

## The magic of metaphor

Want to get your point across clearly? Then harness the power of story-telling – it's inspired people since the dawn of time, and it works just as well in business.

If you could communicate 'messages' to your staff memorably and with impact, what difference would that make to your business? And what difference would it make to other people's perception of you as leader and motivator?

If your team were to share the same vision, direction and values that you do, how much easier would it be to drive your business forward, and create powerful and favourable impressions on your clients?

You and your entire team would be operating as one, moving with confidence and commitment towards a set of common goals.



### **Memorable message**

Top-drawer communicators and great leaders through the ages share many similar strategies. What is it that Jesus, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Tolkien, Wilbur Smith, and J K Rowling have in common with Winston Churchill, Gandhi, Einstein and John Harvey-Jones?

The answer is that they all have used the tools of anecdote, story, and metaphor to put across their message in powerful and highly memorable ways.

Words by themselves are abstractions. A word is merely a representation of something, not the thing itself. Without a context, words remain concepts, and concepts are open to a multiplicity of interpretations. Poor communication means poor results.

### **Poor communication**

Poor communication is responsible for many companies failing to realise their full potential. Research suggests that 80% of problems occurring within business contexts are communication issues. Mainly, the vague interpretation of vague communication.



If we wish to ensure our words are understood in the way we wish, we would do well to translate concepts and ideas into concrete, tangible, shared meanings.

Stories and metaphors are powerful ways to do this. They translate conceptual left-brain ideas into immediate right-brain recognition. Stories connect ideas with people's real-life experiences. They make sense!

Heard the one about the three holy men from three

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religious communities who were invited to give thanks following a fund-raising dinner in New York? The Christian priest offered a prayer about tolerance. The Muslim imam offered a prayer about charity. The rabbi, however, told a story. And the story contained a 'message' for the diners to reflect upon. A week after the dinner, nobody could remember the prayers. But everybody remembered the rabbi's story and the power of its message.

Stories can be used in many different contexts to get key messages across. I use them in my work as coach, trainer, manager, team-leader and presenter, as well as in a raft of personal contexts.

I use them in one-to-ones, small and large groups in different situations: corporate organisations, as well as in small businesses. Whatever the context, stories work brilliantly and are remembered. Now I'll share some ideas about how to use stories, and where they could make a real difference to your impact.

### **Context**

You can use stories in meetings, presentations, feedback sessions, appraisals, coaching contexts, informal chats, or you can send them as emails.

They work particularly well when you 'frame' them. Framing means that you give the listener a clue as to what the message is about.

Here's an example of framing. Let's say an MD is holding a meeting with the intention of encouraging employees to take more responsibility for the running of the business.

The MD has in mind a certain set of attitudes, but would prefer staff to work it out for themselves. So she talks about the type of people who work in successful organisations and uses an anecdote to explain it...

When JFK visited Cape Canaveral in the 60s, he'd met all the top people – the astronauts, the scientists, the technicians – and he was on his way out, walking down a long narrow corridor, when he came upon an old grey-haired man stooped over a mop and bucket. 'What do you do here?' Kennedy asked. 'Sir,' said the old man straightening up and looking the president right in the eye, 'I'm doin' exactly what all the folks here is doin'. Workin' to put a man on the moon!' Kennedy, they say, was impressed.



### **Applications**

Anecdotes, stories and metaphors can be used to reinforce almost any message you want to get across to:

- Motivate people;
- Set goals;
- Teach a point;
- Introduce new ideas;
- Enhance creativity;
- Challenge complacency;
- Simplify a complex idea;
- Develop skills.

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## **Challenging complacency**

*Consider the parable of the boiled frog. Now if you put a frog in a bucket of very hot water you can be sure the frog will jump right out before he gets boiled. So would you!*

*But put that frog in a bucket of water at room temperature and then slowly turn up the heat, and you're going to have one very contented frog. By the time that water gets to the temperature we were talking about earlier, he'll be far too groggy to do anything about climbing out...*



Such complacency is classic in businesses that have seen success as a reason not to change anything. When the market shifts, it's already far too late to take effective action. Wake up!

## **Skills development**

*Tiger Woods' ball was stuck in a bunker. It was a difficult shot, and he took a long while weighing up how to deal with it. Finally, he addressed the ball, focused all his energy and played the shot. The crowd watched with bated breath as the ball hung in the air, dropped, and then bounced twice and ran into the hole.*

*'That was a real lucky shot, Tiger,' a voice shouted from the crowd. 'Yeah, it was,' said Tiger. 'But you know what? The more I practice, the better I get, and the better I get, the luckier I get.'*

Effective behaviour isn't random, it's built upon an understanding of the structures and patterns that support excellent practice. Know-how is priceless, but it can be learned. High quality training and development are not expensive – ignorance is, however.

## **'Walking your talk'**

*A woman approached Gandhi and said: 'Master, tell my boy to stop eating sugar.' Gandhi looked at the portly six year old and replied: 'Bring him to me again in four weeks' time.' The woman was surprised but did as she was told. Four weeks later, she brought the boy back again. Gandhi looked at him forcefully and said: 'Stop eating sugar.' 'Why didn't you tell him that a month ago?' the woman asked. 'Because four weeks ago I myself was eating sugar,' said Gandhi.*

Leadership is not taken, but given. People choose to follow those they trust, and whose behaviour and actions are totally consistent. If you do not 'walk your talk' and act yourself on what you say, people are unlikely to perceive you as a leader.

## **Managing and leading**

*The two directors of Ecological Tours Ltd were guiding a party of tourists through a dense forest. While one was showing the party the many fascinating aspects of the trees and the forest floor, the other wandered ahead along a path and into a clearing.*

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*The first director drew the attention of the tourists to a great number of extraordinary details. He showed them how to collect water, make a shelter, and survive off forest fruits.*

*The other director had meanwhile climbed to the top of the tallest tree from where he surveyed the surrounding landscape. A tourist shouted up to him: 'Hey, this is amazing.' 'You're right,' he called back. 'But we're in the wrong forest.'*

Managing and leading are complementary activities, but they have different functions. It is important to do both. Success requires attention to detail in the present and an ability to map directions for the future.

In a world where the only constant is change, a leader must be like Mississippi steamboat captain – looking ahead for shifts in the current and obstacles in the stream, gauging the current depth, watching out for eddies and backwaters, and taking stock of the journey so far.

### ***Realising your potential***

*Imagine a plank lying in front of you on the floor. It's 50 foot long and one foot wide. If I offered you £100 to walk along it, would you take it? Of course you would.*

*Now if I tell you it's 100 feet up in the air, suspended between two buildings, would you take it now? Probably not.*

*But if I said that at the other end of the plank is your six-year-old daughter, and the building where she's standing is on fire, would you walk it now? I guess so.*



The only thing that holds you back is yourself. What holds back your employees is themselves. Each one of us has to challenge and break the preconceptions that prevent us from connecting with our true potential.

We can always do more than we think we can. Know what you want to achieve, make the necessary decision, and fully commit your resources to it.

So now you've got a taste for the effectiveness of story-telling in your everyday communication, what could possibly hold you back? ❖

*Nick Owen*

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