

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



Making Stories Soar ▶ 03/03/11

Stories soar when you follow two rules

Varena keeps more detailed information in her head on a daily basis than I can cram into my brain in a year. And she cites it with precision but without pretention. She's also smart enough to know that all those facts don't motivate people.

Discussing her upcoming off-site, she told me about a new initiative she was going to roll out. "I've got lots of business reasons why this is a good idea, but I need something more." She stopped and smiled at me. We both knew where she was headed; we'd talked about it before. "All right already, Tom, I need a story and you know I can't tell one."

Varena knows stories touch people in a way that facts and figures never will. She longs to develop this crucial leadership skill. So I reiterated my story-telling advice:

Stories come to life when you follow two rules:

1 Tell us details of what people did, said and felt.

Don't hover over the forest telling us about the landscape; bring us down onto the forest floor so we can *enter* the landscape. Give us the leaves and roots and dirt. Details of what people did, said and felt pull us into the story.

2 Connect the details to other details.

The details of what people did, said and felt must connect to and influence other details of what people did, said and felt. The details you tell us need to feel important. In other words, the details you include must affect the outcome of the story.

When is a story not a story?

During our earlier work on stories, I'd challenged Varena. "Come on, you must have told a story! Don't you tell your son the story of his birth?"



"I tell him about his birth," she laughed, "but it's not really a story."

I pressed her to tell it. She pretended she was talking to her son and said, "When you were born I was so excited. I couldn't wait to meet you. And when they brought you to me for the first time, I kissed you all over and told you I'd love you forever."

What do you think? Is this a story? Are there details of what people did, said and felt? If so, do those details connect to each other and affect the outcome?

I told Varena she was right—it was *not* a story. At least not yet. But it was the *kernel* of a story. There were seeds of what people did ("I kissed you all over"), said ("I'll love you forever"), and felt ("I was so excited"). So why wasn't it a story yet?

Because she didn't follow the two rules. Rule 1: Tell us details. She told some but they're too general. Rule 2: Connect the details. Hers didn't connect.

(Of course, I had one other quibble with her story: it's supposed to be a birth story but there's no birth! Structuring a story is another Executive Coaching Tip entirely. Stay tuned!)

Creating the details

For her off-site, Varena wanted to tell her team how she had decided to take them in this new direction. Here's how she first told it to me:

"I was in Hong Kong to deliver another quarterly review and realized I'd been doing essentially the same review for years and years. I just knew we had to do something new. On the flight back, I sketched out the whole new direction. By the time we got to L.A., the whole thing was done."

Is it a story? Is she hovering above the forest or down among the roots? If she's down among the roots, do the details connect to one another and affect the outcome?

To me, she's above the forest. Are there specifics? Some. Do they connect and influence the outcome? Yes. So why aren't I pulled into the story? Because she hasn't really achieved rule number one: she hasn't given us real details of what people said, did and felt. The details she included are still too general. They're mentioned, then gone. She's given us a glimpse of the ground but hasn't brought us down to root-level yet.



The opening—Take Two!

Here's how the opening minute of Varena's business story sounded after we worked on it.

"When I flew to Hong Kong for their quarterly review, I was feeling off balance. I wasn't sure why. At first I thought maybe I'd missed something in their numbers. So I went over them again and they were fine. But my uneasy feeling wouldn't go away.

"Then, the morning of the meeting, I was looking out the window of my hotel room thinking about what I was going to say, and it hit me. I wasn't disturbed about the Hong Kong review. I was disturbed about *me*. I suddenly realized I was on autopilot. I had been doing these reviews for so long that I wasn't getting any juice from them any more. And I want my job to be juicy! And yours, too!"

Is she following the two rules? Is she above the forest or down among the roots?

She's down in the roots!

Are there details of what people did, said and felt? Yes! What had been one sentence ("I was in Hong Kong to do another quarterly review and realized I'd been doing essentially the same review for years and years.") is now two paragraphs.

Do the details connect to each other? Yes! Every detail in those two paragraphs are about one thing and one thing only: the unease that led to an "aha!" moment.

Two cautions

Now, be careful. Simply expanding details doesn't automatically make a story. But you can't get down onto the forest floor *without* expanding details. But if they don't connect to each other and affect the outcome of the story, cut 'em.

One other caution. When we began developing her details, Varena asked, "Does everything in the story have to be true?"

The answer is no. But everything in the story has to *feel* true. The details of what people did, said and felt have to create a truth that feels authentic. Does that mean you can only tell what people actually, truly, really said, did and felt? No. Did Varena really stand at the window of her hotel? Maybe. But either way, that detail helps us understand the bigger truth of the story.



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

As she approached her off-site, Varena expected resistance. She knew the change she was proposing was big. But very little resistance ever surfaced. She felt her ability to tell a good story helped people align with her vision.

In our coaching, she continued developing her story-telling skills because, she told me—much to my amusement—the day she could tell a good story she would know she'd achieved *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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