



STORIES TRAINERS TELL

Whose Mother Was It?

Contributor

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Chris has successfully managed a \$7-million sales territory, raised a family, and since 1984, built a thriving speaking, training, and consulting business. She has earned a reputation for energizing audiences with her powerful blend of sound research, practical experience, and infectious enthusiasm. Chris is former president of both the National Speakers Association and the Northeast Wisconsin Chapter of the American Society for Training & Development. In 1993, Chris earned the Certified Speaking Professional designation. She is the co-author of *The Instant Trainer* (1997) and author of *Silence Isn't Golden: How to Unleash the Real Power of Feedback* (1996) and *78 Important Questions Leaders Need to Ask and Answer* (2002).

Type and Purpose(s)

Vignette; evaluate and evoke

Background

The story describes Chris's reaction to hearing two different speakers from the same training company tell the same story at two different seminars.

Presentation Tips

Chris's emotions go from being excited after hearing the first trainer to confused and betrayed after hearing the second. This should impact your tone of voice and pacing.

Set-up

Option 1—Ethics is everything in today's business world.

Option 2—What does it mean to speak with integrity?

Option 3—As trainers, sometimes we unknowingly say things that impact our credibility.

Whose Mother Was It?

I can't tell you how excited I was to get the brochure advertising the seminar I'd wanted to attend for a long time! A highly respected training company was presenting and I couldn't wait to learn from the "masters."

The program was everything I'd hoped for and more. At one point in the program, a trainer launched into a humorous story about his mother having attended one of his sessions and about the conversation they wound up having in front of the entire participant group. The program was magical and I left really charged up with all kinds of new ideas to put into use.

About three weeks later, I was speaking at a conference where this same training company was once again presenting, but on a slightly different topic. I thought to myself, "Great, now I get to see them twice in one month. It doesn't get any better than this!" I couldn't wait to go to another of the firm's programs. Once again, a different trainer was doing a masterful job. The program was wonderful until . . . he launched into a story about his mother having been in the audience in one of his sessions and about the humorous conversation they had had. At first, I just felt confused.







"Wait a minute. I thought it was the other guy who had the mother in his training program. Whose mother was it? Was it the first guy's mother and this trainer 'borrowed' the story?"

Suddenly, I realized I was "gone" from the training session and no longer paying attention. I felt betrayed by these wonderfully skillful trainers.




After the session, I thought about it further. You see, it wasn't that they both told the same story—it was the fact that each trainer told it as if it had happened personally to him. I couldn't understand why one of them didn't just say, "You know, this reminds me of a time when a buddy of mine was training and his mom was in the audience and here's what happened." Then he could've told the story—even told it in the first person—with enthusiasm and integrity and it would've been great. I caught him telling someone else's story as his own. His credibility suffered in my eyes.

For all of us, when telling someone else’s story, it’s important to “give credit where credit is due.” [Think for a moment about the stories you tell to your employees, to customers, to suppliers and to your peers as part of your work. Do you always give credit where credit is due?]

Debrief Questions

-  What assumptions did the training firm make about the use of the same “personal” story in two different programs?
-  How did Chris’s reaction in the second program get in the way of her learning?
-  What reactions did you have as you were listening to the story?
-  What lessons does this story hold for you?
-  What does this story tell us about ethics and integrity?
-  What does the training firm need to do to ensure that its trainers do not incur a credibility problem through the telling of the same “personal” story in multiple programs?

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. Peter J. Dean, Ph.D., a former professor at the University of Tennessee has been quoted as saying that “credit is infinitely divisible.” By giving credit to others, you do not diminish your personal work or its impact.
2. Whenever we use a story or an example from another person that could be construed as our own personal story or life example, it is important to give appropriate attribution. As Chris Clarke-Epstein states, “The danger of telling someone else’s story as your own is enormous, while the benefit of telling somebody else’s story as somebody else’s story that you find valuable is also enormous. I learned a valuable lesson from attending both seminars—that it’s okay to borrow stories from other people when you have permission. Just make sure that you put them into context.”
3. Credibility is a function of trust and expertise. If people find themselves in situations where they question our ability to be trusted, it impacts our ability to be seen as credible. This also impacts our ability to influence them.

Follow-up Activity

Step 1—Small-Group Discussion: Brainstorm situations at work where it is important to give appropriate attribution and credit. Record them on easel paper.

Step 2—Large-Group Discussion: Have the small groups report on their discussions. Ask the entire group: What prevents people from giving attribution and credit when it is due? What can you do if you notice appropriate attribution and credit is not being given in a specific situation? How can you ensure that you always give attribution and credit?

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