

A twist in the tale: communicating through stories

Since the beginning of time, stories have been a chief method of conveying messages. As humans we rely on story telling, narratives, to convey complex meanings and emotions and direct our behaviour, at times even over genes and instinct.

By [John Bradfield](#) 25 Feb 2004

Stories of leadership inspire, marketing and product success stories urge us to buy, and stories about overcoming adversities in business give us courage and motivation to act.

In this column, I share some of the influences of a professional storyteller, my father Brian (1934-2004), which help to reinforce the need for courage, authenticity and credibility as a communicator; how communication, as in nature, is vital to our lives in organisations; listening to feedback from your audience; and sharing know-how, contacts and opportunities with others. The insights illustrate that story telling can be a valuable part of the communicator's toolbox, and that stories are just as important to business as they are in our personal lives.

He started out, as a journalist, writing for newspapers, became a magazine editor for several titles, and both author. As a communicator he was first and foremost a storyteller. Despite working as a journalist for most of his life, his best stories were told in person. A raconteur with a huge general knowledge, he conversed on many subjects, and embellished his tales with a dramatic touch. He could captivate an audience, whether motoring journalists on a car launch overseas, with fishermen at a pub in Hout Bay, after work with reporter at the Café Royal in Cape Town, or simply at home with family and friends. His stories and enthusiasm for life inspired others to follow careers in publishing, take up public relations, even pursue careers as professional fishermen, or buy their own boats or yachts for pleasure or profit.

Storytelling need not be limited to the printed page. Stories told in person by the CEO, managers, marketers can deliver a message in a compelling way and make a stronger impact at an emotional level. With management today favouring the participative over the authoritarian style, storytelling is an ideal vehicle to reach people in the right emotional places, and to build empathy, trust and memorability.

One of his first stories as a cadet reporter in the 1950s landed him in hot water. He wrote a story critical of the SA Navy while in service and was discharged. Although he loved the sea, he never had any regrets about speaking out at a time when it took guts to question the ultra conservative status quo.

Communication can sometimes be risky, but often to not communicate or to not be true to your convictions involves the greatest risk of all - losing one's credibility.

Being a keen fisherman, he was a close observer of nature and especially sea birds and their habits, which featured prominently in his stories. In his book, "Fish aren't fools" (1976, published by Estaug), he recalls how the birds communicated with each other to hunt shoals of fish: "Should the fish rise at a particular spot you will suddenly see all the birds (Cape gannet or malgas, terns or sterretjies) in the immediate vicinity make for the spot and soon a long stream of birds will come winging towards the scene of the action. There is a means of communication that is passed along the line so to speak. ... as if given some message or signal the birds will rise off the rocks and head in a particular direction to feed."

As in nature, communication is vital to life in organisations. The right messages need to be communicated "along the line" so that employees are able to move in the appropriate direction in the interests of the growth of the company.

A pioneer of ski-boat fishing in Cape Town, he became the first person to catch a giant bluefin tuna from a ski-boat in the 1960s. The blue fin tuna weighed in at 226-kg and took a three-hour battle from his 6-m ski-boat in False Bay.

With increasing urbanisation, fishing stocks came under huge pressure and he took up the cause in public through his columns, writing stories about conservation and protection.

Fishing for snoek in False Bay offered an important lesson in listening to your audience. We drifted close to a Kalk Bay commercial fishing boat and as we came near, the crew shouted some rather foul epithets to describe his column writing abilities. Apparently they did not agree with his predictions in one of his fishing columns. We were mortified at the harsh feedback, but he was pleased - the fishermen were reading his columns with more than a passing interest.

He gave freely of his knowledge, know-how, and contacts, opening doors for others whether they wished to have their work published, get into fishing, or wanted advice on what cars to purchase. There's no doubt that we need to paddle our own boats, or swim out to our ship if it doesn't come in. We are reminded about all the inspirational stories of those who start out at the beginning of a career, and often someone helped open the door.

Storytelling can open opportunities for compellingly communicating a message - about a company, product or a brand. Shaping and sharing stories, whether through articles, speeches, press releases, and company memos, can help to convey a lasting impression, and ultimately can help to make all the difference in our lives.

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