

TIP #26 – APRIL 2008
BRING THE POWER OF STORYTELLING TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
CONTRIBUTED BY ROBERT THOMPSON, AUTHOR OF *THE OFFSITE*

“I need help focusing on what really matters,” said Joe. “I need to know how to actually do the stuff you guys talk about.”

“Are you really ready to make some changes?” Charlie asked.

“I couldn’t be more ready. I had quite a bit of time to think yesterday. Impending death really boils down the important stuff. I need to show up and speak up and all of those things. Otherwise, I might as well shut up and show myself to the door.”

“That’s a nifty little twist,” chuckled Charlie. “I guess you really were paying attention.”

“Oh, I don’t have any problem with the hearing,” said Joe. It’s the doing I’ve had a tough time with. I don’t know what the Hell I’m doing. I feel like I’m just shadowboxing with the truth.”

Excerpted from **The Offsite: A Leadership Challenge Fable**

Joe, one of the key characters in *The Offsite*, is an amalgam of people I have met over the years. People like Joe walk through life in a fog and hope people don’t see through the masks they wear that cover up their fear of being recognized as a fake.

If an epiphany happens to the “Joes” it usually takes a trauma or two to shake them free from their limited thinking patterns. However, weather patterns shift. Fog clears.

For leaders, one of the best ways to clear the fog is to draft what I call a Vision Story. Similar to the vision work in The Leadership Challenge Workshop®, a Vision Story takes it a bit further. It asks participants to actually create a story, one they can use in its entirety or as selected sound bites in all of their communication.

As this process became more popular with clients, it organically became more formalized. It was obvious that the process could help create community, team spirit, and direction. It was not a check-the-box activity. And it needed a name. Thus, the Never Ending Story Community Building process was born, which I then used in my book *The Offsite: A Leadership Challenge Fable*.

While this technique--which resulted from my reading, research, as well as tons of trial and error--was not spanking new, it was a new way for me to look at the vision process and it produced great results for clients looking to bring focus to their efforts. In addition, it allowed individuals to see that they, too, could be creative and provided them with a template to use in both their personal and professional lives.

The Never Ending Story Community Building Process

1. Discover what matters to you. If you are going to take the lead, what excites you about doing that? You must deeply care about the issue or outcome to light your pilot light.
2. What is today's story? You must specifically identify the good, bad and ugly of your current situation. Knowing where you are and where you want to be on a day-to-day basis is crucial. It is only then that you can fill the gap.
3. What does the future story need to be? Identify the compelling elements. Be sure your values can be seen and heard. Once you have written this piece, re-read it. Be sure you believe in it. Your passion pilot light must be intense or your story won't pass the 'snicker' test.
4. Who/What will assist you? Who/What will oppose? You must look at individual behaviors, systems, process, policy, staff skills, strategy, and budget, to name a few.
5. Take action by personally inviting supporters to join with you in developing your story. Just because they're working with you does not mean they feel invited.
6. Clarify the benefits to you and your colleagues. Everyone wants to know what's in it for them.
7. Ask why you want this repeatedly until you arrive at your deepest reason.
8. Write your story. Let your pilot light burn brightly. Just write what you really want. Don't edit as you go. Rewrite and edit later.

Through the years, I have found Stephen Denning's book, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, to be the best and easiest resource to help people ignite their 'inner storytelling creator' and go deeper into the process. He advises us to be sure our story "has a happy ending; it's brief and naturally interesting; it should personify the change message; it should be able to be understood easily and move the listener to a deeper level of understanding."

When people get stuck, I always advise them to just tell us about "a day in the life" of their workplace a year from now. When they come to work what is going on? How are people behaving? What results are you getting? Sometimes participants reach back into the past, pulling experiences forward and using them as levers to move to the future.

I recently had the opportunity to work in-depth with the top executives at San Diego's Palomar Pomerado Health, a non-profit health organization. Here's a recent story from Joanne Barnett, a nurse manager, who was concerned about keeping the 'care' in caring. Her story, which reaches into the past, hits most of Denning's suggestions. It definitely helps provide direction for her team and motivation for the organization as well.

Late one night, there was a man: a father, a husband who fell asleep at the wheel. He woke to lights, sirens, and firefighters in their yellow turnouts while pinned under a semi-truck with the engine block on his lap. In the distance, he could hear a helicopter arriving. He loses consciousness as the jaws-of-life are used to attempt to save his life.

As black fluid leaked from his vehicle, a flight nurse and firefighter are talking and they both shake their heads. The nurse puts on a pair of yellow turnouts, and climbs in the back of the mangled car.

“Sir, where do you hurt,” she asks. He hesitates and says “I don’t” and then pauses, “It’s bad isn’t it?” he whispers with a strange calm in his voice.

A moment-of-truth. What can you say to make the patient feel better?

“Sir we are doing everything we can and I promise to do everything I can to get you to the hospital, but every time they try to get you out, you lose consciousness. Is there anybody you would like to talk to?”

“My wife”, he says.

The nurse looks at the firefighter whose head is poking through the driver’s window with tears streaming down his face as he says, “I have a cell phone”.

The patient whispers his phone number and closes his eyes. It takes all of his strength to talk.

“Hi honey, just wanted to let you know I’ll be home late tonight, there is an accident on the freeway, No I’m fine, kiss the kids and see you soon.”

He closes his eyes and his breathing is a little shallower. The nurse and firefighter nod knowingly to each other...it’s time.

As the nurse gets out of the car, the patient whispers, “Please, I don’t want to die alone”. At that moment, the heaviness in her heart outweighs the weight of the turnouts. The nurse holds the man’s hand as a single tear rolls down his cheek.

The roar from the Jaws of Life was deafening and in one swift motion, the car is pulled from the semi. In it, lies a lifeless man and the nurse lets go of his hand. As she turns around, the silence is deafening and tears glistened from the faces of the firefighters as she too started to cry.

Compassion makes us humble. Caring makes us real. Riding the wave of the future of healthcare is exciting. New technology, innovative ideas are invigorating and working in the hospital of the future is our goal. Growth is challenging. My hope is that as we

evolve, no one loses sight of why we are in healthcare. What we do is noble yet it is easy to lose sight of what matters. The patient is what matters and their perception about how we cared. It's easy to get lost in the future but we must continue to set the example of compassion while empowering each other to do our best.

Technology may allow us to do more in a shorter period, but we are measured by not just what we did, but how we did it. I will never forget that night and how four little words "I have a phone" made such a difference. I have touched many lives, but this one left such an impression, I encourage us all to be extraordinary. Always want to do what is best for the patient and not just what is best for you.

The team that night could have very easily done the job without any thought as to who that patient was. It's easier to blend with technology and innovation rather than wear your heart on your sleeve. Nevertheless, we can truly shine in the darkness when we do the right thing. Why? Because we touch a life. Why? Because we can save a life. Why? Because we can make a difference. Why? Because the difference is what counts. What patients remember is everlasting. To really see what is before you, to put yourself in your patient's shoes and do the right thing, is compassion and caring, and if the only thing you can do is hold the hand of a dying man or let him speak to his wife one last time, that is greatness.

As a PPH employee, I encourage everyone to continue to persevere to do the right thing, to hold that hand and care for every patient that you touch with compassion. Compassion and teamwork is the legacy of Palomar Pomerado Health.

Joanne's emotionally charged story is certainly a candidate to be used in a variety of settings. Other stories generated from this organization focused on patient care, community outreach, and staff retention with many touching an emotional chord like Joanne's as well. In some way, they all reflect the official vision of the organization. All of their stories make a solid foundation for future presentations.

Many people balk at first about 'writing a story'. "I'm not a writer," they shout. However, my experience says that once people see how well they have done with the process they become more excited. They begin to use their story in full or as sound bites in their conversations and emails, etc. They also find that it is just a great template to keep in mind for their many communication needs.

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More information about his book can be found at <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470189827.html>