

The Power of a Good Story

By Kathleen Cashman, CEO, Cashman Consulting LLC.

As a leader in your organization, you have the power and privilege to have people pay attention to you. But do you have the ability to sustain their attention through the messages that you communicate?

We all know about the power of stories. Many of us, as parents, take the time to read to our children. Kids show us the deep impact of stories. An irritable or excited child will quickly calm down and be pulled in by a story. As adults, stories still have that magic and power over us.

So, why do we forget about stories when we give a business presentation? Don't we want to engage our audiences every time we can? How can we get others to listen to us and want to work towards success?

A big part of everyone's job today is to motivate people to reach goals. To do that, we must engage their emotions, and the key to their hearts is a story. There are two ways to persuade people. The first is by using conventional rhetoric, which is what most executives are trained in. But there are two problems with rhetoric. First, the people you're talking to have their own statistics and authorities. While you're trying to persuade them, they are arguing with you in their heads. Second, if you do succeed in persuading them, you've done so only on an intellectual basis. That's not good enough, because people are not inspired to act by reason alone.

The other way to persuade people is by uniting an idea with an emotion. The best way to do that is by telling a compelling story. In a story, you not only weave a lot of information into the telling but you also arouse your listener's emotions and energy.

Stories tend to share the challenges, pain and truth of a situation, and people are more likely to trust and believe in a person who admits to these. When a leader glosses over bad situations, obfuscates the truth or lies, they destroy trust with their audience. Here are some tips for engaging your audience:

1. **Tell a story:** Try to connect a personal story to your topic and audience. Rather than just giving facts and numbers, try telling the story of how your company overcame a major challenge.
2. **Use pauses:** A well placed moment of silence can draw your audience into your talk. Unfortunately, many business speakers want to finish their presentations quickly, so they rush through and leave themselves breathless. Don't be afraid of silence – it's powerful!
3. **Flex your inflection:** Use vocal variety in your speech. To color your speech with your own emotion and passion, change up your volume and emphasize key words.
4. **Animate yourself:** Let your body move naturally during your presentations. Get rid of the extra energy you feel by moving around. Don't pace or rock back and forth - but do move your feet. Plant your feet and look at the audience when you're making a point. You'll have a much stronger impact

5. **Make eye contact** – Look people directly in the eyes. Remember, you can only talk to one person at a time no matter how many people are in your audience. Connect, one to one.

Remember that it's a privilege to speak to any audience. If you follow these suggestions, your audience will think and feel that it's a privilege to listen to you too.

Kathleen B. Cashman, CEO, Cashman Consulting LLC. *Cashman Consulting LLC guides organizations and teams through building a mentoring culture, creating programs that work and maintaining the system – managing the quarterly interactions and energizing the teams by additional training and development events. For more information on the products and services visit us at www.cashmanconsultingllc.com or call us: 609.518.3540.*