

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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TELE 818.788.5357
info@essentialcomm.com
www.essentialcomm.com

EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Story—The Ultimate Persuader ▶ 09/21/05

In the early days of the Internet, a theme park's Senior Director of IT was proposing a new line of service. Getting approval was critical for him and his group. His people were horrified when he was in and out of the room in less than fifteen minutes; they were convinced he'd fumbled the ball. Their collective jaws dropped when approval came back within the hour.

How did he clinch the deal? He told a story.

Stories get to a different part of people's brains than lists of data. When done well, people remember stories for years.

The three critical elements you must get into every story you tell are:

- 1 The Want**
- 2 The Obstacle**
- 3 The Resolution**

When dealing with lots of data points, identifying these three elements will help you create a narrative that has impact.

When he initially rehearsed his presentation with me, the Director had eight separate data points. He felt if he could explain each one, their collective weight would tip the scale in his favor. I felt certain he only needed three data points, but they had to be The Want, The Obstacle and The Resolution. (He ended up with four points: he had two Obstacles!)

1 The Want

The Want is why everything happens. In drama, main characters speak their Want: Dorothy wants to be "Somewhere Over The Rainbow"; Shrek, in the first movie, wants the solitude of his swamp; Oliver Twist, in the musical, wonders, "Where Is Love?" The common thread? Want. Hope. Longing. Aspiration.

Since business stories are made up of data points, not human behavior, The Want often becomes a Goal or Objective or Expectation.



And remember, the more important The Want, the more that's at stake, the more people are willing to sacrifice to get it, the more your listeners will care. If the listeners don't care, the story fails.

2 The Obstacle

The Obstacle makes people listen because it stops The Want from coming true. Dorothy gets over the rainbow but then can't get home; Shrek is besieged by fairy tale creatures; Oliver is kidnapped by Fagin and the boys. Obstacles, all.

In a business story, The Obstacle is a competitor or survey results or the Wall Street analysis or consumer response or the budget.

When a big Obstacle blocks an important Want, people lean forward and ask, "What happens next?"

3 The Resolution

The Resolution is what happens next. Often, in business, The Resolution becomes the proposal: it's how you propose to overcome The Obstacle. Other times The Resolution introduces yet another obstacle and the story becomes "to be continued." Or it may be bad news.

When you resolve your story, no matter what the outcome, be sure you tell your listeners why you told them the story. Don't let them draw their own conclusions.

So how did the IT guy make his business proposal so compelling? Here it is in a nutshell.

"Our top priority is giving our guests the best experience possible in our park. (The Want.) But during our peak summer months, when the heat is intense, our guests stand in line for admission tickets for up to an hour. This is obviously not the best experience possible for our guests. (The Obstacle.) And, because of our footprint, building more ticket booths is not an option. (Another Obstacle!) So we're proposing online ticketing with variable pricing." (Resolution.)

The next time you need people to listen to a slew of data, create a story. They'll be dying to hear what happens next.



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