

Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins:

How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact

By Annette Simmons

“I find that most people know what a story is until they sit down to write one.”

Flannery O’Connor

Introduction

My maternal grandfather was a top salesman for Kellogg’s in the 40s and 50s. He was funny, out-going and loved practical jokes. In my favorite photo, he sits ramrod straight with the face of a general on a pony so short his toes graze the ground. I never met him but his stories were part of my growing up. Story jokes were popular back in his day. Here is an old one but a good one that helps illustrate the role stories play in communication.

A man walks into a pet store and says, “I want a talking parrot.”

The clerk says, “Yes sir, I have several birds that talk. This large green parrot here is quite a talker.” He taps on the cage and the bird says, “The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want.” He knows the entire bible by heart. This red one here is young but he’s learning.” He prompted, “Polly want a cracker.” And the bird repeated back, “Polly want a cracker.” Then I’ve got a mynah bird but he belonged to a sailor so if you have children you won’t want that one.”

The man says, “I’ll take the younger one if you can teach me how to make him talk.”

“Sure I can teach you,” said the pet store owner. He sat down with the man and spent hours teaching him how to train the parrot. Then he put the bird in the cage, took his money and sent the man home to start his training regimen.

After a week the man came back into the store very irritated. “That bird you sold me doesn’t talk.”

“He doesn’t? Did you follow my instructions?” asked the clerk.

“Yep, to the letter,” replied the man.

“Well, maybe that bird is lonely. I tell you what. I’ll sell you this little mirror here and you put it in the cage. That bird will see his reflection and he will start talking right away.” responded the clerk.

The man did as he was told but three days later was back in the shop. “I’m thinking of asking for my money back, that bird won’t talk.”

The shop owner pondered a bit and said, “I bet that bird is bored. He needs some toys. Here, take this bell – no charge. Put it in the bird’s cage. I bet he’ll start talking once he has something to do.”

In a week the man was back angrier than ever. He walked in carrying a shoebox, “That bird you sold me died.” He opened the shoebox and there was his poor little dead parrot. “I want my money back.”

The shop owner was horrified, “I’m so sorry, I don’t know what happened. But...tell me... did the bird ever even *try* to talk?”

“Well,” said the man, “he did say one word, right before he fell off his perch and died.”

“What did he say?” the clerk inquired. The man replied, “Foo—o-o-od.”

Poor parrot, he was starving to death. That parrot needed food the way we need stories. Most communication designed to influence is like candy – empty calories devoid of nutrition that feeds core human needs. People need more from you. They want to feel your presence in your message, to taste a trace of humanity that proves there is a “you” (individually or collectively) sending them this message. The absence of human presence in today’s high tech lifestyle leaves people starved for attention. Stories help people feel acknowledged, connected, and less alone. Your stories help them feel more alive by proving there is another live person out there somewhere sending them that message.

This joke does that for you and I - it tells you about me as a person. For instance, you now know my family has a sick sense of humor. You’ve met my grandfather and know that I loved him very much. As a bonus, the joke also illustrates a powerful way to examine your approach to communication. Do you concentrate on “bells and mirrors” like measurable frequencies, reach, and clarity in a way that might cause you to forget the food of human connection that fuels the desire to receive communication in the first place? Communication is never an end goal. Communication is always a *means* to a goal that ultimately can be boiled down to one simple objective: meeting human needs – yours, theirs, and ours. Once food and shelter needs are met, the rest of our needs are psychological. Our psychological needs are met or unmet based on the stories we tell ourselves and each other about what matters most and who controls it.

A perfectly happy customer can suddenly feel unhappy after hearing a story that another customer got a better product at half the price, then satisfied again when you assure him that this story was not true and circulated by a competitor who didn’t have all the facts. Nothing physically changed but the stories about reality completely change perceptions of what is true, important, and thus, real.

Stories interpret raw facts and proofs to create reality. Change the story and you change the meaning of the facts. “Man stabs son” could be interpreted as a murder or life saving emergency tracheotomy depending on the story that you tell. To understand the power stories wield is both an incredible opportunity and awesome responsibility. The stories that best deliver the food of human connection are more likely to construct mental realities that have physical consequences. A real estate developer who produces a picture book of the history of the land from school children’s drawings has a better chance of getting a permit than a developer with a PowerPoint presentation on economic development.

It is not necessarily the physical properties of a yacht, fancy car, white teeth or thin body that people want. What they truly want are the feelings and sensations they those things might bring them. People crave confirmation of a self-image that makes them feel important, desirable, and good. Ultimately all humans want the attention of other human beings in a way that makes us feel important, desirable, powerful and alive. Services and goods are satisfying only if they deliver the food of human connection. The stories you tell, and the stories people tell themselves about you and your product or service, enhance or minimize your ability to deliver satisfaction.

The sense of human presence in communication is frequently elbowed out by “criteria” designed to make communication clear, bite-sized, and attention grabbing but instead

oversimplifies, truncates, and irritates. These “sub-goals” often obscure the real goal: human connection. Communication can’t feel genuine without the distinctive personality of a human being to provide context. You need to show up when you communicate - the real you, not the polished idealized you.

The missing ingredient in most failed communication is humanity. This is an easy fix. In order to blend humanity into every communication you send all you have to do is tell more stories and bingo – you just showed up. Your communication now has a human presence. Use this book to integrate more stories into your communication and I guarantee you will develop presence. More importantly, you will reconnect to bigger stories that frame your life and your work in a way that fills your life with meaning and guides others to seek the same.

People float in an ocean of data and disconnected facts that overwhelm them with choices. Barry Schwartz, PhD, author of The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less (Ecco, 2004) says, "... there's a point where all of this choice starts to be not only unproductive, but counterproductive--a source of pain, regret, worry about missed opportunities and unrealistically high expectations."

In this ocean of choice a meaningful story can feel like a life preserver that tethers us to something safe, important, or at the very least more solid than disembodied voices begging for attention.

PART ONE: Thinking in Story

Chapter One: Story Thinking - What does that even mean?

Once upon a time, before you learned to be more objective, you thought you were important and that the people around you were important. Chances are you asked questions that made other people uncomfortable. To protect you from a life of narcissistic, emotional waywardness, you were sent to school to learn how to be useful. You learned the scientific method. You learned you aren't important. You are actually just a dot on a bell curve. If you are lucky, your dot was two standard deviations from the mean and you were deemed "gifted" which is objectively very similar to being "important." Later you learned that nothing is true if you can't test it and prove it is true in repeated experiments. Critical thinking, rational analysis and objective thinking prepared you to put emotions aside and make better decisions.

Since then, making objective unemotional decisions has served you well. You can prove things are true with cost/benefit analyses, models and bar charts so other people can see when you are "right" and know your recommendations are "right." However, being right has lost its luster. Like any good scientist, you have gathered data that *proves* being right doesn't mean people listen to you. You may even have begun to suspect that everyone you work with is two standard deviations from the mean and not in the "gifted" direction. In fact, there seems to be no significant correlation between being right and creating compliance.

Like most of us educated in the 20th century you've come to the conclusion that clear communications, objective thinking, and rational decision making has its limitations when applied to the unclear, subjective, and multi-rational (everyone has their own ratio these days) world. If you are ready to acknowledge the limitations of objective thinking you are also ready to entertain the idea that subjective thinking is not as irrelevant as you were taught. As a scientist you can observe that people insist upon behaving as if they are important and the people around them are important. They may say they think in objective rational ways, but every important decision they make is based on interpreting objective data in terms of how it affects them and those they love. Decisions are always subjective.

Here's a thought....

What if we develop a tool that is specifically dedicated to diagnose, analyze and intervene on those subjective interpretations? What could you do with such a tool? You could identify the bizarre interpretations that another culture or another person might place on your clear, rational communications. You could predict the subjective spin people might give to your objectively derived decisions. You could even influence them to see things they way you see them. What would you pay for such a tool? \$19.95? But wait there's more.

This tool not only helps you influence others it also helps you self govern. Have you found lately that you know what you *should* do, but try as hard as you might, you just didn't *feel* like it. Perhaps you were in a situation where you *knew* you should be patient, compassionate or perhaps more firm, but time and energy were in short supply and you just didn't have it in you. This tool will pop your view of the situation so you can instantaneously remember who you are and why you are here in a way that reframes time and renews your energy. Lots of wonderful things can happen in the subjective world. You are no longer bound by linear, rational

frameworks. Magic can happen. Miracles surprise you and people become important again, even you.

When you stimulate human emotions with a story, you point those emotions in a certain direction. At a social level stories replicate the neurological effect of attention in our individual brains. Society attends to what draws our attention and what draws society's attention is tended. People don't consciously decide to forget a politician's sexual peccadillo; it is just that the threat of war grabs our attention.

Experiment by directing your attention to a past event to see if you can create emotions or even behaviors. Remember your first puppy love. Spend some time remembering how old you were, the hairstyles and clothing of that time. Remember the awkward silences or worse, the babbling nonsense. In your mind's eye lie on your childhood bed once again and think about how much attention you gave every interaction, potential interaction and fantasized interactions with your heart's desire. Stay there until you feel a ghost of the feelings you felt then. Do you feel a slight urge to action? Perhaps you want to find out "where is that person now?"

Now steel yourself for a less pleasant trip. Let's go to high school and pull up a memory of an embarrassing rejection. Any public humiliation will do, just choose one. If you are like most people, high school was full of them. Give that embarrassing memory all of your attention. Remember names, see the place, re-enact the scene. Now notice the ghosts of the feelings you felt then as they reignite. You may feel a tug towards actions that prevent this kind of experience.

This experiment demonstrates how attention - attending to a memory - alters your present reality by changing your feelings and erecting filters that interpret the present. In the same way stories become society's memories that pull the attention of large groups of people to certain feelings and frames that filter perceptions of current events. An article of a current politician can reference Nixon or Lincoln, in a way that shadows or brightens readers' interpretation of the facts presented.

Likewise when you tell a story that both draws attention and is repeatedly told within a group you, in effect, control future feelings and filters about that subject. If you control the feelings and filters of enough people you can alter their conclusions about reality. Attention is a pre-requisite to influence because attention frames interpretations. Like a movie director making a little box with his hands to emphasize what is seen in the frame, he also deletes most of the surrounding data. When you frame a subjective you predetermine the conclusions people draw from available data by focusing their attention on the data inside your frame. In George Lakoff's Don't think of an Elephant the renowned linguist does an excellent job of describing how framing an issue dramatically influences perceptions. When you control attention you control conclusions. His entire book makes the point that whoever tells the best story wins. The most cohesive and powerful story pulls people's attention so powerfully that very few think to override that pull. Once you give your attention to the title Don't think of an Elephant, no matter how hard you try you cannot *not* think of an elephant. It is the same way with stories.

The really important issues of this world are ultimately decided by the story that grabs the most attention and is repeated most often. While objective criteria cannot guarantee a subjective outcome, objective criteria are still important.

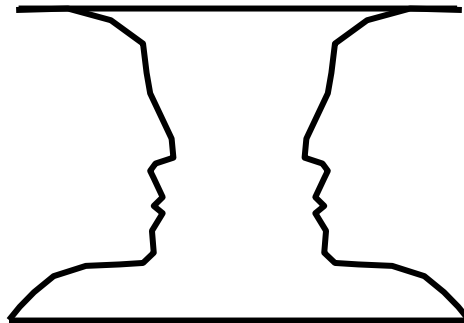
Subjective is NOT the opposite of Objective

Objective thinking is important, valuable and unimpaired by subjective thinking. Learning a subjective thinking tool will not erode your ability to think in objective terms. You

will still be able to conduct a cost/benefit ratio or analysis with the best of them. By adding subjective thinking to your repertoire you add another tool that increases your ability to assemble the many different interpretations that might be drawn from your objective data. Knowing these ahead of time, helps you predict, understand, and influence interpretations before they are set in stone. You already know how to use numbers – the language of objective thinking – to great benefit. What you may not realize is that you also know more about the language of the subjective that you suspect.

The language of the subjective is story. Story is how humans interpret things as good or bad, important or irrelevant, safe or dangerous, and who is “one of us” or “one of them.” These subjective interpretations do not degrade objective thinking but enhance objective thinking so that you can forecast how your obviously “rational” decisions will be embraced by irrational humans.

Look at this diagram:



What do you see? Exactly. Either two faces or a candlestick/chalice/cake plate. This diagram demonstrates how using both objective and subjective thinking works. You can see two completely different pictures from the same input. The tough part is that you can't see both at the same time. Go ahead and try, I'll wait. See? You can switch back and forth really, really fast – but the brain can't let it be two things at once. Similarly your brain likes the objective tools you've been using to identify what is “true” and “false.” Adding subjective tools are difficult for those who are particularly good at rational objective thinking and vice versa. Some gifted individuals do both as naturally as a child prodigy plays the piano. However most of us lean to one side or the other. My hope is that this book will help objective thinkers embrace the subjective, and help subjective thinkers better communicate with the objective thinkers.

Story as Subjective Thinking Tool

Because human behavior is so subjective, objective thinking can actually distort your ability to analyze, understand or predict human behavior. You may have been taught that subjective information is irrelevant...well, *not to the subject*. Humans experience this world from eyes and ears set in a body that can only be in one place at a time. The collective past, present and imagined future times and places represent a subjective point of view that frames how a person feels about you, your idea, or your organization.

Storytelling transports people to different points of view so they can re-interpret or re-frame what your “facts” mean to them. Consider the idea of rational thinking. The term rational comes from “ratio” a basic assumption in decision making – the ratio of cost to benefit. Yet

ratios are based on subjective criteria. For instance, a papaya is useless to a person who dislikes them while simultaneously valuable to the person who enjoys them – even if the cost benefit ratio for each papaya is the same. When a papaya-hater trades one papaya for two oranges with a papaya-lover, their combined cost/benefit ratios create a mutual experience of an “equal exchange” even if not a mathematically equal exchange.

It sounds easier than it is to suspend objective thinking for subjective thinking. When high achievers (hello) employ subjective reasoning the paradox, ambiguities, and contradictions can drive your internal critic crazy over the unscientific and anecdotal nature of stories. Your internal critic usually seeks to discredit and discount mutually exclusive or irrational interpretations of the facts, in order to find the one that is “right.” But the ability to see and deeply understand multiple interpretations is what makes you smarter. Stories are anecdotes - unscientific in statistical terms. In terms of human history, science is a recent adaptation. Stories communicate in the way humans used to think and communicate before we discovered science. Actually stories represent the way human brains *still* think regardless of our rational pretense. Rational thinking is a tool of analysis that stops at the frontal lobes.

Stories communicate directly with the old brain, the limbic system, the amygdala and the other core parts of the brain that only acknowledge tangible reality, not symbols of reality, like numbers and language. The “feeling” parts of the brain are designed to fast track responses (approach/avoid/freeze) to important experiences (good/bad) based on smell, sight, touch, taste and feel. Story ignites imagined sensory experiences that represent reality way better than numbers plotted along a bar chart.

Here is a story that conveys an experience of the sort of perceptual agility storytelling delivers.

An old farmer patiently spent part of each afternoon talking with a nosy neighbor who visited him about the same time every day.

One afternoon during his daily visit, the neighbor suddenly exclaimed, “Did you buy a new horse? Yesterday you only had one horse, now I see two.”

The farmer told the neighbor how this horse, unmarked and apparently without an owner wandered into his barn. He explained that he had asked everyone he knew and since no one owned the horse he would care for it until they found its owner.

The neighbors said, “You are such a lucky man...yesterday you had only one horse and today you have two.” The farmer said, “Perhaps, we shall see.”

The next day the farmer’s son tried to ride the new horse. He fell and broke his leg. That afternoon neighbor said, “You are an unlucky man...your son now can’t help you in the fields.” The farmer said, “Perhaps, we shall see.”

The third day the army came through the village looking for young men to conscript to fight. The farmer’s son was not taken because he had a broken leg. The neighbor again said, “You are a lucky man” and again the farmer said, “Perhaps, we shall see.”

Subjective point of view changes meaning. Meaning is more powerful than facts. If people fear the meaning of your facts they can easily distort, discredit or ignore them. Likewise, if they like the meaning (subjectively) of your facts, they embrace, use, and even embellish your facts. Actions result from the stories people tell themselves about what objective facts mean to them.

Look back at the diagram again to simulate how it feels to toggle back and forth between the subjective and objective points of view. Think about how often we argue about what is and isn't true. Notice how two mutually exclusive things can be true, depending on how you look at it. We can avoid most of our time wasting arguments once we realize that two interpretations (or seven or ninety-five interpretations) are "right" depending on the point of view. By using this tool wisely we can reclaim wasted time that is better spent factoring the impact of different interpretations into our decision making, implementation plans, and marketing campaigns.

The ability to see multiple points of view may feel like a liability in an adversarial situation. It is sometimes perceived as a lack of clarity, a lack of direction, even as a lack of discipline. Subjective reasoning has a time and a place and must be approached judiciously and with wisdom. You or your listeners may feel some anxiety when you intentionally invoke story as a direct feed to the limbic system. People have spent time and energy learning how to exclude emotions from decision making. Many won't welcome the emotions back with open arms. However storytelling doesn't bring emotions *back* to decision making. Storytelling gives us *access* to the emotions that will occur as a result of your decision whether you acknowledge them or not. So yes, subjective reasoning can feel dangerous to people who were trained to believe emotions degrade decision making. As a psychiatrist friend of mine put it, a blind man who could suddenly see would not poke his eyes out just because some of the things he saw were horrible. Likewise, subjective thinking is simply a new channel of interpretation that will bring both good and bad news. Regardless, it brings you vital information you need if you want to influence others.

If you are the only person in the room using story as a tool, understand why and how people will resist this new tool. Be sensitive to people's sincere desire to make good decisions. They've been trained for decades that emotions and anecdotal evidence is "bad." This book is designed to help you lay the groundwork for using story as a credible tool. Understand that allowing the emotions back into decision making can be very destabilizing for people whose entire lives are designed to be objective and rational. Storytelling in a work situation can awaken long denied emotions about personal decisions in a way that surprises and can frighten people who convinced themselves emotions don't matter. Be gentle. Story is a very powerful tool. When you activate new stories you transport people to new points of view, change meaning, behavior and in that way – you change the future.