



Leadership Communication 101 - How to Tell a Leadership Story

A Resource for Your Leadership Development

Stanley J. Ward, Ph.D.

stan@coachingforinfluence.com

coachingforinfluence.com

Introduction

Naked truth went from house to house

but no one would take her in.

So she clothed herself in story

and never went homeless again.

- Adapted from a Jewish teaching parable

Put simply: leaders tell stories. If you want to **train**, **connect** to, and **inspire** those you work with, then you need to learn how to tell a “leadership story.” In part one of this resource, you will learn a basic formula for telling a leadership story. In part two, you will review there basic purposes for these stories and discover six different types of leadership stories.

Part One: A Formula for Leadership Stories

First, here is the basic formula for what to include in your leadership story. Make sure all these pieces are present. As you become more

accomplished at telling leadership stories, you can then develop the different types of stories you tell.

Leadership stories tell us:

1. *Who we are.*
2. *Where we are going.*
3. *How we will get there.*
4. *The obstacles we will face.*
5. *How we will overcome those obstacles.¹*

This formula is a story because it starts with a **setting** (the who, where, and when of the story), then moves on to **conflict** (what we want and the obstacles we must overcome to achieve it), and concludes with a **resolution** (what it looks like to overcome the obstacle).

Here's an Example -

In a recent conversation with a staff member, a new leader told this story.

“As you know, we are growing to become a premier resource in our area. You’ve really helped us get there because of both your personality and the work you do.

¹ These points are adapted from Howard Gardner’s book, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*.

We want to continue growing. So, we need to add staff, because we are currently turning away potential clients. Since we are short on space right now, we will only add staff that can work flexible hours.

That way multiple people can use the same office space, just not at the same time. If we can get a steady stream of work to keep our new staff busy, then we will add more office space.”

Let’s analyze that story according to the five items that a leadership story tell us.

THE LEADERSHIP STORY EXAMPLE

Who We Are	“...we are growing to become a premier resource in our area. You’ve really helped us get there ...”
Where We Are Going	“We want to continue growing.”
How We Will Get There	“... we will add staff ...”
The Obstacles We Will Face	“... currently turning away potential clients ... We are short on space right now ...”
How We Will Overcome the Obstacles	“... so we will only add staff that can work flexible hours ... If we can get a steady stream of work that keeps everyone busy, we can then get more office space.”

Note that our example has a **setting** (a growing business with a successfully contributing staff member) a **conflict** (turning away clients and needing more staff) and a **resolution** (flexible staffing and eventually moving to a new location with more room).

Sometimes leaders are afraid of openly stating the obstacles they will face. Don't be! Those obstacles represent the conflict in your story, and conflict is at the heart of a good story. It's what makes the story interesting.

BONUS - TAKE TIME TO LISTEN!

Conclude the conversation by asking "What do you think? Am I missing anything?" Leadership storytelling can be a conversation, not just a one-way speech.

Part Two: Story Purposes and Types

Leadership stories can be divided into three different *purposes*: (1) educational stories for **training**, (2) relationship-building stories for **connecting**, and (3) motivational stories for **inspiring**. So when you are thinking about the kinds of stories to tell, ask yourself, “What is my purpose here?” Then make sure the content of your story fits that purpose. When there is a disconnect between the content of your story and the purpose of your story, you will lose your audience’s attention, and possibly lose their trust as well.

Annette Simmon’s suggests six types of leadership stories you need to tell.² To really improve your leadership storytelling, keep a journal where you start recording examples these story types. Once you become more aware of the leadership stories present in your life, you will find that this tool can help you with a variety of leadership needs. Let’s take a look at those six types, think about their purposes, and consider how you can use these types as well.

² For more information, see her book *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through Storytelling*.

1. WHO I AM

These are relationship building stories for **connecting**, and often the first stories you need to tell in order to build trust. When you feel like the problem is about trust, consider the following:

- What do you want people to see about you?
- Also tell stories about a hero who you aspire to be. If all your stories feature you as the hero, you will appear arrogant.
- It's OK to tell stories about your flaws. People respect authenticity, and it's easier to connecting with someone who is not perfect.

2. WHY I AM HERE

These stories are also about trust-building through relationships and motivation. “Why I Am Here” stories help with **connecting** and **inspiring**. Consider these points:

- You need a plausible explanation for your good intentions.
- It's ok to reveal what's in it for you. People can handle “selfish” as long as it is not “exploitative.”
- If this really is about others, then you better have a solid story to prove it.

- What are the bigger issues and core values at stake in this project?

3. “THE VISION”

Vision stories are motivational stories. They help people **connect** with a common purpose and **inspire** action. Once your audience understands who you are and why you are here, “then they are ready to listen to what you think is for them” (Simmons, p. 14). Also, vision stories provide meaning, by connecting people with something larger than themselves. To develop a story about the vision, ask yourself:

- Where are we trying to go here?
- How does this goal help create a better opportunities or remove obstacles for people?

4. TEACHING STORIES

Teaching stories help with **training**. When told well, they can **connect** the what, the why, and the how. Here’s an example teaching story:

A sales professional was struggling with how to respond to customers who would call and ramble on the phone. The problem was that he often had multiple customers who

needed his attention at the same time. Because the professional did not want to seem rude by interrupting, he felt stuck.

To address his situation, I share an example of how I respond to coaching clients that ramble. In those situations, I simply ask “May I interrupt you?” Or I’ll say “Let’s hit pause, because I’ve got something for you here.” I explained that by asking for permission to interrupt, it was usually well received, and helped us get back on track.

When developing your teaching stories, ask yourself:

- What is the step-by-step process I need to explain here?
- How does this process help us reach our goal?

5. “VALUES-IN-ACTION” STORIES

These stories can be **training** stories that show how to live out values as well as **inspiring** stories that help provide a larger meaning for daily activities. To know if you really have a “value in action” story, ask yourself, “what did it cost me here to honor this value?” If there is no cost, you don’t have a story to

tell. Why? Because the cost of honoring that value is the **conflict** at the heart of your story. Keep these points in mind:

- If there is no real cost here, I will come off as “phony.”
- How does this cost relate to those I’m trying to lead? Will they sympathize with this situation, or will it seem strange to them?

6. “I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE THINKING” STORIES

When trying to influence others, those who listen to us will often have their own objections to the vision we communicate. These stories are designed to address common obstacles to **connecting** and **inspiring**. But be aware that if you miss the mark, you may create another obstacle for you to overcome in gaining someone’s trust. So, use this type of story with caution.

This type of story can also help when you are addressing how you will overcome obstacles to the goal. Simmons points out that “one of the best ways to use this kind of story is to dispel fears” (p. 25). And, if you do your homework effectively, you can name the objections first. To use this type of story, ask yourself:

- If I were in this same situation, what would be my concerns?

- What are the obstacles faced by this person right now, and how can I address them?

Conclusion

Storytelling is a powerful leadership tool that will help you **train, connect** and **inspire** those you lead. Practice telling these six types of stories, and I'm confident you will be impressed with the results.

Additional Influence Resources

- ▶ I point out how leaders tell stories for education, relationship-building, and motivation in *A Qualitative Study of Community Leader Storytelling: Purpose, Setting, and Mode* (2013).
- ▶ For another introduction to the idea of leadership storytelling, see Stephen Denning's (2007) *The Secret Language of Leadership*, and his updated (2011) *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*. You can also watch his [TED talk on moral persuasion](#), which shares additional tips for leadership stories.

Please share on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#) what you've learned and applied from this resource. I'd love to **celebrate** your leadership development as you **expand your influence!**