



STORIES TRAINERS TELL A Fish Tale

Contributor

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Type and Purpose(s)

Vignette; entertain and explore

Background

This situation occurred several years ago. The interview eventually was completed.

Presentation Tips

Use different voices for the narrator (John) and the executive. There is a pattern to the story (that is, first time, second time, third time) that you may want to emphasize with your voice.

Set-up

Option 1—Sometimes situations are not what they seem to be.

Option 2—Our assumptions can influence our communications with others.

A Fish Tale





As the publisher of the New Leaders Press newsletter, one of my responsibilities was to interview executives for feature articles. On the scheduled day at the scheduled time I phoned a CEO whom I greatly admired. I asked him questions about his company's use of "open book management," and about having an employee-owned organization. The company was a real pioneer and great role model for how well a company can do if you trust people and nurture human creativity. About halfway through the interview he stopped and excused himself for a minute. I heard some muffled noise and figured someone had entered his office for a signature or something similar. When he came back, he apologized. So, I started asking questions again. Besides making enough to payoff an LBO loan, I wanted to explore the hows and whys of his company's spin-off of dozens of other ventures in which they held an interest.

Soon afterwards he excused himself a second time. Once more I heard muffled noise in the background. I found myself getting slightly irritated even though I understood the life of a busy executive. When he came back, he apologized again and we continued the interview.




Then it happened a third time! ["Who the heck does this guy think he is! I told him when I scheduled this interview that he needed to commit an hour of his time. Geez, I have other things I need to do with my time, too! After what seemed like an eternity, the CEO finally returned to the call.] "Excuse me, John, but I've got a really good fish on the line here." Suddenly it dawned on me. How was I to know he was sitting in a rowboat in the middle of a lake with a fishing line in the water while he was talking to me on his cell phone? [He asked if I could hold for a couple of minutes while he reeled in the fish. While I wanted him to commit to the conversation, what was I to say to a man who obviously was preoccupied with finding fish? We had a good chuckle about the situation when he returned to finish the call.]

[What about you? How often have you tried to get employees, customers, or vendor to commit to the conversation when the look on their face or their body language tell you that they, too, have “gone fishing?” So tell me. How are you going to get them to pay attention? And remember what you’ve said?]

Debrief Questions

-  What assumptions did John have about the conversation with the executive?
-  How did these assumptions influence his reactions to the interruptions?
-  When have you been in a situation where someone else was distracted? What was that like for you?
-  What communication assumptions exist in your organization?

Key: Three Levels of Debrief Questions

-  The Story: What the story means—its moral or main lesson. What the story characters have experienced.
-  The Learner: How the participant feels about the story and how it personally applies to the individual.
-  The Organization or World: How the story applies to the participant’s work group, department, business unit, division, organization, industry, or to society-at-large.

Key Point Options

1. Our assumptions are not always accurate; however, they do influence our behavior and responses to others.
2. When we act on our assumptions, we often hinder good communication.
3. Communication is composed of the words we speak, the tone of voice we use, and the non-verbal behaviors we engage in. Over the telephone, we miss a significant portion of what is being communicated. The less actual data we have during communication, the more likely we are to create a potentially false view of what is occurring.
4. Distractions (both face-to-face and over the telephone) also interfere with effective communication. This is a continuing challenge for virtual teams.

Follow-up Activities

Step 1—Small-Group Discussion: Discuss what sort of distractions get in the way of your communication with others.

Step 2—Large-Group Discussion: Have each group share their distractions. Have people talk about how they interfere with work and what can be done to reduce their impact.

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