



Your business, function or project thrives or grinds to a halt, based on how well you communicate to stakeholders. Not communicating effectively is as damaging to performance as failing to plan or to maintain proper measurement and oversight.

I want to tell you a story

2 essential steps to connect stakeholders to your messages.

From our work with successful leaders over the years, we see two essential building blocks to really effective communication. The first is the delivery of messages in a manner that different audiences can consume. The second is the leader's ability as a storyteller.

The days of command and control may be behind us, but it is still the fallback position for Executives who do not pay attention to stakeholder communication needs. As their message fails to land and stakeholders fail to align accordingly, they resort to generally unsuccessful, authoritative demands for changed behaviours. The resulting circle is vicious and has ended many a promising career.

Effective communication is persuasion. It requires sharing your message in a manner that encourages others to listen to and engage with your content. To achieve this a leader must be credible and know whom they are speaking with. They must appreciate how the subject matter impacts their audience and acknowledge their audience's preferred listening style. This can then lead to a common ground on which their message can be rolled out.

Persuasion does not happen through the presentation of statistics and facts alone. Great communicators and persuaders connect with their audiences on an emotional level, by telling relatable stories that support the benefits of their messages.

1. Make believe

No matter how big or small the stage, you need to know with whom you are speaking. Far from being an off the cuff style of addressing an audience, effective persuasion requires great insight and significant planning to make your audience believe in your message. Knowing how your audience likes to listen and intuiting how your messages will impact, are key.

There are two principle types of stakeholder audience, the first of which are the "fast actors". People who respond best to short, refined messages, that are clear and precise. Quick decision makers, they are less risk adverse and apply your message quickly to scenarios. You risk losing their attention with too much detail or context. When they want more information, they will ask, delaying your content with pointed questions to get to the kernel of your message.

The second type of stakeholder audience are "method actors". People who are uncomfortable being asked to make quick decisions, or any decision without a comprehensive array of facts in evidence. In many ways they need to live the scenario you are setting so that



they can experience it and importantly, identify any gaps in your message that they need filled. You risk losing this type of stakeholder by seeking to force your message through too quickly.

If you lead a business, function or team, your audience will often be made up of both stakeholder types. So draft your content structure working from block concept headings down to detail layer, avoiding the use of over complex graphics or tables in supporting presentations or documents. Be able to drill down succinctly to the fundamentals but only when additional evidence for your message is requested.

2. An exciting plot.

While planning structure, content and detail is essential to being persuasive, how often have you delivered or received, a presentation or communication, only to find that no one could remember the salient facts afterwards. We are generally poor at retaining rational facts and figures in our emotional minds, so stakeholders understandably struggle to recall such content. However, people remember stories and can often repeat them to others with high accuracy.

UK journalist Christopher Booker, in his book **The Seven Basic Plots**, describes the different fundamental structures that all stories are ultimately based around. They are: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy and Rebirth. Immediately it is apparent how many of these work well at the heart of a business communication.

Storytelling helps stakeholders to relate to your messages and understand the relevancy of your content

to their situations. By using real life examples in your story and allowing others to share theirs, your audience engages at a significantly higher level and is infinitely more likely to absorb your most important points.

Craft your communication by threading your content elements in story form. Begin by describing the situation, identifying the issues at hand and their impact on stakeholders and business goals. Talk about the actions that have been taken or those that are proposed to address each of these issues. What was the genesis of these actions? Who proposed them? Why they are deemed appropriate?

Outline the results you have achieved or expect to achieve and specifically how you see stakeholders benefit. Wherever possible intersperse with short story experiences that highlight your primary communication objective and supporting messages.

We receive literally thousands of conscious and subconscious messages every day, a lot of it white noise, but all of it competition to the important messages that we wish to convey or need to receive. Plan your communication properly by

knowing your audience and ensuring your messages are delivered in a manner they can consume. As stakeholders, they are thinking “how does this add value to me?”, “what threat might this pose?”, “what problem does this solve”, “how relevant is this to me or my areas?”. If your story does not address these your communication will be seen as irrelevant. Story telling demands authenticity, so ensure that the story you need to tell is results focussed, sincere and genuine. In this way, your audience will learn to engage with and trust your key messages.



The best leaders tell compelling stories, that their audiences will remember.