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When using stories, capitalize on perspectives

Speaker's Notes

By Vincent Kituku

As a speaker who specializes in storytelling and motivating people to action, I know the power of a good tale.

Most people have a strong desire to grow professionally and personally. They want what they learn to help them do their jobs better, relate with people more effectively, take risks, make a difference.

Stories are a wonderful way to connect with a group of people and trigger new ideas within individuals. Over the years, I have used stories to help people make sense of their environment and give meaning to everyday experiences.

But while a good story is always effective in a presentation, you need to remember that the story can be even more powerful if you find ways to encourage audience members to pick apart a parable and explore the parts of the story that are relevant for them. You will be surprised to find that the same tale can mean different things to different people. Encouraging group discussion of these various viewpoints multiplies the power of your anecdote.

The sun, the moon and the stars

In today's working world, people want to know that what they do makes a difference within the workplace. Most underestimate their contributions, and with time, perceive what they do at work as drudgery, a daily routine.

The objectives of the story I use are to have each audience member learn that their work matters, have them understand the importance of other people's roles, and give them an appreciation for how each piece fits into the overall mission.

To do this, I use the following West African folktale about the origin of the sun, moon and stars.

A man named Anasi had six children whose names were See Trouble, Road Builder, Water Drinker, Game Skinner, Stone Thrower and Cushion.

Anasi was having an evening walk when he saw a glittering piece of a rock. He picked it up and decided to keep it to use as a reward for anyone who would help him when he was in trouble.

On his way home, Anasi fell into a river. As he fought to save

himself, See Trouble used his seeing power and saw his father struggling in the river. He informed his siblings, telling them that there was a forest blocking their way between home and the river. Road Builder cleared the forest, making a path for the children to run to help their father.

By the time they arrived, their father was almost covered by water, so Water Drinker drank the water, only to find that a huge fish had swallowed Anasi. That is when Game Skinner saved Anasi by removing him from the fish's belly. But another fate was waiting for Anasi. A large bird looking for a meal picked up Anasi. Stone Thrower hit the bird with a stone, forcing it to release Anasi. When Anasi fell, he was saved from crashing on hard ground by another son, Cushion.

Anasi still had that piece of rock and he remembered his vow.

At this point in my story, I encourage a group discussion that includes questions about who would be the most deserving of the children for the reward.

The resulting discussions are often rewarding, as participants are able to make direct correlations between their everyday working lives and the parable.

The key is for participants to consider each child's contribution and what might have happened if one was not capable of contributing. The lesson is teamwork.

The folktale ends, by the way, with the father throwing the glittering rock to the sky, turning it into the sun, moon and stars to enrich all of his children's lives.

Helpful hints

There are key aspects to consider when selecting a story to use. It must have a connection to your main points and must lead participants to your conclusion. Be clear why you are telling the story. And keep in mind that a bad story is worse than no story at all.

Use a story's twist to build your message. Make sure it's a tale the audience can relate to. The characters and plot turns must resonate with the audience members to make them think, "Yes, I've been there before," or "I know what he's talking about."

Finally, you must practice your story and its interpretation to friendly groups, like family members, before you tell it to an audience of strangers. With adequate practice, a good tale will leave quite an impression on your audience and they will come away with something useful they can apply to both their professional and personal lives.

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