

10 Mistakes Leaders Make When Sharing Their Story

The modern leader doesn't just lead a company. The modern leader is a figurehead, a public persona, a personality. They have a story to tell and a message to share, both within their company and their industry. This story generates trust, buy-in and affinity and can be the difference between roaring success and abject failure. The problem? Many leaders make painful mistakes when telling their story, undermining their quest to inspire and empower.

David Pearl is the author of *Story For Leaders*, a book that outlines how to create a compelling story and deliver it with impact. He is founder of non-profit social venture Street Wisdom, which transforms ordinary city streets around the world into inspirational learning zones through the power of storytelling. Pearl is creative confidante

to high-profile CEOs and their teams across the globe and his most recent book, *Wanderful*, explores our innate internal guidance system to help people find inspiration and fresh direction in a complex world.

As outlined in *Story For Leaders*, Pearl explained the ten mistakes a leader must avoid when sharing their story.

Don't confuse plans with stories

"Plans are not stories and stories are not plans," said Pearl. "So don't confuse the two." When you ask many leaders about the next month, quarter or year ahead, they will give you their plan. "They envisage the future with graphs, numbers and timelines. This is informative, but not



too galvanizing.” As Pearl pointed out, Doctor Martin Luther King galvanized the civil rights movement with the “I have a dream” speech, not the “I have a plan” version. Dreams are inspiring and plans are not. Share your dream and your story, not the nuts and bolts. “Use a plan to describe where you want to go, but use a future story to inspire your people to join for the ride.”

Tell the truth

Crafting a message into a compelling tale does not mean exaggeration or telling lies. “Fiction, not fibbing,” warned Pearl. And the warning is real. “We live in a world of fake news and alternative facts. When you employ narrative techniques to bring a plan to life, people will question if it’s real or if you are lying.” Succeeding as an effective storyteller doesn’t mean “creating more fiction.” Instead it’s about telling the truth, the truth you wholeheartedly believe in. Pearl advised you “use the techniques of fiction to ensure your message is heard and remembered, not to change facts.

Keep stories short

Pearl explained that “leaders often think of a story as a formal element of a presentation. As something they will include in their next town hall, but not in a busy working day.” This needn’t be the case. Stories don’t need to be long, gushing narratives that are told in real time. Pearl said, “the most powerful narrative is the micro-story, one you tell in a few sentences or words.” He advised that you see every interaction in your company as an opportunity for intentional micro-storytelling, and craft your response accordingly. Perhaps you explain that you’re doing well because some key Q3 metrics are brilliant, or you just had a specific piece of feedback from a client. Stories don’t need to be long, even a quick response can paint a picture perfectly.

Consistently collect material

Leaders who love to tell stories have created systems for noticing and remembering when there’s one they can use. You can copy this strategy by keeping “your eyes and ears open for stories wherever you are and whoever you’re talking with.” He said you should, “build your mental story bank so you can weave narratives into your conversation and bring your

ideas alive for the audience.” Remember what people tell you, make a note of the surprising things that happen each day and be ready to share new stories at the next opportunity.

Remain lingo free

Pearl said that, “jargon is generally lousy for storytelling.” Despite business lingo being helpful for brevity, “usually it’s highly conceptual and it’s very difficult to emotionally connect with acronyms and initialisms.” Stories, however, are full of relatable detail. Far from the cold reality of the EBITDA, the SEO and the Q4 numbers, “a real-world-based story will be far more memorable and appealing to the people in your boardroom.” Machines like codes but listeners like stories.



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Don’t be the hero

The untrained leader might fall down here. It’s a common mistake. “While it’s great to use stories from your own work experience and private life, be careful that you’re not using them to illustrate how great a human you are.” No one wants to hear that. If your stories are about you, “focus on times where you messed up and then learned something useful. Our authentic-attuned world appreciates the honesty.” A better strategy, however, is telling stories where the listener is going to be the hero.

Don’t create a vacuum

Without the stories you are crafting and sharing, there’s room for others to take their place. “Nature abhors a vacuum,” said Pearl. “If you leave a fertile space for other stories to grow, they are likely to be unhelpful.” By not intentionally gardening the messaging your company and team members repeat, the default might be, “rumour, gossip, myth and misinformation growing like weeds.” Control of the messaging starts at the top.

Make meaning

A lack of information is not the problem, but a lack of meaning might be. “Your people need to know what all this stuff means, and that’s your job.” Pearl sees stories as vital tools with which “humanity has made sense of the world since we first huddled round a fire together.” Rows of data doesn’t mean anything without the interpretation you give. Trials and tribulations are just random occurrences without what it all means for the next steps. A leader’s role is to make meaning from raw materials so their people stay firmly on board.

Read the crowd

Despite stories being his passion, Pearl knows that a “story is not always the answer.” Instead, he advised you read the room. The key to engaging your audience is paying attention to what they need, moment to moment. “Sometimes they crave the inspiration a story can bring, other times only a detailed Gantt chart or numerical analysis will do.” Keeping your focus on your audience should give you the insight you need to craft your next line.

Don’t solve the problems

Rather than solving problems, which forms the majority of a leader’s life, “story requires you do the opposite.” Pearl said that you should “amplify dramas, run towards obvious trick situations and seek discomfort.” Without this turbulence, there’s no relief in arriving safely at the story’s conclusion. “The audience won’t tell you this, but they thrive on the awkwardness created when a story gets spicy.” Set aside the “risk mitigation you learned at business school,” and thrive on the drama. It will make for better and more memorable delivery.

Avoid these ten mistakes when incorporating story into your company to be engaging, memorable and effective. Keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities to collect, craft and retell stories in formal presentations and offhand interactions alike. Storytelling will soon become second nature to you as a leader, meaning a better engaged team and more reasons for customers to get on board.



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