



Quick Tip:

Personal stories are powerful. If you have a leadership role, note experiences that highlight your leadership perspective. If you are in sales, note specific stories about your clients and what truly satisfies them. We all have experience in conflict, disappointment, difficult situations, poor customer service, getting bad advice or not taking good advice. Be mindful of and document your stories to use them in conversation and presentation.



Tell a Story

Share stories to engage stakeholders

Recently, I interviewed Amara Martin



Dress for Success Denver

from Dress for Success Denver (DFS-D) to learn more about the process of community transformation and the similarities with business transformation. One common area that stood out in our interview was the value of storytelling to engage stakeholders.

As an executive director, Amara, is constantly communicating with community leaders to get support for DFS-Denver. She highlighted in our discussion that with non-profit work, it is hard to show impact unless you are doing something physical like building a playground, cleaning up a park or doing something for a food bank. If you do not show impact, it is difficult to get support. This is where stories are vital.

“We have our women tell their stories, and these stories are amazing, some of these stories are extreme and some of them are very small, but they are all very impactful.” Amara Martin

We grew up on stories. Stories are engaging. Stories tell people the impact of your work. Stories influence people to support your transformation.

What is a Story?

This summary from *Unleash the Power of Storytelling* by Rob Biesenbach is useful. “In its simplest form, a story is a character in pursuit of a goal in the face of some challenge or obstacle. How the character tries to resolve that challenge drives the narrative.”

So how do you apply this to your business transformation? Stories that inform stakeholders about the human impact of your program can be powerful in driving better decisions. Stories can also be applied in business presentations to engage your audience emotionally, before sharing facts and data. Stories pierce that mental fog of busyness for your audience.

Get their attention

Your presentation must have a compelling start. It needs to be to the point and relevant, and it needs to engage people quickly so that they understand the situation and why action is important. According to Rob Biesenbach, “emotion

drives decision-making.” He shares that although we believe we are basing our decisions on facts, often the facts we embrace are just used to justify a decision we’ve already made in our heart. To start your presentation, you need a story that will:

- Summarize the business situation.
- Explain why your audience should care.
- Describe why it is important to take action.
- Describe the risk of not taking action.

Your story makes your audience the “character”, pursuing a business “goal”, in the face of the “challenge” that you are describing to them. You are establishing an emotional connection to the business situation, so your audience grasps the importance of taking action. To heighten the sense of urgency, you may describe the risks of not taking action. After delivering these elements in the beginning of your presentation, you are at the emotional high point of your story. This engages your audience before you dive into the sea of facts and data required for them to fully understand the business decision with which they are faced.

Make a powerful close

Use a strong recommendation to close your presentation. Once you have the factual and emotional support of your audience, they are the most receptive to your recommendation. You are telling the audience or “character” how they will overcome or resolve the “challenge” that the business faces.

- Clearly communicate your recommendation.
- Describe specific actions you think need to be taken.
- Let the audience know the benefits for taking action.

In any story, the audience expects this emotional peak and then resolution. They wait to hear the resolution and if it is not clear and compelling, they leave feeling unsatisfied. This is the most important part of your presentation. The audience needs to be completely convinced that the actions you recommend will really solve the problem. In other words, there must be a clear cause and effect.

Emily’s story

Emily is leading a project to implement technologies that support her company’s remote work environment. There are differing opinions within the leadership team about the effectiveness of remote work, and she needs to get alignment on the breadth of the technology solution and the investments to be allocated to this effort.

- Emily opens with a story about Jayden, who has been working remotely on a part time basis for two years. Jayden is well respected and very technically savvy. He researched and leveraged technology to increase his productivity and has been highly effective in leading several company programs.
- Next Emily highlights a recent external study on remote worker productivity, mental wellbeing, and employee retention when effective cloud computing, unified communications, and project management solutions have been employed.
- Then she shares internal data on the percentage of workers that have expressed interested in part time remote work. She describes the risk of losing valuable employees if remote work is not supported with the best technology.

In this story, the decision-making audience is the “character”, and the “goal” is employee productivity and the retention of valuable employees. The audience is faced with the “challenge” of deciding on the most effective remote work environment for company employees. Emily shared a vignette about Jayden, placing a face and name to the business situation. She has also extended Jayden’s experience to other workers that are expressing interest in part time remote work. With this opening, Emily has engaged the audience at a human level to get their attention.

She now describes the different technical solutions that are available, the functionality that they each provide, and the capabilities that her team thinks are most important to support remote work.

Once she has provided all the facts, she is ready to close.

- Emily recommends specific technology investments that support remote work.
- She proposes a cost reduction opportunity. Part time remote workers could be asked to use a shared workspace to reduce the cost of office space.
- She reinforces the benefits that employees, and the company, will realize with a shift to this new way of working.

Emily has proposed a powerful solution and her recommendations clearly supports the goal of employee productivity and retention. She has a good chance of being allocated the funding she needs.

To better engage your stakeholders, try telling a story!

Additional Resources:

Learn to engage stakeholders and drive community transformation through my interview with Amara Martin,

Executive Director, Dress for Success - Denver.

For a practical and quick read on Business Storytelling, try *Unleash the Power of Storytelling* by Rob Biesenbach.

For more insight, read the blog *The 10 Best Famous Storytellers and How to Become One*.



Are you new to Project Management?

Key concepts in this blog relate to Stakeholders and Communication. See PM Essentials!

Volunteer!

Get involved in transforming your community. Check out Dress for Success Denver if you are interested in supporting Amara and her team.

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About Annette

Annette is a business transformation coach focused on creating more effective operations and greater business value. Both vision and execution are key to motivate people to transform work. She guides leaders to develop transformation vision and strategy, structure implementation projects and roadmaps, and mentor project teams to be successful. Her blog and newsletter share transformation tips, resources and best practices.



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