

# **The Power of Storytelling for Leaders and Senior Managers**

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## **Section 1: Framing the Case for Storytelling in Leadership**

### **Storytelling Is a Core Leadership Lever for Driving Belief, Culture, and Change**

Most transformation efforts do not fail because of poor strategy. They fail because people do not buy into them.

When belief is absent, the response is predictable:

- Passive resistance
- Misalignment
- Superficial compliance at best

In these situations, leaders often respond by increasing the volume of communication. More data. More updates. More detail.

It rarely works.

Data informs, but it does not move people.

Story does.

Story provides context, meaning, and emotional connection. It enables individuals and teams to understand not just *what* is changing, but *why it matters* and *what it means for them*. That shift is what drives engagement and sustained action.

At a senior leadership level, storytelling is not a communication technique. It is a mechanism for shaping how people interpret reality, align around priorities, and commit to change.

### **This Session Equips Leaders to Communicate with Clarity, Influence, and Impact**

This session is designed to move beyond theory and into practical leadership application.

It focuses on four core capabilities:

- Understanding how story drives engagement, trust, and action
- Applying structured frameworks to communicate with clarity
- Learning from real-world NHS examples where story accelerated adoption
- Practising how to shape a leadership narrative for your own context

The intent is not to turn leaders into performers.  
It is to enable more effective leadership communication in moments that matter.

### **Leaders Who Communicate a Clear Change Story Are Twice as Likely to Succeed**

There is strong evidence linking storytelling to successful transformation.

Research from McKinsey & Company found that senior leaders who:

- Spent significant time on transformation efforts
- Communicated a clear, aligned change story

were **twice as likely to achieve successful outcomes**.

This is not a marginal gain. It represents a material shift in the likelihood of success.

The implication is straightforward.

The effectiveness of a transformation is not determined solely by the quality of the strategy, but by how clearly and consistently that strategy is communicated and understood.

Story is the vehicle through which that clarity is achieved.

### **Data Alone Failed to Drive Adoption, Story Converted Insight into System-Wide Action**

A practical example illustrates the point.

A programme focused on improving sepsis outcomes developed a robust dashboard to support measurement and performance improvement. The technical solution was sound. The data was accurate. The intent was clear.

Human connection, however, was limited.

- Measurement of sepsis outcomes was inconsistent
- Data-led communication did not change human connection

The turning point came when the narrative shifted.

Instead of focusing solely on metrics, the programme introduced a personal story that connected the work to real experiences and outcomes. This reframed the initiative from a reporting requirement into something meaningful and relevant.

The impact was immediate:

- Engagement increased
- Conversations changed
- Adoption became more meaningful

The lesson is direct.

Data provides evidence.

Story provides meaning.

Leaders who combine both are significantly more effective in driving change.

### **Storytelling Is Not Optional, It Is a Strategic Leadership Capability**

A common barrier is the perception that storytelling is not part of a leader's role.

Typical assumptions include:

- "I am too operational for storytelling"
- "Storytelling is a soft skill"

These assumptions are increasingly out of step with the demands of modern leadership.

In complex systems, where change depends on alignment across multiple stakeholders, the ability to communicate clearly and create shared understanding is critical.

Storytelling supports this by:

- Increasing clarity of message
- Strengthening engagement and morale
- Enabling consistent communication across teams

There is a clear shift required.

Storytelling should not be viewed as an optional enhancement to leadership communication. It is a core capability for influencing outcomes and delivering change at scale.

## **Section 2: The Science and Structure of Storytelling**

### **Storytelling Works Because It Aligns Emotion, Cognition, and Behaviour**

Storytelling is effective because it engages multiple dimensions of human processing at the same time.

Rather than presenting isolated information, story creates a coherent experience that connects logic, emotion, and meaning. This enables individuals to interpret information more quickly and retain it more effectively.

Key mechanisms commonly cited in the literature include:

- **Cognitive alignment:** Stories help listeners follow a clear sequence, improving comprehension
- **Emotional engagement:** Narrative triggers emotional responses that increase relevance
- **Memory retention:** Emotionally engaged content is more likely to be remembered

- **Behavioural influence:** When people understand and feel the message, they are more likely to act

Research in communication and neuroscience, including work by Uri Hasson, suggests that effective storytelling can create a form of alignment between speaker and listener, often described as “neural coupling”.

**Evidence note:**

Concepts such as oxytocin driving trust and dopamine supporting attention are widely referenced in popular literature. The core principle remains valid, but the biological mechanisms should be interpreted with caution.

The implication for leaders is clear.

Story is not an alternative to data.

It is the mechanism that makes data meaningful and actionable.

**Emotional Connection Drives Recall More Than Logic or Credibility Alone**

A consistent theme across communication research is the importance of emotional connection in making messages memorable.

A commonly cited model, popularised by Carmine Gallo in *Talk Like TED*, suggests that audience recall is influenced by three factors:

- **Pathos (story and emotion):** 65%
- **Logos (data and logic):** 25%
- **Ethos (credibility):** 10%

**Evidence note:**

These proportions should be treated as indicative rather than definitive. The underlying research base is not consistently cited, and the figures are best understood as a simplified representation.

The broader insight is well supported.

Emotional connection significantly increases memorability and influence.

Data and credibility remain important, but are less effective in isolation.

For leaders, this reinforces a practical point.

If a message is not felt, it is unlikely to be remembered or acted upon.

## **The Most Effective Communicators Use a Consistent Structure Across Time**

Across different contexts and time periods, effective communicators tend to rely on similar underlying structures.

From classical rhetoric, associated with Aristotle, to modern speakers such as Bryan Stevenson, the same pattern is evident.

Communication that resonates typically balances three elements:

- **Ethos:** credibility and trust
- **Pathos:** emotional connection
- **Logos:** logic and evidence

These are not competing elements. They are complementary.

Over-reliance on logic can lead to disengagement.

Over-reliance on emotion without credibility can undermine trust.

The most effective leaders integrate all three, using structure to ensure clarity and balance.

## **Section 3: Practical Storytelling Frameworks for Leaders**

### **Structured Story Frameworks Enable Leaders to Communicate with Clarity and Impact**

One of the most practical ways to improve communication is to adopt simple, repeatable structures.

Frameworks reduce ambiguity, improve clarity, and make it easier for audiences to follow complex ideas.

They also ensure that communication moves beyond information sharing to action.

### **Clarity Comes from Structuring Narrative Around Tension and Resolution (SCQA)**

The SCQA framework, commonly used in consulting, provides a clear structure for communicating complex ideas:

- **Situation:** What is happening now
- **Complication:** What challenge or tension exists
- **Question:** What needs to be resolved
- **Answer:** What action or solution is proposed

The critical component is the **complication**.

Without tension, there is no reason for the audience to engage.  
Without a clear question, the answer lacks relevance.

This structure is particularly effective in:

- Board-level communication
- Business cases
- Strategic updates

It ensures that messages are both logical and compelling.

### **Leaders Drive Action by Linking Information to Meaning and Next Steps (What – So What – Now What)**

A second practical framework focuses on moving from information to action:

- **What:** The facts or situation
- **So What:** Why it matters
- **Now What:** What needs to happen next

Many communications fail because they stop at “what”.

Effective leadership communication goes further:

- Interpreting the implications
- Providing clear direction

This framework is particularly useful in:

- Team briefings
- Operational updates
- Decision-making discussions

If communication does not reach “now what”, it is unlikely to drive change.

## **Section 4: Applying Storytelling in Leadership Practice**

### **Storytelling Is a Cross-Cutting Tool Across All Leadership Contexts**

Storytelling is not limited to presentations or formal communication.

It is a core capability that can be applied across a wide range of leadership activities, including:

- Team briefings

- Board papers
- Business cases
- Coaching and mentoring
- Recruitment and interviews
- Patient and stakeholder engagement

In each of these contexts, story supports:

- Clarity of message
- Alignment of stakeholders
- Consistency of communication

This reinforces the central point.

Storytelling is not situational.

It is embedded in effective leadership practice.

### **Leaders Who Shape Narrative Ultimately Shape Culture and Direction**

As Steve Jobs is widely quoted as saying:

“The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values and agenda of an entire generation that is to come.”

#### **Evidence note:**

This quote is widely circulated but not consistently sourced to a primary record. It is best treated as indicative of the broader principle rather than a formally verified statement.

The underlying insight is credible.

Leaders influence not only decisions, but how those decisions are understood.

Narrative shapes perception, and perception shapes behaviour.

### **Effective Leadership Communication Balances Clarity, Consistency, and Emotional Connection**

Across different contexts, effective communication tends to share common characteristics:

- **Clarity:** Messages are simple and easy to understand
- **Consistency:** Communication is aligned across channels and over time
- **Emotional connection:** The message resonates with the audience

This balance is particularly important in complex or high-pressure environments.

Without clarity, confusion increases.  
Without consistency, trust erodes.  
Without emotional connection, engagement drops.  
Story supports all three simultaneously.

## **Section 5: From Insight to Action**

### **Leadership Impact Depends on Intentional and Consistent Use of Story**

Understanding storytelling is not sufficient.

Impact comes from consistent application in day-to-day leadership practice.

This requires:

- Intentional use of narrative in communication
- Reflection on what works and what does not
- Continuous refinement of approach

Like any leadership capability, storytelling improves with deliberate practice.

### **Your Commitment to Stories**

To translate insight into action, three questions provide a practical starting point:

- What story will you tell this week?
- Who needs to hear it?
- How might it shift culture or engagement?

These questions anchor storytelling in real leadership contexts.

### **Leaders Who Communicate Coherent Narratives in Crisis Are More Likely to Be Trusted**

Evidence from Harvard Business Review (2020) suggests that leaders who communicate clearly and empathetically during crisis situations are more likely to build trust.

This reinforces the importance of:

- Coherent narrative
- Emotional intelligence
- Clarity under pressure

In crisis, storytelling is not optional.  
It is central to maintaining alignment and stability.

### **Leaders Are Story Architects**

The role of a leader extends beyond decision-making.

Leaders shape how others:

- Interpret events
- Understand priorities
- Engage with change

Story is the mechanism through which this happens.

Leaders do not simply communicate information.  
They design narratives that influence behaviour and outcomes.

### **References and Evidence Base**

The content in this session draws on a combination of:

- Harvard Business Review articles on leadership and trust
- McKinsey & Company research on transformation success
- Neuroscience and communication research, including work by Uri Hasson
- The Culture Code by Daniel Coyle
- The Pyramid Principle by Barbara Minto
- Talk Like TED by Carmine Gallo
- NHS England guidance on patient stories at board level

Where evidence is commonly cited but not consistently sourced, this has been explicitly highlighted.

The author would be happy to share more detailed references on request.

### **Finally...**

This document is intended to support senior leaders in applying storytelling as a practical leadership tool.

The core message is simple.

Storytelling is not a soft skill.  
It is a structural component of effective leadership.

Used well, it enables leaders to:

- Build belief
- Align teams
- Deliver change at scale

Used poorly or not at all, even strong strategies can struggle to gain traction.

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