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# YOUR LEADERSHIP STORY

THE FOUNDATION

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## MY STORY OF STORYTELLING

# Grandmother's Footsteps

'Modern storytellers are the descendants of an immense and ancient community of holy people, troubadours, bards, griots, cantadoras, traveling poets, bums, hags and crazy people.'  
Clarissa Pinkola Estés

*My grandmother definitely wasn't a crazy person but she was a storyteller extraordinaire. When I was young, she'd come to stay. On golden evenings she would draw the curtains, tuck me in and sit on the edge of my bed to recount tales of Alice in Wonderland and Peter Pan. The strange and wonderful worlds and the characters within enthralled me, but the stories I loved the most were those of her own true adventures and travels.*

*She and my grandfather had lived in Lesotho, Swaziland and Zambia, where my grandfather was chief factory inspector. In England my grandmother had been a keen actress and had directed some plays; initially she wasn't sure what she would do in her life in Africa. She knew that there was a lot of poverty and many social and health problems related to lack of education but didn't know how she could help.*

*In the mountain villages of Lesotho she found something that ignited a spark in her. She saw people sharing knowledge and information through their stories. She saw how these stories resonated with the villagers, allowing them to see how they might apply changes to their own lives. Soon my grandmother was eliciting more stories and helping people share their tales and perform plays to help other villagers with their own knowledge and experience. I knew I wanted to do something similar one day; I dreamt of travelling the world helping facilitate stories and plays.*

*Many years later, I was working in the field of addiction recovery in the London Boroughs of Hounslow and Ealing. My approach, Expressive Therapy, helped my clients through metaphor and image work to understand their own underlying beliefs and values and to discover a renewed purpose and personal identity in order to change their lives. As well as facilitating these groups, I also trained coaches, counsellors and therapists to use my approach. I knew how powerful it was when people expressed their truth and shared their story. I witnessed and helped facilitate some incredible transformations. But, after five years working in the same windowless room, with its indelible stain on the carpet, and always a small group of people, I began to feel confined. When's my own life adventure going to begin? I felt I had people to reach around the world and I wanted to step up onto on a bigger stage. But I didn't know how to start.*

*Then, on 26 December 2004, the Indian Ocean Tsunami struck, devastating huge swathes of the Thai, Indian and Sri Lankan coastlines. It killed thousands of people and left millions destitute, without homes or a means to make a living. A few weeks later, when the world was still reeling, I was approached by Josep – a counsellor and Tamil leader based in London. He had recently attended a training I had given.*

*'I'm holding a Tsunami Conference for our community. The participants will be a mix of Tamil lawyers, teachers, cab drivers and shop owners based in London who want to go out and do what they can to help ease the pain and make sense of things. I want you to explain how they can help their friends and relatives back home,' he said.*

*Josep explained that even though the world had mobilised quickly to make donations to the Sri Lankan government, much of the foreign aid and government help did not find its way through to the Tamils, because they had been fighting with the Sri Lankans. In fact, many Tamils were left without any help at all. As well as needing practical and financial support there was*

also a huge amount of restorative help required. People were still in shock – desperately trying to make sense of the disorder and the horrific losses they had faced. ‘But Josep, why me? I have no experience of their lives or situation!’ I said.

‘Because you tell stories and storytelling is the Tamil way. Your stories help others express their deepest truth! Show us how to use these personal stories so we can help each other and heal together,’ said Josep.

And so, at the Tsunami Conference in London, I spoke to the Tamil audience who were preparing to go out there, while Josep made a simultaneous translation. They could provide practical aid but were not equipped to help mend broken spirits and injured souls. I gave them some trauma approaches, but mostly I showed them how to elicit stories and metaphors that could transform both the teller and listener.

Some weeks later, when Josep and his group returned to London from Sri Lanka, I was eager to hear of their experience: ‘The situation is terrible out there. Our families and friends have lost homes, loved ones and everything else, but, amidst the devastated buildings, smashed-up fishing boats and debris, we created gatherings to hear and share personal stories. People who had been left isolated in their suffering found ways to help one another and there is a sense they are pulling together now to heal and rebuild their lives. The shared stories created a new community spirit, a new energy that has helped people see their world in a new way – restoring a sense of hope that is instigating change.’

Suddenly something clicked for me. Josep’s faith in the potential of personal stories and metaphors to effect a transformation made me realise that I had something to offer that was of value beyond the small groups with which I had been working. This was how I could help all kinds of people to connect and share their messages! That’s when I remembered the stories that my grandmother had told me, of the storytelling-people of Lesotho. Her love for stories, her understanding of their power to convey a message, and the way they build communities and create action, had all been carried within me through the years. Now, here I was fulfilling my dream to help others, in a land far from my own, spreading hope and change through the power of storytelling.

Since then, I have travelled all over the world leading workshops and seminars for global businesses such as AmEx, Accenture, Microsoft and PepsiCo. Whenever I share a story, I find people can always relate in some way. Maybe not to my actual experience but to the feelings of my experience, and I am transformed from the stranger in the room to someone people feel they know and are more likely to trust. That impact is universal. Whether those people are Emirati nationals in Abu Dhabi, Chinese workers in Liaoning Province, or an eclectic mix of Europeans at a meeting in mid-town Vienna, we find, through someone’s story, how we are more similar than different. We all have our share of struggles, aspirations, disappointments and successes and can relate to others when we hear theirs. When we share our own story, we bring others along for the ride. I came to realise that an authentic leadership story is the wand that every leader needs if they want to create magic at the front of the room and influence, inspire and empower others with their message.

‘The role of the storyteller is to awaken the storyteller in others.’

Jack Zipes

# GET YOURSELF READY

## *Your Truth and Experience*

‘Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world.’  
Robert McKee

When you stand at the front of the room, whether to make a farewell speech or head a board-room table, you are leading. If you share tips on video or make presentations and pitches within your daily work then you are there to lead people’s thoughts and actions and to leave them with a certain impression.

Your greatest asset as a leader, is yourself. Storytelling is how you can convert your experience and insights into something of value to your team, business or company. If you don’t tell your story, who will know about the richness of your experience? How will you stand up for what you believe in? And how will you effectively lead others to help your cause or realise your goals?

Leaders do not make their mark by being cardboard cut- outs, following a script and simply going through the motions. In order to connect with people, it is essential that you bring your own personality and perspectives to work. That is why this book is not about just tools or about how to master public speaking or make presentations.

This book will help you to understand yourself as a leader and develop a communication based on your own personal experience, showing you how you can use it to influence and inspire others. You will connect and move your audience by showing your human side, someone who has faced and over- come dilemmas, challenges and setbacks. Instead of giving a wooden, starch-fronted presentation, this book will enable you to tell a human story that is you, that becomes you and that others remember you by.

It will enable you to define and develop your own leader- ship story and share your message in a way that has real impact, whether on stage, in meetings, pitches or presentations. By revealing more of your heart, and communicating its mes- sages with clarity and presence, you will inspire and influence more people to follow your lead.

Your Leadership Story will help you to:

- connect and engage more quickly with people when you speak;
- develop trust and loyal business relationships;
- establish yourself as a leader with unique perspectives;
- tap into the diverse potential of all your followers;
- develop greater presence and enhance your reputation;
- help you to define your personal philosophy and motivations;
- gain others’ support for you and your endeavours and initiatives;
- increase your ability to inspire and influence so you get more done with greater clout.

You can use this whether you are in a presentation to clients and colleagues, or carrying out coaching sessions with your team, because they will learn and engage more when you open up about your own experience.

## **Suggested way to use this book:**

This book provides structured opportunities to reflect, stories to stimulate your thinking and exercises to provoke action. There will also be valuable tips and tools for standing up and delivering your story, so that you can confidently weave stories into your speeches and presentations and convey them with power and presence.

In order to build your Leadership Story, I will take you through a five-stage process that covers all you need to know to use your life experience to influence and inspire. You can dip in and out of each stage or follow it step-by-step to create a leadership story you can use to influence and inspire both others and yourself. These skills will be useful in both your presentations and speeches and your everyday interactions.

**Stage 1** is all about understanding the power of storytelling and how to use your life experience for the most impact.

**Stage 2** is all you need to know to prepare your story, from defining your message to uncovering your story.

**Stage 3** is about how to craft your Leadership Story. You will also have begun to build a stock of powerful everyday stories that you can choose from and use for different situations.

**Stage 4** teaches you how to deliver your story with confidence both on the stage and off, to connect with and more quickly and effectively engage your audience.

**Stage 5** is about how to live your story day to day in a way that inspires and draws you towards a greater vision, so that you continue to influence and inspire.

Follow the five-stage process and you will have your core message and a leadership story that you will know how to deliver to the people around you in a way that will transform you and your business.

# Does a personal story work in a professional context?

‘The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values and agenda of an entire generation that is to come.’

Steve Jobs

I have worked with leaders for many years as a speaker, facilitator and coach and have heard a lot of speeches.

Some are slick and confident while others are nervous and uncertain. But what I have discovered is that even the most polished deliveries do not always land – while others that are raw and timid may take us by surprise, having a profound effect and leaving a lasting impression.

One of my defining moments as a story coach was at a conference for senior civil servants at the Ministry of Defence. We sat in a huge metallic hangar where arches soared overhead and tanks and other military ephemera were dotted around. It was an army museum but we weren’t there to explore the artefacts. My role was to coach this delegation of senior civil servants and decorated military personnel on their own leadership speeches – which they were refining to deliver later to their own cohorts.

Many of the delegates were brilliant public speakers in the technical sense: they spoke with confidence, assurance and eloquence. They gave all the facts, covered what they needed to say. Yet something was missing. Their speeches failed to really convince or rouse any real response. They didn’t get you in the gut.

Then James stood up to speak. His role involved resourcing and equipping the troops. Prior to the event, he had felt nervous about speaking to his more senior colleagues so we worked together on his speech:

*‘Crouching for endless hours in the dust behind the walls of a destroyed fort while the mauves, scarlets and oranges hung in the Afghan sky, our sunset watches had become a sort of meditation. Sometimes, in a quiet lull, there would be bird-song or a sudden crack of a gun. A random shout or the distant thud of a bomb, the hum of a vehicle driving through the dust. But on this evening it was different. Suddenly there was a mad shouting and a staccato of bullets. All hell broke loose and we entered the chaos of theatre. Cries, bloodshed, blind scrambling in the dust as we moved to take cover. Then, the shocking realisation of fatal wounding of a close companion and just as suddenly, silence. As quickly as it started, it was over. All was still and we were left to wrestle quietly with our doubts and fears for the rest of the night.*

*‘Alone with one or two others in an unmarked outpost, that first night became an echo of future nights. All we knew was that we were entirely reliant on each other and our communication and survival equipment. And just one thing pulled me through. Knowing I was part of the finest military establishment in the world. It would hold us. I could trust it to make the right decisions and to give me the resource that I needed. I trusted it with my life.*

*'So remember what your day-to-day decisions really mean. Each decision, great and small, is the entire world of each soldier. They are putting their trust in you to equip, re-source and support them, and they are putting their lives in your hands. Be sure you are worthy of that trust.'*

The audience of James's peers and seniors sat and held their breath for a moment then erupted into loud applause. I took the microphone back from James – 'Wow! Thank you, James!' Then to the audience I said, 'Imagine if James had just said, "Make sure you make good decisions, because you know the ramifications of your actions are huge." What was different about James's speech?'

Then a former general spoke up from the corner: 'James did something that all the rest of us did not. He spoke about his personal experience and in a personal way. We got a glimpse of the human being beneath the words and that was motivating and inspiring.'

It wasn't more polish that was needed in the other speeches. It was rawness and vulnerability. A willingness to show up as the human being he was. James had not just given us a Leadership Speech but his Leadership Story. Without his story, he would have got his point across but it would not have inspired or moved people in the same way.

# *A Fix for Nervous Speakers*

Even the most nervous of speakers can deliver a successful speech that will quickly engage people and move them to action when they know how to share the right information with purpose. Getting personal does not mean sharing all your private experiences, but being open and courageous enough to share what has made you into the person you are today. What is more important is that it is delivered in a natural style with a genuine voice.

That is why, if you lack confidence or experience in public speaking, what I present in this book is a great antidote. You don't have to be a 'great public speaker' in any technical sense to land a great talk. Sure, it helps, but the blood and guts of it – what really connects – is that you are genuine and you share the essential elements. You just need to understand how to craft your own story and know when and how to use it.

The work I did that day at the Ministry of Defence, forms the foundation of this book. We explored how each leader could show more of themselves by using their own stories and anecdotes to get their message across. We looked at how they could do this in a way that was elegant, authentic and in alignment with their objectives as a leader. The transformation was startling. When they spoke again, a little more from the heart and using the power of story to convey their message, it was obvious the audience were more engaged, connected and inspired. I realised this is something I can teach other leaders to do in order to make a huge difference to their work and in their lives.



# Why telling your story is a core leadership competency

*'Stories are the single most powerful weapon in a leader's arsenal.'*  
Howard Gardner, Harvard University

It's no longer a secret that stories are the most effective and powerful strategy to get a message across in a way that really gets through to others. It's also the best way to quickly engage your audience and develop a trusting relationship with them.

Leading-edge global organisations like GE, Goldman Sachs and HSBC understand that storytelling is a core leadership capability and so provide their leaders with storytelling skills as a central part of their leadership curricula. Entrepreneurs and millennials also use the power of story in everything they do, from leveraging opportunities and standing up to speak at networking events to creating YouTube empires with millions of followers.

Your Leadership Story explains and demonstrates how you can use story in your own leadership. This book draws upon my work with hundreds of groups in corporate organisations around the world, helping leaders and managers develop their natural presence, their personal brand and their ability to influence and inspire with authenticity.

Stories help to initiate projects, mobilise people, attain far-reaching goals, and achieve many of the other things a leader is called upon to do. Telling stories will help you to motivate, inform, persuade, engage, inspire or even placate the people you hope to influence.

The simple act of sharing an honest story helps you to connect and build trust with your audience because it demonstrates that you:

- Have the courage to tell your story and be visible;
- Possess the strength and conviction to state who you are and what you stand for;
- Have a clear vision to share and inspire;
- Value what it means to be human and imperfect;
- Are willing to admit to mistakes and learn and grow from them.

All of these things are part of what it takes to be a great leader. And it is only by telling your story that your audience can get to grips with what it is that you do differently and uniquely. Richard Branson's success (I know he is often referenced but bear with me, this is worth it) is based on his willingness – from the outset – to just be himself: to do things his way and to tell that story. It worked and has continued to work for him.

When you create a leadership story, you have something powerful in your store that will serve you throughout your leadership and your life: whenever you stand up to make a speech, give a presentation or run a meeting in any context or setting of life and work.

*'Today everyone, whether they know it or not, is in the emotional transportation business. More and more, success is won by creating compelling stories that have the power to move people to action.'*  
Peter Guber

# Do I have a Leadership Story?

“Everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.”  
Patrick Rothfuss, *The Name of the Wind*

By its very definition, leading is not following. It is about forging your own path and inspiring the loyalty and motivation in others to take them with you somewhere new: a place they may not have arrived at without your leadership.

Whether or not you have some great, dramatic story to tell is not so relevant as the lessons you learned. The story just needs to contain some essential elements for it to swing.

You may not think you have a story but in revealing your personality you will find that you do. The truth is, everyone does. You are built out of your story. Perhaps yours may not appear to be full of swashbuckling high drama. Mine neither. Well, mine has a little bit of swashbuckling, but that's by the by. But what makes a story powerful is, in part, recognising how the experiences you did have shaped you into becoming the unique human being that you are. No two stories are alike because our lives and the lessons we have drawn from them have all been so vastly different. What is humdrum to you might hold something exotic and unique to others, or else something in your experience may be so universal that everyone can relate to it but no one will have related in quite the way you did. Your story might show them how to relate to their own experience in a new and empowering way. That's leadership.

I will help you to understand what is interesting about you and the journey you have been on, and what it is about your leadership approach that is different. You'll learn how to develop communications based on your own personal experience, and how you can use it to influence and inspire others.

With a well-developed leadership story you will connect and move your audience by showing your human side, that of someone who has faced and overcome dilemmas, challenges and setbacks. It's what you have learnt from these experiences that is so valuable to others. You will define and develop your leadership story and share your message in a way that has real impact. By revealing more of yourself, and learning to communicate your messages with clarity and presence, you will connect more powerfully with others whether on stage, in meetings or at presentations. This will engage people to follow your lead.

As a result, you will develop a strong and engaging leadership story that inspires purpose and self-confidence in you, and it will enable you to inform, engage or inspire your audience. Sharing it will become second nature to you and you will feel good about telling your story as you increase your impact and influence exponentially.

# Getting started – the Five Stages of Your Leadership Story

*'People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact it's the other way round.'*  
Terry Pratchett

## **STAGE 1 ACKNOWLEDGE: RECOGNISE THE POTENTIAL OF YOUR STORY**

Stories give colour and life to communications that would otherwise be dull and flat. They connect us as human beings and they have the power to make information more easily understood, and more memorable than bullet points and bare facts alone. When we use our own stories, it takes this a stage further. They instantly enable us to connect with people because we show them something of who we are.

I'll share the latest neuroscience that shows how stories move us in a way that is now proven by scientific evidence, evidence that shows what happens in our brains when we hear a story and how stories enhance communications to more quickly build trust and engagement.

I will ask you to consider your own presentation situations and when and how you can use your stories to best achieve your outcomes. You'll learn about the Seven Cs of leadership storytelling to enhance your connection to your audience, how stories help build your credibility, create context, gain co-operation and collaboration, convince, catalyse action and cultivate a community.

## **STAGE 2 UNCOVER: FIND YOUR MESSAGE AND STORY**

Before moving on to craft your story in Stage 3, Stage 2 is about finding and knowing the message you want to communicate. I will show you how to find your key messages and stories, as well as how to find pivotal moments within these stories, so that you can be equipped and ready to use them before any talk or presentation. We'll also look at the importance of vulnerability, and when personal stories get too personal.

## **STAGE 3 CRAFT: WRITE A COMPELLING STORY**

You might choose to develop just one leadership story as your signature story that you evolve over time. Or you might have a number of leadership stories linked to different messages and audiences. Either way, you can draw out shorter tales to use in your daily working life. Because not every life or business situation requires our whole story, we often need short 'everyday' stories or snippets.

You'll learn the key questions your audience ask themselves before you even open your mouth, and the Essential Elements that your story must contain so that it has the desired impact. And you'll learn how to develop and use this story to entrance and enthrall people on a larger scale.

## **STAGE 4 DELIVER: TELL A POWERFUL STORY**

Stage 4 is about getting on your feet and telling your story, on stage or from the front of the room, and enhancing your delivery style and stagecraft. You'll learn how to read your audience and communicate in response to the real-time feedback you are getting in the room.

Now you have your story, you will discover how to enchant your audience in the telling of it. You will learn what you need to prepare before you share your story, how to connect from the stage, how to navigate through your story, use your voice and body language in the most effective way and how to use the platform to plot out your story to create a living, visceral experience for others.

You will be encouraged to practise so that you build a range of story responses to different scenarios. You will have an opportunity to try out some techniques for using your story as a part of your longer presentations and speeches as well as how you can tell your story ‘on the fly’ in impromptu encounters. You will also be equipped with how to cope when the unexpected happens and you need to ad lib.

### **STAGE 5 EVOLVE: LIVE A GREATER STORY EVERY DAY**

In Stages 1–4 you will have learnt about the power of story, when and how to use it, how to find and write your leadership story, and how to tell it to others in order to influence and inspire them. Stage 5 looks at the story that you actually live and embody day to day, so that you continue to build the Seven Cs with your audience and live the most powerful version of you.

As you become conscious of the story you tell yourself about who you are, you will be encouraged to give yourself credit for all you have achieved and have the potential to still achieve. There are times when we limit or restrict ourselves through the story we tell about who we are. I conclude the book with a call to liberate yourself from any past limiting stories and develop a greater story that recognises you and the potential of who you can become.

We’ll look at how you can continue to share your journey – your successes and your vulnerabilities – with those around you. In doing so and living your story authentically, you will empower others too. Share the value of story with others and invite them to craft and tell their own stories to benefit from the process.

Stage 5 is about living a story that expands your sense of self and increases the impact you make on the lives of others day to day.

**Buy Your Leadership Story here**  
**Or the Audiobook here**