



Spice up your training with stories

By Eleanor Shakiba

Part Four: Speaking with flair

This is the final article in our trainers' guide to storytelling series. This month, you'll discover how to use hypnotic language to captivate your group.

■ Bring your stories to life with artfully vague language

Milton Erickson was a well-known hypnotist, who specialised in using stories to help his clients change. Erickson spent hours writing and refining his therapeutic metaphors. When planning his stories, Erickson concentrated on far more than his plots. He also carefully prepared the words he would use to tell them. He crafted 'artfully vague' sentences in order to draw a client into his story. By strategically leaving out information, he forced his listener to enter the world of his metaphor.

For example, Erickson would say "You might know what it's like to begin relaxing deeply." This sentence prompted the client to scan for memories of being relaxed, thus prompting a relaxed state. Erickson avoided imposing his own interpretation of relaxation on the client, e.g. by using specific such as "You're on golden sand, feeling the sun on your face..." Instead, Erickson allowed the client to make their own sense of the vague statement "begin relaxing deeply." This increased the likelihood that the client would, indeed, begin relaxing.

As a trainer, you can use artfully vague language to draw your audience into your story. There are countless ways you can do this. Five of the most useful are described below.

■ 1. Embed suggestions in your story

Embedding suggestions in your story ensures that your audience will 'get' your key message. In hypnosis, a suggestion is an instruction that is offered for a client to act upon. If you wanted to exercise regularly, for example, a hypnotist might use the suggestion "find yourself exercising four times a week." They would repeat this suggestion many times, thus increasing the likelihood that you would act upon it. Repetition is an important tool when you are trying to make a message stick. This is why great marketing campaigns feature the same tag line over and over again.

When you're telling a learning metaphor, you need to be more subtle about the process of making suggestions. This is where the concept of 'embedding' suggestions becomes useful. An embedded suggestion is one that nestles within a more complex sentence. For example, a hypnotist might say "It could be that you would like to find yourself exercising four times a week, or you might even like to exercise more than that." Changes in voice quality would be used to make the command "find yourself exercising" stand out from the rest of the sentence.

How can you use embedded suggestions in your stories? You can:

- Write down the moral to your story in one sentence. Then repeat that sentence

throughout your story. For example, if you're telling a story about reflective practice in leadership, you might repeat the command "stop, reflect, reframe" to help listeners learn how to manage their emotions.

- Overcome resistance to learning by embedding the command "as you take on new ideas today" as often as possible.
- Trigger insight by repeatedly saying "this idea might really make sense to you".
- Repeat the word "excellent" throughout your story – you'll be amazed at how many times participant evaluations describe you as an "excellent" trainer when you do this.
- Frame a fairytale as a serious learning story by suggesting that "even in this fairy story you'll find important meanings".

■ 2. Engage your group in creating characters

This technique is guaranteed to get people totally involved in the story. It works by triggering the senses of the audience. Start by introducing your character in an artfully vague way such as:

- 'There was a wise man'
- 'This story is about a clever child'
- 'Once I worked with a really difficult person'

- ‘That reminds me of an artist I knew once.’

Then ask your audience to build a fuller description of the character. Do this by prompting for visual and auditory cues. For example, you could ask:

- ‘What does a wise man’s voice sound like?’
- ‘If a clever child was standing over there, what would they look like?’
- ‘Imagine there’s a difficult person here beside me. Are they male or female? What colour hair do they have?’
- ‘What does an artist wear?’

Once you get the group started, their description will become more and more specific. You can then use the details they’ve provided throughout the story. Every time you refer to a characteristic the group created, you’ll reinforce your connection with your audience.

■ 3. Describe universal experiences

A universal experience is one that everyone in your group is likely to relate to. In the city, for example, most participants will know what it’s like to be stuck in traffic. By referring to this experience, you will build rapport with your group. An experience may be universal within a country, a profession or a specific organisation. This means you can tailor universal experiences to your group. If you’re talking to a group of accountants, for example, you can refer to the calls that clients make one day before a BAS deadline. If you’re training in Sydney University you can be even more specific and say “You know what it’s like walking across the quadrangle on a rainy day?”

When you’re referring to universal experiences, be careful to remain artfully vague. If you’re too descriptive, you may not adequately match your listeners’ perspectives. This can break rapport with your audience. A speaker who says “You know how relaxing it is to drink a bottle of wine with a friend?” may offend people who don’t drink alcohol. Instead, this speaker should say “You might know what it’s like to relax with a friend...” Here are some more examples of how to turn specific descriptions into artfully vague references.

Say...	Don’t Say...
You know what it’s like to be stuck in traffic when you’re late for a meeting?	You know that tense feeling you get in your stomach when you’re in your car and the traffic isn’t moving?
Some of you might have experienced stage fright... You might remember what that’s like.	When you’re nervous about speaking at a conference, your legs start shaking and your mouth goes dry.
Remember the experience of falling in love?	Falling in love for the first time is exciting and exhilarating.

When using universal experiences, it’s important to avoid describing situations that may trigger negative feelings. For example, getting into a lift may trigger an anxiety reaction and childhood memories are not always happy. Plan ahead so that your universal experiences prompt positive reactions. This will ensure that you keep your audience on-side.

■ 4. Create an illusion of choice

Would you like to increase the number of people who buy into your message? You can do this by creating an illusion of choice. This language pattern seems to give the listener a choice about what they are going to do. At the same time it assumes that a higher level choice has already been made. For example, Milton Erickson used to ask his clients “Would you like to go into a trance sitting in this chair ...or that one... or standing up... or lying down?” Thus, he gave a choice about where the trance would be experienced. He meanwhile assumed that the client would go into the trance.

When telling stories in training, you can use the illusion of choice strategy to:

- Help the group suspend disbelief (“Some parts of this story will make more sense to you than others”).
- Increase interest in your stories (“I wonder which part of this story you will find the most interesting?”).
- Influence the state of your listeners (“Does this story make you feel amused or inspired?”)

- Suggest options for action (“I don’t know whether you’ll use all these ideas today, or only some of them”).

Once you’ve mastered the art of using artfully vague language, you’ll find it easier to draw learners into your stories. They will remember your message for years after your training. They’ll approach you in the street and say “I remember that story you told about...It really helped me...” This is a sign that you are truly engaging and inspiring your learners. And that’s what storytelling is all about. ■

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