

Stories offer healthy endings in inspiring change

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If you don't have a workplace wellness program, imagine for a moment you do. Your coordinator decides to run a campaign about the importance of exercise and good nutrition in preventing diabetes and give away exercise and food journals to support healthy behaviors.

Now, consider the following two scenarios.

Scenario 1: You spot a poster in the break room with "Prevent Diabetes" printed at the top and these bullet points from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

70 percent of adults are overweight or obese.

Obesity significantly increases the risk of diabetes.

90 percent of people with prediabetes don't know it.

Exercise and good nutrition lower body weight and diabetes risk.

A call to action at the bottom of the poster invites you to pick up a free exercise and food journal at the coordinator's office.

Scenario 2: You spot a poster in the break room with "Live Your Best Life" printed on top and before and after photos of a woman in her 60s. She's clearly much heavier in the first photo. Beneath the photos you read: "I'm Jan in payroll. This was me nine months ago. I was overweight and exhausted. I also found out I was prediabetic. My dad had diabetes, and I didn't want to end up taking medication or insulin shots for the rest of my life like he did. I decided to make a change and set a goal to run a half marathon."

You continue reading: "At first, all I could do was walk. As I walked, I craved healthier foods. Soon, I had the energy and stamina to run. I used an exercise and food journal to keep myself accountable — and seeing my logged miles and foods was motivating. After nine months, I ran my race. I also lost 40 pounds and am no longer prediabetic. I'm now living my best life."

A call to action at the bottom of the poster asks, "Want to live YOUR best life, too?" and invites you to get started by picking up a free exercise and food journal at the coordinator's office.

Which of these two posters is more likely to motivate you to pick up that journal? I'm guessing the poster in Scenario 2.

According to Paul Zak, founding director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University, our brains are wired for stories, not data alone. We pay closer attention to and recall key concepts more readily when information is presented as a story rather than hard facts. Since our brains dislike open loops — like the kind created when we hear the beginning of a story — we're biologically driven to stick around for the end.

Moreover, stories create empathy and trust within groups that trigger mimicking behaviors. Stories act as clues to help us decide what behaviors are normal and accepted. This is especially true when we hear stories about people we can relate to — like those with whom we work. Since most of this occurs unconsciously, it's impossible to fully appreciate how much stories shape our everyday choices about exercise, eating right, managing stress and other healthy behaviors.

As a formal or informal leader in your organization, you can leverage the power of stories to encourage healthier habits in your workplace in two primary ways.

First, find and share stories. Rather than hope people will come forward on their own, sleuth out stories that showcase people's healthy choices and the goals they've achieved. Ask leaders for their personal stories and share your own. Feature stories in your company newsletter or invite team members to present at lunch-and-learn events. As people share, encourage them to share more than facts or play-by-play accounts. Ask them to include details about how their experiences made them feel.

Second, create stories. Workplace culture is built on stories. If existing stories contain themes of unhealthy behaviors, like how funny it was when Johnny got drunk at the company picnic or how the CEO never takes a vacation, it's time for a story transplant. To generate new stories, host company wide wellness challenges, organize volunteer outings and participate in community 5Ks. Seed the office grapevine with anecdotes about these events to help embed these stories into your culture. Soon, a new set of behaviors will follow.

When your organization promotes its next wellness initiative, remember this: Data alone slips off the surface of our brains. Stories stick to our hearts and inspire us to act.

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