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The Power of Storytelling

A Guest Article by Don Yeager

Who in your business holds your attention when they speak up? Who can you count on to be the most engaging dinner conversationalist? What speaker do you see on a program who pulls you in?

The names that come to mind will be those who tell stories so well that time seems to stand still. And it's true whether you're speaking to an audience of one or 1,000. Whether you're on a sales call or a stage; a podcast or around a meal. Those who connect with their listeners best do so through great story telling.

Decades of research and centuries of wisdom make clear that our brains are wired to remember the stories shared well long after the facts grow old. Those who are able to tell meaningful and impactful stories become success stories themselves. Great storytellers become the best salespeople, the best preachers, the best mentors and the best teachers.

The best leaders.

Storytelling is part of the marrow of what makes us human. We see it in cave paintings, hear it in ancient songs, read it etched into stone and transcribed onto scrolls. But the truth is that the art of storytelling matters even more today than ever. Think about all of websites, webinars, podcasts, streaming video and good, old-fashioned, in-person conversations we engage with every day. The way we use these platforms to tell the stories of ourselves, our experiences, our companies, our brands and our ideas has the ability to reach and influence people to a degree unmatched in human history.

The good news on the storytelling front is that great storytelling can be learned. *If fact, it has to be learned.* I've written dozens of books in my life and been fortunate to have a number of them become best-sellers and influential in their space. But I've improved my writing with every book or article or speech because I have apprenticed myself to the craft of storytelling. That's how much I love it.

Along the way, I have discovered a handful of principles—10 principles to be exact—great storytellers regularly apply. I won't go into all of them right now, but let's look at one or two. The first one is very basic: *know your audience*. Knowing your audience takes a little advance thinking and, sometimes, research on your part, but it's worth every second. Different audiences see the world through different frames of reference and share different experiences, interests and even values. For example, describing a January vacation in Montreal to someone from Florida may require you to fill in more blanks about cold weather (and cold weather humor) than would be the case with somebody from northern New Hampshire.

Memorable storytelling is a combination of what you say and how you say it. Let's look quickly at another principle: the use of *dialogue* to help you say something with greater detail and emotion.

Consider the following two sentences:

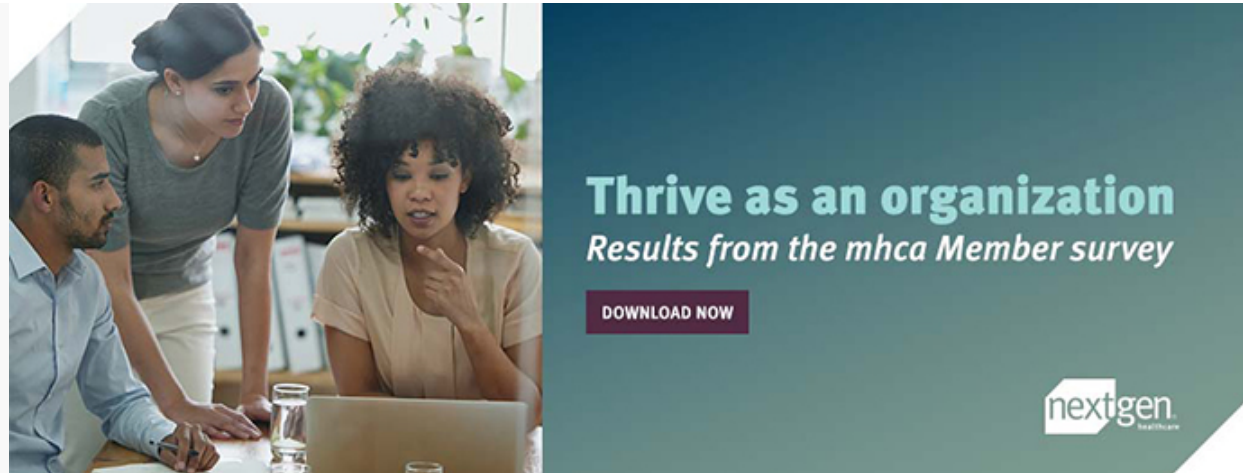
She quietly told her dad how much his presence at the moment meant to her.

As they danced, she leaned in and whispered, “Dad, you being here is everything I’ve hoped for since I was seven years old.”

The first sentence offers an example of telling what happened, the second an example of showing what was actually spoken between two people. Which sentence strikes you as more powerful? Using somebody’s actual phrasing can add color to a story that will pull your listener or reader in and make them care about the characters. And that’s one of your storytelling goals: to have your audience care, preferably in a deep way, what happens.

I hope you can see from these two principles that storytelling isn’t a form of magic but of technique—although the effect you can have on others can seem like magic at times. And becoming a far better storyteller than you believed possible is certainly within your grasp. You just have to approach it as you would other skills worth mastering.

As an award-winning keynote speaker, business leadership coach, eleven-time New York Times best-selling author, and longtime Associate Editor for Sports Illustrated, Don Yaeger has fashioned a career as one of America’s most provocative thought leaders. Throughout his writing career, Don has developed a reputation as a world-class storyteller and has been invited as a guest to almost every major talk show – from The Oprah Winfrey Show to Nightline, from CNN to Good Morning America. He will be leading our Leadership Incubator on storytelling in Raleigh next week. If you are unable to attend, we encourage you to access the recording of this session at mhca.com following the conference.



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