The Trainer as Storyteller

By Chip R. Bell

EVERYONE LOVES TO HEAR A GOOD STORY. BUT STORIES NOT ONLY ENTERTAIN; THEY CAN ALSO INSTRUCT. HERE'S A STEP-BY-STEP PLAN FOR CREATING STORIES THAT HELP LISTENERS TO LEARN.

People love stories. They love to tell them and they love to hear them. A really good story makes a camp fire worth lighting, a cocktail party worth attending, and a reunion worth holding. A story can evoke tears and laughter. A good story can touch something familiar in each of us and, yet, show us something new about our lives, our world, and ourselves.

Stories can also be powerful tools for growth and learning. They can reach resistant learners in ways that even well-delivered lectures may not. Unlike conventional lectures, stories have a way of circumventing the mind's logic to capture the imagination. In this roundabout way, they can lead to learning.

Trainers as storytellers

Trainers can use stories to entertain, inspire, or instruct—or to do all three. Most stories are either crafted or chosen. The crafted ones are "baked from scratch"; the chosen ones are "recrafted"—in other words, tailored to fit the storyteller, audience, and learning objective. The objective is paramount. Stories without purpose obviously lack relevance, but they also tend to lack charm.

Whether a trainer chooses to craft or recraft a story, several key steps are involved. The first step is to clarify a story's purpose. Here's a checklist of questions to ask oneself:

▶ What key learning point do I hope to convey with a story?
▶ By using a story, am I indulging in irrelevant fantasy? Is the point best communicated by analogy?
▶ Does the point warrant the time that's required to tell a story? Or do I need to make the point quickly and move on?
▶ Are listeners likely to appreciate the point if it's conveyed by a story? Or are they likely to be literal-minded and view stories as "much ado about nothing"?
▶ Do I know how to tell a story?

Most people can learn to tell stories well, but some may find storytelling so challenging that they prefer to use other approaches. If you decide to incorporate a story into a training program or presentation, you may find it helpful to structure your story around the following elements: the context, the challenge, and the climax.

The context

The story's context establishes the setting or scene. It's the "once upon a time" part that invites listeners into the story. In a sense, the context allows listeners to become witnesses to the visions of the storyteller.

The first step in creating the context is to write down the story so you can critique it and measure the time it takes to tell it. A story should start with a transition that uses words or cues—such as a long pause—to signify that a story is beginning. Listeners shouldn't wonder why you are telling them what you're telling them, and they shouldn't be asking themselves, "Where does this fit in?"

In a story told in a service-management workshop, the storyteller opens with this transition: "I have for some time carefully observed how service providers deal with service recovery, the process used to turn customer disappointment into delight. Recently, I had a chance to watch effective service recovery in action...."

After the transition, it's important to create a realistic backdrop. Often, a story takes more time to relate than it takes to happen, so you should allow enough time to set the scene.

The storyteller from the service-management workshop stages the scene this way: "It was high noon! I was en route to a 12:30 meeting downtown, and I knew that lunch wasn't in the cards, unless I stopped at Hardee's for an order to go. I pulled into the parking lot and saw that the cars in line for the drive-in window were backed up for a mile! So, I decided to go into the restaurant and get in the long indoor line instead...."

Even well-told stories often violate grammatical rules. They commonly shift between the past tense and the present. The past tense tells what happened; the present tense is acted out.

For example, the story here shifts back and forth between tenses as follows: "Finally, after I patiently worked my way up to the counter, I gave my order to the clerk. 'I'd like a chicken sandwich, a Diet Coke, and a small order of fries to go,' I say. She said, 'We're out of chicken sandwiches at the moment.' 'We

have some cooking. It'll be just a few minutes. Do you mind if I wait on the customer behind you?' she asked politely.

I often frequent fast-food restaurants at busy times, so I realized this wasn't an unusual situation. 'Fine,' I say. I moved aside to allow the customer behind me to step forward...."

When creating the context of your story, ask yourself the following questions:

▶ What do I want listeners to feel?
▶ How can I build a sense of adventure, mystery, suspense, joy, or invitation?
▶ Will listeners be able to visualize the scene I have in my mind?
▶ Will listeners be able to identify with or relate to the story and the picture I've painted?

The challenge

A good story should contain a challenge, which can also be described as "dissonance."

To communicate dissonance, it's important to create a dilemma that listeners can identify with. For instance, most people can identify with having to wait in line at a fast-food restaurant.

"The clerk at the front counter served the next customer. Then she turned and checked with the kitchen. She waited on another customer and then pleaded with the kitchen for my order. Another customer got his order, and she again chastised the kitchen, 'Where's my chicken sandwich? I have a customer waiting.' She served another customer. Still no chicken sandwich.

"After five customers ordered and left with their food, my politeness began to turn to 'perturbness.' As I watched the big hand on my watch move around, I realized that I was going to be late for a very important meeting—and still no order! I'm now seething, ready to let the people over in the next county know just what I think of this fast-food, slow-motion experience...."

Once you've created a dilemma, you should describe in your story plan the challenge for each of the key characters, using one sentence. For example, "John's challenge is such-and-such. Sue's challenge is such-and-such." This can help you

keep things straight or "manage" the story.

The following questions can help you create dissonance:

▶ What do I want listeners to feel?
▶ How can I build a sense of concern, conflict, or suspense?
▶ Will listeners be able to identify with or relate to the dilemma?
▶ Will listeners be able to visualize the challenge or challenges the same way that I do?
▶ Will the dilemma create enough dissonance so that listeners will desire a resolution?

The climax

The story's climax is essentially a punch line with a lesson. Of course, the lesson is usually longer than the typical punch line of a joke.

The climax is more than just an ending. It's a resolution that can be used as a tool for helping listeners to learn. The storyteller instructs through resolution, and the listeners allow their need for resolution to lead them into learning. As the story is told, it educates all who hear it.

The climax must clearly fit the challenge and also carry listeners in new and somewhat unexpected directions. A surprise twist is often what most affects an audience.

Here is the climax or resolution to the story from the service-management workshop:

"Finally, the Hardee's clerk brought me my order. As she looked me in the eyes, she very sincerely said, 'I'm sorry you had to wait for so long. And to think you ordered your meal to go! I'm giving you a *large* order of fries. No extra charge.'

"I heard myself cheerily responding, 'That's okay!' As I left in good spirits, I reflected on the mostly unpleasant experience and wondered, 'Now, how did she get me to do that?'"

If a story were mapped out, the climax would reside on the other side of the gaps created by the challenge. If listeners leap over the gaps, thus eliminating the dissonance, they experience insight and learning. But the climax must be truly inviting, realistic, and relevant. If the climax or resolution is too routine or far-fetched, there is no insight. Listeners must be able to relate to and identify

with how the story ends.

When creating the climax, ask yourself the following questions:

▶ Will the story's ending result in learning and achieve my goal or goals? Is a story the best way to accomplish that with this particular audience?

▶ Will the ending surprise, amuse, challenge, or amaze listeners?

▶ Will listeners view the ending as realistic and relevant?

▶ Will listeners be able to envision several possible endings before the climax is revealed?

▶ Will listeners gain insight and develop new attitudes, understanding, or skills from the resolution?

At the story's end, listeners should say, "I wouldn't have thought of that" or "I wasn't expecting that." They should also feel, upon reflection, that the story makes perfect sense.

Telling the story

Even a well-crafted story can fail to achieve its objectives if it isn't told well. Here are a few techniques and tips for effectively delivering a story.

Dramatize. Don't be afraid to ham it up a bit. Remember, you're trying to paint a picture. As you speak, focus on the scene in your mind and try to become part of it. Relive the story as you tell it.

Describe. Use a lot of details in the beginning of the story and then faze them out. Listeners need to hear more details while you're creating the context.

A good rule of thumb is to start by using more details than you think the story needs. Your goal is to draw listeners into the scene. Once you establish the context and you move on to the challenge and climax, you need fewer details.

Shift. As you're telling the story, you sometimes act as a guide. Other times, you're part of the action. In other words, you step in and out of the scene. These dual functions make it acceptable for the storyteller to shift between the past tense and the present tense.

Pause. Timing is key to good story-telling. So-called "pregnant pauses" can entice listeners and imbue a story with drama and suspense. Practice your presentation by recording your story on audiotape and listening for places where pauses might add punch. Then tell your story at a pace that is slow, but not too slow.

Gesture. Use different gestures, varied facial expressions, and dramatic body movements. Such techniques can help turn a written story into a living demonstration.

The proverbial admonition to "stick to the story" is good advice. The storyteller who goes off on tangents loses momentum and ultimately frustrates listeners. Don't introduce secondary issues or new words and concepts. And don't ask questions during the story. Questions can be effective learning tools, but they tend to break the thread of the narrative.

Avoid biting sarcasm and satire. Even sad stories should have an element of joy. If a story is too acerbic, listeners tend to resist. The same

goes for exaggeration. Most storytellers tend to embellish stories and tailor them to fit their needs and goals. That's expected, but too much poetic license can actually undermine the authenticity and realism that make a story powerful. If the audience members don't buy your story, then they won't buy your learning points either.

Good storytellers, like master vintners with a full-bodied wine, know that a good story mellows and improves with age. Above all, a good story is simple, stylish, and straightforward.

Storytellers tend to have their own favorite recipes for stories, but these are a good general guide:

◗ When choosing a story, "shop around" for the one that best meets your training goals.
◗ Keep the blend simple. A good story has the right mixture of ingredients to make it clear, crisp, and palatable.
◗ Add spice, but don't overseason.
◗ Give your story a distinctive flavor. Make it uniquely your own, even if it's a borrowed one.
◗ Practice makes perfect.

Where and when?

Trainers who have decided to use stories often don't know where and when to fit them into their training programs.

Stories fit just about anywhere. For example, they can work as introductions or as conclusions. As an introduction, a story can announce and organize the main points of the training program to follow. As a conclusion, a story can reiterate the core principles, ideas, and concepts of the training. Using a story to wrap up a program can cut through any confusion that may have built up along the way.

Stories can act as breathers. They can provide welcome respites when training topics are complex or abstract, and they can alleviate emotionally charged discussions.

Stories can clarify vague or easily misinterpreted training points, by adding specific, concrete details. They can help listeners make reasonable deductions from disparate elements and, thus, better understand the training as a whole.

Stories can be very effective when concepts are tricky—that is, when hard-to-communicate nuances are critically important to understanding the training. Stories can engage learners emotionally and show them the consequences of taking or omitting certain actions.

Clearly, stories can enliven training or provide an attractive alternative to traditional training lectures. But it isn't enough simply to "make up a story." As with most worthwhile endeavors, effective storytelling requires thorough planning. Make sure your stories pack a punch and that you have a socko delivery. ∎

Chip Bell is a partner with Performance Research Associates in Charlotte, North Carolina. He can be contacted at 25 Highland Park, 100, Suite 374, Dallas, TX 75205.