

# BUILDING YOUR LEADERSHIP STORY

SEVEN STEPS TO STORIES THAT INSPIRE,  
CONNECT, AND BUILD COMMUNITY

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by Michael Kass

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# PREFACE: WHO AM I AND WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

In 2006, I told my first story in front of an audience. After years of experience on stage as an actor, I figured this would be a pretty easy to scratch my 'performer' itch.

The story I told involved an unrequited love from my teen years. As I started the story, a few things happened in quick succession. First: I started sweating profusely and my mouth went dry. Second: my knees started shaking. Third: my voice cracked as long forgotten emotions swept through my body. All of my hard-earned acting techniques went out the window.

I fought these reactions for a few moments and then, finding that exhausting, just gave over to it. I was nervous. No way around it. None of my 'actor tricks' were working, so I might as well own it and just let the story come out.

The moment that I relaxed, I felt a shift. The audience seemed to lean forward. They laughed with me and groaned as my attempts to win the love of the beautiful maiden became increasingly desperate and ridiculous. When I reached the end of the story, the applause washed over me and, frankly, I wasn't at all sure what had just happened. I felt a combination of exhilaration and exhaustion along with an openness in my chest I hadn't felt in years.

I made my way down from the stage and, as I moved towards the back of the room, a guy stopped me. He shook my hand. 'That was great,' he said. Then he shared a story of his own adolescent heartbreak.

It was weird. This guy didn't know me. But here he was, sharing a part of himself with me, as if my story had unlocked something within him.

This happened a few more times that night.

By the end of the evening, I had become intensely curious about story.

What had happened when I shared my story that invited others to approach a near-stranger and share a part of their lives?

Why had I, an experienced speaker with extensive experience as a stage actor, become so nervous when sharing a personal story?

Was this a one-off experience or could the effect be replicated?

Those questions and my curiosity deepened over time and, 10 years later, I have devoted much of my life to helping people, organizations, and communities rediscover and harness the power of their stories to create change.

This short book is intended to be an introduction to the art of storytelling for leaders. For the purposes of this book, and life in general, I define a leader as anyone who ever needs to connect with, convince, and/or inspire others to action. In other words, you (yes you) are a leader.

Before you dive in, know this: you are already an expert storyteller simply by virtue of being human. I really have nothing to teach you that you don't already know. My hope is to remind you of the power that story has to bring us together, offer a step-wise process to demystify the art and science of storytelling, and empower you to build and share stories in your life, work, and communities.

I've tried to include enough to get you started and help you overcome some common hurdles (those cold sweats, for example). That said, this is by no means a comprehensive tome. You may find yourself getting stuck or frustrated at some points. Or perhaps you'll find yourself hungry for real life examples of each step (in this case, the internet is a great resource!). When in doubt, take a deep breath and share a story.

Thank you for reading; it's a privilege to share my curiosity and passion for story with you!

Michael Kass  
Los Angeles, 2016

# INTRODUCTION: WHY TELL STORIES?

I've had the chance to work with some pretty accomplished people over the past few years. People who have long histories of success, have overcome daunting challenges, and have built things that literally change the world. Want to know one thing they all have in common?

They all feel uncomfortable sharing their story.

They can pitch ideas and business models like the pros they are, but when faced with the most simple of questions: 'What's your story?' or 'Why do you do what you do?' they freeze up. Which leads them to call me. Which leads me to write this for you.

It's all connected.

Here are three reasons that telling your story is important:

## **1. If you don't someone else will.**

Take a moment to think about all of the data out there that's available about you and your work.

Beyond your website, there's Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, that article from your High School Newspaper, a review you were tagged in on Yelp, that furniture you posted for sale on Craigslist using your real name (don't do that, by the way).

We literally go through life streaming trails of data and it's all accessible with a few taps of the keyboard.

I guarantee you that anyone you're meeting with has done a quick Google search on you. It's 2016, this is what happens.

Our brains have evolved to create narrative based on available data. So based on whatever turns up, people have constructed a story about you before you even walk into the room. Due to a bit of cognitive trickery called the anchoring effect, our brain fixates on the first story about someone that it constructs. Any subsequent stories array itself around the initial anchor.

So if the story they've built is accurate, great. If not, then you will spend the entirety of your interaction battling against the false story.

By taking the initiative to put your story out into the world, you get to control how people connect the dots. You get to create the anchor.

*Pro-Tip: It helps if the story is authentic. Because the only thing worse than allowing others to tell your story is getting caught in a web of BS.*

## **2. Stories Create Powerful Connections**

Every workshop I facilitate includes at least one storytelling exercise. Strangers pair up and share a story based on a simple prompt. The entire exercise takes less than 5 minutes and, at the end, I ask folks about their experience. Invariably, everyone in the room reports feeling a strong sense of connection with their partner. This works across generational, ethnic, and class divides. Story fosters connection by revealing a sense of shared humanity.

Whether we're pitching, asking for a contribution for a nonprofit, or looking for professional (or personal) partnership, we need to connect before we convince. When we lead with broad ideas, statistics, or studies, we engage with the rational part of the brain. That's the part that salivates



over the prospect of poking holes in arguments and picking stats apart. It's not the best part to start with.

When we lead with a story, we form a connection, a bond, that builds empathy and inspires curiosity.

*Pro-tip: Working with entrepreneurs, I've come across a tendency to separate their personal narrative from the product narrative. This results in a profoundly disjointed approach. The challenge is to seamlessly link the two!*

### **3. Discovering and Telling Your Story is Hugely Empowering**

This is one that most corporate or branding folks don't get into: the process of discovering your story, crafting it, and sharing it with others is deeply empowering.

This connection between storytelling and growth or power stretches back thousands of years. Ancient rites of passage involved sending young people off into the wilderness on a quest (say, for example, hunting a wild animal or spending a month alone). The process concluded not with the return to the tribe, but with the sharing of the youth's story with the community and the community's acceptance of that story.

In our modern world, we tend to gloss over, ignore, or elide connections between periods of our lives. This can lead to a sense of disenfranchisement from the way our life and work develops. If we don't consciously tell our stories, it can feel like we're small boats being buffeted about by a sometimes raging sea.

When we start to explore the contours of our life, threads of connection begin to appear. After all, we're essentially the same person at 6 as we are at 46. As we start to follow the threads, connect the dots, and assemble our stories, we take on an active role in authoring the stories of our past and begin to realize that, following the threads of narrative that have always been present (if unseen), we can similarly author our future.

It's all connected. And it's really powerful stuff.

If there are so many reasons we should be telling our stories, why don't more people do it? Why do so many of us default to resumes, lists, or data?

Because storytelling done well is incredibly challenging. It's a form of connection and communication that we don't engage in that often, particularly not in a professional setting. It requires a deep courage and willingness to look at moments that may bring up tough emotions or shame. It asks for boldness and trust as we share these stories that feel at times a bit vulnerable. And it demands a faith that humanity is, at its base level, universal.

So story is much more than a tool to tug at the heartstrings. It's more than just a beginning, middle, and end. It's. . .well, what exactly IS story? That's the question we address in Part I.

# PART I: WHAT IS STORY?

Every storytelling workshop I teach, whether I'm working with 10 year olds or a room full of CEOs, begins with the same question: what is story?

The question first meets with silence. Then, slowly, answers begin to bubble up.

*Stories have a lesson.*

*They have a beginning, middle, and end.*

*They're emotional.*

*Stories are about adventure.*

*They let us see the world in a different way.*

*A story is surprising.*

All of those are true, but they are qualities of story, modifiers instead of a definition. The question remains: what, at its elemental level, is story?

There are lots of definitions. The wonderful book *Elements of Persuasion* defines a story as 'facts wrapped in emotion.' Webster's dictionary simply characterizes story as 'an accounting of events.' Here's how I define it:

**Story is the basic building block of community.**

Long before we had writing, equations, double blind studies and infographs, we had story. Tribes of people would gather around the fire

and tell the tales that defined their community. It was story, not data or raw information, that contained the DNA of the community's values, history and purpose.

Hints as to the pivotal role that story has played in the history of human development can be found in the work of Dr. Michael Wesch, a cultural anthropology professor at the University of Kansas, who spent time living with a previously uncontacted tribe in Papua New Guinea. This tribe did not have pens, paper, or written word much less any modern technology. When Michael arrived, he found a purely oral culture.

The tribe did not tell stories in what we might consider a 'conventional' way. Instead of one person speaking and the others listening, stories were co-created in real time. They were happenings, shared participatory events with no clear dramatic arc. Control of the narrative shifted from person to person, as tribe members would interrupt each other with challenges and amendments to the story. Eventually, agreement would emerge from the chaos and the group would disband to begin a new story.

The stories the tribe created were not static artifacts to be consumed for entertainment, but rather the building blocks at the foundation of all community interaction. A story about spirits living in a grove by the river transformed an unremarkable grove into an enchanted forest. More significantly, the tribe members did not have names, but rather were known by their stories and actions.

In a workshop delivered at the Future of Storytelling conference in 2015, Dr. Wesch described his first days with the tribe as intensely uncomfortable. In addition to the inevitable culture shock, he found that, because he was a new entity to the tribe, he had no identity. As someone with no 'name,' he found himself even more of an outsider, unable to forge relationships or gain access to the culture's stories.

One night, just after learning about the many different types of poisonous snakes in the village, Michael woke up and felt something lying across his chest. A snake! He immediately grasped it by the neck and rolled over to

get on top of it, strangling it and bashing it against the ground.

Moments later, tribe members, alerted by the noise, arrived with a lamp to reveal that Michael had been attacking his own arm. It had fallen asleep and he had mistaken it for a snake. The tribe members laughed and Michael had a story. With an identity forged (albeit perhaps not the one he would have chosen for himself), Michael was able to participate in the culture in a different way.

I want to tease out a couple of elements from the story above:

1. Story is more than just a 'tool' for building community. It lies at the very heart of both individual and group identity. Without a story of their own, the individual cannot participate in the group.
2. Stories are co-created by members of the community. The designations of 'storyteller' and 'audience' are fluid, changing on a moment by moment basis.

Any business or organization, regardless of the sector or mission, is engaged in community building. You build communities of customers and clients, investors, team members, volunteers, and more. Your community engages with your business because, whether it's conscious or not, your story resonates with their story of who they want to be in the world. And, intentionally or not, every business is engaged in an act of co-creation with its team, customers and other stakeholders.

In the next section, we'll explore ways to find your stories. But first, a quick exercise:

### **Exercise: What Stories Are You A Part Of?**

*The objective of this exercise is simply to build awareness. You're living in a world of stories. What are they and what makes them so powerful for you?*

Take a few minutes to think about all of the communities that you're a part

of. Here are some examples: Networking groups, families, customers of a certain brand, etc.

What is the core story of each of those communities? For example, I recently bought a watch off of Kickstarter. The watch is fine, honestly nothing I couldn't have purchased at Target. What got me was the story behind the watch's creation. A guy had collaborated with his grandfather, an oldy-timey watch maker to create a modern, stylish time-piece as a way to ensure the continuity of his family lineage (while making serious money). That story, as much as the watch itself, lies at the core of the business.

Finally, what about that core story resonates with you? Why have you chosen to join that community?

### **What Next?**

Now that we've established a shared understanding of what story is and how it functions in community, the next section focuses on mining for raw material and excavating powerful stories.

# PART III: FINDING RAW MATERIAL

One of the toughest parts of developing strong leadership stories is getting started. Perhaps you feel that you don't have stories worth telling (I sure didn't when I got started). There are all sorts of reasons for that feeling, some of which we'll touch on later in this course, but for now I'll just say this: You absolutely have stories worth telling. Cool? Cool!

Our lives are filled with stories. Our brains constantly construct narratives to make sense of the world. In the last section, we focused on bringing awareness to the stories all around us. In this section, we turn the focus to generating the raw material for your leadership stories.

## **Some Useful Framing: Six Stories You Must Tell**

In her fantastic book *The Story Factor*, Annette Simmons lays out six types of stories that leaders should be able to tell. They are:

*Who You Are:* What experiences have you had? What are your core values? Who are you beyond your work and resume?

*Why You're Here:* What brings you to the meeting or presentation? What is the 'why,' the driving passion behind your work?

*Your 'Vision:'* What change do you want to see in the world? How will your work create this vision?

*'Values-in-Action:'* It's easy to say that you stand for or believe in something. . .but how do your actions demonstrate this belief?

*'Teaching' stories:* Telling stories to convey a lesson or encourage behavior change will always be more effective than simply telling someone to change. What are some situations that a 'teaching' story might be useful? What experiences have you had or witnessed that contain a helpful lesson?

*'I know what you're thinking:'* These stories are powerful tools to put people, particularly those who may not be predisposed to your point of view, at ease. A story in this category may revolve around someone just like whomever you're speaking with or around how you once felt.

If you think about the stories you've heard and your own tales, you'll realize that there's a ton of overlap between the different types. For example, a strong 'Who You Are' story may also contain information about why you're there and your vision. As you move through the exercises in this lesson, you may want to track how many of these types the stories you generate hit.

For much more on the six types of story, you can check out Annette Simmons' website at [www.annettesimmons.com](http://www.annettesimmons.com).

The exercises below will guide you through the process of finding raw material that you can work with to craft powerful stories.

### **Exercise 1: The Big Want**

Take a moment to think about a time you wanted something. It may have been last week or 20 years ago. Whatever this 'want' was, you felt the desire for it in your bones. You simply couldn't live without this thing, person, or achievement. The more specific you can be, the better. 'World peace,' for example, might not work so well.

Once you've settled on a want, ask yourself what drove you to want it so deeply. What would getting this thing do for you? How would it complete



or otherwise enhance your life? Even a desire that looks somewhat trivial on the surface may be linked to a deep need.

Now let the following questions guide your memory:

How old were you?

What stood between you and the object of your desire?

How did you overcome that obstacle?

Did your efforts work?

If so: who were you in the moment of victory? If not: who were you when you didn't get what you wanted?

Did getting the object of your desire (if you did) fulfill you in the way you believed that it would?

At the end of this 'quest,' what had you learned? How did it affect your world, even if in a small way?

How many physical sensations can you recall around this story? Images, smells, tastes? The quality of the light? What you were wearing?

Once you've made some notes about your Big Want, take a few minutes to reflect. These types of stories contain a ton of information. They can reveal core values, how you, as a human and a leader, confront challenges, how you absorb lessons, and so much more. What does this story reveal about who you are at your core?

You can do this exercise as often as you'd like to build a library of 'Big Want' stories.

## **Exercise 2: Winning and Losing (or at least giving up)**

Think of three times that you 'won' or prevailed against overwhelming odds. As with the Big Want exercise, remember the challenge(s) you faced and how you overcame them. Make some notes about those times.

Now think of three times that you 'lost' or gave up. Make some notes about those.

A great way to generate these stories is to find one or two examples from

different periods of your life. What victory did you achieve as a child? As a teen? As an adult? And do the same for defeats.

Once you have a selection of events for winning and losing / giving up, flush out the stories a bit. Look for common themes: what elements link your stories of victory? And of defeat? Looking at these stories from the point of view of an impartial observer or potential customer, what would they tell you about the storyteller?

### **What Next?**

Once you have 5 to 10 stories in your quiver, go back and see how many of the six categories of story you've covered. Don't worry about getting all of them at this point. It's just fun to notice!

Remember that this stage is all about generating raw material. In the next sections, we'll look at refining the stories. For now, give yourself permission to play. Notice what comes up for you during these exercises. What emotions do you feel? What physical sensations do you notice as you access different memories? Chances are that your listeners will experience similar sensations when you share these stories with them.

# PART III: HONING YOUR STORY

In the last section, we focused on generating raw material. That process never ends—every day is full of potential stories. I encourage you to get in the habit of noticing these stories and jotting down thoughts as they come to you. You'll be amazed at how quickly stories start to reveal themselves once you start paying attention!

With the 'ingredients' of strong stories in place, this section takes a look at Exercises you can use to hone and refine them.

## **Exercise 1: Go Deeper**

Take a look at the stories you've uncovered and see if you can identify the universal human need that lies beneath each one. Generally speaking, strong stories are about a deep need for community, acceptance, love, or joy. They may also be about loss, surrender, or a pursuit of transformation. Identifying and throwing this deep need into relief for your audience can make all the difference between a story that truly connects and inspires and a story that's just kind of . . . nice.

Imagine this: You're in a meeting with a potential client. You know that he likes skiing. You like skiing, too, so you decide to tell a story about skiing. The version that doesn't go deep might sound like this:

*You: I went skiing a few weeks ago and totally wiped out. It was rough!*

*Customer: Yeah, I wipe out sometimes too.*

*You: Cool. So I'd love to work with you.*

*Customer: ...*

In this iteration, the story only connects on a surface level. You've established that you both like skiing. But what bearing does that have on whether or not this person should work with you? None (unless you're in an alpine sport related business).

Now here's what it might look like with a little more depth:

*You: I went skiing a few weeks ago for the first time in a couple of years. I wanted to keep up with my friends, so I went straight onto a Black Diamond run. I knew it was a bad idea the second I scooted off the lift. And, sure enough, after about 150 meters, I wiped out. My skis went everywhere. I had to walk down the slope!*

*Customer: Oh, man, that's happened to me.*

*You: As I was walking down, I realized that it was a great reminder to accept where I am and not worry about what others think. If I'd let myself work up to it, I could have been on the advanced trail by noon. Instead I spent the day icing my back!*

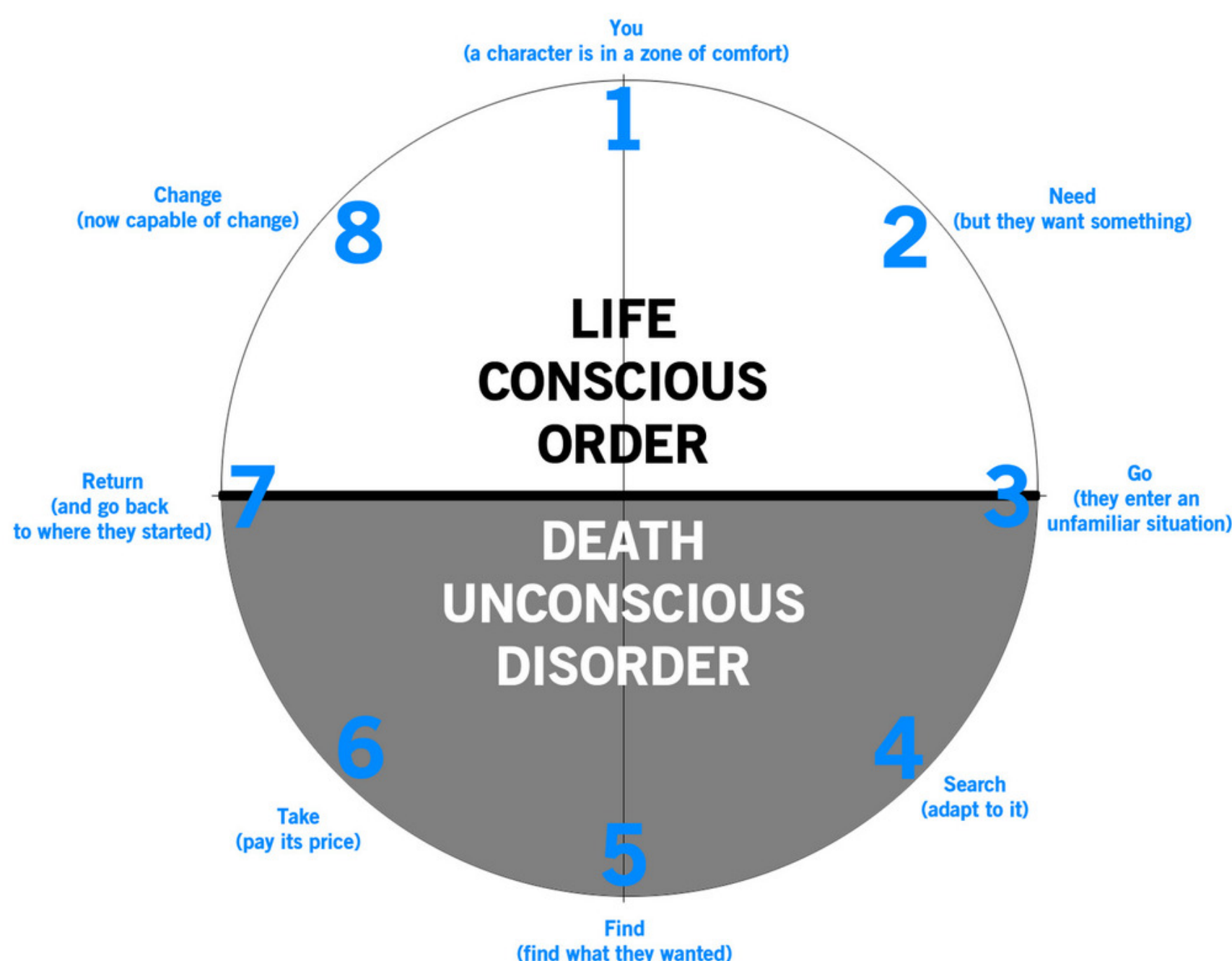
In this version, you've revealed a bit more about yourself. The deep need driving the story is the desire for acceptance and community. That need led you to ignore the reality of your situation to attempt an unrealistic path. And in the end, you learned to listen to your intuition and make big leaps in small steps. The listener learns a bit about how you react to adversity and learn from mistakes. They also learn a bit about your approach to growth and problem solving.

Rooting the story in a universal human need creates a deep connection. In this situation, that story would work even if the customer didn't care about skiing at all!

## Exercise #2: Sharpen the Structure and Increase the Dynamics

Most strong stories in Western countries follow a similar structure. Known as classic story structure or 'The Hero's Journey,' it traces the path of a hero from a place of status quo through some sort of quest where they must overcome challenges and eventually move to a place of transformation. The picture below, adapted from television writer/producer Dan Harmon illustrates this structure.

## STORY STRUCTURE CIRCLE



Much could be (and has been) written about the Hero's Journey. For a deep dive, check out Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces* or simply play around on Google.

For now, take a look at your stories and see how closely they adhere to this structure. I'm guessing it's pretty close—research shows that this structure is actually hard-wired into our brains!

Once you've identified the structure in your stories, it's time to look for opportunities to deepen the dynamics. The more deeply we want to connect with someone, the higher the stakes of the story must be. We

want to keep the story authentic while finding the greatest distance between the top of the 'story circle' and the bottom.

Returning to the 'skiing story' above, how might you up the stakes?

Looking at your own stories, where are there places to deepen the need?

### **Exercise 3: Keep it Specific (but not too specific!)**

Much of a story's power lies in its ability to give us the experience of seeing the world from another person's perspective. Specific sensory details go a long way to maximizing this effect. When we share the right details, the listener can often experience them in their own body.

Go through your stories and see if you can remember key details: the quality of the light, how something felt in your body, a taste, smell, or sound. Everyone leads with different senses, so play around a bit and see what's most evocative for you.

In general, it's always more powerful to show an emotion or moment than to tell it. For example, instead of saying 'I was sad,' you could communicate the emotion by describing how it looked on you: 'My head hung low and I traced the lines on the sidewalk with my eyes. Everything felt heavy.'

This technique comes with a caveat: Too much detail will overwhelm the story and the audience. You'll lose the connection with them and they'll tune out. There's no hard and fast rule about how much detail to include, so your best bet is to 'listen' to your listener, closely observing how they react to your story. If you sense that their attention has wandered, it may be time to move the story forward a bit more quickly!

### **Exercise 4: Jump Right In!**

One of the pitfalls most of us fall into when working on a new story is over-explaining the set up. When this happens, we may not actually get to the beginning of the story until a minute or so into the narrative. To avoid this, try starting with a dynamic action rooted in a specific time and place.

Starting with action gives the listener an immediate access point to the story, a point of connection.

Jumping into the action makes a huge difference. It's the difference between this:

*This story takes place in 1988 in Washington, D.C.. The city was small and I didn't like living there. My neighborhood was not the best and one day I was walking home and. . .*

And this:

*A fist connected with my stomach. Another with my chest. Someone kicked my legs out from under me. It was 1988 in Washington, D.C. and I'd just learned that my neighborhood wasn't the best.*

There's nothing technically wrong about the first version, but the second is more engaging. We immediately know that there's a beat down happening. And, as an audience, we're curious about what's going on. The story that follows holds the promise of explaining the action and giving us the background.

How can you move to the meat of your story as efficiently as possible?

### **Exercise 5: Practice. A lot.**

Once you have the basics in place, the best way to hone a story is to practice. Try it out on friends, ask for their support and feedback. When I started doing storytelling shows, I would take friends out for drinks and simply practice telling the story to them over a beer. Or I'd go for a walk and share the story over coffee.

Sharing and practicing these stories in a safe, informal setting helps get them out of your brain and into your body so that when you're performing, making a presentation, or sitting across from a customer or investor, you can fully own the narrative. Practicing also offers the opportunity to find new turns of phrase or moments that may not have occurred to you when

writing or running through the story on your own.

Asking for feedback on new stories can be tricky. Often, our friends want to 'fix' the story instead of building on what's working well. Asking the following specific questions can help guide them a bit:

What stood out, what did you remember?

Where did you get confused or lose focus?

What questions were left unanswered at the end?

What, if anything, did you feel during the story?

### **What Next?**

These five techniques are great ways to get your story in shape, honing them as powerful tools for connection. In the next section we'll look at how to use these stories to go beyond connection so that you can actually inspire people to action!



# PART IV: CRAFTING YOUR CALL TO ACTION

At this point, you have (or are in the process of crafting) a library of stories to draw from. These stories are powerful tools to foster deep connections with your listener or audience. This section focuses on how to leverage that connection to inspire your audience to action.

## **Knowing Your Audience**

Have you ever felt a room go cold during a presentation? Or been listening to a story that's chugging along nicely, then the storyteller says something jarring that throws you off? You may experience it as a chill or a heat rising from your feet to fill your face. Or maybe just a slight awkwardness.

The best way to avoid that sense of disconnection is to know as much as possible about the person or people you're addressing.

Here are some key questions to consider:

Who is your audience demographically?

How much do they know about you and your work?

What is their relationship to you and your work?

What are they passionate about?

What communities are they a part of?

Many of your stories may be appropriate for multiple types of audiences with a bit of tweaking. You may, for example, use the same 'Who Am I'

story for investors and staff, but the framing and approach will want to shift a bit.

## **Craft Strong Calls to Action**

The purpose of telling these stories is to build a community and inspire the individuals within it to action. So your Call to Action is really important.

Here are three qualities of strong calls to action:

*They are Specific and Actionable:* Make sure that your listeners know exactly what you're asking them to do and that it's something that they can take action on immediately. Calls to action like 'Help us end world hunger' are much less effective than one like 'sign up to volunteer for an event that will help end world hunger.'

*They are Meaningful:* The call to action should contribute in a meaningful way to your 'vision' or 'picture of success.' If requesting a contribution or investment, for example, make sure that it's linked not just to your product, but to the change that your product will create in the world.

*They are Related to Your Story:* This one should go without saying, but we'll say it anyway. Your call to action should be related to your story in some way. If it's not, your listeners will end up feeling confused instead of inspired.

The following exercises will help you build compelling calls to action.

### **Exercise 1: Know Your Audience**

Make a list of the various audiences you'll be speaking with and what you know about each. For example, here's part of a list I made:

*Nonprofit Executive Directors:* Passionate and committed to a cause, likely feeling overwhelmed, may be worked with a case of impostor's syndrome (especially if younger), want to create a more just and vibrant world.

*Early Stage Entrepreneurs:* Hungry for progress, committed to a Big Idea, likely grappling with feelings of overwhelm and/or isolation, swinging

between energized excitement and stressed out exhaustion.

*Established leaders:* Committed to ongoing improvement, desire stronger relationships with team, tend to skew a bit older (40s to 60s) and have families, may be seeking greater balance between work and life.

## **Exercise 2: Calls to Action**

Now that you know your audience a bit better, think about what actions you'd like them to take. Come up with three for each group that invite different levels of commitment. Sharing an email or message on social media to raise awareness, for example, requires less involvement than investing six figures in a business. Once you've developed three calls to action for each audience, review them to see if they are specific, actionable, and meaningful.

## **What Next?**

At this point, we have a bunch of different moving pieces: stories, audiences, and calls to action. In the next section, we'll take a look at a simple structure that puts it all together.

# PART V: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

At this point, you've generated raw material, shaped it into some stories, and have a strong sense both of who your audience is and what you want them to do. In this section, we'll focus on how to put the pieces together in a way that feels organic and feeds into your call to action.

## **The Power of Self / Us / Now**

Since stories are the basic building blocks of community and leadership is, to a certain extent, the act of creating community, it seems fitting that one of the most powerful ways to bring people to action through story comes from the world of community organizing.

The 'Self / Us / Now' structure, developed by legendary organizer Marshall Ganz, is a simple format that allows you to guide your audience to action.

Here's how it works:

*Story of Self:* This is where you use the stories you developed in the first part of this course. Tell your 'who you are,' 'what you're doing there,' and 'vision' stories, tailored to your specific audience. When the story connects, your listeners will be primed to find out how they can be a part of your story.

*Story of Us:* This is where you take it from a story about you to a story about what you and your audience can do together to achieve the broader

vision. Everyone, even business oriented investors or company employees, wants to participate in something meaningful that's greater than themselves. This is your chance to meet that need. What can you accomplish together that isn't possible alone? The more vividly you're able to paint the picture of what you can do together, the more powerful the 'Us' part of your story will be.

*Story of Now:* Now that you've painted a picture of what you and your audience can create together, it's time to create a sense of urgency. What, specifically, are you asking your audience to do? What is the call to action? Why is now the exact right time to take action? This is where you can talk about your business strategy and how the action you're asking the audience to take is integral to its success. What is the cost of delay and inaction? If your 'self' and 'us' stories have done their job, your audience will want to avoid that cost!

The self/us/now structure has been used by political candidates for decades, but it also applies to any situation where the speaker or writer seeks to create a community of action around a cause (e.g. your business).

### **Exercise: The Self / Us / Now Format**

This is your chance to put all the pieces together:

Select your audience and the appropriate call to action.

Based on the audience, choose a 'Self' story. You may have to tweak it a bit, but most of the work here should already be done.

Construct your 'Us' story. This one may require a little more thought. The 'Us' is the bridge to your call to action. What is your picture of success? Why do you need the audience to make it possible?

Construct your 'now' story. What is at stake? How can you impart a sense of urgency and empower your listeners to take concrete action?

Put it all together and smooth out the edges a bit through practice.

Iterate and repeat at will.

### **What Next?**

You've made it to the home-stretch! In the final two sections, we'll look at some common challenges that come up in working on leadership stories and explore some ways you can use stories and storytelling in your work that may not be obvious at first glance.

# PART VI: BOUNDING OVER COMMON HURDLES

In working people on their stories, and crafting my own, over the past few years, I've found that there are a few challenges that pop up frequently. In these sections, we'll take a look at three of these hurdles and some ways to work with them.

## **Hurdle 1: Fear**

Infusing emotional storytelling into pitches, business presentations, and even personal professional websites can bring up a ton of resistance and fear. It often goes against everything we've been taught from kindergarten onwards. For better or worse, our society has developed a heavy reliance on, and near obsession for, data, charts, and complex rubrics.

Sharing your story, even a small part of it, is a tremendous act of courage.

Here are some ways to move past the fear:

*Take Comfort in Science:* There is a mounting body of peer reviewed research pointing to the power of stories in forging deep connections. For our purposes, I'll focus on two conducted in the past 10 years.

First, in 2009, Dr. Uri Hasson, a Princeton neuroscience professor, had a graduate assistant tell a story about her disastrous high school prom while inside a fMRI machine that measured and recorded her brain activity. 11 other volunteers were then placed inside the fMRI and listened to the story.

Dr. Hasson found that not only did all of the listeners exhibit similar brain activity to each other as they listened to the story, they also mimicked the activity of the original storyteller. For the most part, there was a slight delay--the listener's brains lit up moments after the storyteller's brain, giving the listener a moment to comprehend the story. Other times, however, the listeners' brains would activity milliseconds before the teller's indicating an anticipatory response based on a structure that appears to be deeply wired into our brains.

The brain mimicking effect, called neural coupling, is more pronounced the more deeply the story was comprehended. Repetition of facts and data alone did not produce the effect, only stories. Stories, in other words, allow the storyteller to bring her audience's brains into sync. Members of a community who share a story also share brain waves!

Three years later, in 2012, Dr. Paul Zak released a study of how stories trigger chemical and hormone releases that, evolutionarily speaking, have been essential to our survival as a species. Dr. Zak's work grows out of his research into a brain hormone called oxytocin. In the early 2000s, he found that oxytocin triggers the brain to feel safe approaching others and associates with greater cooperation. The chemical accomplishes this by fostering a sense of empathy, allowing us to see and feel the world through the experiences of others.

As tribal creatures, this sense of cooperation and empathy was key to our survival.

Once he had uncovered the effects of oxytocin, Dr. Zak and his team wondered if it was possible to 'hack' the chemical's release. In other words, was there a way to consciously produce the release of oxytocin into the bloodstream?

The answer was yes. And stories were the way to do it.

Dr. Zak recruited volunteers and took blood draws from them before and after they viewed a videotaped story. The study showed that character-



driven stories reliably triggered the production of oxytocin. Furthermore, the research revealed that the greater the oxytocin levels were, the more likely someone was to help others or engage in collaborative activity.

In other words, more oxytocin means stronger collaboration!

Subsequent studies explored this 'oxytocin effect' further and found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that more compelling stories triggered a greater oxytocin release. To maximize empathy, the story first had to focus the listener's attention by creating a sense of danger or stress. If you think of most classic stories, from Greek Myth to Disney films, most begin with a tragedy of some kind. In fact, many Disney films begin with the death of a parent. There are few things more stressful than that!

With the listener's attention focused, a strong, compelling story that follows a structure like the Hero's Journey goes on to take the listener on a journey, moving from danger to a sense of accomplishment and well being.

If we want to inspire cooperation and a sense of community, we want our listeners' bloodstreams to be flooded with oxytocin. The more compelling the story, the more oxytocin is released. As with neural coupling, this oxytocin release has been key to our survival as a species.

The fact is that our brains are wired to respond to stories much more than data. In fact, data has been shown to be singularly unconvincing unless linked to a story that forges a connection first.

*Think About What You Respond To:* Take a moment to connect with yourself. Think about a time that you really responded to a speech, presentation, or pitch. What was it about it that made it so interesting? Chances are that if you dig deep enough, you'll find a story. A deep passion in the speaker that awoke your curiosity. Your story will help you connect in the same way.

*Practice. A lot.:* This is HUGE. Road test your story with friends, co-workers, people who are squarely on your team. Hone it. Get it in your body.

The more comfortable you become with it, and the more experience you get receiving the reactions of listeners, the more confidence you'll build in the power of your stories. If you know others working on their stories, think about setting up 'story circles' where everyone gets 3 to 5 minutes to share their story!

Finally, when in doubt, simply take three deep breaths. This signals the brain that it's not in any danger and decreases the physiological fear response.

### **Hurdle 2: 'My Story Isn't Interesting'**

There's a crippling misconception that tells us that the only good stories are based on Big, Dramatic Events. A major humanitarian crisis. Or a story of individual tragedy that, through heroic action, becomes a tale of almost superhuman triumph. While it's true that those stories have power, sometimes the stories that resonate most strongly occur in small moments of reflection or realization.

The truth at the emotional core of the story, its universal humanity, makes it compelling.

One of the strongest stories I ever heard from a client was about him wanting a certain pair of shoes as a kid. As we started developing the story, he doubted that it would work. As we dug into it, however, it came out that these shoes represented a new way of life for him, access to a higher socioeconomic status. The plot of the story was about shoes, but the story was really about a deep desire to belong.

Once we discovered the core, we were able to draw a direct link between that desire to belong and his work helping small business owners scale their business while staying aligned with their own core values.

What makes something 'story-worthy' has less to do with what happens in the story and more with what it's about, the deeper human need that drives the action. This applies to organizational stories just as much as personal ones. A story about a small, human interaction can have just as

much, if not more, weight as a tale of epic proportions.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when trying to determine the story-worthiness of an event or interaction:

*Did it move you or change your perception in some way? If you weren't directly involved, ask the same question for the folks who were involved.*

*What specifically resonated with you?*

*What deep human need (e.g. acceptance, love, community, support) underlies the events of the story?*

If the answer to the first question is 'yes,' then chances are that other people will be moved, too. And if something moves people, it's a story worth telling.

Trust the power of your story and of the universality of human experience.

### **Hurdle 3: 'This Isn't Working'**

Last year, a company brought me in to work with their business development team. They'd been trained to use stories in their sales and pitches. They'd even been coached on structure and delivery. But it wasn't working. Sales were actually worse than they had been!

After speaking with the team members, the problem became clear: they were delivering the stories like a memorized monologue instead of using them to connect. They sounded like automatons and weren't listening to the customers!

If you're not connecting, it may be that you're not tuning in to your 'audience.' Listening should be a full body activity that takes place all the time. Even when you're speaking, try to stay present to the listener's reactions and body language. What are they responding to most strongly? Where do they lose interest? Remember that the goal of developing and sharing these stories is to forge strong connections, not to impress people with your virtuosity as a storyteller.

All of that being said, it's also important to remember that no story is effective 100% of the time to 100% of the people. Sometimes, as with any form of communication, it's just not a good match.

### **What Next?**

Now that we have developed raw material, gotten to know our audience and what action we want them to take, put all the piece together and even addressed some common challenges, the question is: What do we do with all of these stories?

That's what we'll address in Part VII.

# PART VII: PUTTING YOUR STORIES TO WORK

Now that you've gone through the process of discovering and crafting a few stories, we'll wind things up by taking a look at four ways you can apply story and storytelling in your work. This list is far from comprehensive; the possibilities, as far as I can tell, are limitless.

## **Pitches and Meetings**

Incorporating a storytelling approach to your pitches and meetings can make the difference between a pitch that goes fine and one that sticks with people long after you leave the room. The story doesn't have to take much time (some of the most effective ones are less than a minute long) and immediately creates a more human atmosphere in the room.

Note that I'm in no way advocating that you rely completely on story to make your case. The goal is to connect, to invite the listener in so that they're engaged enough to be curious about your service, product, or company. We have to connect before we convince!

## **Story Circles**

One of the most powerful uses of story lies less in telling your own, but in creating a space for others to share theirs. The need to be seen and heard is a basic human desire. Sharing stories, and having them received without judgement or agenda, is one way to meet this desire.

Story Circles are exactly what the words imply: a circle of people telling

stories. A group of five to eight is ideal for the exercise. After receiving a prompt, participants have a few minutes to think about their story and take notes. Then each person gets 5 to 7 minutes to share their story. As one person speaks, the others in the group simply listen, keeping their attention focused on the speaker.

The prompts for this exercise depends on the context. For a team wanting to reconnect with core values, the prompt might revolve around a time that they lived one of the values (a Values-in-Action story). Or for a strategic vision session, the prompt might revolve around how they see themselves functioning in the team to help the work move forward. Whatever the prompt, one of the keys to this exercise is to encourage participants to engage with the storytelling, as opposed to the fact based, side of their brain. The creative impulse as opposed to the rational one.

If you're interested in learning more about Story Circles and how to facilitate the activity, please get in touch!

### **De-escalating Conflict**

Conflict within a team can be exceptionally damaging to morale and productivity. Oftentimes, conflict arises when people stop seeing each other as three-dimensional human beings and begin seeing each other as proponents of an opposing point of view. When that happens, communication becomes difficult to say the least.

Encouraging people or teams that have moved to a place of tension or conflict to share stories helps reassert their joint humanity and de-escalate the conflict. The stories don't have to be after the subject of conflict itself. In fact, it often works better if it isn't.

Invite people to share stories about pursuing their dreams. Or about times they've felt fully aligned with themselves. Anything that helps them reveal their humanity. Once people have heard each other's stories, they won't be able to see each other as two dimensional. The objective with this isn't necessarily to resolve to conflict so much as de-escalate to the point that resolution becomes possible.

## Communicating and/or Discovering Core Values

There are a couple of ways to communicate your core values. One is to simply state them: 'I believe in trust, customer service, and integrity.' If you do that, people will nod with understanding. Those are good values. But they won't necessarily feel any sense of conviction from you.

Story is the best way I know to surface core values and connect people with existing values.

Here's one way it can work:

A group of 10 people who work across functions in a company gathers. It might be a manager, an assistant, two engineers--the more diverse, the better. Sitting in a circle, they are asked to think about a simple prompt such as 'Think about a time you wanted something and what you did to get it' or 'What was a time you felt completely at home in your body and aligned with yourself?'

Each person then shares their story with the group. Through facilitated discussion, shared values demonstrated by the stories start to emerge. It may be a dedication to helping others, a desire for a supporting and challenging environment, or a need for trust in the workplace. The key is to connect each person's story and experience to a core value.

As the process continues, the most commonly held drives, beliefs and values naturally float to the surface. These then become, or at least heavily inform, the core values of the organization.

A similar process also works to connect teams with existing values. In that case, the prompts used would derive from the values. For example, to help deepen connection to the value of 'trust,' you would ask the team to share a personal story of a time when they felt trust and how that impacted them. With that connection forged, the value becomes more than a word, it becomes a governing principle.

Sharing stories around core values can elevate the values beyond lip

service to help them become fully embodied. Giving your team the chance to find and share their personal connection to the values can make the difference between an engaged team and one that is truly inspired.

### **What Next?**

Well, we've come to the end of our seven steps. I have a few closing thoughts to share. After that, it's back to step 1!



# CLOSING THOUGHTS: THE NEXT CHAPTER IN YOUR STORY

I wrote this short book to give you the chance to go through the process of building leadership stories, step by step. As mentioned in the Preface and throughout each section, this is a far from comprehensive guide. You'll come across pitfalls along the way. And questions. And moments of uncertainty.

All of that is part of storytelling. And it's part of being human.


As you continue to work with your own stories and build awareness around the stories surrounding you every day, I hope that you'll explore the power of story on your own.

What impact has developing your own stories had on your work? On your perception of yourself? On how people perceive you?

How can you expand your use of story to build a business and a team that feels organically aligned and inspired?

Finally, I'd like to close with an invitation: feel free to reach out with

questions. If I can answer them without giving away the proverbial farm, I will. And if not, I can point you in the right direction or, perhaps, we can explore what it would look like to work together.



### **About the Author**

Michael Kass is a Los Angeles based facilitator, coach, and award-winning storyteller dedicated to helping individuals, organizations, and communities harness the power of story to create change.

Michael's trainings on storytelling, speaking, and mindfulness have been featured at events hosted by the Center for Nonprofit Management, NationBuilder, The Well-Being Project, Kaiser Permanente, CreatorUp!, Swipe Out Hunger, the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles and many individual nonprofit and tech organizations. His storytelling has appeared on podcasts including I Love a Good Story, StoryWorthy, and TabooTales. Michael's solo storytelling show, Ceremony, has toured nationally and garnered recognition including LA Weekly Pick of the Week, Best of Fringe at the San Francisco Fringe Festival, and Outstanding Solo Performance at the San Diego Fringe Festival.

In addition to his work with story, Michael also facilitates breathwork meditation groups and private sessions and is the founder of Eastside Breathers in Los Angeles.

Michael is a graduate of Rice University and Northwestern University. He is an ACC coach certified by the International Coach Federation, is a mentor with the Creative Visions Foundation, and serves on the Board of Directors of the Breath Center.