

People & Strategy

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From the Perspectives Editor

Anna Tavis, Perspectives Editor

We dedicate our first 2011 Perspectives to the importance of telling good stories in business. At the time when management-by-numbers has gained currency and everyone in business believes that a firm's success is predicated on the quantity of its data and the ability to model them, Peter Guber, chairman and CEO of Mandalay Entertainment Group, tells us that whenever he failed to connect with a client, it was because he failed to tell a good story. This may sound counter-intuitive to many in the business world. After all, isn't business about being logical and fact-based? Where do stories belong? According to Peter Guber, most people in business forget that they are dealing with human beings, and to engage employees and customers, any business interaction has to have an emotional component to it. Stories not only add an emotional dimension to business communications, but evoke our hard-wired predisposition to process information faster and more holistically when it is presented to us in the form of a good story. It is not accidental that Peter Guber's book "Tell to Win," has been one of the best-selling titles on Amazon since it was published in early March. According to Peter, successful business leaders of the future will have to have holistic, empathetic understanding of their employees and their customers and will have to know how to tell a good story.

All our respondents not only agree with Guber's position, they take it to the next level. Storytelling is an art that only becomes successful with practice. Our authors write about how to develop a successful storytelling practice. We all grew up using/telling stories. Somewhere along the way most of us abandoned stories for facts. We may never achieve the level of proficiency required for the entertainment business, but by studying the storytelling tips and techniques and listening to well-crafted stories, we can become much better at telling them. Crafting our own stories and paying attention to the feedback, we will become better communicators. Moreover, as HR professionals, we need to coach our business partners in the techniques of telling meaningful stories. As Rob Quish remarks in his response, organizations, just like people, have their own stories to tell.

In this issue, we only open the discussion of the reemergence of good stories as good business communication technique. We do so not only to help our professional HR colleagues become more persuasive in what we do, but also to make us aware of resources available to us if storytelling is ready to be revisited by our business leaders.

Telling Purposeful Stories: An Organization's Most Under-Utilized Competency

By Peter Guber, author of "Tell to Win"

“Just the facts, ma'am. Just the facts,” Sergeant Joe Friday famously said in the TV series *Dragnet*. Unfortunately, many professionals in organizations today try to persuade other folks to join their parade, adopt their mission or cause, or turn a “no” into a “yes” by using the same communication skills as Sgt. Friday—facts, figures and information. Not only do these individuals typically fail to get others to act on their goal, but they often feel frustrated, impotent and not heard.

Facts, figures, information, PowerPoint slides and data rarely catalyze, excite or incite action, much less motivate others to own and viral market your offering for you—your ultimate goal. But embed them in a purposeful story—a story with a clear call to action—that you preferably tell face to face and in the same room, and through the emotional transportation of the story you tell, you will experience a game-changer.

Magic happens when you narrate otherwise soulless data into emotional nodes that ren-

der an experience to an audience—and a single listener is an audience—that makes the information inside the story memorable, resonant and actionable. In trying or triumphant times, an individual in any organization can tell purposeful stories, connecting through state-of-the-heart-technology, to propel a business outcome.

A well-told story can drive change, inspire innovation, stimulate more sales, foster collaboration, re-brand a company, incite viral advocacy for a mission or cause, generate

more effective management and help overcome resistance. As Harvard University professor, Howard Gardner once said, “Stories are the single most powerful weapon in a leader’s arsenal.”

The question then is why isn’t everyone in business telling purposeful stories to propel their goals? I believe two misperceptions lie as root causes for this resistance. The first is the belief that the stories are soft, fluff and are best told at bedtime to children.

To this, I would argue based on my own considerable successes in entertainment, sports and new media, that when I was successful, I was persuading others through the stories I told. When I failed, in retrospect, it was because I was firing PowerPoint bullets. No wonder I was shooting blanks!

However, my own personal experience wasn’t sufficient social proof to me that telling purposeful stories was a true game-changer. So in writing my new book, “Tell to Win—Connect, Persuade and Triumph with the Hidden Power of Story,” I sought to validate my own experiences. I reached out to people I knew personally who are at the pinnacle of their careers spanning diverse industries (not just storytellers and entertainment) to see if and how they used stories to drive their success. From President Clinton, to Chad Hurley, co-founder and CEO of YouTube, to Lynda Resnick, the marketing genius behind POM Wonderful, Fiji Water and Franklin Mint, to Pat Riley, famed basketball coach and motivational speaker, Deepak Chopra, Muhammad Ali, Wally “Famous” Amos, and COO, JWT North America, Rob Quish, their answers were a resounding “yes” supporting that they did, indeed, tell purposeful stories to drive their successes. These folks are just a few of the more than 90 “voices” in “Tell To Win” who not only validate the telling of purposeful stories, but reveal how they told to win.

I believe the second root cause of resistance to telling stories is the misperception among many business professionals that they are not natural storytellers. We’re all storytellers,

“Stories are the single most powerful weapon in a leader’s arsenal.” — *Howard Gardner*

story listeners and story advocates—we’re designed that way. It’s in our DNA. We are filled with stories. Think of your life. The only thing you have is stories as memories, not information. In fact, if it wasn’t for our ancestors’ ability to tell stories, you and I wouldn’t be here.

About 10,000 years ago, humans were prey and the predators were winning. We weren’t more ferocious than a tiger, faster than a cheetah or bigger than a rhinoceros. So we had to outsmart them. To compete, we developed language, giving us the ability to communicate complex thoughts and socially organize through oral stories told around the campfire, which bound and passed down our tribes beliefs, rules, values and lessons learned. And in so doing, we turned from prey to predator. This telling magic is still in us today and working to propel organizational success, like in the case of performance gear manufacturer, Under Armour.

At 23, Kevin Plank put his life savings into developing a prototype undershirt made of women’s lingerie that had superior moisture wicking technology that would soak up the buckets of perspiration that slowed him and his fellow football players down on the field. He called his label Under Armour. Over a decade later, Kevin came to my office to leverage some of my sports entertainment relationships. His challenge with Under Armour, he told me, was to broaden its appeal to reach a larger population. Success required that he find, create and craft a story to tell his employees/sales team that they could retell to their customers to incite and excite them to purchase Under Armour.

Kevin told them to tell an aspirational story, and the aspiration was whatever goal their customers had. “We didn’t just say, ‘How may I help you?’” he explained. “We asked, ‘What do you want to be? Do you want to play var-

sity? Be the best? Lose 20 pounds? Whatever it is, you’ll get there with Under Armour.”

The Under Armour sales team understood the theme of their story was to always make the customers the hero. Every Under Armour product helped the customer perform like a pro. Under Armour would provide the physical assist and the emotional propulsion, but it was the customer who would break higher and higher personal records. And telling this authentic and passionate story internally to his employees struck an emotional chord resulting in them successfully retelling the “customer as hero story” that proved to be the game changer for his company.

Today Under Armour is worth nearly \$1 billion, and Plank makes sure that every one of his 2,400 employees tells a version of this story every day to consumers, retailers, media and athletes.

Peter Guber is chairman and CEO of Mandalay Entertainment. Films he personally produced have earned more than \$3 billion worldwide and include the box office hits “The Color Purple,” “Midnight Express,” “Batman” and “Flashdance.” Guber’s films have been honored with more than 50 Academy Award nominations, including winning Best Picture for “Rain Man.” In 2011, Mandalay’s “The Kids Are All Right” won the Golden Globe’s Best Motion Picture and is nominated for four Academy Awards including Best Picture. Guber is a full professor at UCLA and is the owner and co-executive chairman of the NBA franchise the Golden State Warriors. His new book, “Tell to Win,” is available from Crown/Random House.

From Telling to Influencing

David Rock, founder, Neuroleadership Institute

Peter Guber is indeed onto something here. Most work today involves either thinking, or trying to influence other people's thinking. The latter is still one of the least understood processes in the modern world. Yet we know enough about the brain now to understand that story telling is a key to influencing.

A big part of the challenge of influencing others comes down to our small capacity to process any new information, particularly if that information is complex, novel or conceptual. We can add two plus two with minimal effort, but adding up 56 and 79 is a different degree of difficulty altogether. The difficulty in this task points to the challenges of influencing others. Ideas we have not thought through require effort to process. This effort is something we try to minimize.

To process a new idea requires activating what is called working memory. Working memory is small and easily overwhelmed, surprisingly so. Contrary to the idea of "learning styles," which was recently debunked, working memory has only two modes of processing: audio and visual. The audio is where we hear an idea, like recalling a few notes of a favorite tune, activating the auditory cortex. The visual is when we literally see something in our mind's eye, activating the visual cortex. The visual cortex has dramatically more real estate in the brain, and can process far more information than the auditory cortex. In the brain, a picture literally can contain a thousand words. In this way, when you can literally see what someone is saying, you have created a richer circuit for their idea in your mind than just hearing the same idea.

How do you get people to see what you are saying? Storytelling it turns out is one of the keys. According to Neuroscientist Dr. Matthew Lieberman, head of the social cognitive neuroscience lab at UCLA, when your brain isn't doing anything active, the circuits that come alive are those involved in thinking about ourselves and other people and how

we all connect. When at rest, we like to tell ourselves stories. These stories are very visual—we literally see people interacting in working memory. This circuitry, because it is so deep, is highly efficient, requiring minimal effort to activate. (Note that the people who can memorize a randomized pack of cards do so by creating story of characters interacting, not by repetition.)

When we speak in stories, people digest complex information faster and easier. Given that most ideas we are trying to influence each other with are harder than adding up 56 and 79, than the degree of difficulty involved in just understanding an idea is key to whether you influence others.

Stories, therefore, rule the day when it comes to influencing others. Even more so if the other does not necessarily perceive you as a friend, which makes it even harder for them to process new information. But that's a whole other story...

David Rock coined the term NeuroLeadership and co-founded the NeuroLeadership Institute. He works globally helping Fortune 500 companies improve engagement and performance through understanding the brain. See www.neuroleadership.com

Getting People to Care: Give Them a Story to Believe In

Michael Margolis, president and founder, Get Storied an education, advisory and publishing co.

As Peter points-out in his article and great new book "Tell to Win," it's baffling why more leaders don't embrace the power of purposeful storytelling. Especially in today's context: the crisis of confidence faced by so many leaders.

How many organizations are in the midst of reinvention, restructuring or repositioning? The future of your company, division or initiative hangs in the balance (not to mention your career prospects as a leader). Restructuring and repositioning are just the latest synonyms for organizations overwhelmed by adaptive change. In essence, you're moving from an old story to a new story. Getting others to believe in the new story is your ultimate task.

What used to work, no longer does. People have stopped believing in the same old stories—especially when it comes to inspiring, motivating or mandating change. Leaders find themselves often in an environment of suspicion and distrust. So it takes more than just a good yarn to gain people's trust and commitment. Storytelling is still the task at-hand. It's just the stakes are higher.

The challenge is that people have become attached to the old story, however tired it may be. That's why cynicism and resistance often stand in the way. You need to provide stepping-stones that allow people to locate themselves in the new story. How is this a natural evolution of who we've always been, rather than a radical and unfamiliar departure? As chief storyteller, you have to connect the dots in the story.

Nobody likes a change story; people crave a continuity story. In many ways, change storytelling is about making that new story real. Not some once-upon-a-time fairy tale, but rather a tangible, palpable experience that people can point to and say, "Look, that future already exists!" You're, in effect, socializing your new story into reality by showing it's already here and how it makes everyone's life better.

If you approach storytelling as the latest management technique to get your way, you will be disappointed. Many of us forget: Purposeful storytelling is an act of empathy. It goes beyond the art of seduction (although that's part of the equation, too). Demonstrating you care is usually glaringly missing from the message. People can feel it when you mean it. You either believe in something larger than your-

self or you're just trying to sell more garbage. Sorry to be so blunt.

Michael Margolis is the president of Get Storied. He advises companies and creatives how to get others to believe in their story. He is also the author of "Believe Me: a Storytelling Manifesto for Change-makers and Innovators" that you can download as a digital copy for free.

How to Tell a Great Story

Murray Nossel Ph.D, founder, director, Narativ, Inc., New York

In "Tell to Win," Peter Guber brilliantly conveys the power of oral storytelling. He makes a compelling case for why stories work.

Guber's correct. There is widespread resistance to telling stories, that's based on the fear of failure. In training a range of professionals how to tell their stories over the past two decades, I have developed a remedy for this fear: a methodology for discovering one's natural ability as a storyteller. Before introducing story structure and performance, I start by teaching people how to listen to themselves and to their audiences, openly and without judgment.

To be a great listener, you have to tune into your audience, reaching for what touches, moves and inspires people. You must do this whether you are talking to a single person, a group of hundreds or even an entire nation.

In 1990, I was one of thousands who woke at the crack of dawn to wait in Cape Town's Central square for the release of our leader, Nelson Mandela. Waves of excitement ripped through the crowd of black and white South Africans as we anticipated his arrival. Finally, with the whole world watching, Mandela broke a 27-year silence.

On that day, Mandela showed that he understood both black frustrations and white fears. He listened to our deepest need that was to live together, peacefully and prosperously. Without compromising his deeply held principles, he put not only South Africa but the entire world at ease. I asked Richard Stengel, editor of *Time Magazine* and author of "Mandela's Way: Fifteen Lessons on Life, Love, and Courage" whether the great South African statesman is also a great listener. "Mandela is a disciplined listener," says Stengel. "He listens for the good in people. He knows that if you want to make the sale, you have to address the heart."

Mandela's story triggered another unprecedented movement in world history: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Here victims of apartheid were able to tell their stories for the first time. And they were listened to for the first time.

In the early '90s, working with AIDS patients in New York I learned firsthand about the reciprocal relationship between listening and telling. In those days, patients were dying every day. When they died, their few belongings were packed into black bags, which were discarded. People were dying leaving nothing behind. I suggested that at least they could leave their stories by telling them to a group of witnesses. "I don't have a story" was a frequent refrain. And the

other was "Who will listen to me?" I knew people would feel differently about their stories if they were assured of a supportive audience. So I began to train people how to listen. Not only did the patients tell amazing stories, but they went to Albany and left videotapes of their stories on the desks of legislators. Their call to action was heard. It's because of those personal stories that public funding was increased and the shape of the epidemic was changed forever.

Murray Nossel is the founder and director of Narativ, Inc. Narrativ teaches individuals and groups how to listen and tell stories for effective communication, confident self-presentation, powerful team building, and bold leadership. Based in New York and London.

Response from The Storytellers to Peter Guber's Article

Alison Esse, director, The Storytellers, London, UK

Peter Guber's article has resonated strongly with us. Stories are indeed the currency of human interaction and bonding, and as such can have a powerful effect in changing beliefs, attitudes, actions and behaviors. Sharing stories can help business leaders better connect their employees both rationally and emotionally to every business's journey; bring the customer experience to life; galvanize employees by connecting them to a higher (common) purpose, beyond making money.

Stories about real people and real situations help people make sense of the world in which they live and work, far more effectively than simply furnishing them with dry, abstract facts and figures which are hard to absorb and bring to life. Sharing a human story ➤

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perspectives – counterpoints

Change in business is constant and universal...
Storytelling is a natural tool that can help retain talent, persuade people to embrace change and work with maximum discretionary effort. It really works.

about the positive impact that a product or service has had on the end-user—often with highly emotional connotations—can stimulate tremendous pride and a sense of purpose. And creating a culture of knowledge-sharing and innovation through sharing stories of success can result in drastically improved engagement, commitment, productivity and performance.

It was this that led The Storytellers to take storytelling to another level in the corporate world. We have designed an entire storytelling program, specifically for employees of large organizations that are going through change, to help them to understand the business's journey, and embrace new behaviors and ways of working.

To make change happen, pulling together in the same direction is critical. This has to start with—as Peter Guber puts it—a well-told story. We help the executive team to co-create a simple, clear narrative that articulates the forward ambition of the business, linking together the key ingredients of the journey (strategy, vision, mission, values), building in a strong sense of pride and purpose and a compelling destination for rational/emotional balance. Alignment and cohesion at this level is critical to drive it through the organization.

Peter also refers to collaboration in his article. Storytelling is all about involvement, participation and dialogue—now demanded by both Generation Y and leaders developing a high-performance organization. We train managers to run regular storytelling sessions, during which they engage their teams in the master narrative, then empower them to take

ownership of the changes and improvements required at a local level. Here they share their ideas, experiences and stories of change—what being great looks and feels like, recording and disseminating anecdotes of best practice across the business to inspire and motivate others. Linking these stories back to the business narrative shows how relevant they are to achieving clear business objectives. It is a highly effective way of involving everybody in the implementation of change in a non-threatening and inclusive way. It helps build belief systems, a common culture, reinforces behaviors and the way we do things around here.

Change in business is constant and universal. To ignore the human aspect of change is perilous in terms of time, effort and cost. Storytelling is a natural tool that can help retain talent, persuade people to embrace change and work with maximum discretionary effort. It really works.

Alison Esse is a co-founder of The Storytellers, a UK-based consultancy, with a background in PR, marketing and communications. She advises on the strategic direction of the client's programs.

As Families Have Legends So Do Companies

Rob Quish, COO at JWT, marketing and advertising firm, New York

My father was eaten alive by Alzheimer's. Slowly the disease stole the former lawyer's mind in a kind of dark irony that is only surpassed by the tremendous sadness of his decline. For about a year before his passing he completely lost recognition of me and the rest of our family. We were simply nice people who greeted him with big smiles and affection. It occurred to me that moments after I left him each Sunday afternoon our visits vanished from his mind but lingered in mine as I thought of who he was and what I might become.

On Sunday January 31, 2010, I visited him and fed him lunch. Time got away from me and I jumped up upon seeing the clock and asked the aide to take over so I could pick up my son. The gentleman gladly took my spot and said "Mr. Quish, your son is leaving."

Dad looked at me with remarkably clear eyes and said, "Hi Rob." In shock and leaning toward the door I froze and said, "Hi Dad." He looked at me and said, "I'm so proud of you."

A great ball of emotion welled in me as he settled back into his chair and the fog of his disease.

Three days later I got a call that he was declining rapidly. He passed with family at his side the following day. Surely, at peace.

This story may be told by generations of my family as a seminal moment that reflected Dad's character and a belief in wonder and miracle.

To make change happen, pulling together in the same direction is critical. This has to start with—as Peter Gruber puts it—a well-told story.

As surely as families have legends, so, too, do companies. They course through an organization as points of pride or glue that connects and give purpose. Inside every company is a story. Finding it and telling it well is an investment that is well worth it. A great inside story helps to define the company as an employer, helps people know what is expected of them, the standards that have been set and the reasons it's different than its competitors. A great story can hold the right people and lure the best people.

Peter's career in the entertainment industry is unparalleled and the disciplines of his craft

are incredibly useful. His new book, "Tell To Win" is both inspiring and instructive. In fact, we use his four truths of storytelling (see HBR December 2007) to develop narratives for CEO's and employer brands. These stories become the property of the employees and they retell it, add to it and participate in it using the age old techniques of conversation and the new age tricks of social and digital media.

Your company's story isn't hard to find and it's being fueled every day. Once identified future paths become that much clearer. You just have to look.

Rob Quish is chief operating officer, JWT North America and chief executive officer of JWT INSIDE, the digitally led branding and communications agency that specializes in employment relationship marketing. Through Quish's careful navigation, JWT INSIDE has consistently evolved their business to advance employee engagement and enliven company cultures.

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