

# Storytelling benefits for learning and development

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**The emotional 'buy-in' associated with storytelling makes it a useful ally for learning and development departments. Nadia Damon reports.**

Storytelling traditionally achieves high engagement levels in the training room, making it the perfect tool for communicating strategic issues. Yet the 'campfire' cliché associated with storytelling can make companies a little dubious about its actual benefits. However, experts claim that in a [blended learning situation](#), it's a powerful resource for any company.

For Robin Fritz, manager of creative design and delivery at experiential training company Purple Monster, whose top parable is a version of [Loren Eiseley](#)'s short story *The Star Thrower*, storytelling humanises a theory, fulfilling the role of a message-giving communications tool - albeit one which puts images in people's minds and makes people do the work themselves.

Business-led stories are the lifeblood of The Storytellers - a training company that assists organisations in implementing strategic change by using storytelling as a means of translating what people should be doing on a daily basis.

## Shared experience

Marcus Hayes, director of story and programme planning, says all the stories are sourced from each client and stem from the concept of shared experience.

"Strategy execution is a key area for us," explains Hayes. "Our big topics revolve around what an organisation needs to do to increase its competitive advantage - such as improving service, how to operate more efficiently, service delivery and customer relationship building.

We use [appreciative inquiry](#) - examining how you can use storytelling as a way of encouraging the people you are training to identify and focus on times when they have previously achieved the things you're trying to train them in. By focusing and amplifying the positives you're able to get them to make connection between their own best practice and what you're trying to achieve."

Margaret Wood, a director at virtual training company Zynia, which produces CD-based storytelling packs, claims the emotional engagement associated with storytelling makes it the perfect training tool for more emotional subject matter such as leadership, diversity, communications and change management, helping people to feel secure about the territory being covered. "Telling a story enables people to look at issues without feeling personally threatened," reveals Wood, whose personal favourite, which comes from the company's communications pack, concerns an apparently dull accountant with a hitherto unknown passion for dancing. "Communications and diversity are our most popular storytelling topics, but change is also an excellent one because it is about dealing with emotions."

Zynia currently offers six training packs covering diversity, communication, teams, customers, leadership and change. Each pack has a CD containing around seven or eight stories (with hard copies) written by trainers in the first or third person. The stories can be used on a one-to-one basis or in group situations - to set the theme or kick-start a discussion. "Using a story, you can take people away from the work environment and let them get into a topic in a non-threatening way," she explains. "It enables them to start with an objective situation and then relate it back to their own."

### **Imagining the future**

Hayes claims that stories can be used in three ways: first, to illustrate second, to stimulate a discussion and third, to envision - to flick forward in time and think of the story that you want to achieve.

"If you help people gain a clear vision of what success would look like, it can have a powerful influence on helping people think about what they need to do to achieve that success," he explains. "You can often unlock this by thinking about the future and working backwards."

Termed 'co-creational coaching' by Hayes - whose top (and true) business story centres around a group of waiters from a large hotel chain who shaved their heads to enable a young patron with cancer to feel less conspicuous - this form of interactive storytelling enables individuals to co-create an answer as opposed to simply having an instructional trainer.

To stimulate these conversations, Hayes claims it is useful to have a pre-developed set of stories that can be used as a stimulus - while helping people envision what success might look like.

### **Case study: Currys**

After instigating a major change programme, electrical retailer Currys identified a need to sustain commitment, motivation and performance. Training company The Storytellers liaised with senior Currys management to articulate the supply chain strategy and vision.

The resulting 'StoryMap' was created with 'Superhero' illustrations and real stories from the business, with a chapter dedicated to four key areas. Particular emphasis was given to the 'Focus On Four' priorities: Improving Our Customer Experience, Improving Our Stock Availability, Improving Our Efficiency and Create A Great Place To Work Together. Stories were used as tools to identify key findings, actions and measures, with a StoryWall chart to record and share output.

Managers attended a one-day session before delivering the training back to their own teams.

Training was supported by an online share tool, StoryWeb, which in turn fed success stories to supply chain newsletter *The Buzz*. Currys claims the scheme reduced staff turnover from 38% to 18% and increased productivity, while absenteeism dropped from 8% to 4.2%. The scheme was a winner at the [CiB Communications Strategy Awards 2007](#) and has been updated for 2008.