

*Chapter 1. The Six Stories You Need to Know How to Tell*

*To be a person is to have a story to tell.*

*Isak Dinesen*

Skip looked into the sea of suspicious stockholders and wondered what might convince them to follow his leadership. He was 35, looked 13 and was third generation rich. He could tell they assumed he would be an unholy disaster as a leader. He decided to tell them a story. “My first job was drawing the electrical engineering plans for a boat building company. The drawings had to be perfect because if the wires were not accurately placed *before* the fiberglass form was poured, a mistake might cost a million dollars, easy. At 25, I already had two masters’ degrees. I had been on boats all my life and frankly, I found drawing these plans a bit ...mindless. One morning I got a call *at home* from a \$6/hour worker asking me “are you sure this is right?” I was incensed. Of course I was *sure* – “just pour the damn thing.” When his supervisor called me an hour later and woke me up *again* and asked “are you sure this is right?” I had even less patience. “I said I was sure an hour ago and I’m still sure.”

“It was the phone call from the president of the company that finally got me out of bed and down to the site. If I had to hold these guys by the hand, so be it. I sought out the worker who had called me first. He sat looking at my plans with his head cocked to one side. With exaggerated patience I began to explain the drawing. But after a few words my voice got weaker and *my* head started to cock to the side as

well. It seems that I had (being left-handed) transposed starboard and port so that the drawing was an exact mirror image of what it should have been. *Thank God* this \$6/hour worker had caught my mistake before it was too late. The next day I found this box on my desk. The crew bought me a remedial pair of tennis shoes for future reference. Just in case I got mixed up again - a red left shoe for port, and a green right one for starboard. These shoes don't just help me remember port and starboard. They help me remember to listen even when I think I know what's going on." As he held up the shoebox with one red and one green shoe, there were smiles and smirks. The stockholders relaxed a bit. If this young upstart had already learned this lesson about arrogance, then he might have learned a few things about running companies, too.

### Trust Me

People don't want more information. They are up to their eyeballs in information. They want *faith* – faith in you, your goals, your success, in the story you tell. It is faith that moves mountains, not facts. Facts do not give birth to faith. Faith needs a story to sustain it - a *meaningful* story that inspires belief in you and renews hope that your ideas, do indeed, offer what you promise. Genuine influence goes deeper than getting people to do what you want them to do. It means people pick up where you left off because they *believe*. Faith can overcome any obstacle, achieve any goal. Money, power, authority, political advantage, and brute force have all, at one time or another, been overcome by faith.

Story is your path to creating faith. Telling a meaningful story means inspiring your listeners -- co-workers, leaders, subordinates, family, or a bunch of strangers -- to reach the same conclusions you have reached and decide *for themselves* to believe what you say and do what you want them to do. People value their own conclusions more highly than yours. They will only have faith in a story that has become real for them personally. Once people make your story, *their* story, you have tapped into the powerful force of faith. Future influence will require very little follow-up energy from you and may even expand as people recall and re-tell your story to others.

Whether your story is told through your lifestyle or in words, the first criteria people require before they allow themselves be influenced by your story is, Can they trust you? The story above demonstrates that even a zillionaire can have trouble influencing others. If influence were simply a function of power or money, Skip would have it made. He has power *and* money. But there are times when being rich and powerful is actually a disadvantage. Is his story a form of manipulation? Possibly. If it were manipulation it would begin to unravel as soon as Skip stopped talking. When a manipulator isn't present to maintain his web of influence the web falls apart. Manipulation (getting people to believe a story that isn't quite true) demands constant energy to maintain the desired outcome and the ethics are bothersome. Frankly, manipulation is an inferior method of influence. There is a much more powerful source of influence available to anyone with experience as a human being – telling an authentically persuasive story.

There are six types of stories that will serve you well in your efforts to influence others.

## I. Who I Am Stories

- II. Why I Am Here Stories
- III. My Vision Story
- IV. Teaching Stories
- V. Values in Action Stories
- VI. “I Know what you are Thinking” Stories

Those you wish to influence begin with two major questions: Who are you? and Why are you here? Until these questions are answered they don't trust what you say. The stockholders Skip wanted to influence wanted to know who the hell he was before they were willing to listen. Most of them had already decided he was just a rich kid playing at being a businessman. Skip had to replace the “we can't trust him” stories that his listeners were already telling themselves with a new story that inspired faith in him and his ideas.

Skip could have said, “ Yes, I'm rich, young and I just bought controlling interest in your company but don't worry ...I'm not a know-it-all. I can be trusted.” Technically, those words send the same message as the story he told. Yet... the difference between the impact of his story and the impact of assuring them that “I can be trusted” is vast. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a story is worth a thousand assurances.

Before you attempt to influence anyone you need to establish enough trust to successfully deliver your message. Their trust in “who you are” becomes the connection that serves as a conduit for your message. Announcing that “I'm a good person (smart, moral, ethical, well-connected, well-informed, savvy, successful- whatever they trust) ...and therefore trustworthy” is more likely to activate suspicion than trust. People want to decide these things for themselves. Since you usually don't have time to build trust based on personal experience, the best you can do is tell them a story that simulates an

experience of your trustworthiness. Hearing your story is as close as they can get to first-hand experience of watching you “walk the walk” as opposed to the “talk the talk.” A story lets them decide for themselves – one of the great secrets of true influence. Other methods of influence - persuasion, bribery or charismatic appeals – are push strategies. Story is a pull strategy. If your story is good enough, people -- of their own free will -- come to the conclusion they can trust you and the message you bring.

### So...What's *Your* Story?

Before anyone allows you to influence them, they want to know, “Who are you and why are you here?” If you don't take the time to give a positive answer to that question, they will make up their own answers – usually negative. It is human nature to expect that anyone out to influence others has something to gain from it. Most people subconsciously assume your gain will mean their loss. This is human nature. We instinctually erect barriers/suspicious to protect ourselves. You need to tell a story that demonstrates you are the kind of person people can trust. This will be different in different situations. On one extreme, I can imagine that a bunch of gang members might begin to trust a new kid if he told a convincing story about stealing (or worse). But I am reasonably sure you aren't a gang member and the only stories that will work for you will be the kind of stories that demonstrate your moral and ethical character, or in business situations, your ability to turn a profit. Whatever simultaneously connects to something relevant and meaningful to your listeners and gives them a taste of who you are, works.

Think about your own experience with anyone who ever wanted to influence you – boss, co-worker, salesperson, volunteer, preacher, consultant. Think of one person who succeeded and one who failed. How connected did you feel to each? Did you “feel

connected” because this person influenced you or did they influence you because you felt connected to this person? What made you trust one and not the other? Chances are that it was important for you to know what kind of person they were and what they stood to gain from your cooperation. Sure, your potential gain counts, but your judgments about their believability heavily influenced how much you trusted their assurances about your potential gain. No matter what people say about “what’s in it for you,” potential self interest, reasons why, or logical justifications, we filter every word through a believability index based on our judgments about who they are and why they are here.

A consultant “selling” an idea will often waste time extolling the benefits or the logic of a process if he or she has not first established a connection. If a group believes most consultants are more interested in billable days than client success, they don’t hear a thing until they decide for themselves that “this” consultant is different. The chairman of a volunteer committee need not address one agenda item until the board members see her as more than just another “do-gooder” or politically motivated social climber. A minister who is not seen as a compassionate man cannot successfully deliver a message of love and forgiveness. And a Quality Manager’s impassioned appeal to employees to improve customer service is lost if the employees believe that “this guy doesn’t live in the real world.”

A *New York Times*/CBS News poll from July 1999, revealed that 63% of people interviewed believe that in dealing with “most people” you “can’t be too careful” and 37% believed that “most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance.” If you assume that this is representative of the people you wish to influence, your first job is to let people see that you can be trusted. How? The same study gives us a hint. It also

revealed that of the people that they “know personally” they would expect 85% of them to “try to be fair.” Hmm-m-m-m. Could it be that simple? Let people see who you are, help them to feel like they *know* you personally, and your trust ratio automatically triples? Think about our language: “he’s o.k., I *know* him” or “it’s not that I don’t trust her, I just don’t *know* her.”

How can we expect people to trust us, to be influenced by us, when we don’t let them know who we are? When we separate our attempts to influence from *who* we are personally, we neglect the most important criteria most people use to decide whether to listen to us or not. We spend too much time talking to a person’s rational brain and we neglect their emotional brain. Emotional brains are very touchy about being neglected. Without proof, the emotional brain would rather be safe than sorry, and will tend to conclude that you bear watching.

### I. “Who I Am” Story

The first question people ask themselves the minute they realize you want to influence them, is “who is this person?” A story helps them see what you *want* them to see about you. Public speakers, who start with a genuinely funny joke answer an easily anticipated question, “is this guy boring?” Once you make me laugh I conclude for myself that at the very least you aren’t boring, so I relax and listen. However, if you began by bluntly asserting “I’m a very interesting person,” I start scope-ing out the exits. If you *demonstrate* who you are, rather than tell me who you are it is much more believable. A story lets you demonstrate who you are.

Public speakers face a challenge every time they stand before a crowd. I recently had the privilege of listening to Robert Cooper, author of *Executive EQ*, address an

auditorium of 900 people. The audience greeted him like just another consultant who had written a book. Crossed arms and cynical looks indicated suspicious opinions about emotional intelligence being “ a bunch of touchy-feely stuff” or that he might be yet another consultant jumping on the latest bandwagon. However, the story he told in the first ten minutes of his speech answered the unspoken questions, demonstrated his authenticity and told these 900 people at a very deep level who he was, what he believed, and why.

He chose to tell us “who he was” by telling a story about his grandfather who died when he was 16 years old. His father’s father had four major coronaries before he succumbed to the fifth. During that time, he had taken great care to assist in Robert’s development as a young man. He invested long talks and personal time with him. We could see the love Robert felt for his grandfather when he used words to help us see this man as he saw him back then. He said, “If you could measure intelligence in the quality of intensity in a man’s eyes, he surely must have been a genius.” He described the decline in his grandfather’s health and how after each major heart attack his grandfather would call Robert to his side, burning to share his latest near-death insight. Robert had us leaning forward in our seats, as he recounted his grandfathers words “I’ve been thinking about what is most important in life, and I’ve concluded that the most important thing in life is...” We wanted to share this great man’s insights. By the fourth time he had us laughing at the old man’s revisions and Robert’s adolescent fear that he was going to be tested on remembering what last heart attack’s “most important thing in life” was.

As we still smiled, he told us about his grandfather’s last revision, “My grandfather said to me ‘give the world the best you have and the best will come back to



you.’ Then his grandfather said, ‘I have asked myself -- what if every day I had refused to accept yesterday’s definition of my best? So much would have come back to me...to your father...to you. But now it won’t, because I didn’t. It is too late for me. But it’s not too late for you.’ I held my breath along with everyone there at the somber power of a man’s regret at the end of his life. “It is too late for me.” Our common humanity it to know that we too, will die. Every person in that audience flickered an awareness toward our own deaths and our own potential regrets. He didn’t pull any punches with this story but Robert glows with the intensity of total authenticity and his integrity gave him the right to tell such a powerful story. Only a cynical bitter person could have heard that story and continued to doubt that Robert Cooper is a man you can trust.

Personal stories let others see “who” we are better than any other form of communication. Ultimately people trust your judgement and your words based on subjective evidence. Objective data doesn’t go deep enough to engender trust. Personal stories allow you to reveal an aspect of yourself that is otherwise invisible. However, there are many ways you can reveal “who” you are to your listeners.

You don’t have to tell a personal story. Throughout this book are fable stories, historical stories, stories re-told from a friend, current event stories and parables. Any of these can become a “who I am” story if you tell it in a way that genuinely reveals a part of who you are on a personal level.

When a person tells a story about Mother Theresa that reveals that he understands gratitude and the humility of learning from others, we can conclude he is not bound by ego and can be trusted to listen to what we have to say. If the story he chooses to tell reveals that he understands self-sacrifice, we feel he can be trusted to blend compassion

with desire for self-gain. When we see through a story that someone has learned to recognize his own flaws and not hide in denial we assume he can be trusted to deal head on with tough issues rather than pretend things are “just fine.”

I’ve seen many leaders use the power of a story of a personal flaw to great effect. The psychologists call it self-disclosure. One theory about why this works is that if I trust you enough to show you my flaws, you will trust me enough to show me yours. The experience of vulnerability-without-exploitation helps us conclude that we can trust each other in other ways as well. For example, a new manager meeting his staff for the first time might choose to tell about his first management job when he spent all of his time telling people what to do and ended up getting reprimanded for driving them crazy with his controlling ways. It is a bit of a shock to hear your new boss talk about having been reprimanded. At a deep level we know that true strength is found not in perfection but in understanding our own limitations. A leader who demonstrates this self-knowledge demonstrates strength.

A “who I am” story can break through negative opinions by disproving one of them right up front. It begins to merge into the next kind of story you need to tell (not that any story fits into one particular category), the “why I am here” story. Even if your listener decides you are a trustworthy human being, they still wonder what’s in it for you to get their cooperation. And until they have a good answer, they will tend to assume that you have more to gain than they do – otherwise why are you trying to influence them? Can you fake authenticity? You can try, but I don’t recommend it. People talk about successful manipulators but I don’t know any that succeed for long. Most of us can pick a faker a mile off.

## II. “Why I Am Here” Story

People won't cooperate with you if they smell a rat and most of us sniff for rats and are suspicious of hidden agendas. If you do not provide a plausible explanation of your good intentions early, people tend to make up “rat” reasons. Before you tell someone what's in it for them, they want to know what's in it for *you*. It is natural. If you want me to buy a product, contribute money, change my behavior, or take your advice I want to know what you will get out of it. It is a big mistake to try to hide selfish goals. When you focus all your communication on showing your listener what he might gain, you come across as hiding your gain. Your message begins to seem incongruent, insincere or worse, deceitful. If people think you are hiding or lying about what you stand to gain from their cooperation, their trust in your message plummets.

There is no need to fake selfish goals. People really don't mind selfish goals as long as they aren't exploitative. Story is best suited to people with genuinely good intentions and sound personal goals. A “Why I Am Here” story usually reveals enough for people to make a distinction between healthy ambition and dishonest exploitation. If your goals are selfish, people don't mind as long as you are up-front about it, there is something in it for them, and you frame your goals in a way that makes sense to them. I know a businessman who often tells the story of why he likes being rich. He came to America from Lebanon when he was 13. He didn't speak English, had no money and worked as a busboy in a restaurant. Everyday he would teach himself a few words of English. He admired people who had beautiful clothes, big cars and happy families and he wondered if he could ever work hard enough and be smart enough to earn those things for himself. Ultimately, he has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams and with a glint in his eye he

will tell you that he has “new and improved” dreams. When customers, financiers, and potential partners listen to his prospectus after hearing his story they are relaxed because they feel like they know who he is and why he is here. Yes his goals are selfish, but they are selfish in an understandable way and he isn’t hiding anything. His story makes him trustworthy.

A CEO who makes ten (fifty?) times the salary of his subordinates is foolish to begin a company meeting about an upcoming merger with an “We are doing this for you” speech. Puh-lease! I think most mergers fail because the senior team assumes anyone below middle management is stupid. People will not be influenced by someone who treats them like they are stupid. Whether you are talking to factory workers, homeless people, or the social elite, addressing them as if they aren’t as smart/enlightened as you are will sabotage your potential influence. Never, never, never tell a story to someone you don’t respect. The only message they will receive is your lack of respect.

Your reasons for wanting to influence may combine selfish desires for power, wealth, or fame with selfless desires to benefit the organization, society or a particular group of people. If you choose to tell a story that focuses on your selfless reasons, at least acknowledge the existence of your personal goals lest you lose credibility as a truth-teller. People want to believe you – help them out.

Sometimes you genuinely want nothing for yourself other than the feeling you are making a contribution to others. Your goals are authentically altruistic. Unless you radiate the purity of the Dalai Lama don’t assume that people automatically believe you truly have selfless goals. If you are on an altruistic mission, you need to tell a story that gives solid evidence of that. Tell how you quit your job paying \$100K, went back to

graduate school and now make \$30K teaching kids. Let them see in your eyes and the way you tell your story that the joy of teaching children is truly the reason why you are asking them to give money for this educational program.

I met a successful businessman from a big city who spent much of his time volunteering for an AIDS hospice and his city's ballet company. He told me a story that he uses when he visits other businesspeople asking them to contribute their money or time to these causes. He tells them that when he was in the Holy Land someone explained the difference between the Dead Sea and the very much alive Sea of Galilee. The Dead Sea has no outlet. Both are fed by the same source but the Dead Sea can only receive an inward flow. The Dead Sea is prevented from flowing outward and the accumulation of salt has killed it. The Sea of Galilee is alive only because what flows in can also flow out. For this man, the metaphor of the Sea of Galilee demonstrates his experience that for him, giving is a necessary function of thriving and feeling alive. His message not only explains "why I am here" to the person he is visiting, but it begins to give a glimpse of his "vision" of how alive we feel when we give to others and let our wealth flow both in and out.

### III. "The Vision" Story

If your listener(s) are comfortable with who you are and why you are here then they are ready to listen to what you think is in it for them. I don't think anyone sets out to influence others without the understanding that we need to demonstrate some benefit of compliance – some "what's in it for them." However, many people do a lousy job of painting a moving picture of benefits. Either the speaker is too focused on what *she* sees to translate it into terms that her *listeners* can see or she gives some linear fact-based

description that is as appetizing as saying “cold raw fish tastes good” when she should be telling a story about sensuality of eating sushi.

A CEO’s vision to “become a \$2 Billion company in five years” might get *him* up in the morning but it doesn’t mean squat to his regional manager, sales people or the administration assistant down the hall. He is so hypnotized by what he sees as the benefits of being a \$2 Billion company he doesn’t even realize that no one else sees what he sees. As a CEO he is in double jeopardy because everyone pretends they see this vision as long as he is in the room. I’ve seen CEOs actually get angry when they hear their staff say, “we don’t have a vision.” The CEO responds, “of course you have a vision – it is to become a \$2 Billion company.” Hey, if they don’t *see* the vision it ain’t a vision. Blaming your employees for not seeing your vision is....don’t get me started.

You have to take the time to find a story of your vision in a way that connects – a story that people can *see*. The secret of a moving story is to tell it from a place of complete authenticity. In the same way that reading the words “I have a dream” and watching Martin Luther King *say* those words are very different experiences, my ability to give you an example of a vision story is hampered by the one dimensionality of the written word. This is important because of the six kinds of stories, a vision story is most likely to sound corny on paper at the same time it might get you a standing ovation when delivered in person and with authenticity. Vision stories are very easily taken out of context. One of the difficulties in telling an authentic vision story is the fear that detractors can take it out of context and make us sound sappy, or “out there.” Vision takes courage.

A CEO of a small start up created his own version of the story of the artist, Van Gogh to communicate his vision. The idea of Van Gogh appealed to his 20-something staff's self-perception as "a bunch of crazy lunatic software artists." Van Gogh may have been nuts, but his dedication and genius resulted in art now worth millions. This CEO also knew that millions of dollars would strike a chord as well. He told about Van Gogh's brother supporting him even when he had no money and had been institutionalized. The unspoken message in the story was that their sacrifice, his dedication, and the lack of public recognition would all make sense (and be very profitable) in the end. Granted he didn't talk about the fact that Van Gogh was dead and gone by the time his work was recognized but that's not the point. The story delivered to his troops a moving vision. It worked for them. It made the invisible visible, at least in their mind's eye. They had Van Gogh prints all over the office. Many of the staff members had a favorite print that spoke to them and kept them going when they felt like quitting. A real vision story connects with people in a way that shrinks today's frustrations in light of the promise of tomorrow.

A dear friend of mine told me a good vision story. (Neither of us remembers where we first heard it.) A man came upon a construction site where three people were working. He asked the first, "What are you doing?" and the man answered, "I am laying bricks." He asked the second, "What are you doing?" and the man answered, "I am building a wall." He walked up to the third man, who was humming a tune as he worked and asked, "What are you doing?" and the man stood up and smiled and said, "I am building a cathedral." If you want to influence others in a big way, you need to give them a vision story that will become their cathedral. A vision story weaves all the pieces together –

particularly the struggles and the frustrations – so that they make sense. A vision story is the antidote to meaningless frustration. To live in this world with purpose and meaning we must tell ourselves some story of vision that gives our struggle meaning. In the next chapter you will see how one man sought out a vision story simply to feed his own soul and inadvertently became a beacon of light for those around him.

#### IV. Teaching Stories

Whatever your role in life, you have certain skills that you want others to have, too. Whether you need to teach someone how to write a letter, design software, answer a telephone, make a sale, or manage a group of volunteers, story halves the necessary teaching time. Too many people get mad at those they wish to teach because, “they just don’t get it.” Rather than banging your head against a wall, why not find a story that successfully delivers whatever it is you want them to “get.” Often the message you want to send is less about *what* you want them to do and more about *how* you want it done. Story is perfectly suited to combine both *what* with *how*.

Telling your new receptionist where the hold, transfer, and extension buttons are on the console is not going to teach her how to be a great receptionist. However, telling her about the best receptionist you ever knew, Mrs. Ardi, who was from Bangladesh and could simultaneously calm an angry customer, locate your wandering CEO, and smile warmly at the UPS man gives a much clearer picture of the skills that you want her to display. Later, under stress, her brain is better equipped to handle complex situations if she can ask herself “What would Mrs. Ardi do?” instead of “Where is the hold button?”

Teaching stories help us make sense of new skills in meaningful ways. You never teach a skill that doesn’t have a reason “why.” For instance, if I wanted to teach you how



to use a new piece of software, I would not start by telling you that there are cells, formulas, and eight menu choices. I would tell you the story about my first job at a telecommunications company where I was asked to price a product that was, basically, a room full of shelves and circuit boards. After hours pricing each customer request – one option at a time since I almost always made errors – I'd just cry when the customer decided to change specs from eight incoming lines to ten. I'd have to start all over again from scratch. One afternoon around 4:00 p.m. I started playing with this spreadsheet software and spent eight straight hours finding a way to get it to calculate prices for me. Late that night, I succeeded. I started using it and two days later my boss noticed how quickly I could respond with quotes and asked to see it. He made copies for all of the sales people. They loved it and I felt like a hero.

Notice that in the story is the unpleasant fact that it took me eight hours to learn how to write one application. However in the context of saving three hours each and every time any of us priced a product, saving mistakes, and getting recognized for doing a good job, it was worth it. Once I've told that story, I can then move on to the cells and formulas because now they make sense. When skills become a part of a story, everything is linked together and our memory works better.

Most people agree that Plato was a pretty good teacher. He frequently used story to teach people how to think (still an underdeveloped skill). One story Plato used to teach about the limitations of democracy was about a ship in the middle of the ocean. On this ship was a gruff burly captain who was rather shortsighted and slightly deaf. He and his crew followed the principles of majority rule on decisions about navigational direction. They had a very skilled navigator who knew how to read the stars on the ship but the

navigator was not very popular and rather introverted. In the panic of being lost, the captain and crew made a decision to follow the most charismatic, eloquent and persuasive of the crewmembers. They ignored and ridiculed the navigator's suggestions, stayed lost and ultimately starved to death at sea. One of the things I like about Plato's story, as a teaching story, is that his story introduces a lack of clarity just where it is needed.

Our tendency to try to create teaching that is *clear* creates an unintended consequence of over-simplification. When someone understands what you want them to do, but doesn't buy into why you want them to do it, you will never be satisfied with their performance. Clarity is over-rated in teaching. Story allows you to re-introduce complexity over tidy "skill-set modules" so that the skills you teach also teach people to think about why and how they might use a new skill. Plato's story blends a teaching story, "how I'd like you to think" with a values story "what I'd like you to think about." There aren't clear distinctions. Story often simultaneously demonstrates values as it demonstrates skills.

#### V. "Values-in-Action" Stories

Without a doubt, the best way to teach a value is "by example." The second best way is to tell a story that provides an example. Story lets you instill values in a way that keeps people thinking for themselves. "We value integrity," means nothing. But tell a story about a former employee who hid his mistake and cost the company thousands or a story about a salesperson who owned up to a mistake and earned so much trust her customer doubled his order and you begin to teach an employee what integrity means.

I recently listened to Dr. Gail Christopher, head of the Innovations In American Government Awards Program at Harvard's Kennedy School, tell a story that breaks

through the “do more with less” mantra currently sabotaging many long-term organizational re-design efforts (in the private as well as public sector). She pointed out that few people are willing to publicly challenge the idea of “do more with less.” Few are willing to voice the reality that at some point we can only do less with less. Because of this unwillingness to voice an unpopular truth, many organizations have begun to cannibalize their internal resources. “Responsible stewardship” is a difficult value to communicate to people mindlessly chanting “we need less government.” She did it, though. And she used a story.

She told a story about when she was co-chair for the Alliance for Re-Designing Government one of her staff interviewed a 45-year-old man who had been in the service of the government for his entire career. She was glad he was being interviewed for this position, not only because of his obvious dedication to his job but because he was an African American and she was hoping to create more diversity on her team. He described working long hours and many weekends. His accomplishments were impressive. During the interview conducted a few doors down from her office, he grabbed his chest and had a heart attack. They immediately called ‘911.’ The entire office was stunned. She said by the time the EMS people came, she knew that he had “already passed.” This man, a government employee dedicated to doing more with less, died during an interview for a job that would have potentially been even more stressful than the one he presently held. (Again, the written word cannot do justice to the power and authenticity of stories like this one. Without authenticity a story like this invites cynicism and sarcasm. Gail’s authenticity delivered this story without a cringe factor.)

We sat stunned. Her story illustrated a value in action in a way that forced us to consider its implications, question our own mindless application of that value, and consider more important values. She did not have to say we need to take better care of our people. She let us see for ourselves, through her story that we are literally killing people if we endlessly demand more for less. Without that story her message could not have reached the hearts of the people in that room. You can be sure that I am not the only one who remembered this story or chose to re-tell it. This story has a life of it's own.

Efforts to articulate “our values” often end up laminated onto a card, posted on the wall, or recounted mindlessly like 4<sup>th</sup> graders reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. It's not that we disagree with things like integrity, respect, and teamwork but the height of these ideals make them invisible to us when Bobby is shoving Susie, and Rick has a frog in his pocket (or a dinner date with the budget committee chairman). We say we believe in these things, but until they are woven into the story of our daily lives they don't *mean* anything.

If you wish to influence an individual or a group to embrace a particular value in their daily lives, tell them a compelling story. Marti Smye, Ph.D., author of *Is it too Late to Run Away and Join the Circus? A Guide for Your Second Life*, tells a wonderful story that illustrates the often professed, yet neglected value of “having fun” at work. During a speech, she introduced us through story, to her father...named Marti, and her brother...also named Marti. While she let it sink in that her dad obviously had a few eccentricities, Marti explained to us that her mother (Doris) was a little more grounded in reality --except for the abiding belief that both of her children would, eventually, learn to play the piano. Their piano sat on the back porch and practice time for both children was

*not* the highlight of their day. Her brother even wore his football helmet in silent protest as he slumped over the piano. Months of piano practice torture ensued until the day when Marti and her mother were in the kitchen and her brother ran screaming in the door, “Mom, come look, COME LOOK!” Both of them tore out to the backyard where they saw first, flames leaping high in to the air and then, the source of those flames...the piano. As they turned their shocked faces to him, her Dad calmly explained to them both, “I want my children to know that if it ain’t fun, don’t do it.”

Marti gives us, through her story, the gift of a burning image of a piano bonfire that will forever remind us that “if it ain’t fun, don’t do it.” Her story is laced with the shared humanity of love, humor, and risk and when she told it to an auditorium of 800 listeners there wasn’t a person there that wasn’t engaged. The piano lovers were probably a little freaked out, but they were engaged. Values are meaningless without stories to bring them to life and engage us on a personal level. And personal stories are the best way to engage people at a personal level. Extreme stories like this one are fun, but sweet, quiet stories work just as well. Your family has stories. You have your own stories from your personal experience and you have heard great stories that make values real. A good test for yourself is to discover how many stories you can come up with to demonstrate the values you profess to hold. This will be the first source of your “values in action” stories. You need as many stories as possible in your tool kit if you want to influence the values of others effectively enough to change their behavior.

#### VI. “I know what you are thinking” Stories

When you tell a story that makes people wonder if you are reading their minds, they love it. It isn’t hard to do. If you have done your homework on the group/person

you wish to influence it is relatively easy to identify their potential objections to your message. If you name their objections first, you are that much closer to disarming them. Maybe people more easily release objections if they have not staked themselves out by naming them. Maybe they are grateful that you brought it up and they didn't have to. Maybe they see respect in your taking the time to think things through from their perspective. Or ...maybe you just come off as eerily wise like fake psychics do when they guess at the easy stuff.

One of the stories I use fairly often is about a CEO who did *not* want me consulting within his newly merged organization. I tell this story when I feel I am surrounded by people who are pretending to agree with my ideas while they sabotage my efforts behind the scenes. My goal is to let them know "I know what they are thinking" without accusing them of anything. In a recent merger situation I was hired by the Chairman of the Board. The new CEO was pretending that he agreed with the idea of introducing dialogue to his senior team. I knew better. His behavior told a very different story. He would introduce me as the "young lady from North Carolina," (not the most credible introduction within a Silicon Valley corporation) or ask, "what cheap psychological trick, sorry, I mean *process* do you have planned for us today?" His resistance was beneath the surface. He did not choose to openly question my value to the organization so I had no opportunity to answer openly. Many people don't even realize how transparent their fears and suspicions can be to those around them. My strategy was to meet him where he was. One of the things that I did was adopt his terminology "cheap psychological trick" and use it to explain every step of the process, the psychological reasoning behind the steps and what emotions people might experience as

a result of choosing to participate in dialogue. I explained that my job is to “manipulate” the group, but that I intended to do it in as transparent a way as possible, out of a deep respect for the wisdom of everyone involved. I even made jokes about learning new methods for self-manipulation. I explained how the managers might want to use several of these “cheap psychological tricks” themselves, but to be sure to always be open and honest about what they are doing and why. The term “cheap psychological trick” began to take on a new meaning. Ultimately, we would both smile at each other when we used the term. It began to symbolize the successful testing of each other’s intentions and the trust that we developed.

I tell this story when I suspect that someone in a group might try to discredit me in this subtle way. It cuts them off at the pass and gives me a chance to earn their respect, before they decide to dismiss me out of hand. Living a life of influence means that we are more often evangelizing to the heathens and less often preaching to the choir. As you speak to individuals or groups that you wish to influence it is common for one or more of the group to seek to discredit you or your message. This is rarely done overtly. Your best defense will be equally subtle. Telling an “I know what you are thinking” story can neutralize concerns without direct confrontation. Sometimes I use this story when I know that the group is suspicious of my training in psychology and wary of my intentions. I let them know that my goal is to be transparent at all times. I have used it here, however, because I anticipate that for some of you the idea of using an “I know what you are thinking” story might feel manipulative or deceitful. Trust is very important. But a hammer is a hammer, you can use it to build up or tear down. “I know what you are

thinking” stories can be used respectfully or disrespectfully. This is just another tool. Trust yourself to make good choices.

One of the best ways to use this kind of story is to dispel fears. Before you facilitate a committee meeting, tell the group about the time you were on the “committee from hell” that was more like a dodge ball game than a work group. Tell about the specific behaviors and characters. Like the Napoleon looking guy who cut everyone off, and the sweet Southern lady whose charm did not quite hide her insincerity. Whatever your story is, and we all have one, your story will let them know that you want to avoid the same things they want to avoid. Once they know that, they can relax and listen. A speaker I heard recently started his speech with, “I am a statistician and this will be the most boring one hour of your life.” He then told some silly story about how his last group needed resuscitation. We loved it. He read our minds, zeroed in on our major fear-- “this is going to be boring” -- and dispelled that fear with a story.

So now you know the six stories, you might ask yourself...are you a good storyteller? Chances are, you don’t think so. It’s like asking a group of adults if they can draw...if you were five years old you’d say “Yes!” with confidence, but now you hesitate. This is unfortunate but not unfixable. Storytelling is the most valuable skill you can develop to help you influence others. It is your birthright to be a good storyteller. In a sense, your life is a story and you are already telling that one perfectly.

The rest of this book is dedicated to proving to you the things you already know about storytelling and filling in whatever gaps might be missing. Storytelling is not rocket science. It is very easy, and incredibly rewarding to practice.