



Storytelling: how leaders can leverage this communication superpower

By Ian and Zoë Sanders



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A shift in leadership

In her article [In praise of the boring chief executive](#), Financial Times columnist Elaine Moore lauds the quiet and considered nature of four leading CEOs. She namechecks Alphabet’s Sundar Pichai, Amazon’s Andy Jassy, Apple’s Tim Cook and Microsoft’s Satya Nadella. Elaine notes that their style of communication with the outside world is far removed from that of higher profile CEOs, and is all the better for it.

“Flaunting idiosyncrasies and cavorting for an online audience drives attention,” writes Elaine. “But for established companies, boring is better.”

Yet there is a middle ground between noisy self-promotion and 'being boring.' If yours is a more modest or considered leadership style, it's still possible - and, we suggest - essential, to share what's on your mind.

Over the last few years, and especially after the pandemic, there has been a shift in leadership from 'command and control' to 'trust and inspire.' Research by the Edelman Trust in 2022 shows 60 percent of employees would like their CEO to speak out on controversial issues they care about. The notion of a CEO high up in her or his ivory tower feels outdated.

In today's working environment, we need to hear from our leaders. We want to know who they are, what are their values, what's their backstory. We've become hungry for more authentic and real ways of doing things. Employees are looking for openness and honesty from those they report to. They want to see evidence of humanness and empathy, to see the real person behind the job title and to hear their views on topics they're interested in.

When opinions, experiences and stories are meaningfully and authentically told, then it's a powerful tool of communication that has far reaching benefits. It builds trust. And in a world where misinformation is rampant, this has vital significance. After all, we seek reassurance that those at the tops of our organisations are building a world we want to live in.

For leaders today, invisibility isn't an option. Leadership requires those to stand up and assert their values, to step out of the shadows and engage.

Becoming visible

How can leaders share meaningful and gettable content that resonates with their audience? By using stories as a wrapper, lifting a lid on the experiences that have shaped them.

Yes, talk about the good, but more importantly, show where things have gone wrong, throwing a spotlight on the challenges and obstacles that they had to overcome along the way. What employees “hunger for most,” says Nikki Cicerani of the US consulting firm SY Partners, “is being reminded their leaders are people too”.

We’ve all got stories of how we ‘got to here’ and examples of difficult decisions, things that went right, things that went wrong. In sharing these examples, leaders can teach and inspire, as well as show their humanity and vulnerability. It’s not about showboating. It’s about connecting deeply and meaningfully. Stories provide a hook onto which to hang a conversation, where you can engage deeply with your audience - investors, employees, customers.

In fact, one of the CEOs Elaine mentions - Satya Nadella - already uses stories to great effect. He’s shared his life experiences in his book ‘Hit Refresh’ and also posts engaging story-led content on LinkedIn. Satya is an excellent example of how an unflashy, meaningful and well-considered communication style can be successfully executed.

Setting the tone

Using stories in the way Microsoft's CEO does brings the leader out from behind a closed door. It opens them up, allowing the audience in and begins the process of building trust and inspiring action. And by sharing their stories and values, it sets the tone of the organisation, the culture. It helps answer the question: what kind of organisation do we want to be in? Most people will agree: they'd prefer to work for one that's open and respectful, not secretive and dismissive.

And being open and honest about any failures models the kind of behaviour the leader wishes to see in the workplace. When they demonstrate first hand their fallibility, or talk about having to find new ways through a problem, it gives employees the understanding and tools how to make the right choices for themselves. It can show what is meant by integrity and doing the right thing. A leader after all leads by example.

How a leader communicates is essential for creating the right conditions of psychological safety so employees feel able to speak-up.

Our best communication tool

Why stories? Stories are our most human and authentic communication tools. They're gettable and visual and can make an immediate connection with an audience. They can be peppered with emotion and insights, colour and flavour. Stories take us on a journey and through them we can share those things that speak deeply to others; things that will encourage employees to lean in and bring them onto the leader's side.

A leader's stories about their career, formative experiences growing up or overcoming adversity - these are all universal tales about what it is to be human. And the act of sharing a story, of passing that spark, creates powerful connections with others.

And a leader will never get to meet every one of her 5,000 or 50,000 employees in-person. But she can touch them through stories, building powerful emotional connections along the way.

This can have profound effects. Because when the company has a crisis, or employees are urged to speak-up about malpractice, or the CEO wants their team to go the extra mile - what's going to get employees onside and believing in their organisation? It's when those employees respect and trust their leader. That emotional connection will motivate employees to respond to requests for their help.

Storytelling is a powerful tool for sparking change. It's not necessary for those in the C-Suite to share their views and opinions on everything under the sun. We're championing instead for leaders to embrace the magnetic power of storytelling.

A leader who leverages storytelling can become a better leader.

What are the stories you're wanting to tell?

About the Authors



We partner with heart-led and purpose-driven individuals and teams as we help evolve their leadership, communication and organisation's culture through the humanising power of storytelling. A husband and wife team, we value building strong relationships with those we work with. We like to do things a little differently from a regular storytelling agency or training company, treading a path guided by a spirit of curiosity and creativity. We pour into our work our own passion for the role stories play, and how they shape both our individual and collective direction in life. Human behaviour, organisational culture and the future of work fascinate us.

We work out of our studio overlooking the Thames estuary or in our garden cabin with our border terrier.

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