

# Signature Stories

**Personal, purposeful stories that reflect your leadership values and communicate one clear idea.**

## What makes them powerful:

- Focused on **one key message or insight**
- Typically **short and adaptable**
- Can be used in **many leadership settings**

## Why leaders use them:

- Build **connection and trust**
- Illustrate values and leadership mindset
- Make **meaning in complex situations**

**Best practice:** Develop **3–5 signature stories** you can adapt for different audiences and moments.

# The Science of Storytelling

*Stories activate the brain in ways that facts alone cannot.*

## **Stories build trust and empathy.**

When we hear stories, the brain simulates the experience of the storyteller through mirror neuron systems and oxytocin release, increasing connection and trust.

Gallese & Goldman (1998); Iacoboni (2008); Zak, P. (2014). "Why your brain loves good storytelling," Harvard Business Review

## **Stories increase attention and retention.**

Stories activate emotional and visual processing centers, making information more immersive and memorable. Research suggests people remember information up to 22x more when it is embedded in a story.

Hsu et al. (2014), NeuroImage; Green & Brock (2000), Transportation Theory; Stanford Graduate School of Business study (2011); Schank & Abelson (1995)

## **Stories model emotional intelligence.**

Leaders who share authentic stories demonstrate vulnerability and self-awareness, core elements of emotional intelligence and leadership presence.

Goleman (1995); Brown (2012); Cuddy (2015)

# Executive Presence & Storytelling

Executive presence happens at the intersection of **content, delivery, and audience impact:**



**Powerful leadership storytelling works best when all three are aligned.**

# What You Say (Content & Clarity)

Great stories begin with a clear structure and purpose.

- A clear narrative structure and story arc
- One powerful focused idea or clear takeaway
- Builds tension and resolves it meaningfully
- Personal, specific, and authentic

## Crafting the Signature Story

**STEP 1: Start with the end in mind**

- What is the **one idea or insight** you want people to leave with?
- How do you want your audience to **feel at the end**?
- Your story will begin with the opposite insight or feeling...



## STEP 2: Create the narrative journey

### Beginning

- Start with the opposite of how you want people to feel or think at the end
- Start where the stakes are high, the emotion is real, or something is misaligned (pulls people in)
- Place the audience in a specific moment they can visualize
- Offer enough details that they can visualize the moment



### Middle

- Walk through the challenge, turning point, or realization (may be more than one)
- Keep details vivid but *relevant to the story* and concise



## STEP 3: Close with a Strong Ending

- Reveal the shift in awareness or lesson learned
- Connect the story to the leadership message or “a bigger why” that relates to the audience

**Practice tip:** Matthew Dicks’ “*Homework for Life*” encourages noticing meaningful moments each day that could become future stories.

# How You Say It (Delivery & Tone)

The delivery of a story drives understanding and deep connection.

## Mindset

- Focus on sharing an experience, not performing
- Authenticity builds credibility and trust
- Connect with the *one idea* you want people to remember, your “why”

## Voice

- Vary tone, pacing, and volume to sustain attention
- Strategic pauses create emphasis and reflection
- Anxiety shows up in voice first, do breathing and vocal exercises to warm up

## Body Language

- Use gestures and posture to reinforce key moments
- Eye contact - focus on deep connection, not scanning the room
- Move with intention - don’t pace the room, move infrequently and with purpose

## Emotion

- Allow genuine emotion to show, it creates connection
- Reframe pre-speaking stress as excitement  
“I can’t wait to share my ideas on...”
- Reduce stress by focusing on having a positive impact on *just one person*

(Insights inspired by communication research and Julian Treasure’s work on vocal presence, personal coaching from TEDx Hartford Team)

# Impact (Purpose & Results)

Effective storytellers adapt stories to their audience.

## Understand what matters to your listeners

- Their goals, pressures, and priorities
- The context of the specific moment, place or culture

## Adapt the story's emphasis

- Highlight the elements that resonate most with this group
- Adjust opening framing or examples when needed

## Connect the story to insight and action

- One signature story can have different closing insights based on audience
- Customize opening context setting and closing insight to audience needs

**One story can serve many purposes.** The message evolves as the audience changes.

# Storytelling for Teams

Storytelling is also a powerful leadership and culture shaping tool.

Leaders can use stories to:

- **Reinforce values** - Share examples that demonstrate what the organization stands for
- **Create meaning during change** - Help teams understand why something matters
- **Recognize and celebrate people** - Stories highlight contributions in memorable ways
- **Build shared identity** - Teams remember and repeat stories that capture who they are and who they are striving to become.

Over time, these stories become part of the **culture of the organization.**

# Next Steps & References



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## Next Steps

- Begin to develop and practice your signature stories, one at a time.
- Immerse yourself in learning, watching videos, observing others, and trying out new approaches; it's a craft you develop over time.
- Draft one signature story to practice delivering to several different audiences; ask for feedback and improve - confidence will build!

## References

On the craft of writing and telling stories:

- [Storyworthy](#) by Matthew Dicks
- [TED Talks: The Official Guide to Public Speaking](#) by Chris Anderson
- [Stories that Stick](#) by Kinda Hall

Some tips on humor as a leadership strategy:

- [HBR Humor is Serious Business](#)
- HBR [Interview - The Kinds of Humor That Help Leaders Build Trust](#)

On body language and vocal exercises to enhance positive impact:

- [Presence](#) by Amy Cuddy
- [TED.com: How to Speak so People Will Listen](#) by Julian Treasure
- [Vocal Warmups for Public Speakers](#)

Managing Stress and Anxiety Around Public Speaking:

- [Talk Fast, Think Smart Podcast at Stanford Business: Hacking Your Speaking Anxiety: How Lessons from Neuroscience Can Help You Communicate Confidently](#)
- [TED.com - How to Make Stress Your Friend](#) by Kelly McGonigal
- [The Effect that Anxiety Can Have on the Voice](#)