

Getting The Most From A Good Story

Lori L. Silverman and Mary B. Wacker

Abstract: Trainers often overlook the possibility of using stories they have collected in advance to enhance the training experience, even though many do use stories spontaneously in their presentations. This article delves into the use of stories in training, what makes a story effective, story selection, and their presentation. The authors explore the many places where stories can be found and how they can shape the design of a training session or be used to enhance or elaborate on specific content. Spontaneous stories, often told by participants, also have a role in training. The authors emphasize that no matter how they are generated, it is important that stories be appropriately introduced and debriefed.

Remember when you were a child and your parents or grandparents used to read stories to you? These stories frequently left an indelible imprint on your memory and became a part of your conversations with your friends and family. Often, the same is true of stories that are told in training sessions. It is not unusual to find trainees retelling a story to their colleagues, rather than recounting specific content material, because the story made a lasting impression. Chances are also good that the participants may email or talk about the story to their family and friends, thus reinforcing the message the story was meant to communicate.

The Purpose of Stories in Training

Good stories can serve many purposes in a training session. They can entertain or energize, educate, evaluate, engage, encourage, explore, and evoke. Each of these purposes has some type of relationship to the overall training: the training topic, the trainee, the trainer, and the design of the training material or the session in which they are being used.

Entertain/Energize

There are a variety of reasons for using stories that entertain or energize in a training session. They can help to humanize the trainer, thus increasing the person's credibility and rapport with the audience. This is especially true if the trainer shares a situation that makes him or her appear to be a bit vulnerable. Stories can also change the energy level in a room. Imagine being in a room where the energy is low, perhaps after lunch, and hearing an instructor recount a situation that brings belly laughs to all who hear it. This type of story can also release tension in the room. It might be appropriate to use it during a training session that helps individuals prepare to take a certification exam or address a serious organizational issue.

Stories that entertain can also be a way of remembering a concept that is to be applied in the workplace. In team-development sessions, one of the authors of this paper often uses a story about how three college students went about creating a large slingshot that was eventually located on the top deck of a fraternity house situated on a lake. The purpose of the slingshot was to provide "feedback" to the crew team that practiced on the lake very early in the morning, even on weekends. Unexpectedly, an unripe cantaloupe that was launched around 5:00 a.m. one day actually sank a crew boat (no one was hurt). What the story demonstrates is that the builders of the slingshot (the "team") had a goal, a plan, and defined roles, responsibilities, and ground rules.

Educate

Stories that educate are meant to introduce new knowledge or to build on already existing knowledge. An example might be the types of stories used in new-employee orientation. Instead of presenting a list of the organization's core values, the trainer could elect to tell a series of stories that help participants to identify the organization's values, their importance, and how these values might influence the decisions the participants will make in their future work. When introducing new concepts, such as the topic of variation, stories that educate can also be effective. Here a story might be about special and common cause variations involved in driving to work.

Evaluate

Evaluating the rightness/wrongness, goodness/badness, or appropriateness/inappropriateness of behaviors or options in a given situation is another purpose for using stories. These types of stories are effective when speaking of policies and procedures, industry regulations, work standards, customer requirements, and local, state, and federal guidelines. For example, consider telling a story about an employee in a procurement who has been asked by a major customer to engage in a series of actions that have some ethical and legal implications. The trainees' task is to outline what the employee should do in the situation. Used in this way, the story provides a context for discussing appropriate and inappropriate behaviors.

Engage

Stories that engage participants capture their hearts and minds and help them move from being passive to being invested in the training. Imagine the following story being told to a healthcare audience and the type of impact it might have.

A five-year-old boy with severe asthma, who spent much of the first eighteen months of his life in the hospital, took his first camping trip. He discovered a nest of duck eggs at the edge of the campsite. By the end of the trip, he was able to watch the baby ducklings hatch. His excitement knew no limits. The boy was able to go on that trip because of the wonderful medical care he had received.

At this point in the story, imagine that the trainer thanks the participants for all that they do and asks them to remember how much of a difference they make.

Encourage

Stories can also be used to encourage participants to demonstrate behaviors or take some sort of action they might otherwise not take. In this way, the stories have a motivating effect on behavior. It could be a story about an individual who has overcome adversities similar to what participants are experiencing. Or the story might be one that offers realistic ways to approach a situation that is uncomfortable, such as confronting a colleague on a sensitive issue.

Explore

Stories whose purpose is to explore a topic, concept, or behavior in more depth serve to enhance or expand on knowledge participants already have. These types of stories may pick up on a nuance in a situation or explore it from a different angle. Consider the following story that might be told in an advanced coaching workshop: A new manager inherits a long-term employee with a history of significant performance problems. Unfortunately, the prior manager failed to coach this employee or document her poor performance. The employee has recently developed a serious health issue and is now claiming that as the reason for her work problems. After relaying this story, the trainer could have participants identify actions the new manager needs to take as well as actions the prior manager could have taken to prevent the situation from occurring. From there, the trainer might follow up with a discussion on implications for effective coaching within the organization.

Evoke

Finally, there are some stories that, when told, immediately evoke a response from trainees. These stories are wonderful lead-ins to large- and small-group discussions. Chances are this type of story also engages the emotions of the listener. For stories like these, it is advantageous to have participants put themselves in the shoes of the person who is having the “experience.” For example, imagine being the daughter whose father has become gravely ill and is in the intensive care unit of a local hospital. You arrive at the hospital to visit your father and, on the elevator ride to his room, overhear two nurses talking about that “new case” in ICU, whom you assume to be your father. Apparently, the attending physician is going to have to break some tough news to the family. The nurses proceed to outline the issue in general terms as you continue to listen. No doubt, when the trainer tells this story, the participants will have a strong negative reaction. This energy can be used to fuel a discussion on what the

participants would have done in the situation and what the nurses might do if confronted. This might also lead to a discussion of times that trainees have been embarrassed by some action they took and what they did to recover.

What Makes A Story Effective

It Is Memorable

Great stories are, first and foremost, memorable. What makes them memorable is that they engage both the heart and the intellect of listeners and create a visual image and/or short movie in the mind's eye. This often is accomplished through highly descriptive words and phrases and through the use of gestures, facial expressions, and vocal intonations on the part of the storyteller. Picture listening to a mountain climber who has been to the top of Mount Everest recount a portion of the climb that was grueling at the same time he is lying on the floor going through the same physical motions, with the same energy and the same emotional state that he experienced while on the mountainside. As a result, those who are present in the room vicariously become engaged in the story.

It Is Universal

Great stories are universal in nature. Each person who hears them can relate to what is being told. In addition, they are told in a manner that makes them relevant to that specific audience. The trainer might alter the level of language and the words that are used, perhaps using colloquialisms, to fit the demographics of the group. To this end, the same story can be told from different perspectives, depending on who is listening to it. Let's take a customer service story where, in a retail setting, the checkout clerk decides to uphold a company policy with a customer, which results in the customer being treated poorly. It could be told from the perspective of the employee to a group of managers who are responsible for policies that might conflict with providing good customer service. Then again, it could be presented from the perspective of the customer to a group of employees who are going through customer service training. In this scenario, employees could be asked what choice they would have made and why, which then could lead into a discussion of implications within their own jobs.

It Brings Realization

Great stories conclude with a compelling point or "aha" for the listener. Thus, they may motivate trainees in the direction of a particular action or set of behaviors or cause a shift in thinking or attitude. They may also bring about an increased level of sensitivity or appreciation for a situation that was previously

misunderstood. For example, a major corporation in the chemical industry holds as one of its values the safety of its employees. During a new-employee orientation session, a participant raises a question about the stringency of the organization's safety policies, which she sees as unnecessary. The trainer relates a story about the inception of the company, the original purpose of which was to produce ammunition during the Civil War—a potentially catastrophic situation if not handled correctly. What the story points out is that the safety policies are not arbitrary—that they are an integral part of respecting the health and welfare of all who pass through the company's doors. This story grounds the current situation in the organization's history and provides a context for appreciating the care that the organization affords to its employees.

It Is Practiced

For a story to be truly powerful, it must be told in an effective manner (that is, with attention to facial expressions, eye contact, vocal inflections and intonations, body language, and the use of pauses) and at the appropriate point in the training session. In addition, it has to be long enough to make its point but not so long that listeners lose interest. All three of these items point to the importance of practicing telling stories out loud to others to gauge their reactions.

Where To Find Stories To Use In Training

Your Own Experiences

Stories are all around us. The easiest place to find them is within our own life experiences. Consider keeping a personal journal and logging situations in it or recording items on index cards, in your daily planner, or on Post-it Notes so that you are able to remember the details. These situations may be portions of conversations with family members or significant others, observations of children or pets, and positive or negative experiences you encounter throughout the day at work and other places. They might also include your experiences at special events, such as holiday gatherings, birthday parties, anniversaries, graduations, and the like. Often, these gatherings are places where others recount stories and tales from the past. Your own thoughts, insights, hopes and fears, dreams and images are also wonderful sources of inspiration for creating stories.

Friends and Colleagues

Friends and colleagues can be great resources for stories. They may tell you about situations they or others have experienced or send you emails that trigger a story line. Recently, one of the authors received a series of daily emails from a

colleague who was traveling on business through Bulgaria and Macedonia. Not only did these notes detail her travel and work experiences, but they also contained her observations and the stories she told her students. One email spoke to how she taught business planning by referencing different ways people obtain directions when they are seeking out a new location: another, entitled “The Thirteenth Fairy,” explained how a fairy tale was related to a dinner meeting she attended. Both of these are examples of wonderful stories that can be used in specific types of training sessions. They can be saved in electronic files for future reference or printed and logged by topic.

Consider querying friends and colleagues for stories on particular topics. For example, let’s say you have been asked to give a short presentation on “schmoozing” to a group of attorneys who are going to be entertaining a large group of clients at a company-wide social event. Email communication is an easy-to-use medium to send out notes to others asking for their most memorable or embarrassing “schmoozing” moments. Their responses can form the basis for determining specific topics to be included in the talk as well as provide examples of situations that stress key points.

Organizations and Professional Associations

Other places to find stories include community, civic, and religious organizations and professional associations on a local and national level. People you meet or overhear on bus, train, or airplane trips may have interesting life stories to share as well.

The Media

Print media—newspapers, magazines, industry trade journals, and the like—include a wealth of possibilities. Cut stories out and save them by topic area. If the story is one that is found online or is sent by email, keep electronic files organized either by topic or by relevant workshop. Radio talk shows and television news programs are another source. Because of their real-time nature, it is important to record notes immediately in order to recall facts and details accurately.

How To Use Stories In Training

Stories can be used to shape the design of a particular training session. To this end, they can become the focal point for the topic, as described earlier in the example about “schmoozing.” In addition, they can be used:

- To introduce or wrap up a topic;
- To kick off a small-group activity or large-group discussion;

- To form the basis for a case study; or
- To transition between topics or key points.

More often, stories are inserted into training materials after the initial design of the workshop or session. When used in this manner, they can serve to enhance or elaborate on the content by:

- Providing an example of right versus wrong, good versus bad;
- Making a concept, theory, or principle more tangible;
- Detailing what can occur if a particular action does or does not take place;
- Moving people to action;
- Delineating the steps that can or should (or should not) be taken if a specific situation occurs; or
- Refocusing or reframing a situation.

Here is an example of a story that can be used in a variety of ways. Consider the scenario where a large retail home-improvement chain operation enters a small town that currently has a similar, locally owned and operated store. While this new competitive situation may appear negative because it may put a local store out of business, it also has benefits associated with it. This challenge might cause the local retailer to find unique ways of providing value, such as through exceptional customer service. In a training setting where this story illustrates a situation the organization anticipates in the near future, the main purpose of the story could be tasking participants with brain-storming creative options for the local storeowner. It can then lead to options the organization and its employees could engage in within their own work situations. In addition, the story could serve to make the concept of creating value more concrete.

Stories grounded in the content of a training session need to be set up through an introduction and debriefed afterward. The set-up may include contextual information, such as when the story occurred, the geographic location, who was present, and its historical significance, as well as how the story was obtained. Since the story itself is used to make a point or raise an issue, the debriefing may be a large-group discussion, a small-group activity, or an exercise involving individual reflection.

Thought provoking questions are a key technique for debriefing stories. Think about asking questions similar to the following:

- “What do you think she felt at this point?”
- “What would you do in this situation?”
- “What’s at stake here?”
- What are the implications for the company?”
- “How does this apply to your work setting?”

Don’t assume that all participants have reached the same conclusion as a result of hearing the story. Some trainers poll their groups to check reactions before highlighting key learning points. The amount of reflection the story elicits is in direct proportion to the amount of time spent debriefing it.

Not all stories need to be planned, of course. You might spontaneously tell a story as a result of a question or comment or in reaction to what is happening in the room. In addition, participants can be asked to tell their own stories or they may volunteer to share them during the course of the session. For example, within a workshop that is addressing customer service, an activity could be designed to have participants provide a story of the best (or worst) service they have ever received. From here, they could outline what made that experience exceptional (or a disaster). From these points, the group can determine what sorts of behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate when working with their own customers. The benefit of participant-generated stories is that they have a vested interest. From the trainer’s perspective, this is also an excellent way to pick up more stories for use in other training situations.

Be willing to debrief a participant’s own story. It will provide additional learning for the group and acknowledge the trainee who took the risk to share a personal situation. Consider asking: “What was most difficult about that for you?” or “What did you learn from that experience?”

Conclusion

Stories are an integral part of the fabric of our lives and our work. Getting the most from them during training involves knowing the audience, ensuring the story is relevant, using a variety of sources and types of stories, and practice, practice,

practice. Bring your own genuine enthusiasm to the telling of the story and you will carry your participants along with you. To avoid getting stale, incorporate

new stories into your standard program topics. In addition to using stories in training programs, you might also use stories in one-on-one coaching, on sales calls, and with employees and co-workers during meetings. Regardless of how they are used, stories are a powerful tool for enhancing learning.

***Lori L. Silverman** is the co-author of *Critical SHIFT: The Future of Quality in Organizational Performance* and the owner of *Partners for Progress*, a management consulting firm specializing in organizational change, strategic management, and performance improvement. Ms. Silverman holds a master's degree in counseling and guidance from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an MBA from Edgewood College, Madison, Wisconsin. She is the co-author of a forthcoming Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer book on storytelling in training.*

***Mary B. Wacker** is the president of M.B. Wacker Associates, a firm specializing in team building, leadership development, and customer service systems. She is the author of numerous manuals and training kits, including one on leading virtual teams. Ms. Wacker is a past president of the ASTD Southeastern Wisconsin Chapter and holds a master's degree in educational psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is the co-author of a forthcoming Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer book on storytelling in training.*

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