



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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7 July 2005

### Long, Long Ago...

*Using storytelling to improve training effectiveness*

Once upon a time there was a trainer who was finding it difficult to keep participants interested in his training sessions. He tried telling them jokes, used animations and spiced things up with a couple of games too. But nothing worked for long.

In despair he set out on a walk. Engrossed in his thoughts, he tripped on a bottle lying on the road. He picked up the bottle and just as he was about to throw it into a bin, guess what happened? Out came a genie and granted him a wish. He wished that he could do something to make his training more effective. The genie granted his wish and turned him into a storyteller!

#### **In an office...**

“Hey, let me warn you right at the beginning not to be late by even a few minutes. A few years back we had an employee who was fired on the spot for coming in two minutes late,” a supervisor tells a new employee. On another day he narrates another incident to the new employee “Thanks to Jim we now have coffee dispensers on every floor. He was smart enough to suggest to management that if everyone had to go down for coffee we’d only end up wasting more time!” Such tales pass on from one corporate generation to the other. It is now believed that these stories are powerful drivers of employee behavior.

#### **Cultural tales**

Every organization has its share of myths and legends. These tales interweave with its rules and norms to build its culture. While the rules and norms are documented, the legends get passed on as stories. It is through these stories that the organization reinforces and communicates its culture. Storytelling can be used as an effective learning tool when training employees.

Every training program has a different objective. Some impart information while others aim to develop specific skills. However, the goal of all programs remains the same - participants should retain what they learn. Retention can be improved when participants find some meaning and logic in what they hear and experience. A study of the adult learning theory provides reasons for using storytelling in the learning process. The theory states:

**“People learn and remember information that applies to them directly.”**

When employees share stories at the workplace they are basically sharing information. As opposed to a lecture or a textbook, this medium is both narrative and informal. The likelihood of the employee retaining the information passed on in this form is high.

In addition, when sharing workplace stories employees are actually sharing information about issues and problems they encounter. Some problems are likely to be common, and



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therefore participants tend to pay greater attention. They naturally relate to the problem and solutions emerge.

### **“When multiple senses are stimulated during learning, people acquire information more quickly and retain it longer”**

A story can make an individual laugh or cry. A storyteller (trainer or employee), especially one who has lived the experience, is bound to emote while narrating his or her story. Listeners react emotionally to what is being said. Therefore, the storytelling technique ensures that the participants are wholly involved. This makes learning an internal experience (part of their thinking) rather than an external one (something that they are likely to forget once the training session ends).

### **More reasons why storytelling works**

Stories work as fasteners and connectors. Participants not only remember stories long after the learning program, but they also quickly connect a story to relevant concepts or information conveyed during the program.

Adults learn better in relaxed environments. Stories lighten up a rather intensive training topic and bring in an element of fun. This doesn't mean that they are added only with the intent of entertainment. Stories help a trainer grab participants' attention while communicating some information.

Storytelling helps the trainer build a rapport with participants. This is especially so when it is based on personal experience. Sharing personal experiences helps create a bond. Stories are extremely helpful while imparting team-building and leadership skills.

A participant rarely forgets a concept or topic when he or she takes his or her own meaning from it. Storytelling gives participants the freedom to assimilate and interpret the information received, thereby enhancing their learning.

### **The technique in action**

A trainer usually uses a story as an icebreaker. He or she may also use it to explain and simplify a complex concept. Stories can be used in different contexts and help cover multiple learning points. Trainers could use anecdotes, personal experiences and mythical or folk tales.

### **Getting in the story**

To successfully incorporate storytelling into a training program, a trainer can:

**Ask participants to share stories.** The trainer can ask participants to exchange their experiences intermittently to help him or her along during the session. This ensures students' total involvement.

**Utilize small groups.** Storytelling is a time consuming activity. The most effective way to maintain the efficacy of this tool is to have learners work in small groups.

**Ask “What's your best/worst story?”** While narrating their best and worst experiences at the workplace, employees indirectly share information about what works and what

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doesn't. For instance, one trainer (during a performance management workshop) asked the participants to narrate their best and worst performance appraisal incidents. While they were narrating the stories, he asked the participants to list the best and worst practices. This list doubled up as a list of do's and don'ts that they could use during actual reviews.

**Go online.** The use of stories is not restricted to face-to-face encounters - they can be built into Computer Based Training (CBT) programs. Chat rooms, intranet groups and FAQ's are other platforms for sharing stories.

### **Does a trainer need to learn about how to tell a story?**

For a story to be effective, the trainer requires a fair amount of preparation and practice. He or she also should have the will to experiment with teaching methods. To begin with, he or she should collect stories from different sources. While most trainers are comfortable narrating their own stories, others' experiences and stories from books and magazines are useful as well. The larger the database of stories, the more topics a trainer can cover.

### **Who's a good storyteller?**

A good storyteller displays

- Patience
- Effective style of delivery (voice modulation, pace of narration)
- Spontaneity (ability to narrate a story off the cuff while gripping the audience's attention)

Storytelling facilitates organizational learning; it can be used as an efficient learning tool.