

Story Listening: A Skill for Leaders

There are two sides to every story • BY ELLIOTT MASIE



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The power of the story as a leadership and learning device is universally accepted. Stories can touch people, disrupt organizations and shape our behavior.

For some time, we have recognized that it's critically important for leaders to have the ability to tell an authentic and well-constructed story — whether it's about a customer, a regional office or simply a challenge his or her group is facing. However, I would advocate that we add an even more subtle and critical component to this required skill set: story listening. A leader should have the ability to actively, effectively and visibly listen to stories.

Here are some of the necessary ingredients for effective story listening:

- **Give story permissions.** People don't naturally tell leaders their stories. They will tell their families or friends, but often strip out the story elements when talking to managers, executives and leaders. Good story listening skills start with giving direct reports explicit permission to tell a tale. You might say, "Tell me a story about one of our happiest and one of our most disgruntled customers." You might even give people some advance notice that you would love to hear their stories.
- **Don't interrupt.** Leaders love to cross-examine, drill down and get to the bottom line. All of these things kill stories. Hold those instincts in abeyance and don't interrupt! I know this is hard, but people need to know that they can tell you the whole story — beyond just the facts.
- **Encourage with your eyes.** People know when you are really listening to their stories. Let your eyes show them that you are right there and following along.
- **Save stories in your story drawer — and share when appropriate.** We stockpile stories in separate parts of our brain. When I hear a story that moves me, I put it in my mental story drawer. Here, the tone and context is as important as the content. When I have heard a story that is key to the organization, I find a way to get that story onto video or audio so that it can be more widely shared.
- **Honor the story and the storyteller.** Yes, you should collect stories from your colleagues, customers and suppliers, but don't rip them off. I love to retell elements of a story that I have heard, but I always give full credit (if they want it) to the originator.
- **Don't play dueling stories.** Leaders are great walking collections of stories. It is very tempting to follow up a story with one of your own, or even to slip into a game of dueling stories. While you may have a cool tale to match the one you've just heard, it often is wiser to listen, probe and absorb. Your story could negate the power of collecting others'.
- **Being heard is key.** Sometimes stories are highly forgettable, but employees' ability to tell leaders their stories is incredibly important. It builds trust, connection and collaboration. When we have an opportunity to tell our stories and feel that we are heard, the leadership climate changes.

Story listening is even more critical in the online and social media worlds. There are three dimensions to story e-listening:

- **Sometimes, go live.** Every week, I will pick up the phone after getting an e-mail from someone and ask him or her to tell me the whole story behind the message. I know that the verbal story will contain so much more texture and that the act of reaching out will extend our relationship.
- **Create YouTube-like story collections.** Consider building a digital collection of stories within the organization. Gather a collection of video YouTube segments from the workforce — reaching out to both senior and new employees — that can be used in learning programs or accessed from the intranet.
- **Listen to rumors, too.** Sometimes, a story containing wrong or misleading information goes viral. When that happens, listen carefully. What about the story is making it viral? Listen for the emotion and context. You can't stop a story with a memo; it will probably take an even more resonant story — and that requires great listening.

Finally, I would suggest that story listening is a good characteristic to include in leadership selection criteria. It helps recruiters sort through candidates quickly and often is a great predictor of how leaders will shape their environments. **CLO**