

## CHAPTER 5

# Making your stories shine

*If you always put limits on everything you do, physical or anything else, it will spread into your work and into your life. There are no limits. There are only plateaus, and you must not stay there, you must go beyond them.*

**Bruce Lee, martial artist and actor**

So you have a good story, but how can you ensure you have an inspiring story—one that is going to land you that multimillion-dollar deal, get you promoted, help you exceed your sales targets or make you the stand-out speaker at your next company event?

If you want to achieve all that and more, this is the chapter for you. We want to make sure your stories ‘shine’ to give you every chance of getting people hooked on you and your messages.

## Avoiding story roadblocks

One of the first things you have to do is to ensure you do not have any ‘roadblocks’ in your stories. A roadblock is a point in your story where the audience gets stuck.

One presenter we watched shared a story where she was shopping on Thursday and was rushing as the shops shut at 5 pm. Everyone was thinking, ‘Thursday is late night shopping. The shops are open until nine’. Immediately there

was a roadblock that distracted the audience and made them think, 'You haven't got your details right. Is the rest of your story true?'

Examples of roadblocks include:

- incorrect details
- far-fetched facts
- sensitive subjects
- cultural cringes.

Let's look at each of these in detail.

## Incorrect details

A client of ours once started a story with, 'At the 2000 Athens Olympics...' Yeah, right. *Big* mistake. The 2000 Olympics were held in Sydney. Even worse, the majority of his audience lived in Sydney so everyone knew that the date was incorrect. From the moment he said it, this was the only thing anyone could think about.

Mistakes such as this can be really costly. For starters, they undermine your credibility. If he got that fact wrong, his audience may be thinking, 'What else did he get wrong?' Not only that, but imagine if you were pitching to a new client and they had worked on the Sydney Olympics! It would make you look sloppy and incompetent.

## Far-fetched facts

One of our clients, Sonia, was sharing a customer-service story about a colleague who was making an urgent delivery to a customer in a remote part of Tasmania. The road was blocked by a fallen tree so her colleague got his chainsaw out of the boot of his car, cut away the tree, cleared the path and continued on to the customer.

Do you carry around a chainsaw in the boot of your car? No, neither do we, nor do the majority of the audience she was talking to. Fortunately, Sonia sensed everyone's disbelief and made a joke about the fact that while it sounded unusual to have a chainsaw in your car, it was quite common if you lived and worked in this remote part of Tasmania. She said, with a roll of her eyes, 'Yeah, I know — a chainsaw in the boot of your car? Only in Tasmania!' The audience laughed and moved through the rest of the story with her.

If there is anything that sounds far-fetched in your story — even if it is true — make sure you have a line explaining it, as Sonia did.

## Sensitive subjects

Remember that the point of business storytelling is to evoke an emotional response in your audience. However, there are some subject areas that you have to be extra careful and empathetic with. Serious illness, loss of a loved one and anything that may draw up painful emotions or memories for people can be quite confronting and should be dealt with carefully.

It is common, for example, for someone to talk about their spouse going through cancer and not reveal until the end that their loved one is now okay. Building this type of suspense may work in the movies, but in general this tends to leave your type of audience feeling anxious and unable to concentrate on anything else you are saying.

The way around this is to reveal your ending at the start. For example, you could start your story with, 'Five years ago my daughter was diagnosed with anorexia. I am happy to say she is fit and healthy now, but it was one of the most horrendous times of my life'. Then you can continue to share the story with that roadblock removed.

What if there was no happy ending? This is your moment of truth as a storyteller. You have to decide whether to use the story, whether despite the unhappy ending it will work for your purpose and audience. But do test it with a trusted adviser first to ensure this is the case.

## Cultural cringes

Have you ever told a really bad, inappropriate joke and wished you could take it back? Anything surrounding race, religion and gender is, quite frankly, a no-go zone. As a note of caution, what *you* find okay, someone else might find demeaning.

Take for example Tim Mathieson, the partner of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard. In January 2013, he was hosting a reception for the touring West Indian cricket team. Being a men's health ambassador, Mathieson was talking about the importance of men having regular check-ups for prostate cancer. He said, 'We can get a blood test for it, but the digital examination is the only true way to get a correct reading on your prostate, so make sure you go and do that, and perhaps look for a small Asian female doctor is probably the best way'. In the room there was laughter, but the media had a field day.

Tony Wright from the Melbourne *Age* newspaper wrote, 'Uh oh. In three words, he'd contravened an expansive sweep of the proposed anti-discrimination decrees. Small (sizeist, you might think); female (sexist); Asian (racist). We won't even go near digital penetration'. Wright added that it was not Mathieson's first offence with badly chosen language.

What can seem like a perfectly innocent attempt at humour can backfire, especially if it has even the slightest hint of sexism or racism—for example, someone telling a story about his wife and referring to her as 'the missus' may sound acceptable to him, but it is a roadblock for some people

(especially women) and sends the wrong message about you as the storyteller. In this instance, it says that you are out of touch because you used old-fashioned, sexist language.

Once you have checked your story for roadblocks and removed the roadblocks using the techniques we have suggested, what next? Another way to make your stories shine is to use appropriate humour.

## Using humour with purpose

*A joke is a very serious thing.*

**Winston Churchill, former British Prime Minister**

Everyone likes a story and everyone likes a funny story but don't slide back to being a Joker (you will remember this term from the Dolan Naidu Story Intelligence Model in chapter 3) by using humour without purpose... and without a reason. You have come too far to weaken now. Stay strong.

Humour definitely has its place in business storytelling and we encourage you to use it—just use it purposefully.

Let's look at when and why you would use humour in your stories.

### Begin with an icebreaker

Humour is scientifically proven to have physical benefits. There is wisdom in the old adage that 'laughter is the best medicine' because laughter:

- relaxes the whole body
- decreases stress hormones

- triggers the release of endorphins, which are the body's natural, feel-good hormones.

This is good news for you and your audience! Not only will laughter help you relax, decrease your anxiety levels and increase the happy hormones, but it will have the same effect on your audience.

We were working with a group of four young leaders who had to present at their company's yearly conference. One of the leaders, Paul, was really nervous, even at the practice session. About halfway through his story he had a humorous line, at which we all laughed. After that he continued on with his story, but in a more natural tone. When everyone laughed and Paul also laughed, it relaxed him and his story flowed better after that.

We suggested to Paul that he should move the humorous line forwards when telling his story, to settle his nerves sooner. This helped him relax into his story significantly earlier, making for a much more engaging story.

## Lighten a heavy situation

Sometimes you can lighten an otherwise heavy-going or tense story by weaving in a line to lighten it. This is like having shades of grey, black and white in your story.

In her TED video 'The power of vulnerability', research professor and speaker Brené Brown shares a poignant moment when she had to put data away and find a therapist. She says that she asked five of her friends if they could recommend anyone and they all jokingly implied that no-one would ever want to be her therapist! Brené continues by saying that when she saw the therapist she said to them, 'But here's the thing, no family stuff, no childhood s\*\*t. I just

need some strategies'! This is a topic that could have left the audience feeling uncomfortable, but by including humour in her speech Brené was able to make the audience laugh and lighten the atmosphere in the room.

You may be able to pre-empt a heavy situation and have a line in your story ready to go at the appropriate point in your story, as Brené Brown did. It is important to try and lighten the situation to enable your audience to become engaged in your story and not distracted by any dark or uncomfortable elements.

## Bring in humility

When you are sharing stories about yourself, it is a good idea to avoid stories about how great you are. Even if the story does involve you doing great things, you can use humour to bring in humility.

This does not mean you have to belittle your achievements, but some self-deprecating humour never goes astray. For example, we heard someone share a story of when they won their club's 'best and fairest' and then added, 'I know you may find that hard to believe looking at me now'.

Next we are going to take this a whole notch up by opening your eyes to how you can pick and select stories for maximum impact.

## Negative and positive stories

The stories you tell can be either positive or negative. As a storyteller, it is important to understand the benefits and limitations of both positive and negative stories and in which situations you would use one over the other.

## Negative stories

A negative story is usually about a negative event with an unhappy ending. It starts negatively, stays negative and ends negatively. For example, here is a story a leader shared when attempting to explain to his team the importance of doing things the right way.

### *Doing it the right way*

Earlier this year I went overseas with my family. During the weeks leading up to our big overseas adventure I wrote myself a list of all the clothes I would need to take and advised my wife and two teenage kids to do the same. They kept assuring me they had everything under control, but on the first night, on landing in a freezing New York city, it became obvious that neither my wife nor my daughters had packed appropriate warm-weather gear. The next day I had to spend a fortune on buying them all coats, gloves and scarves. If they had followed the procedure I recommended and been better prepared, this would not have happened. We are planning another trip next year and this time I am going to take control of the packing.

The story is negative because it starts off negatively and does not get any better. The ending implies a level of blame towards the leader's wife and daughters. Hearing it does not leave the listener in a good place.

We have an abundance of negative stories around us... they have a life of their own. There is a saying around customer-service issues that if someone is happy with your products they will tell one person; if they are unhappy they will tell 10 people. You do not need a communications plan to circulate negative stories...they spread like wildfire. This



is why it is so important to understand their purpose and their limitations.

Negative stories have a very specific purpose. They can shock people into seeing a situation differently, they can create a sense of urgency and they can carry lessons. They raise awareness of a situation, especially if no-one currently thinks there is even a problem.

To use negative stories well is to understand that they only inform people — they do not influence behaviour. At best, you may get begrudging compliance by telling negative stories, but if you want long-term change of behaviour they are not going to be as effective as positive stories because negative stories inform, but they do not influence. If you want to influence behaviour in a positive direction and for the long term, you have to use positive stories.

Negative stories have limitations so to inspire action and change behaviour, you need to follow your negative story with positive stories. You may need a negative story first to shock your audience and raise awareness of a problem. But if you leave it at that, you may do no more than raise awareness of a problem (which is fine if that is all you want to achieve).

Sharing his own experiences, Harvard Business School professor John Kotter states, 'I concluded years ago that people need more positive examples than negative ones. People are seeing too much negative stuff, and they know it. They can all give you 53 negative stories. What people need are positive examples of what works'.

So it is important to understand that the purpose of negative stories is to grab people's attention; they inform people, raise awareness of a situation or create a sense of urgency. It is also important to understand their limitations. They will not change behaviour. To achieve that you need to follow your negative story quickly with positive stories.

## Positive stories

A positive story can present a challenge or deal with adversity; the positive part comes from how the problem was overcome and presents a positive or happy ending.

This does sound trite, but when done well it is simple, effective and powerful. We are all hooked on popular television shows, movies and books that embrace what American scholar Joseph Campbell first described as 'The Hero's Journey'. This is a narrative pattern that describes the typical adventure of the archetype known as The Hero, who faces challenges and overcomes them.

Some positive stories are positive all the way through; others have the 'hero's journey' structure. So while a negative story starts negatively, stays negative and ends negatively, a positive story can start either positively or negatively. If it does start negatively it then turns positive and it always ends positively.

Unlike negative stories, there is sadly a dearth of positive stories. *Huffington Post* is trying to remedy this by running a section described as 'A spotlight on what's inspiring, what's positive and what's working, *Huffington Post* Good News covers the stories that most media chooses not to'. Have a look at [www.huffingtonpost.com/good-news](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/good-news) for inspiration on positive stories.

## Negative or positive?

Of course not all stories will fit neatly into one of these two categories. Sometimes the distinction will be fuzzy. What helps decide is how the story ends. Does it leave the listener

in a better place than when the story started? If so, it is more likely to be a positive story. If you are not sure about a story, but you feel it is right for your audience and purpose we would still recommend using it and not forcing it into one category or the other. For the stories that do fit into one of these categories — negative or positive — what we share with you next will help gauge their impact.

## The Story Impact Matrix

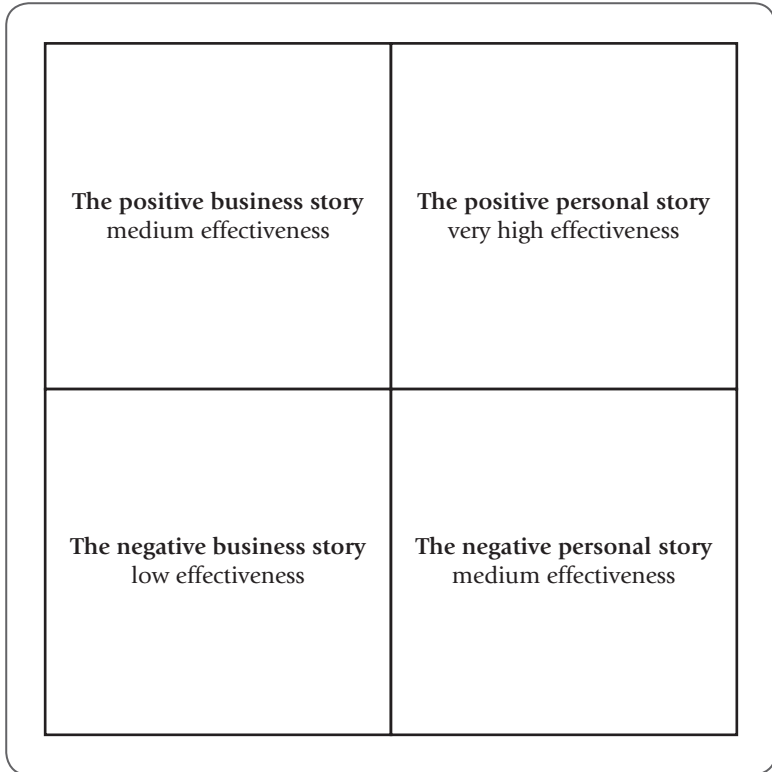
So, your stories can be either positive or negative and — as we shared in chapter 4 — they can be either business or personal. Your business story could, for example, be either of a customer not using your product and suffering the consequences (negative) ... or of a customer using your product and gaining the benefits (positive). It is the same with your personal stories ... they can be either positive or negative.

When we add positive and negative to the mix we end up with four different types of stories:

- the negative business story
- the positive business story
- the negative personal story
- the positive personal story.

We have combined these into The Story Impact Matrix (as shown in figure 5.1, overleaf). This matrix will help you choose the right story for maximum impact easily and it can also be used after the event to assess the impact of your story, as well as other people's stories.

Figure 5.1: The Story Impact Matrix



## The negative business story

Negative business stories serve a purpose as they teach a lesson or raise awareness of a problem. Their limitation is that they have a low rate of effectiveness. Follow your negative business story with either a positive business story or a positive personal story.

This is an example of a negative business story that a leader who worked in a call centre told her team.

### Lack of ownership

Last week I rang my mobile phone company and I was on the phone for what felt like forever. It was such a long wait time and it made me feel really frustrated. It is not like when you go into a shop and you can see people serving customers ... in that situation you can see how many people are in the queue in front of you. Being on the phone makes the wait seem even longer and I just started to feel like no-one was concerned about me ... that I didn't matter. When I eventually got through, the operator I spoke to was lovely, but it took me three phone calls to get my problem resolved. I reflected on this and thought, this is exactly what our customers must feel: long wait times and lack of ownership.

This story is negative because there is nothing really positive in the whole story and it does not leave the listener with any sense of hope that things can change. This story is also likely to start a downward spiral of people sharing their own negative experiences with phone companies.

## The positive business story

The positive business story is more effective than the negative business story simply because it leaves you in a better, more positive, happier place. Here is an example (overleaf).

## The new iPhone

After getting my new iPhone, I was having trouble syncing my emails. I tried to find a solution by looking online but in the end thought I had better just ring Apple. I hate ringing help centres because, first, you are normally left hanging on the line forever and, second, they usually cannot fix your problem. I called Apple and was pleasantly surprised how quickly my call was answered. I spoke to a very polite man and after about 10 minutes he advised me that what I was trying to do could not be done. I hung up feeling a bit disappointed that my problem was not resolved, but I probably did not expect anything more. A few minutes later my phone rang and it was another person from the Apple help desk. She advised me that the advice I had just been given was incorrect and I could in fact do what I wanted. Within minutes my emails were syncing and she apologised for the initial incorrect advice. I can't describe how overwhelmed I was that a call centre had called back, fixed my problem and exceeded all my expectations. Imagine if our customers felt this every single time they dealt with us!

The story is positive because even though everything did not go perfectly, obstacles were overcome and the end leaves the listener in a place where things are possible.

## The negative personal story

A negative personal story is where you tell a negative story with a personal example.

The story about packing for a trip to New York we shared previously is an example of a negative personal story. It starts negatively, stays negative and offers no hope at the end.

## The positive personal story

The positive personal story is the most effective type of story. This is because it combines the influential power of positivity with the connectedness and higher recall of a personal example.

Here is an example from one of our clients, Fiona Michel, who worked for a company that had a global parent company with a different brand. Her team often felt torn between the local company and the global company. This is a positive personal story she shared to get the message across that feeling torn was okay.

### The fish pie

A couple of years ago I was away with two friends for a winter weekend getaway. It was freezing cold and the conversation turned to what was the best comfort food. We all agreed it was fish pie, but my two friends then had a debate about the best fish pie recipe. The debate turned into a cook-off, with me being in the fabulous position of not having to lift a finger in the kitchen but being asked to judge which was the best fish pie.

My two friends toiled away in the kitchen with much humour, passion and secrecy. The first fish pie I tasted was very much the traditional kind of fish pie I was used to. It used smoked fish with peas in a thick, rich sauce. It was absolutely fantastic. The second pie was less traditional and more gourmet, with fresh fish in a light, creamy sauce and parsley. It was different from the first but equally delicious. I could not make a choice; both fish pies were great—different, but great—so I didn't make a choice. We all just sat back and enjoyed both of them.

*(continued)*

### The fish pie (cont'd)

I often think back to this wonderful night when I hear our people feeling pulled between our two brands. We feel confused because we think we have to choose, but we don't have to make a choice between the two brands. Just think of the benefits we can enjoy by not choosing and accepting the delights that both can bring.

This is a perfect example of a positive personal story and it highlights that inspiring business storytelling is not about business stories but rather how you can take personal stories and relate them to a business message. After many years of research we can confidently advise you that these are always the most effective stories... always.

So there you have the four kinds of stories. We are not suggesting that you have to use a positive personal story all the time because the type of story you tell will depend on your purpose and message. But if you are finding that your positive business or negative personal stories are not quite hitting the mark, give a positive personal story a go.

It is also good to have a mix. You may even have two stories for the same purpose, which means you can test them out and see which one delivers you greater success.

In order to make your stories resonate you have to consider your purpose and audience. As a storyteller you have to choose the best type of story for your purpose and audience from the types in The Story Impact Matrix (see figure 5.1 on p. 98).

So remember that you have the following choices:

- *The negative business story* raises awareness to a problem, but may not change behaviour.



- *The positive business story* is still in the business realm so you can stay in the logic space and create audience pushback.
- *The negative personal story* is refreshing as it is personal — not business related — and may engage, but it may not inspire because it is negative.
- *The positive personal story* is refreshing because it is personal; people can relate to it and it inspires and engages because it is positive.

The magic of storytelling lies in making your story as realistic as possible. When we talk about realism on various levels, we come across the concept of story matching.

## Story matching

Matching is a subtle aspect of storytelling. Matching can refer to:

- language
- age of character
- era and character.

Let us explain each of these for you.

### Language

When you are telling a story, the language your key character speaks should match who they are. If you were narrating a story on customer service, it would sound wrong for the customer-service assistant to say, 'We do that for every customer because that is our retail strategy'. That sounds like a bit of scripting, even if the person actually did say that. The language you use must appear consistent with something they would actually

say in real life. For example, the customer-service assistant may say, 'We do that for every customer because it makes each of them feel special'. This simple language matching makes your story credible and authentic.

## Age of character

When Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard made a speech to the US Congress in 2011 she talked about how for her own generation, the defining image of the United States was the first landing on the moon. She remembered how she and her classmates were sent home from school to watch the great moment on television. She would have been about five years old when this happened and she used language appropriate for that age when she said, 'I'll always remember thinking that day, Americans can do anything'.

Quite often people's stories are about when they were children. So if you are narrating a story about when you were 10 years old, you have to use language that a 10 year old would use, as this reflects the age of the character.

## Era and character

If your character is from, say, the 1960s or 1970s you have to match the language or pop-culture references to that era (without being corny, of course). For example, phrases such as 'Far out, dude!', 'Groovy, baby!', 'Peace' and 'Flower power' would be appropriate. Think disco, mood rings, lava lamps and tie dye. You could not, for example, have someone from the 1960s saying 'As if', 'Whatever' or 'OMG'.

When you are narrating a story set in a particular era, your character must also fit into the era. If you were talking about when you went to your first interview in the 1980s, this could be as simple as the character saying, 'I remember both the

interviewer and I had shoulder pads and big hair'. This makes the whole story come together and sets the right scene for your story and your character.

## Match your story to a purpose

One of our clients once narrated a story of going through a major illness and then linked that to what a lot of people would consider a mundane business matter (the purpose). There was a lack of connection between the level of the story and the business purpose of the story. Everyone in the room was most likely thinking, 'When you've been through something like that, a small business matter like this one shouldn't matter'.

On a separate occasion, we heard a leader narrate a story on losing someone close to them. They followed with the message that this had always given them a perspective on what is important in life — their family and people. This story worked because the speaker took something significant and linked it to a significant message, not to something trivial.

Most people match the level of their story to its purpose intuitively. But it is always worth checking this, especially if your story is about a serious life crisis such as a major illness.

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### **In a nutshell**

#### ***Did you get hooked?***

- Roadblocks in your stories can stop people moving with you through your story. Potential roadblocks include incorrect detail, far-fetched facts, sensitive subjects and cultural cringes.
- Humour has a place in your storytelling if used purposefully. Humour can be used to break the ice. It can be used to lighten a heavy situation and to bring in humility for you as the

storyteller. Jokers in particular need to ensure they are not being self-indulgent with humour and using it without purpose.

- Stories can be either negative, positive or a bit of both.
- As well as negative or positive, stories can also be personal or business. Positive personal stories are the most inspiring.
- Matching is very important when you are storytelling. You need to match the language you use to ensure it is relevant to your key character and the era of the story. You also need to match the level of your story to its purpose.

### ***How hooked are you?***

- Take the story you crafted in chapter 4 and make sure there are no potential roadblocks in it.
- If you already use some stories as a leader, review them against The Story Impact Matrix and if they are not giving you the results you want, think about how you could use a positive personal story instead.

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In this chapter we left no stone unturned to ensure your stories will have the greatest impact possible. In the next chapter we are going to look at what you can do to deliver them like a natural-born storyteller.