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# Leadership Through Storytelling

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A column sponsored by the ABC Business Practices Committee

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In this issue:

## **LEADERSHIP THROUGH STORYTELLING**

WHEN I WAS about 9 years old, I heard the story about two long-time friends who were riding the ferry back to their village many decades ago. They were laughing and talking about their trip to the city and what they planned to do once they got home. Most of the other passengers knew the men and that they got along well.

At one of the stops, a stranger boarded the ferry and sat facing the men. He observed the camaraderie between them. After listening to the men for some time, the stranger greeted them and asked if they had any wishes. The men quickly responded that everyone has wishes, so they had wishes. The stranger pondered for a minute then proposed that if the men told him their wishes, he would grant them. The two friends looked puzzled.

“You mean you are able to grant wishes?” asked one friend, jokingly.

“Oh, yes.” The stranger replied. “But with certain conditions.”

“What conditions?” the other friend asked.

“Whatever the first person wishes for, the other person gets twofold,” replied the stranger.

The two friends were unconvinced but started discussing what they might wish for. They also joked about who would go first. Then the discussion got serious.

“Well, why should I go first?” one friend asked, “You go first.”

“But you always get your way,” said the other. “You can be less selfish for once.”

As the men argued, their faces became stern, and it was apparent to the other passengers that the friendship that the men shared was under great strain. Finally, one friend volunteered to go first. The other friend was relieved yet pleased that his friend was giving up. The friend who offered to go first turned to the stranger to speak his wish.

“I wish,” said the friend, with a pregnant pause. “I wish to be blind in one eye.”

That haunting tale still stands as one of the most memorable and influential on my life. Over the years, I often use the moral of this story as a touchstone for judging my decisions when faced with personal and professional challenges. Thus, I was not surprised to read recently that “we gradually acquire the ability to formulate plans through the stories we hear in childhood” (Shaw, Brown, & Bromiley, 1998, p. 42).

I have been keenly interested in storytelling since attending a seminar led by John Seeley Brown, coauthor of *The Social Life of Information* and a former chief scientist of Xerox Corporation. Brown and Duguid (2000) have been leading advocates of stories in the workplace, which they described as the “social software” that will promote organizational learning, increase employee intelligence, and boost innovation far more effectively than the “bits and modems” of hi-tech information systems. Brave scientists!

Stories play a distinctive role in effective leadership, says Howard Gardner, the Harvard psychologist who has written extensively about multiple intelligences. He suggests that “the artful creation and articulation of stories constitutes a fundamental part of the leader’s vocation” (Gardner, 1995, p. 43). This view is echoed by Annette Simmons, author of the business best-seller *The Story Factor*. Simmons (2003) defines the story as a “narration of a sequence of events that stimulates a visual, sensory, and emotional experience that feels significant for both the listener and the teller” (p. 41). She also promotes storytelling as a way of “reconnecting people to their wisdom” and as a means of escaping the “tyranny of agendas, objective measures, and outcomes [that] has distorted our ability to do good work” (p. 42).

The series of business practices articles in this issue looks at storytelling in various organizational and career contexts. The lead article by Janis Forman describes a CEO who uses his experience “finding Waldo” with his young son as a story springboard to motivate potential investors in his company. Kenneth Bulls, a former military officer,

shares his stories about leadership in the military and his transition to corporate and university careers. Ken Land, a mental health counselor, discusses his use of storytelling as a therapeutic method to teach courage and other life lessons to clients.

Cecilia Katzeff and Vanessa Ware introduce us to the application of digital media in organizational learning and describe the use of video storytelling booths as a learning tool in a temporary, volunteer organization. Yunxia Zhu and Allee Zhang collect “success stories” from Chinese executives who describe the importance of establishing *guanxi* in Chinese business culture. And finally, Katharine Hansen, an expert on career development strategies, discusses her interviews with employees who had experienced major changes in their organizations, but who turned those seemingly negative experiences into stories about change to enhance their careers.

It is my hope that as instructors, trainers, and consultants, we begin to ask our students and employees about the experiences that have shaped them, with an ear toward turning their stories into instruments for personal, professional, and organizational success.

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## LEADERS AS STORYTELLERS: FINDING WALDO

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I worked with the senior managers of a real estate investment firm, helping them to prepare for their annual presentation to investors for the next round of funds. The CEO himself was an excellent speaker, as I witnessed during the opening session. He began his presentation with a personal story, armed with one of the “Where’s Waldo?” books, the primary audience for which are young

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