



Using storytelling to coach leadership self-expression

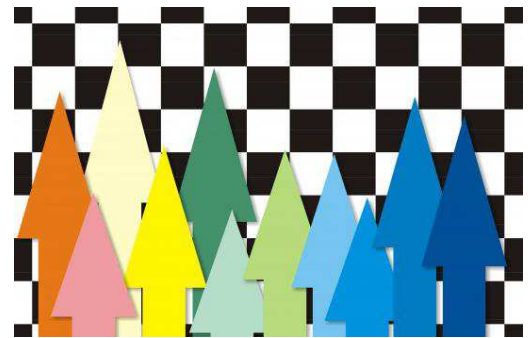
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Self-knowledge is central to effective leadership

Leaders persuade by telling their personal stories of identity

Speaking as a leader is not a natural talent but a learned skill

John Sadowsky explains that inspirational leadership communication can be learned and coached.



This article provides a rapid overview of my method for coaching a leader to become an inspirational communicator. At the core of the process is the concept of learning to express oneself through one's personal stories of identity.

I came to coaching, and to storytelling, quite accidentally. My first coaching endeavour began in 1998, when fellow board members at a European company asked me to help the CEO learn to communicate more effectively. When I began this mission, I had little appreciation for storytelling's role in a leader's discourse. Rather, my belief in the power of telling authentic, autobiographical stories has grown slowly and consistently over the past 15 years.

Indeed, the reason I have come to use storytelling so extensively in my coaching is that I have seen many successful speakers exploit it to great effect. In the early years of my coaching and research, I analysed hundreds of orators and discovered a pattern, which I now summarize in three parts:

First, leaders process their own experience and come to understand the lessons of their lives. Second, they store those lessons in the form of stories of identity that become the sources of their inspiration and their foundation for teaching others. And third, they use their authentic personal stories of identity to move their followers to action.



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Coaching reflection and self-knowledge

Self-knowledge and self-awareness are central components of effective leadership. So, in any coaching relationship, one of my primary goals is to help the client develop the type of deep self-understanding that the most effective leaders seem to possess.

My coaching of an individual invariably begins with a set of exercises that constitute an 'inner journey' of self-exploration. In our subsequent work, we focus on uncovering the leader's deepest convictions, on defining his point of view on issues of importance to him, and on expressing these points of view in a true, authentic and natural voice.

How leaders use their personal stories

Leaders actively craft and tell authentic personal stories of identity that bring their values to life. And, they use their stories to teach their followers, their teams, and their organisations. It is through their personal stories that leaders reveal who they are, and it is by expressing their true nature that they inspire others.

The more I observe the phenomenon of leading by autobiography, of leaders teaching and inspiring with their personal stories, the more I recognise similar patterns in the discourse of a wide variety of famous individuals. For example, when Barack Obama is questioned about the need to reform health care in America, he often talks in very personal terms about the illness and death of his mother, about all the things this life event taught him about Americans and their struggles with hospitals and insurance companies.

In the 80s when Jack Welch sought to make GE the world's most competitive company, he inspired others with stories of what he learned as a young hockey player in Boston.

When asked about the most important lessons of his life and career, legendary investor Warren Buffett invariably lapses into memories from his childhood and adolescent years, tales of timeless wisdom from his home town of Omaha, Nebraska.

Learning and practice

Depending on the structure of the coaching relationship and the frequency of our contact, the inward journey of self-discovery usually lasts from three to six months. Once we have clear ideas about the client's core values, we explore the stories that express the individual's true essence.

From this point on, the key to the leader's progress is developing the desire to practise and the passion to improve. The coach is there to encourage and critique, often with the aid of the video camera, and to provide examples of effective discourse that the client can study and learn from.

Often, I have had occasion to deal with individuals who say they have little 'natural talent' as speakers. In these cases, I need to emphasise that there are no natural orators or storytellers; every example I have ever studied or experienced in my coaching is a story of improving one's discourse through deliberate practice. We enhance our speaking expertise and our ability to influence our groups in the same way we improve as golfers, skiers or violinists - through attention to detail, focused feedback, and a true desire to improve.

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We work throughout the coaching relationship at shaping the leader's mindset and attitude. In successful leaders, self-exploration is a constant, ongoing, lifelong exercise. They reflect on their life experience and update their worldviews continuously, and they tell the stories that explain their points of view. When telling their personal stories, they are simultaneously inspiring others and rekindling their own passion.

Conclusion

We can all use our personal stories of identity to exert greater influence in our worlds. Reflecting on our past experience and its lessons, articulating our ideas and values, developing teachable points of view, and learning to tell the stories that bring our views to life - these are all learnable and coachable skills.

In the past 15 years, I have been fortunate to witness some remarkable success stories, of leaders who have learned to tell their personal stories, in a voice that is both natural and passionate. The more I coach and learn, the more I understand the truth of two fundamental concepts. First, narrative-based discourse is the most powerful and influential form of self-expression. And second, this type of speaking - learning to inspire with one's personal stories of identity - can be coached. It is accessible to anyone willing to put in the time and effort. Those who succeed are not the most talented but rather the most determined, the ones who decide to get on the path of learning and persist on it.

John Sadowsky is an internationally renowned leadership coach and inspirational speaker with over 20 years experience on 5 continents. He is the author of several books about the use of narrative in business and leadership. John is Distinguished Professor of Management at Grenoble Ecole de Management. Find more information and read John's blog at www.johnsadowsky.com