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Springboard Stories

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Most change efforts fail. If you lead others, you're probably aware how difficult it is to change beliefs and, consequently, behaviors. Moreover, the bigger the organization, the more difficult meaningful change becomes. I was most recently reminded of this during a meeting with managers at a client's field office. During a teambuilding discussion, the conversation turned to new corporate requirements for more detailed cost reporting. The managers – all dedicated, loyal, and results-oriental – did not support the effort because they could not see the benefit. Clearly, senior management had not made a compelling case for the program. I imagined compliance, at least *accurate reporting*, would be poor unless attitudes among the managers changed.

Using a "springboard story" helps people imagine how change can lead to a better future, thereby reducing the normal resistance to change. Stephen Denning has written extensively about storytelling (most recently: *The Secret Language of Leadership* and *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*), and defines springboard stories this way, "By a springboard story, I mean a story that enables a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an organization or community or complex system may change." When working at The World Bank, Denning used the following story to convince the organization's top leaders to support a move into knowledge management.

In June 1995, a health worker in Kamana, Zambia logged onto the U.S. Centers for Disease Control website and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria.

That simple, minimalist story changed everything. Suddenly, individual new stories were ignited in listener's minds, and the senior managers envisioned a new future role for the World Bank. They thought, "If this idea worked in a basket case like Zambia, it could work anywhere!" Perceptions changed. Money was reallocated, and a previously untapped competency of that vast, bureaucratic organization was deployed to help people worldwide.

The first step in developing a springboard story is to clearly define the change idea you want. Clarity of purpose is absolutely vital to a successful springboard story. After that, use the following principles.

1. 1. Find an example that clearly illustrates the benefits of the desired change. Since you're trying to describe what you want to happen, you need a true story that has already happened. It's also important that the story is authentic, not just technically true. This means that when people check out *all* the facts, they will say, "Yes, that's pretty much what happened."
2. 2. The story is highly compressed, with minimal detail.
3. 3. Include the date and place.
4. 4. The story must have a single protagonist, preferably a fairly anonymous person typical of your audience, so that people can emotionally connect with the character. This type of story is the "hero's journey" narrative pattern, and it has deep roots in human psychology. Put simply: it works.
5. 5. The story must have a surprising element (like all good stories) and should stimulate an "aha moment." Once the surprise is delivered, the listener should begin to envision a path to the future.
6. 6. Finally, the story must have a happy ending.

The Stephen Denning example I cited previously is truly minimalist, a single 30-word sentence, but most springboard stories are somewhat longer. Because they have few details, they free the imagination and invite the listener to see himself in a better future. They are designed to build confidence (We can do that!) and stimulate action.

Finally, when you deliver the story, link the change idea to the story with what Denning calls "magic phrases" like the following.

- What if . . .
- Just imagine . . .
- Just think . . .

This is important because listeners need to immediately understand the relevance to their lives.

Developing the right springboard story is hard, but it's worth the effort. When you make the upfront investment to build buy-in for a change initiative, you enjoy the rewards throughout the rollout process and beyond.

Tom Wagner

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