Stephen Denning describes the power of telling stories to transfer knowledge and promote workplace change. While his article is written for a business audience, its lessons are equally relevant to leaders in health services organizations or anyone interested in being more effective at sharing knowledge and inspiring action.

Choosing the right story for your purpose

A “well-told” story is not always the best story for the job. In fact, the key to effective storytelling is choosing the right story for your purpose. Denning describes eight story types, each suitable for a different purpose. In addition to providing a powerful tool for focusing attention and highlighting change, storytelling can:

- spark action;
- communicate who you are;
- transmit ideas;
- communicate who your organization is;
- share knowledge; and
- lead people into the future.

Denning summarizes the purpose, characteristics, and results of each story type in a table. The following condensed version focuses on the five story types that are most relevant to health system policy and decision makers.

### Five story type patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>The story should:</th>
<th>You will need to:</th>
<th>Your story will inspire such phrases as:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spark action</td>
<td>Describe a successful change, yet allow room for the listener to imagine</td>
<td>Avoid excessive detail</td>
<td>“Just imagine…” “What if…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share knowledge</td>
<td>Focus on mistakes, how they were corrected, and why the solution worked</td>
<td>Solicit alternative solutions</td>
<td>“We’d better look out for that, too!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead people into the future</td>
<td>Evoke images of the future you want to create, without providing too much detail (that may turn out to be wrong)</td>
<td>Have strong storytelling skills</td>
<td>“When do we start?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster collaboration</td>
<td>Recount a situation that listeners have experienced, prompting them to share their own stories</td>
<td>Permit time to share stories</td>
<td>“That reminds me of a time I . . .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmit values</td>
<td>Prompt discussion about the issues raised by the values being promoted</td>
<td>Tell a story that is consistent with your own actions and uses realistic characters and scenarios</td>
<td>“That’s so right!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From among the above list, Denning expands on three story types: those that spark action, share knowledge, or lead people into the future.

**Spark action**

Denning says the question leaders ask most often is how to master a “springboard story” to effectively spark transformational change in their organization. The key to it lies in telling the story in a minimalist fashion. By providing only the bare bones of the story, the storyteller leaves room for listeners to imagine it unravelling for themselves. As listeners envision the story in their own context, they inadvertently create action plans that turn the vision into reality.

**Share knowledge**

Stories that aim to share knowledge tend to focus on recent mistakes or pitfalls and provide great detail around the cause of a mishap and its consequences. To make these stories relevant for a broad audience, the story must be transformed into what Denning refers to as the “well-told” story, complete with a human hero, plot, and turning point.

**Lead people into the future**

To prepare others for what lies ahead, leaders can tell stories that take people from where they are now to where they need to be. Because the future is uncertain, crafting a credible and compelling story about what lies ahead can be challenging. For Denning, a successful story about the future must be logical and convincing enough so listeners can imagine how they would operate in their new setting or environment.

**Summary**

If used properly, storytelling can be an effective tool. Crafting an artful story takes time, skill, and good judgment. Delivering it is just as important, as delivery can enhance or diminish the story’s effectiveness. Harnessing the full power of storytelling takes time and practice, but mastering it can help inspire action, incite change, and transfer knowledge to those who can benefit from it.

**Bibliographic Reference**


For more information about the Insight and Action series or to retrieve other summaries, please go to www.chsrf.ca/other_documents/insight_action/index_e.php. Please note that this summary is an interpretation and is not necessarily endorsed by the author(s) of the work cited.