

Why Business Leaders Should Share Stories

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Communications consultant Shane Michael Hatton (main photo) aims to get the best out of your staff. In this extract from his new book *Lead The Room*, Hatton says a good business success story is one best shared...

If you have ever had the privilege of speaking to a room full of people, you will understand the power of effective storytelling. As a speaker, the disposition of the room changes when you begin to share a story. People who were hitherto distracted or fidgeting begin to lean in, to focus and hang on your every word. What's more, neuroscientist Paul Zak has found "Character-driven stories with emotional content result in a better understanding of the key points a speaker wishes to make and enable better recall of these points weeks later." Effective storytelling is a skill that every leader must learn to master for several key reasons:

Stories are a *language* that everyone understands

Regardless of where in the world you travel to, people understand the power of stories. Whether it's over a glass of wine or around a campfire or dinner table, stories are how we connect with one another. It's one of the reasons we love watching movies, reading books and opening the newspaper every day.

Stories help people *lean in* to you as a leader

When you share a story, especially a personal story, in those moments you break down the barriers to trust and connection and help people lean in to you as a leader. People learn a little more about who you are outside of the organisation. They see the human being behind the title.

Stories cause people to focus and *listen*

When you start telling a story, the atmosphere of the room changes and people actually listen. If you travel regularly with one of the major airlines you will have noticed the shift over the past few years in the pre-flight safety videos. Once stale and boring demonstrations, they have now taken on a life of their own, following the journeys of people around the world from New York to Cape Town, pairing yoga with the brace position,

waterslides with escape slides. Airlines know that if they can share important information through the medium of a compelling story, the audience is more likely to stop, focus and listen.

Stories are how we *learn*

In preliterate times oral storytelling was how people shared experiences, knowledge and learning. Storytelling has always been humanity's way of passing wisdom from one generation to the next.

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We are hardwired for stories. In *Talk Like TED*, author Carmine Gallo advises, 'If you want people to pay attention to you, wrap your idea in a story'. The story you share may be the product of personal experience or observation, or a fictional account shared as a life lesson or illustration. The key is to ensure your story supports your main message. Stories shine a spotlight on a big idea; they are not the big idea itself. I tell leaders, "If people remember your story but forget the idea, then everyone has missed the point."