

A Sandbox of Stories

Your life is a valuable source of stories that can teach powerful lessons to your learners.

BY HADIYA NURIDDIN

Years ago, my manager at the bank I worked for invited me out to lunch at a fancy restaurant in downtown Chicago. About 30 minutes in, she handed me a folded white card embossed with gold print provided to her by human resources that said I had been promoted from training consultant to training officer. Before I could react, she told me that the card was wrong and that I was being promoted a level above officer—to senior training consultant.

“I’m being double promoted?” I asked.

“No. You’re already a training officer.”

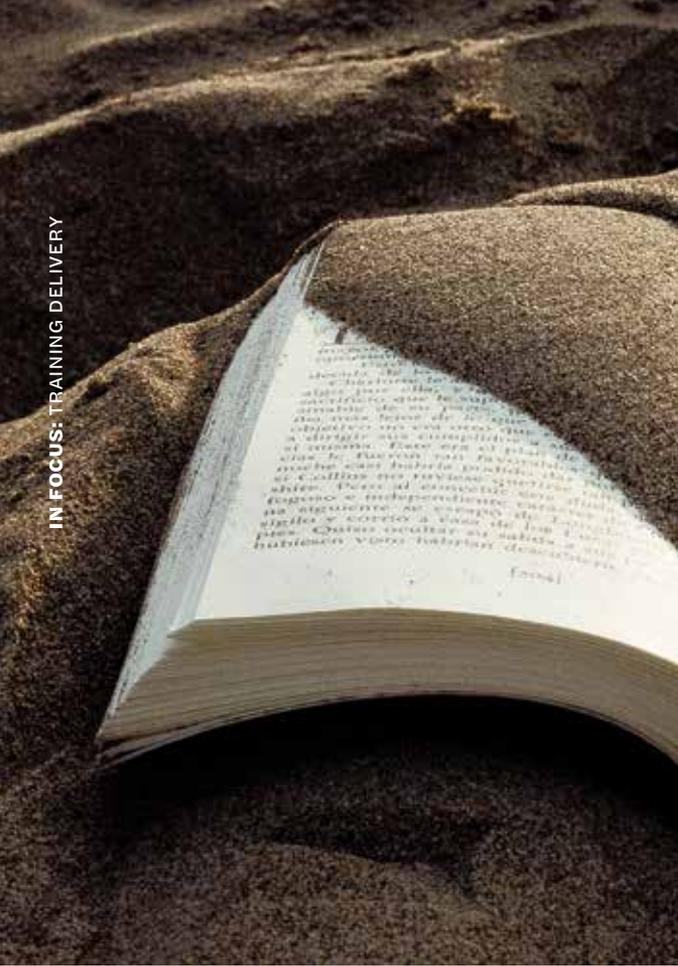
“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. I hired you as one.”

“How can that be? I didn’t even know what a training officer was until I asked someone a few weeks ago.”

While it’s plausible that I was not listening carefully when my job title was explained to me a year before, why did the person who printed the card also think that the level above me was training officer? Instead of being happy about my promotion, I ruminated over how I could have a title—and four weeks’ vacation—that I didn’t know I had. I got over it, but although I told myself I was angry because someone, somewhere had the wrong information, I was angrier because I was confused and didn’t know what was happening. My manager made me doubt my own memories and question myself for having gone so long without knowing my actual title.

It’s a simple story, but there’s still enough there to encourage discussion around multiple themes.



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Should intent eclipse a flawed execution? What drives people to focus on the negative aspects of an otherwise positive outcome? What happens when a small event makes a person question their identity? I don't know the answers to any of these questions, and that's what makes facilitating with story useful. The learning is not in the answers—it's in the questions, the reflection, and the pull to resolve that nagging cognitive dissonance or accept that two conflicting ideas can be true at once.

My memory is filled with incidents that seemed trivial when they happened, but as I gained experience facilitating and struggled to explain complex topics, I found myself using my memories as stories more and more. These events aren't stories by de-

fault. I had to select the right one and then shape it into a story, elevating it beyond a sequence of events to reveal a deeper message. How can you find and structure stories to add to your story cache?

Finding stories to tell

I've had people tell me that they do not tell stories when facilitating because they have no stories to tell. It's as if they believe great storytellers live super-exciting lives and can magically conjure up fascinating and perfectly structured stories without much effort. Perhaps some can, but most have to work at it.

It is true that the process starts with material, and the question for many is where and how to find appropriate material. Some people live for the story; they live a life where they leave room for interesting things to happen and time to reflect on what they learned. But usually, you find what's meaningful, interesting, and universally applicable about the experiences you've already had.

Building story caches

It's a good idea to prepare stories ahead of time, but facilitators often need to quickly pull from their repository of stories. There's no magic or innate talent; just hard work and skill. The repository has to be constructed and curated with intent. I call my repository my story cache. It works like a sandbox filled with complete stories mixed in with anecdotes that are flexible enough to serve multiple purposes.

The stories that gain admittance to the story cache share a few characteristics:

- I experienced a change or a revelation as a result.
- The intent is clear enough for learners to see the relevance of the story, yet ambiguous enough for listeners to apply the point for themselves in a way that may be different from my intent.
- They have multiple layers and meanings, making the story useful for many topics and occasions.

From event to story

Before entering the cache, an event has to be transformed into a story. This means going through a process of identifying its point and the key events that support that point. The Facilitating With Story Process is a useful framework for transforming events into stories.

Step 1: Identify a story that will support a point.

The story's content is a vital consideration, but what happens in the story is often less important than what you learned from the story's events. You can find career lessons in personal stories, and words to live by in business stories. The key is to match the point you're trying to make with a story that clarifies

and reinforces that point.

Stories also should have the qualities for facilitating effective learning, which include:

- Stories that connect: They facilitate the learners' connections to content and one another.
- Stories that show change: They show a change in the story's main character and are instructive on how listeners can make the change.
- Stories that are relevant: They are relevant to the content and convey the appropriate points with intent.
- Stories that entertain: They facilitate a memorable experience through humor, suspense, or emotion.

Step 2: Identify the focal point of the story. While you may tell the story with an intent in mind, understand that once you tell a story, it no longer belongs to you. The learners will construct their own meaning based on their experiences.

Step 3: Timeline the events. I use timelining to identify the key event that carries the story, the leading events that immediately precede the key event, and the consequential events that followed it. Begin timelining by drawing a line that represents the story (see figure). Then identify the key event, which is probably the part that makes you remember the story so well. The key event is usually the point on which the rest of the story depends.

Starting with the key event, search your memory for as many related events that preceded it as possible. These are leading events because they led to the key event. Now, move on to the consequential events—those that occurred as a result of the key event (and all the events that led up to the key event). Stay focused on your intent as you identify consequential events. Avoid overreaching by attributing the cause of circumstantial incidents to the key event.

An essential part of timelining is self-questioning, which helps you remember leading and consequential events and consider the connections among them. There are no specific questions to ask, but the types of questions fall into three categories:

Story Sources

If you find yourself looking for an applicable story to tell, reflect on the events that have happened in the many areas of your life and how they changed you.

- Your professional career: Reflect on your experiences and what you learned from them, who helped or hurt your career, and your major turning points and their effect.
- People in your life: Reflect on the people who had a positive impact on you, people you admire and why, and people who taught you something about yourself.
- Events in your life: Reflect on your proudest achievements, events that triggered happiness or fear (or both), or memorable events from engaging in hobbies or other interests.
- Your values: Reflect on the times when your values were reinforced or compromised, times when you learned to trust (or not to), times when you felt guilty about what you did or didn't do.

- the sequence of events and their possible connections
- where and when events took place
- how the events facilitated the change featured in the story.

Step 4: Structure and shape your story. Once you have identified a reason to tell your story, found a story that supports an idea you are facilitating, and determined the point of the story itself, you are ready to apply a structure and shape it.

Story formats generally fall in two categories: reci-

The Facilitating With Story Process



The Story Spine

Using the Story Spine helps you identify the connections between events. Here is an example of a story fleshed out using the prompts:

- *Once upon a time ...* I was a technical support representative who worked on a team with about 10 peers.
- *Every day ...* We had lunch together and often hung out after work and on the weekends.
- *But, one day ...* Our manager got promoted, and his position became available. Everyone wanted to apply for it, but we were afraid to talk about it for fear that the competition would disrupt our relationships. I applied for it and got the job.
- *Because of that ...* I felt like everyone had turned on me. I was busier so couldn't hang out as much, but they were also meeting up without inviting me. They were still friendly to me in the office, but there was a distance that was beginning to affect my job.
- *Because of that ...* My manager reprimanded me for being too concerned about whether people liked me and not focusing on the call center numbers. He told me he promoted me because I was already a leader and that I needed to get back what I lost.
- *Until, finally ...* I decided to tackle my insecurities head-on. I met with the team, and they told me they thought I had changed. I told them I thought they had changed. We talked through our differences and re-established expectations.
- *And, ever since then ...* I was more comfortable in my managerial role, and we all realized that our friendship hadn't gone away. It had just evolved.

pes and building blocks. Recipe models explain what a good story includes. They dictate what should be added and how it should taste, and, as with recipes, each ingredient influences the taste of the entire meal. Building block models focus on structure. You arrange story elements in a specific order, but the content decisions are yours.

A popular building blocks model is the story spine, which is a popular way to structure true stories. The story spine model is structured like this:

- Once upon a time ...
- Every day ...
- But, one day ...
- Because of that ...
- Because of that ...
- Until, finally ...
- And, ever since then ...

The story spine provides structure, but it does not suggest the type of content to go into each block. The words at the beginning of each line are prompts and are not used in the story itself. The story spine reinforces the idea that in a good story, something happens. Events occur that move the story along, and each event builds on its predecessor. The model encourages the storyteller to communicate a sequence of events that culminate in a change. The pattern is not “this happened” and “this happened.” It’s “this happened” and, consequently, “this happened,” and so on. There is a rhythm—a momentum driving the story forward and taking the listener with it.

Step 5: Facilitate the story. All the work that goes into selecting and shaping stories goes out the window if the story is not delivered well. Four considerations for creating an effective learning experience are revealing your truth, inviting listeners in, using body language, and showing and telling.

Find your inner storyteller

There is a storyteller inside of us all, but some of us just need to work harder to find it. It's not a special ability. Though it seems effortless for some, it's a skill that can be learned. Building a strong story cache that you can quickly pull from is a big part of the process. The first step is identifying the point you want to make and then finding stories to support it. The Facilitating With Story Process can guide you. But although the tools can help, it's being open to new experiences, taking the time to reflect on your own journey, and being willing to reveal your own truth that separates the people who tell stories from the storytellers.

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