



Spice up your training with stories

By Eleanor Shakiba

Part Three: Stage craft for storytellers

Great stories create a sense of magic. If you want to be a storytelling wizard, you need to know how to create that magic. This month, learn how professional magicians stage their shows – and transfer their skills to your storytelling sessions.

There are four key stage-craft skills you can use to pep up your stories. Two of these use space to draw your audience into your tale. One uses props. The fourth technique uses your body as a tool for engaging your group. Once you master each technique you will find your stories coming to life on stage easily and naturally.

■ Framing your stories

Magicians are professional creators of illusion. So are storytellers. To create a believable illusion, you need to direct the attention of your audience. Framing skills help you do this. A ‘frame’ is the mental perspective someone takes on your performance. You need to influence this in order to become a convincing story teller.

Think of the best story you’ve ever heard. Chances are it was skillfully framed. You might have been drawn in by the storyteller’s posture, the tone of their voice or the words they used to introduce their tale. All of these are framing tools. Powerful stories are framed in ways that:

- Mark the story out from the rest of your training material
- Induce a mild trance state

- Prompt the audience to suspend disbelief
- Set the scene for learning
- Build on the themes of the story

The classic storytelling frame open with the words “once upon a time” and closes with “they all lived happily ever after.” This frame clearly defines the start and finish of the story. It also moves your audience into listening mode, simply because it is so well recognised. Often, the classic storytelling frame is a great way to gain your group’s attention.

However, you can make yourself stand out as a master storyteller by creating your own, unique, storytelling frames. To do this, develop opening and closing statements that suit your presentation style. Repeat these statements whenever you tell your group a story. It only takes three repetitions to build a pattern your listeners will recognise as creating the storytelling frames.

Some useful words to use when opening your stories include:

- That reminds me of a story...
- I once had a client who...

- My old friend told me...
- Let me tell you a story...

Good phrases for closing your stories include:

- It’s an interesting story, isn’t it?
- I wonder how many of you have had a similar experience?
- Just think about how that story makes sense to you.
- And that’s where the story ends.

■ Anchoring your space

A magician defies the laws of gravity by strategically directing your attention. Gestures and actions hold your gaze on one part of the stage, while the logistics of a trick are carried out somewhere else. You can use this principle to create “anchors” during storytelling sessions. An anchor is an automatic response to a sight or sound. For example, a red traffic light is an anchor. It triggers the reaction “stop” from a driver. Master storytellers use anchors to influence the mood and responses of their listeners.

Here are four ways to use anchors in *your* storytelling sessions:

- Set up a storytelling chair or stool on your presentation space. Only sit on it when you are telling a story. The audience will soon learn that when you sit there, you're in storytelling mode.
- Put aside a space for interacting with your group during stories. Move into this space only when you want people to participate in creating the story. For example, you might step into your interaction space and ask "how old do you think a wise man should be?"
- Display a picture that represents the theme of your story as you speak. Also include this picture in participants' notes. This will remind them of the story when they read through their notes.
- Make a storytelling costume. You can use a hat, a cloak or a brightly coloured jacket. Only put on your costume when you are about to tell a story. Take it off as you speak your closing lines. This is a fantastic way to create a visual anchor that helps your audience move into a state of suspended disbelief.

■ Using special effects

Magicians carefully stage their shows in order to build a sense of drama. They use flashing lights, smoke, music and sound effects to stimulate the senses. You can do exactly the same thing, using simple tools like an ipod, a data projector – and the human imagination. Your special effects can take place on stage, or inside each person's head.

Here are some quick and simple ways to build sensory prompts into your stories:

- Create a powerpoint presentation that uses pictures to highlight the key points of your story.
- Embed strategic sound effects into your powerpoint presentations. If you are telling a story about lions, for example, you could include the sound of lions roaring in your slideshow.
- Use music to trigger emotional responses. For example, the soundtrack from a horror movie might help you raise suspense during a scary story.
- Decorate a suitcase and use it to store props. As you tell your story, pull props from the case and act out scenes.

- Check out magic stores online. You can buy "egg production kits," fake blood, vanishing canes and ventriloquists' dummies. If you're really keen, you can sign up for magic classes. Just make sure you rehearse well before trying a new trick in front of your audience.
- Ask everyone to close their eyes while you tell your story. Produce sound effects as you speak. This is a really simple way to draw your group into the story.
- Ask for volunteers from the audience to make sound effects for you. Once again, instruct the group to close their eyes while you and the volunteers stage the story. This technique gets lots of laughs from the audience.

■ Acting it out

Imagine watching a magician who stood still in the centre of the stage and just didn't move. At first you would be interested – but your attention would soon be lost. Gestures bring a magic show to life. They do the same thing in storytelling sessions. To be a great storyteller, you need to use your whole body. Taking lessons in drama, dance or mime can help you do this. You don't need to become a master at any of these skills. Simply learning to mime walking up stairs, leaning out a window and opening a box will give you three tools you can fit into virtually any story. Likewise, one simple dance routine can be modified to fit a variety of tales.

Your stance, gestures, movements and voice all play a part in producing a dynamic performance. They can all be used to raise or lower the energy of your tale.

Some simple ways to build energy in a story include:

- Moving your hands upwards. The higher the gesture, the more energy it creates
- Using gestures in short, staccato bursts
- "Pacing out" important points by moving from space to space on your stage
- Alternating between slow and fast talking speeds
- Speaking in a different voice for each character

- Using onomatopoeia (words that sound like the concept they describe)
- Taking up a position at the front of the stage
- Leaning towards your audience

Quick ways to lower energy when telling stories include:

- Keeping your hands still
- Using long, slow hand-movements
- Keeping your hands at waist level or lower
- Walking slowly or sitting down in the centre of your stage
- Only using the middle pitch in your vocal range
- Talking in a repetitive, rhythmic voice
- Speaking very quietly
- Pausing
- Moving to the back of your stage area
- Leaning slightly away from the group

As you use these stagecraft skills, you will discover new ways to add zing to your stories. You might find a new way of moving, using your props or increasing your vocal range. Write these down in a journal, so you can use them in future stories. The more skills you bring to your storytelling, the more magic you will create on stage.

In the next edition of *Training and Development* you'll learn how to use hypnotic language to hold your audience's attention. ■

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