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training
AUSTRALIA MAGAZINE



Storytelling – The New Business Tool

Humans have been telling stories since the dawn of time. Cultures have perpetuated their values and principles through myths and legends passed down the generations by storytellers. Yet it is only very recently that Top 500 companies have begun to integrate the art of storytelling into their Learning and Development (L&D) training schedules.

Business now uses actors – as experienced storytelling experts – to inspire their staff and enhance their communication skills. Neuro Linguistic Programming and Emotional Intelligence regularly appear on companies' L&D calendars. Recently the leading training companies have introduced the business world to the newest technique in L&D training: Storytelling and Mastering the Art of Persuasion.

Storytelling is now recognised as a powerful way to communicate change and stimulate innovation. Training companies have discovered that the right story, well told, is far more effective than flowcharts or PowerPoint presentations.

Maura Fay Workshops was one of the first training companies to use professional actors in corporate training, and has developed storytelling workshops over the last two years. Gina Zoia, a professional actor and trainer with MFW, has observed that: "Many professionals perceive storytelling as something very separate from work. When they want to impress they use facts and figures." As a result, training companies have had to devise programs that teach professionals how to weave these facts and figures into a story that connects their clients or colleagues emotionally to facts and figures.

So much of business is about persuading people, and selling products and ideas. Sales people know that the way to win customers is to affect them emotionally. If managers learn to tell stories then they can connect with their staff members' emotional responses to events, ideas and concepts.

Information and instructions presented in standard ways are processed and filed away in the brain (sometimes never to be retrieved). Yet the brain tends to process narrative and story information in an entirely different way. Storytelling leads people on journeys in their imagination. The listeners find themselves drawn into the narrative. The story itself conjures association and thoughts, which embed the information in a different filing system. It moulds listeners' perceptions and can touch their unconscious minds.

Often, in business communication, facts are pushed at listeners in the hope they will understand the meanings behind the information. With storytelling, the effect is more of a pull exerted on the listener. The overriding goal of story-based communication is

to generate an idea in the listener's mind that will strike the listener not only as fresh, but also as "self-generated".

In MFW's storytelling workshops, participants are taken through the four key elements of storytelling: setting, character, conflict and resolution. They are taught how to relate these elements to a business situation – whether it is dealing with a difficult staff member, presenting at a board meeting or selling to a client. They learn how to frame their stories in different contexts such as a boardroom. The participants identify their protagonists, whether they are their company's CEO or the newest recruit. They are taught how to build tension. They then learn that their stories do not need to have a happy ending to be effective. The story must have a moral that can be applied to a specific situation. Participants who come to the workshops with a specific "problem" – such as a need for planning or a restructuring of roles – will have a very clear moral. Learning how to frame it in a story then provides them with a new way of communicating and addressing their "problem".

Everyone likes to hear a story – but few like to sit through a PowerPoint presentation or read sheets of data analysis. If managers can master the art of storytelling, their meetings and presentations will be far more enjoyable and effective. They will find they have far greater success persuading staff and clients towards their ways of thinking.

Actors are the professional storytellers. As workshop trainers, they are able to teach participants to make the most of our natural inclination to "have a good yarn".

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