

The Truth About Your Storytelling

Human beings are constantly telling stories. Storytelling represents our attempt to give meaning and significance to our world of experience. Stories fundamentally explain how and why things happen or how and why things *don't* happen in our lives. Stories typically begin with a relatively balanced, tranquil life being suddenly broken by an “inciting incident” or “personal storm”. The drama of the story unfolds as the person attempts to resolve the crisis and restore relative balance. The inciting incident may be a health problem, a conflict in personal values, the time demands of a new job, a marriage that is failing, the loss of a loved one or the trauma of relocation.

The most important consideration in storytelling is the realization that the stories we tell ourselves and others all too often become our reality. The wrong stories disengage us, block personal growth and make us victims of our circumstances and serve to derail any mission. The right stories bring us to the truth, mobilize us to dig deeper and make tough values-based choices that lead to expanded growth. The right stories deepen our engagement in life, keep hope alive and, despite risks, inspire us to take courageous action supportive to mission success.

The goal here is to establish clear and concise guidelines for storytelling so that whatever changes are necessary to achieve full engagement are, in fact, identified and systematically addressed.

A negative habit that persists in our lives invariably comes with a story that supports its existence. As long as the supporting story continues to be told, there is little chance of change. Let's look at a few examples.

Nicole H. has received feedback for many years that her impatience and critical attitude toward others are big negatives for her direct reports. Both are disengagers which stoke the fires of resentment and serve to de-motivate members of her team. Here is Nicole's story:

"I am not running a popularity contest at the office. Yes, I am impatient with people and I am because it serves a purpose. Plain and simple, it keeps people on their toes and they get things done. If I were to be all sweet and nice, projects would drag on and on. People will slack off if I am not on their cases all the time. I don't really enjoy being this way. I tell people if they cannot handle my heat, go somewhere else. You have got to be tough and deliver the goods to be on my team."

Alex D. is very unfit and out of shape. He is 46 years old and struggles with persistent low energy. He has never been able to get any kind of physical exercise into his life. Here is his story:

"My work is all consuming. I have neither the time nor the energy to exercise. What little energy I have left over at the end of my day I want to give to my family. I am not a jock and frankly feel quite uncomfortable when I go to public workout facilities. We all have to make tough choices and working out is a luxury I simply don't have right now. My job and my family come first."

Gabriella B. consistently gets feedback from her boss and her peers that she lacks enthusiasm and passion for her work. She is very talented and skilled but rarely do these assets come fully to life on the job. Her attitude and interactive style suggest she is not fully committed or highly motivated. Here is her story:

"I am simply a very laid back person and rarely show excitement for what I am doing. I think most enthusiasm and passion are phony anyway. How much genuine excitement can one generate for work like mine? I work numbers from dusk till dawn and get more than 150 e-mails every single day. I get my

work done, but am I fully committed? Probably not – but I don't think I need to be. There is much more to life for me than just my work.”

Michael G. smokes 1½ packs of cigarettes per day on average. He is 37 years old and started smoking when he was 18. He has two children, ages 3 and 5. Michael tried quitting twice but failed after just a few days. Here is his story:

“Both my mother and father smoked and neither contracted cancer. Smoking really helps me keep my weight down. Which is worse, being overweight or smoking? I am still pretty young and doubt whether it really is that bad for young people. Someday I will quit – just not now. We are all going to die of something someday.”

Even though each of these stories represents only a small piece of a much bigger story, it is evident from the brief story line why the negative habits continue to persist for all four people. The story each individual tells essentially locks in the behavior and ultimately becomes his or her reality. In order to change the behavior so that deeper levels of engagement are possible, each individual will have to change his or her story.

Stories that deepen engagement and facilitate difficult life changes have three characteristics in common. First, the new story must be closely linked to a primary value such as health, family, integrity or kindness. Second, the story must reflect the truth as much as humanly possible. Third, the story must engender a deep sense of hope that the successful change mission is indeed possible. If any one of the conditions is not met, success of the mission can become compromised.

The Right Story Connects the Dots!

An important aspect of facing the truth is confronting the long-term costs of habits that compromise our energy management and engagement. We call the process

of confronting these costs *connecting the dots*. All too often we fail to consider the long view when we make decisions about whether habits should or should not be eliminated from our lives. Smoking a cigarette, an episode of rage or impatience with a direct report, a skipped meal, an evening of excessive alcohol consumption, being distracted and unfocused in a meeting, or disengagement from a spouse or a child upon returning home from work can appear insignificant and unimportant in the short view. Repeated occurrences of such behaviors over time, however, can have dire consequences and give a trajectory to our lives that can carry a very high cost both personally and professionally.

The goal here is to ensure that you have thoroughly explored the potential long-term costs of the habits you currently possess that compromise your engagement. That is what *connecting the dots* is all about.

Now take a moment to think about the full engagement barriers currently inhibiting you right now. In all probability, you have recognized these habits to be problematic in your life for some time. The reason negative habits persist is that we derive some benefit from them. There is a payoff of some kind or they simply would go away. An important step in launching any successful personal change is fully acknowledging the current payoff that keeps the undesirable habit alive. Two other considerations are important as well. The first is honestly exploring the message you send to others by allowing the behavior to persist and the second is fully confronting the long-term potential cost of perpetuating the behavior both for yourself and for others you care about.

Let's explore a couple of examples. After thoroughly reflecting on all the issues that have been raised thus far, assume that your number one issue is poor work/life balance. Connecting the dots requires that you answer these three questions:

1. What benefit do you derive from perpetuating poor work/life balance?
2. What message are you sending with your behavior?

3. What are the potential long-term costs to you and to others if this continues?

Starting with the first question, what might be your payoff for poor work/life balance? A number of possibilities exist. You may earn the respect from your boss and colleagues by always being the last to leave work. Pouring your entire life into your work may lead to higher pay and more promotions. By rarely being home, you may unconsciously be trying to circumvent all the hassles of taking care of your three young children – changing diapers, meal preparation, trips to the doctor, etc. It may also be a way to avoid facing personal relationships or intimacy issues. How about the message you are sending? Possible messages include: work is more important than family, it is okay to sacrifice your family for work, investing time and energy at work is necessary but investing time and energy with family is optional. In terms of the long-term costs, poor work/life balance may, over time, cause you to lose your marriage and even your children. It may also cause deep resentment and, in so doing, cause you to become disengaged, disillusioned and even burned out at work.

Let's look at another example. Assume your issue is defensiveness. What benefit do you derive from being defensive with others? Fundamentally, defensiveness serves as a protective strategy to one's self-esteem. The perceived payoff is safety or security. Being defensive keeps people from hurting you emotionally, keeps emotionally sensitive areas from being exposed or breaking through into consciousness, and allows you to compartmentalize unresolved conflicts. The message you send to others is that you are overly sensitive, controlling, insecure and even rigid. Your message is also that you neither want nor value personal feedback. And what are the potential long-term costs? Most importantly you stop growing. You get progressively disengaged from the truth and your interpersonal relationships typically lack depth and dimension. Lack of openness, emotional rigidity and distrust become powerful disengagers over time.

Connecting the dots helps us to link our daily habits to the big picture of our lives. By taking a fresh honest look at the trajectory of our lives as a consequence of certain habits, the hope is that we will be moved to change our stories and begin mobilizing for change.