flash on the screen behind the storyteller? Which approach would be more appealing and more influential?

Telling stories allows listeners to connect stories to their own experiences. In many ways, stories allow listeners to crawl inside the story and begin to feel and experience information on an emotional level - and from the storyteller’s point of view. Stories also create relationships between storytellers and the audience, as audience members empathize with the struggles described as if they, too, have wrestled with those struggles.

Further, storytelling is a vital means of sharing tacit knowledge within schools. Think of all the people in your school or district who are retired or may soon be leaving. A lot of important learning walks out with veteran educators. How will your school retain its history? How will your school capture and convey those lessons learned? How will you orient new staff to the student-focused culture you’ve worked so hard to create as a team?

Sharing stories about those who live the lessons learned is a powerful way to create local heroes that others want to emulate. Here’s a story recounted by Nick Forster (1999) about Dave Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard:

…new recruits to the company often hear about the time when Dave Packard awarded a “Medal of Defiance” to house engineer Chuck House in the late 1970s. This was awarded because House had persisted in working on a new monitor despite being told to drop it by Packard. The monitors were a huge success in the 1980s. Today, all HP staff still look for ways to innovate new ideas before senior management tells them what they should not be doing (as quoted in Forster, N. et al., 1999, 15).

Forster also recalls a story shared by a Ford executive about how hard it can be to change:

A photographer caught the moment when the gorilla gingerly tested the grass with a toe, and the portrait hangs in the executive office today. It’s there to remind me that no matter how attractive the new surroundings might appear, it takes time and courage to leave the coterie (the comfortable security) even an ugly cramped space - that you know well (as quoted in Forster, N. et al., 1999, 15).

Communicating examples of times when hard decisions were made in the best interest of students, despite the fall out, clearly sets expectations for new and veteran staff alike and communicates deeply held values. While posting the vision, mission and goals may be important, sharing stories of the values is more likely to influence behavior, weave values into the fabric of the organization, and create a shared vision of the future.

Stories can also be utilized to help people unlearn old ways and embrace new approaches. Take this story shared by Heifetz and Laurie on the need for adaptive change:

When a leopard threatens a band of chimpanzees, the leopard rarely succeeds in countering a strong chimp (as defined by group hierarchy) who is ready to respond to this kind of threat. But when a man with an automatic rifle comes near, the routine responses fail. Chimps risk extinction in a world of poachers unless they figure out how to disarm the new threat. Similarly, when businesses cannot learn to quickly adapt to new challenges, they are likely to face their own form of extinction (Heifetz and Laurie, 1997).

What Stories To Share

Annette Simmons, author-consultant, notes, “People are up to their eyeballs in information. They want something beyond the data. Chimps know how to respond to this kind of threat. But when a man with an automatic rifle comes near, the routine responses fail. Chimps risk extinction in a world of poachers unless they figure out how to disarm the new threat. Similarly, when businesses cannot learn to quickly adapt to new challenges, they are likely to face their own form of extinction (Heifetz and Laurie, 1997).”

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Similarly, author Noel Tichy (2002) asserts that leaders must create their teachable point of view; one that the organization’s view of why the organization exists and how to deploy its resources, then influences this view into others through three basic types of stories: 1) Who I Am Story - reflects the leader’s fundamental mental model of how the organization will succeed, including the leader’s values that shape that vision; 2) Who We Are Stories - affirm the leader’s beliefs, and experiences as a team or organization; 3) Future Stories - helps others break from the past and embrace a new and better state. Tichy says, “The best way to get people to venture into unknown terrain is to make it desirable by taking them there in their imaginations.”

How To Tell Stories That Influence

Using Leader Stories to Build Shared Vision and Commitment (Page et al., 2006) provides step-by-step guidance for how to create the Who I Am Story by reflecting on lessons learned that have shaped beliefs, reflecting on those lessons and applying them to your beliefs about your school. For the Who We Are Story, would-be storytellers gather materials and resources related to student demographics and status, improvement needs and school culture, identify what is to be communicated about these, then brainstorm and illustrate the plan for how the storyteller and team will achieve the desired end. In crafting the Future Story, writers jot notes about the storyline, cast self and others as protagonists and heroes in the story, and illustrate the challenges, vision and victories of succeeding together in the future.

Across all three story types, storytellers keep the intended audience in mind, thinking through how to pitch the story, get and stay clear on their purpose, practice telling it, and seek feedback for improvement. Clear criteria for each story provide templates for drafting, assessing, and delivering each story type.

Jeanine Pinner, a parent leader, shares these strategies for creating compelling stories to influence decision makers on issues related to children with disabilities: focus on the outcomes (results) you want to achieve; keep your story simple and short, repeating key points frequently; make it personal; choose an effective way to share your story; be clear on your purpose; practice before an audience and seek feedback (Pinner, Fall 2006).

When developing a story, consider the central elements of a story: 1) including protagonists the listeners care about; 2) providing a catalyst that causes the protagonist to set things right; 3) identifying obstacles, conflict, or barriers that test purpose; practice before an audience and seek feedback (Hermina and Lineback, 2005).

Who tells the story is also critical. Storytellers have to be credible or possess the ability to build rapport through the telling of the story. In the opening of her book, for example, the principal might be the first person imagined as the storyteller, but a teacher who shares stories of guiding struggling students who ultimately achieve success may have even more influence with audiences. When crafting stories, both the teller and the tale are essential ingredients for evoking desired story outcomes.

Conclusion

Storytelling has a rich history in human experience. Because stories are a natural part of our lives, storytelling offers a powerful way to inspire, influence and persuade those around us to embrace a shared vision. By telling and sharing stories, educators can personalize lessons, ignite passion around school issues, transfer tacit knowledge, and generate emotional connections that motivate action to create a desired future. As Warren Bennis (1996) reminds us, “Effective leaders put words to the formless longings and deeply felt needs of others. They create communities out of words.”

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As children, many youngsters were rocked and cuddled while parents read spellbinding stories or shared fascinating fairy tales. At an early age, children begin to create and consume stories. Some of the stories children hear are simple, containing one story line, while others are complex, interwoven tales. If the tales are clear and compelling enough, children understand and relate to stories. They often ask to hear the same story again and again. Because of such curiously positive experiences, people have good feelings about stories. Thus, storytelling holds promise as a powerful tool of influence with adults as well as with children. But will adults listen to stories?

"Once upon a time in the great state of Georgia, a group of leaders began to worry about Georgia's educational leadership..." So began the history six years in the making of a public-private collaborative at its recent anniversary celebration. Because everyone in the room had played a part in the organization's success, partner organizations, collaborators, funders, sponsors, and K-12 stakeholders were featured as characters, protagonists, heroes and heroines in a shared story of barriers, solutions, successes and lessons learned. Adult audiences, it seems, will listen to stories that have relevance to educational objectives and that feature their roles in achieving those objectives (Page and Hulme, 2007).

Why Storytelling in Organizations

It's time to share the State of the School report - first with faculty, then with parents, and finally, with the community. Your principal announces she wants to conduct a dry run with a...