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Guidelines to become a better storyteller

Content

Ch. 1 – “Mutual” – a story on the basis of storytelling	page 1
Ch. 2 – “An interesting story” - how to find stories	page 2
Ch. 3 – “Learn a new story” - two strategies for learning stories	page 3
Ch. 4 – “King and servant” – take and give responsibility	page 4
Ch. 5 – “Images and meaning” - two sides of the same coin	page 6
Ch. 6 – “Who is telling stories?” – simple answer: Everybody	page 8
Ch. 7 – “How to collect stories” – oops stories as well	page 8
Ch. 8 – “The organizational tree” – I -, we – and future - stories	page 9

Ch. 1 – Mutual

“I started teaching storytelling in 1994.

We offered our students a program with two lessons twice a week in four months. I had to prepare 26 lessons filled with theory, practical exercises and inspiration to work out side the classroom.

When I started my preparations, I realized how little I knew about the subject. At the time I had been a theatre director for 10 years and my experience with storytelling was limited. Therefore, I looked around.

One of my main interests was to investigate the basis of a story:

I believe that the storyteller is influenced by the listener. The creation of the inner film is a mutual responsibility. It is like a dance where you are not a 100 % sure of who is taking the lead.

In 1994 I asked myself this fundamental question: How does the storyteller involve the listener in the creation of both meaning and flow of the pictures?

Could I find a daily life expression to describe the phenomena?

The word interaction wasn't sufficient, because interaction covers only the mutual responsibility for the content of the story. There was something much more interesting at hand!

In 1994, not a lot of people were involved in storytelling, and the few books that I have borrowed at the library weren't of much help. I went looking in rather strange places.

I read some interesting points about *Verfremdung* in the work of Bertolt Brecht and others. I looked and found inspiration in the work of Eisenstein, a film director from the 1920s. Then, one day I found a book describing the conversation between Albert Einstein and the Danish Nobel Winner Niels Bohr. At a certain point of time Bohr talks about an expression that caught my attention. Bohr described what happened when you send out a proton. It can either be a wave or a particle and the decision is taken by the spectator. Bohr called it a **complementary** movement between opposites. Bohr and others found inspiration in the ancient Chinese Philosophy, Taoism.

Here was something. Then I read a fragment of a book about the founder of my school. His name was Grundtvig and his school took its basis on the following:

1. Respect for every student and interest in what each individual can bring into the room
2. The spoken word as a base for the talks around any subject and
3. then I noticed that the Danish word, *vekselvirkning*, could be the expression, I had been looking for. The closest you get to an English translation is the word mutual.

vekselvirkning : mutual reaction; reciprocal action; reciprocal effect; inter-relationship (The inter-relationships of the process technical measures); interaction (the Interaction between people and technology at work); interplay; with ~ interactive; (adv) interactively; reciprocally acting; mutually reacting.

In 1996 I went to a master class with Dario Fo, from Italy, the winner of the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature and a wonderful storyteller: "The audience has always been my litmus paper, every second. Are you able to listen to them, does the audience conduct you like a conductor of a major orchestra? But sorry that storyteller that get flattered and carried away; the audience can also be your wild horse, that throws you off the saddle"

When I started my classes in storytelling, the first thing I wrote was the word mutual. The students went looking for connections between storytelling and mutuality.

Ch. 2 - An interesting story

First step of the storytelling process is to find a good story. And that is the first mutual meeting between the storyteller and the listener. Try to image one of the listeners. What is her interest? Who is his partner? Try to put yourself in the shoe of the listener and from that point answer the fundamental question:

- Is the story relevant to the listeners?

If you have answered yes to that question, ask yourself the next, just as crucial:

- Does the storyteller learn something new from telling this particular story to this particular audience?

The storyteller must be curious - must have the spirit to explore the unknown. This story will be told once to these people at that moment. So you as a storyteller are excited to learn from the experience.

When you search for a good story, try searching unlikely places. If you are the boss, ask the cleaning staff, if you are a mother searching for a good story, search in your own life. Do you remember your first bike? The first kiss?

Sometimes a story needs to be refined to be a diamond. And the only way to find out if the story is a diamond is by telling it. So find someone to practice on. Ask the person: Will you please listen to this story and give your honest feed back?

Exercises to find good stories – 2 persons, a storyteller and a listener. Can be done in groups.

Tell a story about this morning. 1 minute. All the details.

Tell about a certain time in your life where you overcame an adversity.

Tell about a room you like – one specific spot that you like. Could be outdoor, could be an open space.

Tell about a person that meant something for you in your past.

Preparation: Choose at least 25 different pictures from different sources with different subjects pictured. Put them in a bowl or a hat. Every participant picks one picture. Turn to a partner and tell a story about that picture. Remember: A story needs who, where and when!

Read the newspaper, find a small story that attacks your emotions, tell it.

Ch. 3 - Learn a new story

In the motion picture from 1992 by Tarantino "The Reservoir Dogs" there is an undercover agent, Mr. Orange. He is told by his police partner to learn a story for gaining confidence from the members of the gang. Mr. Orange is handed over four pages filled with the anecdote. Then Mr. Orange asks his partner, how he can learn all this? His partner tells him that he should learn it by using two strategies:

1. Hard work - "You shall say it, say it and say it".
2. You have to imagine the environment. The story in the film is a story from a loo. And Mr. Orange is told to imagine the smell of the

loo, if the soap dispenser is full or there is granulated soap, if the hand dryer is from the company Katrin etc.

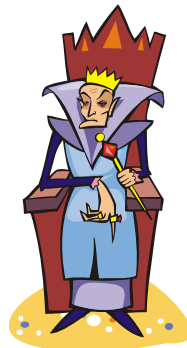
There are no experts in storytelling. Of course, it is possible to consult professional storytellers and get them to give you some good tips on how to become a better storyteller and listener (the two are connected: the better a listener you are, the better you can tell a story!).

But once this is said, there is still only one way to learn how to tell stories: Tell stories.

Start by finding a good short story. If it moves you or you have fun, then your audience is probably reacting the same way. Then you have to learn your little story by heart. Find its images and get to know them.

1. Tell the story to yourself, no spoken words - I like to walk when I do this – when you have told the story like that, ask yourself: Where do you feel comfortable and where are you lost? Ask yourself why? Wherever you find a weak spot in your telling, focus on it. Something interesting could be hiding.
2. Tell it out loud to yourself – you can pretend that you are talking in your headset – it is different to tell with no words than it is with the voice – make notes
3. tell it to a one-man audience – let the listener give you response (see page 6)

Ch. 4 - King and servant



Now you have chosen a story. You have found an opportunity. And the listeners are there.

Before you start telling your story you have to consider: Are the listeners comfortable? Do they hear you? Can you see their eyes?

Your beginning is crucial.

Go straight to the story. Let us hear: Where? When? Who? You know that your story is good. Show it! Be there for the listener.

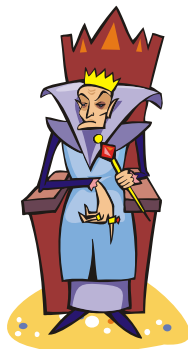
In the silence you invite us into the world of your story. You let us, as listeners, create both meaning, pictures and senses.

Stimulate our senses.

It could be done very fast by telling about the looks, the sounds, the smells. And then silence.

If you are uncertain, be honest. Don't shout, whisper. Instead of throwing more energy to a sceptical audience, you should try the opposite: Give less energy. Create a moment of silence. Invite the listener into a mutual experience.

Tell us your story both as a king and as the most humble servant. It is a **complementary** movement between opposites.



When you finish your story, you are the king again. Just finish your story. Stop talking and let the listeners speak. Don't apologize and don't ask for their sympathy. Just relax and let the listeners give their feed-back.

Exercise for king and servant - in a group, min. 15 people.

Create a space for the storytelling performance. The storytelling space is empty. The group members sit on chairs. Everybody has prepared a story. One by one they get up and stand in the storytelling space.

The person who had left the audience and now is a storyteller stands firmly on both feet and tells his story

1. the first meaning (king)
2. silence (servant)
3. the last meaning (king)
4. silence (servant)

Now leave the storytelling space and return to the audience.

The next listener becomes a storyteller. By this way you can hear 15 stories (or part of 15 stories) in a very short time.

Ch. 4 - Images and meaning

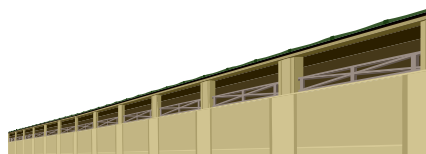
If the story just contains a lot of beautiful images and the meaning is nonsense, you have lost your audience.

And they will never come back to you. So you have to pick a good story with new insights for the listeners and you as a storyteller.

But just as important is the need for clear and creative images in the story.

Read the work of H.C. Andersen. In every story you are stimulated, he creates images, tells about the sound and the smells. It is a voyage de senses. In this way, he activates you, he invites you to work.

My Swedish colleague, Anders Granström tells about a city that had a wall around it. When he has finished his story, he asks the listeners which colour the wall had.



A woman on the first row saw a red wall, in the back two men agrees on yellow and soon the room is filled with suggestions.

As long as the details are not relevant to the meaning of the story, the listener can create their own images.

There are always two stories told: The story of the storyteller and the story of the listener

Silence is a key word here. It is in the silence filled with tension that the listeners create images.

Feed-back to a told story

Ask for feed-back and use these guidelines:
The first three steps are given in a one way communication from the listener to the storyteller.

1. What was the clearest image?
2. What was the theme of the story? What was it about?

3. Give positive feed-back to the storyteller – rhythm, voice, body language, eye contact etc.

Mutual response:

4. Discuss the process of the three steps and find ways of improvement.

Exercise, in group of min. 14

Phase one

Stand in a circle. Turn to a partner.

Choose one direction. Everybody facing this direction in the circle is no. 1. And the rest is no. 2.

No. 1 tells the story of this morning to no. 2.

No. 2 listens carefully. 1 minute of storytelling.

Feed-back from no. 2 in two steps: Clearest image and positive feed-back to the way the story was told.

No. 2 tells about their mornings.

Feedback from no.1.

Phase two

Everybody turns around and faces a new person.

No. 1 tells no. 2 the story that they have heard from the first partner.

They focus only on the clearest image given in the feed-back and therefore they are forced to exaggerate, so - the clearest image can last one minute.

Feed-back, clearest picture and positive feed-back on the way the story is told

No. 2 tells story to no. 1.

Feed-back, clearest picture and positive feed-back on the way the story is told

Phase three

Turn around to the first partner.

No. 1 tells the story last heard, now as you wish to tell it, without any limits.

Feed-back.

No. 2 tells the story last heard.

Feed-back.

Did you learn something about storytelling in this process?

Did you or any other member of the group become a better storyteller?

Who is telling stories?

My son, 1½ years old at the time, and I sat playing in a pile of sand lying right by the road. It was a beautiful autumn day, and when we left that place, we both felt good.

One week later, the rest of my family came walking by the place where we had played. When my son spotted the sand pile, he began gesturing and speaking in incomprehensible baby talk to my wife. She laughed and looked at my son with loving eyes, and then we all felt good when we left there.



Stories have been told as long as people have existed. It is a way for a person to become one of the tribe. My son demonstrated one of the fundamental things about storytelling by telling the story to my wife, not to me, although it was me that was pushing the baby carriage. But I had been there, you see, when it originally happened, and to create a new space, the story had to be told to my wife. This allowed our son to take part in the world twice:

1. by doing something with his father that made us both happy, and
2. by telling his mother about it, thus creating a new happiness, one not unlike the first.

We enter into the world by listening to stories about it. We begin changing the world by telling about it.

It is the same in organizations. An employee enters his or her new workplace by listening to stories about it. He or she begins to become a part of the company, when stories are told about him or her. The new employee listens to other stories and gradually becomes a part of the company's history him- or herself. The wise manager understands this and encourages it to happen.

Collecting Stories in the organization

Everyone can tell and listen to stories, and everyone recognizes the elements of the story that are relevant to them. Recognition also arises from the type of story it is. When you use an easily recognizable format such as that of a fairy tale to tell a story, then your listeners can concentrate on the content rather than the form. Almost all good stories about an organization can be put in a fairy tale format, with heroes and villains, dragons and princes.

Stories told in the company can be collected in several different ways. When the project, all levels of the organization are informed, and everyone is asked to find the stories most often told.

Then you need to create space and quiet for informal meetings. Formal meetings, where there is an agenda and a chairman, require knowledgeable assistance, of course, but the most important thing is that there is room for informal meetings as well.

Formal meetings can take the form of story circles, where groups of people sit around in circles and tell each other stories. Exercises are good as well, e.g. everyone trying to tell the worst story they can (this can get pretty wild), or who performs a certain task best. Changing perspectives is good practice: tell the story from your point of view, changing its focus. How does one of the other people in the story tell it?

"Oops" Stories

We do not need to focus only on successes: on the contrary, remembering only part of the past only makes us poorer. It must be legitimate to tell about the "oops" mistakes we make: they happen to all of us.

In the beginning, this will cause a great deal of uncertainty, and ethics rules should be introduced for this work – it is very strong forces we are unleashing when we do this. After a while, however, we can see that it doesn't hurt (all the time) and that it is an effective way to share knowledge.



The organizational tree

There are basically three kinds of stories that can be used in your organization:

- *I - stories – the roots of the tree:* Every person in the organization is important and every voice should be heard. Some of these stories should stay hidden under the surface.
- *We stories - the trunk of the tree:* Stories that create identity. Values become alive in these stories.
- *Future stories – the fruits on the tree:* Visions of what the immediate and long-term future will bring to the organization.

Future

A vision for the organization in the future is that its members are independent individuals able to make complex and far-reaching decisions. Networks form, bloom and are transformed into new networks. One of the prerequisites for a lively and chaotic system such as this being able to function is knowledge about and actual experience with stories that are told.