

How a 2-Minute Story Helps You Lead - Stew Friedman

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Leaders gain trust and teach people what's important to them by telling stories. But these days there's so much to attend to — *now!* — coming at us so fast. You might be tempted to let slide your soft skills, like how to tell a useful story. Just get to the point and move on to the next thing on the list. No time for fluff.

Even President Obama, who masterfully demonstrated his storytelling skills in the campaign, was recently described as shuffling from one crucial issue to the next, like an iPod listener flits from song to song. No time for albums. Trying to do too much, too fast, and on too many fronts can be risky, yet today's environment requires that we get better at doing so.

All the more reason, then, for giving attention to how you get others to pay attention. The trick is to show movement on the issues that matter while, for each issue, helping your key stakeholders grasp the meaning of what you're aiming to achieve — why the goal matters to the team or the organization and how we're going to get from here to there.

So don't give up on honing your storytelling skills; instead, learn how to move faster among your different narratives. Through practice and feedback, improve your ability to connect through stories — while keeping them short to hold beleaguered attention spans. For even as the digital age compels us to develop ever-increasing capacities for a switch-your-focus-but-remain-present state of mind, as a leader you still have to be able to convey a narrative that resonates with your people and inspires them to move with you in the right direction.

A good leadership story has the power to engage hearts and minds. It has these six crucial elements:

1. Draws on your real past and lessons you've learned from it.
2. Resonates emotionally with your audience because it's relevant to them.
3. Inspires your audience because it's fueled by your passion.
4. Shows the struggle between your goal and the obstacles you faced in pursuing it.
5. Illustrates with a vivid example.
6. Teaches an important lesson.

Leaders at all levels and in all walks of life can improve their skill in telling a good, fast leadership story. Here's how: think of a story that meets these six criteria and convey it to someone — anyone who you'd like to teach — in less than two minutes. Then ask them what impact the hearing of your tale had on them. Where they moved? Did they learn what you wanted to convey? Next, repeat with someone else — but do it faster. Then again, faster still.