

# Stories and Storytelling for New Trainers and Consultants

By Alan Landers

This article was written for a person I was mentoring. She was an aspiring trainer and felt that her lack of experience was a detriment because she didn't have stories to tell. It's true that newbie trainers, managers, consultants and others lack personal stories that can be used to help make teaching points. That does affect their credibility.

New trainers, consultants, coaches, etc. need to have a good collection of stories that reinforce or make your points. To get them, you have to be proactive. You have to go get them.

## Easy ways to gather stories and own them

First, get to know as many people as you can within the organization. Ask them about their jobs, their backgrounds, and attitudes about things at work. Ask questions to keep them talking and sharing. Encourage them with positive body language and supportive comments. Your goal is to gather information that can become part of your storybook.

Without divulging names or betraying confidences, confirm or validate the stories you heard. Do everything you can to maintain the confidentiality of your story sources. No one will tell you anything if they think you are a "bucket-mouth."

Here's how to make someone else's stories your own. Start the story by saying "I was talking with a supervisor/manager/person who..." Or you can say, "I met a couple of people who felt that..." Whatever you do, remember to keep the story innocuous. Don't "throw someone under the bus."

Another way to own a story is to quote a book, video, whatever. For example, you can say that you read an article by \_\_\_ in \_\_\_ magazine and it noted that \_\_\_\_. You are giving credit to the author, citing the source, and retelling the facts. This does a couple of things in your favor. It lets people know that you read and do research and it establishes you as someone with helpful knowledge.

The point is... you may not have direct personal experience, but through conversations and research you have valuable insights to add to the conversation. That earns a certain amount of credibility.

## Here are some guidelines for telling stories

**Have a purpose or premise:** What are you trying to do? What's the point of the story: entertain, educate, put at ease, persuade, introduce, provide an example?

**Embellish:** Add details, relevant details make things interesting and allow people to "see" what you are saying. I'm sure you have heard people say: "Do you see what I mean?"

**Make your characters interesting:** You are interesting because you are telling the story. Provide some descriptions that make the other people in your story interesting. Are they good, bad, rich, poor, smart, foolish, overbearing, gullible? People should be able to identify with or know someone like the characters in your story. All families are a good source of characters. People at work are like families.

**Make the setting relevant to the listener:** People want to "see" the story. That's easier when the story is in a setting that is familiar to them. Take a bit of time to describe it, so they get more involved.

**Have a hero:** Stories with a protagonist (you, perhaps) who is on some sort of a quest engage people (especially if they are on some personal version of that same quest – a protagonist).

**Overcome obstacles/conflict:** During the story there are obstacles or people that have to overcome (antagonists). Good should always win at the end. By that I mean the point of your story should emerge and be obvious when your story is finished.

**Be vulnerable, the underdog:** People identify more with underdogs than with the perennial champion. Vulnerability leads to trust, pathos, and opens people up to what you have to say.

**Be the star:** People respond better to stories that feature the storyteller, not someone else. You can talk about how it affected you, what you did because of it, etc.

**Remember that people are hard wired to listen to stories:** Long before there was a written language, people learned from stories. As a child, you learned much of your family's norms from stories.

**Keep it simple:** Really good stories are easy to understand. They have a start, middle, and end. The end makes a point. Easy to understand stories with a clear message are memorable.

**Cater to emotions:** Set a scene, build expectations by slowly revealing information, the end of a story usually results with a release of emotions that have built up as the story is unveiled.

**Keep it real:** The more realistic, the more the story fits the audience's situation, the more they will want to hear. That's especially true if you've followed the above steps.

Not everyone is a good storyteller. But, with work and practice you can make your interactions with others more effective and more compelling with good stories. Learn a few good ones that people like. Repeat them.