you mean, my story?”*

*“Well, perhaps talk to them about the first time you visited an Aboriginal reserve. What did you see? How did you feel? Who was the first person you knew personally who was eliminated through Program Review? Those sorts of stories.”*

*Later, we noticed him in a small room with a pen, the back of an envelope, and a worried look on his face. We still didn't know what he was going to do.*

*That evening after the dinner, Scott walked up to the podium, called off the person who was going to run the PowerPoint presentation and, with a death grip on the podium, started telling us his story. I can't remember the stories, but I do remember that within 20 minutes I could see the odd tear in the eyes of some of those hard-bitten managers.*

*He had them. And he still has them. I knew that I had seen a true leadership moment, and that they would follow him anywhere from that night on.*

*And I was right.*

## The day I stretched myself to a new level

by Kathleen Libelt (formerly Keenlyside)

*As the Pacific Region's representative on the National Managers' Community Council (NMCC) for the past three years, I have been fortunate to not only meet and work alongside some pretty fantastic colleagues (now friends) from across the Public Service of Canada but also to have an opportunity to meet and work with experts on leadership.*

*Back in May 2002, I met Paul Lefebvre for the first time at the NMCC meeting in Ottawa. We met again in September 2002 at the next NMCC meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Paul exposed the Council to the principles, tools and practices in his Leadership Coaching model. This was a first for me to expand my thinking and learn how, through language and observation, to look at the world differently. I was so impressed by Paul and the coaching piece that I approached him and booked him to come out to Vancouver, British Columbia, in November 2002 to deliver his session on Coaching Practices for Managers to as many managers as I could muster. So impressed was I that I challenged Paul to join me in my quest (or was it a dare?) to "change the world" (something I have been personally striving towards in the Public Service of Canada at least) and guess what? He agreed! A partnership and friendship was formed.*

*Paul joined me in Vancouver and I walked with him and watched as he took approximately 200 managers as well as a few executives from all over the public service through the coaching practices. I took it all in and learned something new from every session. I watched and heard from individual managers how this impacted their lives in a positive way. I could actually SEE and FEEL the energy moving in every room—I could see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices and the voice in my own head was the loudest one of all. This is the way to mobilize the coaching energy in the public service—one by one. Never before have I been so moved or affected by such learning. Upon*

returning to my own office, I was approached by some of my own staff who had attended the sessions, and heard their stories about how Paul's teaching had made a difference for them and how practical it all seemed. Wow!

I digested the experiences and my newfound knowledge and filed it all away for safekeeping. I spoke to Paul a number of times after those sessions, and gathered and shared feedback from the participants. I wanted to continue being involved in coaching, maybe initiating a community of practice, or taking the Canadian Centre for Management Development (CCMD) five-day coaching course but wasn't sure how to do it or where to start. So I stood back, focused on the other issues that occur daily in our work and personal lives, and waited ... for something to happen.

On January 13, 2003, it happened. I received a phone call from a man who was coordinating a regional all-staff learning day for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). This man had heard of Paul Lefebvre and his coaching session from our November sweep and really wanted to add this to the list of workshops for their upcoming event. As luck (or fate) would have it, Paul was unable to attend but gave this man my name and highly recommended me to GIVE the session.

I spoke with Paul about this and felt extremely uncomfortable. This is not my material. I am not the master coach that Paul is. I have only just begun to learn about this model. What if I fail? What if I embarrass myself? What if I disappoint Paul? What if I can't?

Paul encouraged me to consider this request seriously. He told me how I had committed to him in September that I wanted to change the world. This was the start of that pledge he helped me to see. He told me how impressed he was with my abilities and that, in his observations and interaction with me, he was confident that I "have it" and would be very successful should I choose to challenge myself in this way. He promised to support me in any way I needed and to coach me through the process.

How could I say no to that?!

*I called the gentleman from INAC back and accepted the challenge to put on TWO Coaching sessions for 50 people each for their Learning Day. Was I nuts?!*

*I thought I must have been!*

*Then a miracle happened; an old friend/colleague who is now the HR Director in INAC, in Vancouver (Shelagh Ryan-McKnee) offered to help co-facilitate. I welcomed her with open arms and started to work with her and others to bring this session into my new reality. We co-developed scenarios for the coaching practices that spoke to the culture of INAC and we met and discussed our approach. Another co-facilitator came forward from INAC as well, an experienced and energetic manager who was on a CAP assignment (Morlene Tomlinson). I involved both of these “miracles” to add their own insights into how coaching had affected them and what they could offer from the Coaching Connection Web site. I wanted them to become involved so that the INAC staff could relate to their being senior managers from the department, and there was a hope on my part that they would catch the “coaching bug”!*

*In the days leading up to the Learning Day, I found myself flipping from excitement to dread. While flattered to have been asked, I still had serious doubts as to my own ability to do this subject any justice. Paul Lefebvre is a certified coach and master storyteller. He’s had years and years of education and practised experience, enabling him to truly teach this to others. I, on the other hand, felt inexperienced and ill-equipped to succeed. I felt that I was in over my head and worried about the outcome. I wanted the day to be value-added for the participants. I wanted to provide them with not just a good session, but a great session and that worried me.*

*I kept hearing Paul’s words ringing in my head: “Coaching is about helping others to further their own reflection, to help them to observe the world differently, to access the world in a different way and, if we can, we may see different results. What is the single thing I would like to change and what is it that is stopping me or causing me*

to think I can't do it?" Then the dare: "Kathleen, remember Halifax: Let's Change the World!!! Take a risk ... and make it happen!"

D-Day came February 17, 2003. "Today will either make or break my reputation and my credibility," I thought to myself. But something mysterious was driving me to do this, something internal, something strong, powerful and passionate. That something was my belief in the coaching practices, the practicality, the shift in thinking that just might "change the world," a lofty goal, but a goal nonetheless. What is that saying? "The greatest rewards come from the greatest risk." Okay here I go.

Following my introduction to the group, I started to speak. I provided the participants with background information on how this movement to "mobilize the coaching energy in the Public Service of Canada" had come about. I spoke about the creation of Regional Inter-departmental Management Councils, the National Managers' Community, and my mentor Paul Lefebvre. I noticed the level of interest and attentive listening in the room increase as I spoke about how leadership coaching would help each one of them see the world a little differently and how it would help them become better leaders in their own right regardless of their level in the organization. I felt invigorated, and a little nervous at how I would ultimately engage the participants and help them to open their minds a little given the level of complexity and self-motivation that coaching requires. I noticed that participants in the room were taking notes, nodding their heads and, better yet, asking questions! My nerves settled completely. I felt confident and secure in my level of knowledge and my own coaching ability. My words flowed with ease. "It's happening," I thought, "this is it," and, to my own surprise, I met the coach in me. Instantly, just like that. The best way to learn a subject is to teach it. I felt a commitment to the subject and the theory, and to those who were there to learn. Now I was having fun!

I don't know how to say this any differently than ... what an incredible experience! Both sessions went better than

*I had hoped or anticipated; so many participants came up to me, shook my hand and told me what a difference this day had made in their lives. One woman plans to look into the Leadership program at Royal Roads University, in Victoria, British Columbia. One man in the room, a naysayer throughout the session (by eye contact and body language), came up and told me he had had an “Aha!” moment; all of a sudden it all made sense, it all came together and it had a huge impact on him and his thinking. He thanked me for being there. Another woman came up and shook my hand and said she couldn’t believe how much of a difference this had made for her; she too thanked me for being there.*

*As people filed out of each session, smiling, shaking my hand and thanking me, I was dumbfounded. Could I really have not only survived but actually done a good job?! I felt re-energized, confident and successful.*

*I wanted to jump up and down and shout “Yahoo!” and “Wow!”—words that don’t adequately express my learning and breakthrough in this story. I realized that I do have power, strength, ability and KNOW-HOW. I can do this. I took a risk, I believed in myself as Paul and others believed in me to do it and I am proud of this accomplishment. I’m still up on the ceiling somewhere! People have commented to me that they have never seen me so energized and pumped up as I am right now. I stretched myself to a new level and guess what? I’m still standing! I made a difference that day in at least three people’s lives and for that I am thankful and proud.*

*I feel like the gardener that Paul saw in me ... I planted the seeds and now they will grow. I’m sure of it!*

## Leadership mastery level: the change model

by Geoff Munro

*I work for Natural Resources Canada in one of its sectors, the Canadian Forest Service (CFS). My story begins when I transferred to Ottawa from a regional position, to take over a Branch with about 50 people, responsible for the national coordination of science in an organization that is over 80% regionally located and spread right across the country. We work in the forest sector; our mission is to sustain Canada's vast forests and to support the maintenance of a strong forest sector. We work in the context of sustainable development, which means we are interested in the economic, environmental and social implications of a healthy forest.*

*In reviewing the challenges of the new position and the mandate of the Branch, it became clear to me that both a functional review and possibly a reorganization were due. Having worked with the team from the National Managers' Community in the past, while developing a Strategic Plan for the Great Lakes Forestry Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, I once again turned to them for some ideas and some help. I was looking for more than classic "consultative services" as I also wanted to help build the capacity in my leadership team, and in the staff of the Branch, to deal with changes in a participatory and constructive fashion. Together, we developed an approach which, admittedly, has been adjusted as we moved through the various processes, but nonetheless got us started down the road to change.*

*I began by preparing a four- to five-page description of the challenges that we needed to overcome and the objectives that we needed to achieve. The primary message in this paper was one of integration of science, regardless of source, while remaining relevant to the government agenda and to our clients, maintaining excellence in the science itself, and ensuring that our science products and*

services have an impact on our mandate. The challenge document was shared with all staff before our first staff day to kick off the discussions.

We then spent a day together, with all 50 of us as one big team, to discuss the way forward. Bob Chartier, Karen Bonner and Sylvie Lapointe worked with us through the day using the “open space” technique, asking an open-ended question about what I needed to know (from staff) about the Branch, the people in it and the work we need to do, as I began reviewing branch functions or changing the organizational design.

The whole team then got involved in discussing their responses and providing additional detail. The Leadership Team of the Branch used all this information in a three-day seminar that followed immediately after the staff day, again working with Bob, Karen and Sylvie. All the material was typed up and circulated to all staff of the Branch. It was in raw form, but that way staff could see their own ideas as well as those of their colleagues.

The three-day seminar that followed was part instruction on the various tools, part team building for the Leadership Team itself and part trying to digest all the information from the staff day and figure out a way forward. We arrayed and organized all the material from staff and ended up with six categories that we referred to as the building blocks of the new Branch. We also built a team charter together which has subsequently been signed by each member of the team, printed up in both official languages, and can be found today hanging in all of their offices. At the end of the seminar, we charted the next steps for the broader participation by staff.

Each member of the Leadership Team took one of the six building blocks and invited staff to self-nominate their interest in helping to flesh out more detail. With a team of two to three staff, we undertook a process of “appreciative inquiry” and set up an opportunity for all staff to be interviewed by the smaller teams. When we began, we were shooting for 60% coverage of the full staff

complement but, based on feedback, we quickly realized that the staff wanted to have their say and looked for the occasion to be interviewed. We ended up with most everyone being interviewed at least once, and a number were interviewed for their ideas on more than one building block. Once again, the feedback we received through the interviews was typed up and made available to all staff of the Branch in its raw form.

The next stage of the process was to once again get everyone together. We had a second staff day where all the material collected to date was presented. Then, using the courtyard café technique, we gave staff an opportunity to discuss what we needed to watch out for and how we might implement their ideas. We used the six building blocks as the subject of each café with a waiter (facilitator) in each who was not a Branch member, not staff, and not part of the Leadership Team. Instead, the waiters were staff from other branches and other sectors of NRCan, as well as being from outside the department. This created an environment where everyone was free to voice their ideas and opinions while working outside the conventional hierarchy that exists in the day-to-day work world.

At the end of the café session, we put up a Challenge Wall where staff were free to leave sticky notes dealing with their concerns, next steps and what was missing. We closed the day with a talk show involving a couple of staff who volunteered and myself. We had an open discussion about the overall process to date and the staff day itself. Once again, all the material was typed up and made available to the whole Branch.

I then created a Futures Committee, again made up of staff, with at least one staff member from each division in the Branch. They went out and examined the various approaches used by other science-based departments and agencies and compared them against all the material we had collected with respect to our Branch and its activities. I met with the Futures Committee a number of times and, with their input, was able to develop a functional approach for the Branch, with similar activities pulled together

*and some new functions added. We then created a matrix, which listed all the input and priorities we had received. Each item was shown as being associated with one of the original six building blocks and was categorized as functional input, input on our organizational structure, or input on the scientific content of our work. As you can imagine, we received all three and, in a number of cases, input that had an impact on two or even all three categories. The final column in the matrix identified how the idea was being dealt with in the new functional design of the Branch. The matrix was shared with all Branch staff.*

*The functional description for each of the new groupings of activities in the Branch was then used to prepare the Divisional Directors' job descriptions. At the time of writing, we are waiting for the final classifications to be determined against the job specs. When that is completed, the Directors will be put in place with their new responsibilities and we will then move the staff responsible to deliver those functions into the appropriate divisions. You would think that the story would end at this point. Under a "no-change" scenario, that might be true; however, the one thing we can count on these days is change!*

*Partway through this process, the headquarters branches of the CFS were also reorganized. One division from our old Branch went to join a newly formed information group and we were joined by a group of staff responsible for regional coordination of program delivery. We now have a Branch of both science and programs, which represents the majority of the regional coordination activity for the CFS, all in one place.*

*Remember the original challenge was integration; now we are embarking on a process to integrate our new Branch program colleagues with the science staff while we complete the original reorganization. This will mean a new Leadership Team (in part) and so the need to revisit the team charter, the list of priority activities, etc. I am confident we can now do this on our own. We have not quite finished the original task we set upon, but we have*

*developed an understanding of how to live with change,  
how to deal with it in an inclusive and constructive fashion,  
and how to have some fun along the way.*



## CHAPTER 5

# Over to you

By Bob Chartier

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.*

– Margaret Mead

So there it is — our modest contribution to the art and power of storytelling. We hope you enjoyed and were even perhaps provoked by our take on storytelling in the workplace. We also hope you enjoyed our stories and, if our plan has worked, you are thinking about your own stories, how stories are seen in your workplace, and the stories that formed and continue to form the ongoing history of your own organization.

Let's take a minute to think about your own stories.

We suggested to you that storytelling is a core mastery in the practice of leadership. We also subscribe to a core value that leadership comes from all levels. That should be a clear message to you, the reader, that you can and must practise leadership at whatever level you work in the organization.

The second core value we hold is that everybody is already a storyteller. You were born a storyteller.

Some of us have polished the gift, others have been sitting on it for a while, but all of us still carry it. If your storytelling muscles have become somewhat atrophied, you may want to design a new fitness plan to get them back into shape.

### **First step – Just become aware**

Notice the stories around you. Note especially the storytellers. How do they get your interest, how do they turn you off, and what can you learn and steal from them? It has been said that good writers are voracious readers. We believe good storytellers are voracious listeners. You can listen to storytellers just about anywhere in your community. You can hear them at pulpits, you can hear them in curling rinks, and you can hear them in comedy clubs. You can get the really good stories by joining the old characters at the corner table on “coffee row.”

### **Second step – Collect your stories**

This second step is so important. You must start to collect stories in the same way kids collect cards. We actually mean physically collect them. Unless you happen to have a photographic memory, you will not remember the good ones, so write them down! Find the good jokes and turn them into stories. Call up your dad or grandmother or eccentric aunt and ask for a story about their strangest day at work or the best boss they ever had. Start to think like a reporter – you are out to get the best stories and keep them in your own personal stash.

### **Third step – Try them out!**

And finally, you have to test drive them. You have to practise, practise, practise. Remember, the best storytelling is “springboarded” to a current topic. So go into your stash, find stories that you could tie to bosses, teams, current events, change, learning, accountability, etc.

Then, one day at coffee, slip one in. “You know all this talk of accountability reminds me of an incident that happened to my grandfather. He was fifteen, a-little-rough-around-the-edges farm boy, and so it came as a bit of a surprise when he got elected as treasurer of the Dry Creek 4-H Club. It was an even bigger surprise when they found out, the hard way, that he had been consistently flunking math for the past three years he’d spent in grade seven. So Grandpa’s first attempts at producing financial accountability had an interesting twist.”

Practise reading stories. Read to your kids, your grandkids, the neighbour’s kids, or volunteer on Saturday morning at the library to read to kids. You will start to connect with an audience, hear your own voice, and build some level of comfort. After reading, start practising your own real or made-up collected stories. Kids are the best practice audiences because they don’t care how good you are, they just love the stories.

And, of course, whenever you have to give a committee report, or speak to a proposal or debrief on an event, try to find a quick, snappy story that helps to set the stage.

You can also improve your own storytelling skills by finding an on-line storytelling organization such as [www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org), joining your local toastmasters club or attending a storytelling seminar or workshop. These will help you refine your style and add a professional touch to your storytelling skills.

## **How can you create a work environment that is conducive to storytelling?**

Here are some ideas to encourage storytelling in your workplace and promote its value in continuous learning:

- You may try starting a daily “stand-up” with your team that allows for “quick bite” stories in the morning as well as details of “need-to-know” stuff for the day.
- Start an on-line e-mail daily newsletter in your organization that has a “your story” feature. When you know people are sitting on a good story, relevant to this or that meeting or issue, encourage them to tell it.
- Start a book club in the workplace. It will soon be a hotbed of new reading and storytelling.
- Work with others to create an attractive, comfortable storytelling space in your organization. You could use part of the cafeteria, or learning centre, or perhaps the atrium in a different way. Start a storytelling festival in conjunction with your annual staff picnic.
- Of course, we love the idea of starting a dedicated community of practice centred on storytelling.

All these efforts could contribute to helping your organization start to recognize the important role of storytelling in building relationships, opening possibilities, passing on knowledge and learning in community.

## **What can you do to help your organization find its own stories?**

Once again, the first thing we must do is become more aware of the fact that our organizations are full of sleeping stories. So where do they sleep?

Fortunately, they sleep in the hearts and minds of those colleagues who have “been there, done that.” They are dormant in memory and practice. The stories of public service surveyors who have been mapping the North usually leave the organization when the surveyor leaves. It is good news if they are still sitting out on the deck, in the backyard or at the convalescent

home waiting for someone to come and listen to their stories.

To get these stories, we need to actively get out of the cubicle and seek them out. We may not have to go beyond the workplace or the community to get them, but we have to make the effort.

In libraries and storerooms, there are books and compilations that have some great stories. There may be old films and documentaries that refer to or spotlight your organization. Go to the archives; our public service archives are the best in the country. Then propose one really good idea. Propose that the best organization story that is told or found each year be recognized and told at the annual awards and recognition celebration. Celebrate your people and celebrate their stories.

You know, they say the ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle believed that civilization and culture were developed and passed down around two essential human activities — eating together and practising the art of conversation. So stop eating alone at your desk!

Public servants are, by their very nature, the frontline workers in building democracy, ensuring freedom and justice, and securing a management frame for a fair and equitable society. This sounds like civilization and culture building to us, and it is therefore important that we use all the tools and practices that we can find (including storytelling).



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