

Managing Through Stories

by Evelyn Clark

One of the top management/supervisory challenges in our world of information overload is to cut through the clutter. More than 3,000 messages bombard each of us every day, and these constant distractions blur employees' vision and distort their focus. To overcome all these distractions, managers and supervisors need to continually remind employees of the University of Washington's core values—as well as their college's or department's—to keep them centered on their own roles in achieving the University's mission.

Storytelling is a powerful tool for meeting this challenge. The power of stories is that they captivate both the minds and the hearts of the people listening. Just as we all fondly remember family stories that we heard years ago, employees remember stories that their leaders tell them, and those stories become guides for carrying out their responsibilities. By continually telling stories that illustrate the organization's values, everyone will be clear about where the team is going and how each can contribute to, and benefit by, achieving the goals.

Stories also are an effective teambuilding tool, as the UW College of Education staff discovered when they participated in a Corporate Storytelling® session. When the members of a work group are given the opportunity to share their personal stories with one another, they uncover shared values. As a result, they work together better, support one another more enthusiastically, and are better equipped to serve the customer more effectively.

Many of America's top business leaders regularly use stories to recognize employees "caught doing something right." By highlighting employees' accomplishments, managers and supervisors clearly convey the organization's values and illustrate how those values are being brought to life throughout the organization. Employees who are recognized know that their efforts are appreciated, and others quickly understand what it takes to be successful.

Strategic planning is another application of organizational storytelling, and one company's highly successful experience with this use was the subject of an article in the Harvard Business Review. For my book on Corporate Storytelling, I interviewed the leaders of a number of successful companies, such as Costco, FedEx, Nike, 3M and Kinko's, about a myriad of uses for stories by managers.

Like the leaders of many successful businesses, University managers and supervisors can leverage stories to convey key messages. How and when can you use stories to communicate more effectively? Which stories can your college tell that will keep everyone on your team focused on the University's values—as well as your own team's role in enacting those values?

Cut through the information clutter by putting the power of story to work for you. Become a more effective leader. Start telling a few well-chosen stories.

Through these stories, employees "uncover shared values. As a result, they work together better, support one another more enthusiastically, and are better equipped to serve the customer more effectively."



Evelyn Clark, is a member of the University Consulting Alliance. An author and inspirational keynote speaker, she facilitates retreats and storytelling workshops focused on supercharging work teams, firing up customer service, developing red-hot brands, and transforming organizational stories into hot news.

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