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What's the Story?

Using everyday, real life experiences will enliven your presentations, engage your audience, and make your message stick.

You've been there... Sitting in the grand ballroom of a large hotel for your company's annual meeting. You listen to presentation after presentation, fighting the urge to doze because the tone, tempo and content of the presentations are numbingly similar. After the meeting, what do you remember?

These speeches may have accurate, even important content; their goals may be well stated; the slides may even be chock full of supporting material. Unfortunately they lack intimacy, creativity and color. Such speeches are forgotten before the audience files out into the hallways.

As a speech coach and writer for more than 20 years, one of my passions is helping individuals create and deliver memorable messages. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to integrate "story" into your presentations. Using story, personal example, anecdote, or metaphor is key to making your points memorable. Quite simply, what separates great presenters from average ones are the stories they tell. One of my favorite speech coaches, Max Dixon, helped me understand the power of story when he noted, "Information plus emotion equals memory." When you can connect information to emotional content, your chances of high audience retention skyrocket.

In coaching business professionals at all levels, I find that many are intimidated or uncomfortable with the idea of using story in their business presentations. Here are some of the most popular excuses.

- "Our people are used to very straightforward presentations. Using stories or personal examples wouldn't really be appropriate."
 - "Using stories is for motivational speakers, not for me."
 - "I don't have time for stories in my presentations."
 - "I lead a very ordinary life. I have no stories to tell, even if I wanted to!"
- If these responses sound familiar, please pitch them out the window now. Stories work for everyone! Stories are appropriate and highly effective in business. Stories can range in

length from 15 seconds to 5 minutes and beyond. And no matter what your life circumstances, trust me, you have stories to tell. You just need to know how to unearth them and polish them a bit for presentation purposes.

There are three easy steps to get started on the road to making your public presentations more memorable with personal stories. Let's focus on how to *notice*, *note* and *voice* the stories that surround you every day.

NOTICE:

I encourage you to become a "Professional Noticer." It is an attribute regularly honed by great communicators. Recognize that the minute your day begins, you are surrounded by story possibilities. Inspiration can come in the form of a conversation with the mailman, a joke your child told over breakfast, a tough meeting with your boss, the service you received at the restaurant where you had lunch, an article in the newspaper, a trip to the doctor's office....

As you go through your day, just observe yourself and be mindful of what you notice. Pay attention to your --and others'-- reactions to encounters and situations you come across. Ask yourself, "What's the story?"

NOTE:

Once you develop the habit of noticing, you'll want to capture the situations you are observing – with the intention of developing them into powerful anecdotes you can use in your future presentations. Keep a journal and add to it a little bit every day.

This often proves to be a challenging discipline for most people, yet it is crucial to success. If you don't write down what you are observing, you are unlikely to remember it when it's needed. Create your own bank of stories with this a simple daily exercise. Take fifteen minutes at the end of each day to record:

- *One thing I noticed today*_____
- Example: After a 25 year hiatus, I have returned to taking ballet class again. Today I attended class with a new teacher. As challenging as the class was, I found myself smiling throughout in direct response to the instructor's ever-present smile. At the end of class, she made a point of commenting on how

much she appreciated seeing smiles on people's faces because dance should be fun. When you smile, endorphins kick in and your whole mood elevates.

- *What did I learn or discover from this?* _____
 - Example: As I left class I was aware of how good I felt. While physically spent, my mood was bright. She reinforced a simple life lesson akin to "whistle while you work." No matter how challenging the task at hand, remember that you are making a choice to take it on. It will serve you well to have an upbeat attitude about it.
- *How could I use this story?* _____
 - Example: I could use this anecdote to talk about how attitude affects work effort. It also might be a way to illustrate how we sometimes get so focused on the work we are doing that we forget to savor it, enjoy the moment, and remind ourselves that we are making a choice to participate fully in the activity.

VOICE:

Once you start to collect stories, you will want to begin practicing how not only to craft but also to deliver that story to an audience to illustrate your point. Try these practical tips for articulating or voicing your stories:

- Record the story on audiotape or via your computer then listen to it. Determine how it is working and what you could do to refine it.
- Share the story with family or friends over dinner or lunch and get their reactions.
- Tell the story to a professional colleague and listen to the feedback.
- Experiment with different versions of it. Try recording 30- second and three-minute versions, for example. Which works best?

Using story in your presentations is a foundational communication technique. Don't worry. You probably won't master it overnight. It's a process that needs to be nurtured and practiced daily. Don't wait for a big presentation to practice your stories. Instead, get used to sharing stories in small staff meetings to gauge the reaction. Pay attention to how speakers, politicians, business leaders, or friends use personal stories or examples to help communicate their message. Notice what works and what doesn't.

Remember that when you tell stories from your own life and experience, you open a window for others to do the same. Stories allow us to be intimate and familiar with our listeners. Stories allow us to make connections and reveal that we are more alike than we are different.

Listen for stories. Look for stories. Tell your stories. In doing so, you will create community as you deliver a memorable experience for your audience.