

Linking Stories to Life

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A participant in a recent storytelling workshop that I delivered in Canada had this to say at the end of the day: “OK, just to prove to you that I was paying attention today I took a lot of notes. Here’s what I discovered. You were talking about technical stuff (this was a workshop for professional sales people who sell cloud technologies to large enterprises) for the entire day, yet you told stories about SCUBA diving, ghosts in a data center, useless employees, the similarities between Pidgin, Swahili, Latin and English, the origin of the toilet and the guy who made it popular, Thomas Crapper; and goat trails. The amazing thing is that I remember every one of those stories within the context of the technology that you were explaining at the time, and I remember why the technology matters. How the heck do you do that? How do you match what appear to be unrelated stories to a technology lesson?”

Hmmm...I don’t know that I can do this question justice without a lot of thought, but I’ll certainly give it a shot.

Stories come in a wide range of “flavors” and are used to do a variety of things in the world of business. For example, a story can be told to introduce the speaker (the storyteller) to the audience as a way to establish credibility at the onset of a meeting or engagement. Good storytellers may use humor here as a way to disarm the audience; self-deprecation is extremely powerful when followed by obvious skill and credibility. For many of my speaking engagements, clients insist on reading a long introduction that they download from my Web site. When the finish, after they’ve talked about all my speaking and writing and travel, I usually wander up on stage and say something like, “I don’t who that guy is that they just described, but I was out in the hall and they needed a speaker...” This usually puts to rest the bloated nature of all biographical introductions.

Stories are also used to set the stage for an engagement that may require lots of work. “Over the course of the last six months we have seen a decline in sales of 15%. Our retail stores are quiet; our people are becoming disenchanted; and shareholders are beginning to ask questions. This cannot be allowed to continue: We are here to put a stop to the hemorrhage.”

Another way that I like to use stories is as teaching aids or as techniques for conveying demonstrable values. One of the fields where I do a lot of work is the world of human resources and organizational performance. One of the most difficult things to deal with is a problem employee who is dragging down the rest of the organization. Whenever I work with a group on

this topic I often tell the following story. Apologies: This is a bit long but it's well worth the read.

Lessons in Management

I often tell people that the best boss I ever had was a man who worked for me at Pacific Bell from 1987 until 1989. His name is Tom Vairetta, and I learned more from him about friendship, human nature, surviving life in a corporation, and the art of managing people than I did from any other person I've ever known.

Tom worked for me during a time when I had the most challenging job I have ever had. I was a mid-level manager, responsible for all data and telephone network activity in the corporate headquarters building in San Ramon. In that capacity I "owned" installation, maintenance, and repair technicians, service representatives, communications consultants, the LAN Control Center and the Network Trouble Analysis Center, a group responsible for coordinating repair of network and equipment failures within the building.

The Pacific Bell (now AT&T West) headquarters building is enormous and quite beautiful. It is shaped like a cross, and each leg of the cross is just over a quarter mile long. It is surrounded by lakes and landscaped jogging trails and has a resident population of several hundred ducks, geese and swans. At the time the building had a resident population of 11,000 employees, and according to local legend was the second largest administrative complex in the world, after the Pentagon.

To manage the building's network, I had an organization of some 120 people, roughly half of whom directly reported to me. It was a monstrous job and I didn't have the managerial seasoning yet to do the job justice. That's where Tom came in. I had known him from a prior position when we worked together in another network management organization. I knew Tom to be not only technically competent but also a skilled and well-organized manager. So I asked him to take over management of a significant chunk of my reporting structure. What I didn't tell him at the time was that the piece I selfishly gave him included the most managerially troublesome segment of the organization. As it turned out, it was the best decision I could have made.

Tom had been with the telephone company for well over 20 years. His career had followed a very traditional track: he joined the company as a Union-represented teletype repair technician following a stint in Vietnam with the Marine Corps. He held many jobs throughout his career and was eventually promoted into

management. When I accepted the job in the headquarters building, Tom was already in the group, working as a network analyst.

Shortly after Tom took over a segment of the group, I was treated to my first lesson in managerial excellence. Because of the scope of responsibility of our job and the volume of work that the building's occupants generated, Tom and I met every morning at 6:30 to plan the day's attack over coffee. We would assess service order priorities and schedule the workforce. During those sessions, I got into the habit of answering the phone by simply hitting the speakerphone button, rather than picking up the handset. That's what I did that morning when the phone rang.

In every organization, there is always one problem person who takes up 80% of the manager's time – something of a managerial albatross. My organization was no exception to this, and the person calling that morning was my albatross. For the purposes of this essay I will call this person Nancy. Thankfully, she now reported to Tom. It was now 7:55; her shift started at 8:30.

Nancy was one of those people who had worked for the phone company for – lest I exaggerate – several hundred years, and who was now retired in place. She had been around long enough to know every trick in the book. She knew exactly how far she could push the limits of managerial law before stepping over the edge into the wasteland of unsatisfactory performance, and like the Flying Wallendas, would carefully, delicately, and infuriatingly walk that line without falling. I didn't have the fortitude, ability or patience to deal with her. Tom, however, was a different story.

"This is Steve," I answered, slapping the speakerphone button. The voice that came out of the speaker was high, near-hysterical, tearful, and clearly Nancy's. "Oh Steve, I'm so glad you're there I don't know what to do he's really sick he's throwing up everywhere!" The words came out in a steady, uninterrupted and delightfully panicky stream. "I know I'm supposed to be there in half an hour but he's really sick and I know that one more tardy will make me unsatisfactory (true) but this is an emergency and I'm sure you understand and – !" From the corner of my eye, I saw Tom, who had been silent so far, gesturing to me, indicating his desire to get into the conversation. Gesturing back, I conceded the floor.

"Nancy – this is Tom. Tell me what's wrong." His voice was strong, sure, commanding. Nancy immediately responded. "Oh Tom, I'm so glad you're there, because you ARE my boss really, and I know you'll understand –" Tom

interrupted her. "Nancy, calm down and tell me what's wrong. Who's sick?"
"Oh, Tom, it's my little dog, Tom! He's throwing up all over the house and I don't know what to do! It's terrible! Can you help me? I know I should be there really soon, but —"

The smile on Tom's face at that moment in time will be burned into my memory until the day I die. It was a gotcha smile, wrapped in evil like bacon around a scallop. "Nancy, don't worry. I know exactly what to do, but you'll have to help me." Her response was immediate. She had Tom exactly where he wanted her. "Of course, Tom. I knew I could count on you. Just tell me what to do and I'll get in there as quickly as I can." He did.

Leaning into the speakerphone, and speaking in a quiet, deliberate fashion, Tom told Nancy exactly what to do:

"Nancy, shoot the dog. It's now 8:05. I expect you in your chair, at your desk, at 8:29." And he hung up the phone.

Needless to say, my chin hit the desktop. "I can't believe you said that!" Smiling, hands folded across his belly, Tom leaned back in the chair and said, "We're not done yet." Leaving my office, we strolled leisurely to the cafeteria, refilled our coffee cups, then proceeded down the hall to Nancy's cubicle, where Tom took up a position in front of her desk with his arm cocked so that he could see his watch.

At 8:29, Nancy came huffing and puffing down the hall. She gave both of us a steel-melting glare — but she was on time.

Two weeks later she transferred out of the group. Tom made her life so miserable by having the audacity to demand that she actually carry her share of the workload that she left.

To those people who were hard workers and who resented Nancy for what she had gotten away with for a long time, Tom became a hero. To the other Nancys in the group, he represented a serious threat to the stability of their carefully crafted non-workdays. His treatment of Nancy illustrated one of his guiding philosophies of management: "The single most valuable tool that any manager has at his or her disposal is human sacrifice. You only have to kill one."

Tom also understood the double-edged role of positive incentive in the workplace. One morning, one of his first-level managers came into my office,

where Tom and I were having a meeting. "I have a bone to pick with you," he indicated to Tom, who in turn motioned to him to sit down and explain. "Last week, when you handed out bonuses, I didn't get one. I want to know why."

Tom sat back in his chair, once again folded his hands across his expansive lap, and asked a simple question. "Well, explain to me why you think you deserve one?" The response was exasperated and immediate. "Well, it's obvious! I did exactly what I was supposed to do, all year. I always got my work done on time, I was never late, I never took advantage of the system, and —" Tom suddenly threw himself forward in his chair, his index finger pointed at the employee. "That's right. And for that, I give you a paycheck every two weeks. You want a bonus? Then you have to give Pacific Bell a bonus. You want more money? Do something beyond the requirements of your job to earn it." at which point he sat back and folded his hands in his lap once again, smiling, a managerial Buddha. The employee, now completely flustered, sputtered for a moment and left without retort. What could he have said?

During each of these episodes, I experienced something of an epiphany. Tom's answers were simple, logical, elegant. In every case the employee learned an important lesson. But it wasn't always Tom's employees who benefited: in one particular case, the lesson was directed, quite appropriately, at me.

Tom and I had worked hard for several months to rearrange and consolidate people and equipment in our work area to make the operation more efficient. One particularly sticky problem had to do with the three printers that generated trouble reports all day long. I wanted to put them *here*; Tom wanted them *over there*. For reasons I will never completely understand, the two of us got into a toe-to-toe screaming match about the disposition of the printers, in the middle of the office, surrounded by our employees. Eventually, Tom backed down, saying, "OK, you're the boss. Put them where you want." And he left.

Well, the victory was a hollow one. As it turned out, Tom was right; the printers should have been placed *over there*, which is where we eventually put them. I won the argument because I was Tom's boss, but I was devastated. Our relationship was very special to me and I now realized that in my zeal to win the argument I may have damaged it irretrievably. For the sake of winning an incredibly stupid argument, I had lost my best friend. I slumped my shoulders and Eeyored my way back to my office.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang. When I answered it, I was surprised to hear Tom's voice on the other end of the call. "Where are you?" he asked.

Puzzled, I responded, "What do you mean?" "It's 2:30," he countered. "We always have coffee at 2:30. How come you're not down here?"

I was stunned and momentarily taken aback. "What are you talking about?" I asked. "After what happened down here between us, you still want to have coffee with me!?" There was a pregnant pause on the other end of the line, and then Tom said, "Don't move. Don't you dare leave your office. I'll be right there." And he hung up.

I didn't know what to expect when he arrived. Five minutes later, Tom walked into my office, and without preamble, he taught me one of the most important lessons I've ever learned. I've never forgotten his words, and never will:

"Shep, Nothing in this world is more important than friendship. What happened between us today was *business*. Our friendship is *personal*, and a hell of a lot more important. Don't you *ever* confuse the two again." All this with his index finger at my nose.

When I left that job in 1989 to accept a position in the technical training department, I turned the reins of the network organization over to Tom, knowing that he was the most competent manager the place could ever have. To announce my departure and Tom's ascension to the throne, I called a staff meeting.

Because we had such a large organization, I reserved a room that had a very large boardroom-style table that could seat the 40-50 people who were invited. Most of them would be happy with the transition; the hard workers had long since recognized that Tom was a good manager and a powerful ally. There was still, however, a small cadre of people that Tom referred to as "can't hardlies." As was always the case, they gathered in a small knot at the far corner of the table.

When I announced my departure there was polite applause and enthusiastic wishes of good luck. When I announced my replacement there was more polite applause, except that the far corner of the table remained noticeably silent. At that time, I announced that Tom would now join us and would take over the meeting in-progress to announce his plans for the organization.

Tom came into the room with his briefcase in one hand and a box of Kleenex in the other. Setting both down, he looked at the far corner of the table and smiled. Then he took the box of Kleenex and slid it all the way down to the silent group at the far end of the table. Still smiling, he intoned: "You're gonna need that."



This story goes a long way to convey the values that my friend Tom (that's him at left) stands for, how he put them into practice, and how he motivated others through his actions. The point is that this story can be used for a variety of purposes; you just have to be aware of your own intentions as you consider the proper story to tell.

Another way that stories can be linked to the real world is as a tool during negotiating activities. A story can be used to seek commonality of purpose with the other party in the negotiation and can also be used to establish a vision between the two parties that demonstrates a viable and desirable outcome for both.

The key message here is that just about any story can be used to your advantage as a storyteller, as long as you are sensitive to the needs of the listener and as long as there is a relevant point to the story in the way in which it links to the objective at hand. This requires practice and good listening and awareness skills, but it is *absolutely* a skill that can be learned and very effectively applied.

Thanks for reading.