

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of an elephant's face, focusing on its eye and the deeply wrinkled texture of its skin. The lighting is warm, highlighting the intricate patterns of the wrinkles. Overlaid on the lower-left portion of the image are three dark blue rectangular boxes containing white text.

Storytelling in Business

Bringing Presentations to Life

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of an elephant's head and tusk. The elephant's skin is dark and heavily wrinkled, with a blue-tinted overlay on the right side. The tusk is light-colored and curves downwards. The background is dark and textured.

CONTENTS

03 STORYTELLING

04 WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY

05 CHARACTER

07 PLOT

08 STRUCTURE

11 FURTHER INFORMATION

STORYTELLING




No one dreams in bullet points.

Thank you for taking part in this Storytelling in Business seminar. All too often business presentations are delivered in a manner which, to be frank, can only be described as stupefyingly dull. When a presenter reads out detailed technical data to an audience, the effect is underwhelming; when they tell a story the effect is mesmerising.

Being able to convey your message through stories will tap into the human level of your audience and not only engage but also resonate. There are a number of tried and tested techniques that work with stories and by exploring these styles and how they can be adapted to business, you will be able to speak to people in a way that connects with them on a deeper level and makes you memorable.

Luan de Burgh
Director

T: +44(0)20 7416 6076
E: luan@deburghgroup.com

 Luan de Burgh
 @luandeburgh
 de Burgh Group



Over the years I have become convinced that we learn best – and change – from hearing stories that strike a chord within us... Those in leadership positions who fail to grasp or use the power of stories risk failure for their companies and for themselves.

*John Kotter,
Professor of Leadership,
Harvard Business School*



**“No one cares about your strategic staircase.
No one cares about your bottom line orientation.
No one cares about your global talent sustainability
imperative to nurture robust future leaders...
But everyone cares about a good story.”**

What makes a good story

We like stories. Stories are part of our lives; stories are what inspire and motivate us; we have been telling stories for thousands of years. The inside wall of a cave and some charcoal embers being now the office HD multi-function smart screen complete with wireless technology that NASA would be proud of.

Stories are what connect us and business is all about connecting with people. Even the driest of corporate presentations can be brought to life with a story and an engaging presenter. It's the story that we remember.

All too often in the corporate world stories are ignored. They are for others – not for the serious world of business. How short sighted that is. Business is about connecting with people and you do not connect with people by boring them into submission through dreary content full of interminable jargon, random meaningless words and lacklustre slides fired off in bullet points.

We don't speak in bullet points – they are not a normal form of interaction, but they have become the accepted mode of communication in business.

Stories are not mission statements detached from reality and full of corporate verbiage. Stories are human, real and bring businesses to life. Business stories are not fiction, they are a true reflection

of what the business really is and where it is going. Stories bring people together, raise a sense of common purpose and inspire emotion. Stories illustrate points. Stories tell people who you are. Business stories are told with an outcome in mind, not simply to entertain.

“

**An honest tale speeds best
being plainly told.**

Richard III, IV, iv

”

Businesses need to look at themselves under a microscope, look at what works rather than what doesn't and look at what really galvanizes those who are part of it. We learn from stories – storytelling is a great tool for leaders seeking new behaviours in their teams.

There are stories all around us

but that doesn't necessarily mean they are good stories. In the same way that a great cocktail needs a recipe it also needs creativity. It is the little details that capture our imagination, capture emotion and bring stories to life and in so doing the storyteller appeals not just to the rational side of their audience's character, but the emotional side and that's what makes them different.

Stories in presentations should be:

- Relevant
- Honest
- Memorable

A good presenter takes their audience on a journey and leaves them feeling inspired and motivated.

Our brains are wired to respond to stories. Stories help us to remember things and the importance of this in a pitch or presentation is paramount. When businesses go out to market they often do so armed with facts and figures, but our brains simply do not remember these facts and figures for long. Stories, however, remain with us for far longer.

When told facts, only part of our brain focuses; yet when we are told a story our whole brain wakes up; the parts responsible for language, feelings and emotion.



A study from Princeton University published in 2010 demonstrated that the neural activity in the brain of someone telling a story will be mirrored by the neural activity of their listener(s), whereas when there is merely the transference of data no such mirroring will occur. In ‘*Speaker-Listener Neural Coupling Underlies Successful Communication*’ the neural activity of speakers and listeners was monitored using fMRI and the observed coupling was shown to be crucial to successful communication.

Keep it relevant, keep it honest and keep it memorable. ■

Character

Some people are born storytellers, some people achieve storytelling and others have storytelling thrust upon them to paraphrase a great storyteller, William Shakespeare. We are not all natural storytellers, or rather, we were once upon a time but the combined worlds of formal education and business have taken their toll.

However, there are some simple principles that will add impact to any story:

- Keep it simple
- Create desire
- Make it memorable
- Have a conversation
- Respect your audience

1. Keep it simple – most stories follow a fairly simple structure and have a handful of main characters. The characters listed here are taken from the leading study on archetypes published in 1949 and written by Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A*

Thousand Faces, and are deeply rooted in the myths and legends of many cultures.

a. Hero

The essence of the Hero is not bravery or nobility, but self-sacrifice. The Hero must pay a price to obtain their goal.

The Hero’s journey during a story is a path from the ego, the self, to a new identity which has grown to include the experiences of the story. This path often consists of a separation from family or group to a new, unfamiliar and challenging world and finally a return to the ordinary, but now expanded world.



Think when we talk of horses, that you see them printing their proud hoofs i’ the receiving earth; For ‘tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings.

Henry V, Prologue



The Hero must learn in order to grow. Often the heart of a story is not the obstacles they face, but new wisdom acquired, from a mentor, a lover, or even from the villain.

Heroes can be willing and adventurous, or reluctant and reserved. They may be group and family oriented or loners. They may change and grow themselves, or act as catalysts for others to grow and act heroically.

b. Mentor

The Mentor is a character who aids or trains the hero. The Mentor represents the wiser and more godlike qualities within us.

The Mentor’s role is to teach and equip the hero by giving them gifts that are important to their quest (Obi Wan Kenobi giving Luke Skywalker his father’s light sabre). Frequently, the Mentor requires the Hero to have passed some sort of test before receiving the gift. The gift may be seemingly insignificant at the time but important later.

c. Threshold Guardian

The Threshold Guardian is the first obstacle to the hero in their journey. The threshold is the gateway to the new world that the hero must enter to change and grow.

The Threshold Guardian is usually not the story’s antagonist. Only after this initial w has been surpassed will the hero face the true contest and the arch-villain. Frequently the Threshold Guardian is a henchman or employee of the antagonist.

The role of the Threshold Guardian is to test the hero’s mettle and worthiness to begin the story’s journey, and to show that the journey will not be easy. In the Harry Potter series this role is fulfilled by Professor Snape.

d. Herald

The role of the Herald is to announce the challenge which starts the (often reluctant) hero on their journey. The Herald is the person or piece of information which upsets the sleepy equilibrium in which the hero has lived and starts the adventure.

The Herald need not be a person – it can be an event or force.

e. Shapeshifter

The Shapeshifter changes role or personality, often in significant ways, is hard to understand and casts doubt and uncertainty. That very changeability is the essence of this archetype. The Shapeshifter's alliances and loyalty are uncertain and the sincerity of their claims are often questionable. This keeps the hero off guard.

The Shapeshifter is sometimes a catalyst whose changing nature forces changes in the hero, but the normal role is to bring suspense into a story by forcing the reader, along with the hero, to question beliefs and assumptions.

f. Shadow

The Shadow archetype is a negative figure, representing things we don't like and would like to eliminate.

The Shadow often takes the form of the antagonist in a story. But not all antagonists are villains;

sometimes the antagonist is someone whose goals clash with the protagonist's.

The Shadow is the worthy opponent with whom the hero must struggle. In a conflict between hero and villain, the fight is to the end; one or the other must be destroyed or rendered impotent. The Shadow brings out the best in the Hero who thus achieves their destiny.

While the shadow is a negative force in the story, it's important to remember that no one is a villain in their own eyes. In fact, Shadows frequently see themselves as a Hero, and the story's Hero as their villain.

g. Trickster

The Trickster is a clown, a witty and humorous mischief maker. They provide the comedy relief that a story often needs to offset heavy dramatic tension. The Trickster keeps things in proportion and keeps the story moving on.

The Trickster can be an ally or companion of the hero, or may work for the villain. In some instances the trickster may even be the hero or villain. In any role, the trickster usually represents the force of cunning, and is pitted against opponents who are stronger or more powerful.

2. Create desire – to convince people that your product or service is useful to them you need to create desire. You need to demonstrate how your story is going to put things right and the more relevant and interesting you can be the better your chances are of creating desire.

3. Make it memorable – have a great opening, inspire curiosity where you can and, if you are going to use visual aids make them strong.

4. Have a conversation – use everyday language; replace jargon and acronyms with actual words and speak as if you are talking to one other person.



5. Respect your audience – your story is for them, not for you. On no account talk about how great you are and how many awards you have won. ■

Plot

In another great work on storytelling, *The Seven Basic Plots*, Christopher Booker argues that everything ever written boils down to seven plots. Whilst this is not a precise science, it is hard to find storylines that do not fit into one of these plots.

“

Storytelling is about two things; it's about character and plot.

George Lucas

”

1. Overcoming the monster

– the man character sets out to defeat a powerful force of evil and can be used for

- a. succeeding when the odds were stacked against you
- b. talking about life lessons
- c. discussing how you or your team became stronger through adversity.

2. Rags to riches

– the hero comes from nothing, achieves everything, loses it and has to fight to get it back again and is good for

- a. admitting mistakes
- b. talking about benefit of taking risks
- c. explaining how you (or main character) earned success.

3. Voyage and return

– the main character travels to an unfamiliar place overcomes trials and uses their new-found



wisdom to find their way back again and is useful for

- a. talking about being open to new experiences
- b. showing what you or the protagonist learned on the journey
- c. demonstrating power of friendship and partnership.

4. The quest

– the hero sets out in search of a specific prize, overcomes challenges, personal flaws and temptations and reaches their goal, often accompanied by accomplices and is good for

- a. talking about sticking to convictions
- b. showing how you or the protagonist grew
- c. demonstrating the power of teamwork.

5. Comedy

– a light-hearted story which centres on confusion leading to conflict and a happy conclusion and which sometimes focuses on two people who are destined to be together but outside forces conspire against

them and is useful for

- a. talking about the early difficulties of a partnership
- b. discussing what was learned from a difficult negotiation
- c. demonstrating the mutual support of two parties.

6. Tragedy

– the main character is good but flawed and faces temptation which ultimately leads to their downfall with this character being used for

- a. explaining wider problems in business or society
- b. demonstrating differences between them and you
- c. demonstrating how not to do things and how we can learn.

7. Rebirth

– the main character is a bad person who is shown the error of their ways and redeems themselves and is good for

- a. talking about being enlightened
- b. showing the importance of having support from people close by
- c. demonstrating that everyone has the capacity for change. ■



Structure

Seven storytelling techniques that can be used in business presentations:

1. **The Hero's Return** – or Monomyth takes the audience on a journey and demonstrates the benefits of taking risks as well as explaining how you developed a greater understanding of an issue and has the benefit of taking the audience full circle.

The hero is called onto a journey that they don't particularly wish to go on, going from the known into the unknown where they face an ordeal. They will have allies and enemies and face various tests but will ultimately overcome

and return with a reward and new-found wisdom. Examples are numerous from Homer's *Odyssey* to *Finding Nemo* and *The Lion King* to *The Silence of the Lambs*.

How does your presentation, pitch or speech stem from a journey of sorts?

2. **The Mountain** – takes the audience on a similar journey to the Monomyth but instead of it being a solo journey it is more akin to a TV series with each episode having its ups and downs all of which lead up to a big finale. This is particularly good for **explaining how you overcame a series of challenges in your business** and it does so by building the tension

leading to a satisfying resolution. Any classic mini series uses this technique and it can work just as effectively when speaking about the challenges of business.

Does your presentation reflect distinct business challenges that have formulated your actions or opinions?

3. **The Nested Loop** – is a particularly effective technique for explaining how you were **inspired to do something** and involves placing the most important part of your story in the centre and using stories around that to elaborate – three stories in total is a good number. The first story you start is the last story you finish; the second story you start is the ►

penultimate story you finish and the third story you start is the antepenultimate. This can be varied depending on what helps to move the story forward and cliff-hangers can be employed. *Breaking Bad* is a prime example of the nested loop.

It is the art of using selected stories to hook an audience in. Leaving loops open creates anticipation. Resolving them creates closure. Both are necessary for a good talk.

Have you experienced different business situations could be used to illustrate the main point of your presentation?

4. Sparklines – are a way of contrasting ‘what is’ with ‘what could be’ which fuels a desire for change in the audience by drawing their attention to particular problems and what could be done to effect transformation and is a very emotional technique. Most famously, Dr. Martin Luther King used the contrasting forms by aligning everything that was on one side and everything that could be on the other side and the emotional response was extraordinary.

Is your presentation proposing to change the status quo for the better?

5. In Medias Res – is the art of beginning a story in the middle of events before going on to explain how you arrived at that point. You are literally dropping your audience right into the midst of the action so they will be engaged from the start and want to know how they got there. It is a particularly effective technique for **grabbing attention, keeping an audience with you and focusing on a**

specific event or point. *Kill Bill* is a classic example of this style of storytelling.

Can you put a fresh spin on your presentation that will keep your audience gripped until the big picture is revealed?

“

A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end but not necessarily in that order.

Jean-Luc Godard

”

6. Converging Ideas – is similar to nested loops but rather than framing one story with complementary stories it demonstrates how several equally important stories arrive at a single conclusion. It can show how **great minds came together and how relationships have formed through collaboration.**

Does your presentation reflect the ideas and concepts of others, or have collaborative elements you can draw upon. Alternatively, can you illustrate your presentation through the use of different media?

7. The False Start – is all about luring your audience into a false sense of security and then shocking them with the unexpected. You tell them a story with a predictable ending and then shock them with an unforeseen turn. It is a **quick attention-grabber** by disrupting your audience’s expectations and surprising them and is effective in explaining how you **learnt from an experience** and became more flexible. *Game of Thrones* is a good example of the false start with its killing off of main characters unexpectedly.

Can you lead your audience down a well-trodden path before twisting it to reveal how that experience showed up your shortcomings and how you learnt from it? ■



Knowing your audience

Having thought about plot and structure, you need to think about your audience. It is no good creating a great story with a very clear and engaging plot and then delivering it in a way that your target audience will not relate to. Understanding why companies and individuals project themselves in the way that they do is critical to identifying the right style of delivery for them and will place you ahead of the rest.

This doesn't mean that you have to change your personality, but rather adapt your style of storytelling to best suit your audience.

“

It is an ancient need to be told stories and the story needs a great storyteller.

Alan Rickman

”

Conflict

Other than a main character, the hero, the essential ingredient to any story is conflict. Set these two up and you will have an audience eagerly engaged. If the hero doesn't struggle why do we care what happens.

There are different types of conflict in stories:

- 1. Hero fights villain** – the hero is driven by a deep desire and the villain stands in their way and is used for showing what you stand for and setting yourself in direct opposition.
- 2. Hero fights society** – raging against a man-made regime and is good for announcing a new way of doing things.
- 3. Hero fights nature** – survival stories which appeal to any form of adventure.
- 4. Hero fights themselves** – a battle of conscience and good for any type of struggle.

Storytelling takes time and practice and can, on occasion, take courage but it is worth all the effort when you connect with your audience in a human way that allows them to relate to what you are trying to explain and remember you for the right reasons. ■

Top Ten Tips

- 01. Have a plot**
- 02. Keep it simple**
- 03. Create tension**
- 04. Create desire**
- 05. Respect your audience**
- 06. Have a conversation**
- 07. Be relevant**
- 08. Be clear**
- 09. Be honest**
- 10. Be memorable**

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FURTHER INFORMATION

de Burgh Group Training Courses

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**For further information,
please contact us on**

T: +44 (0)20 7416 6076

E: training@deburghgroup.com

www.deburghgroup.com



www.deburghgroup.com

T: +44 (0)20 7416 6076

E: info@deburghgroup.com

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