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## Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal
Acquisition and retention of learning: use of stories in executive development program
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# Feature articles

# Acquisition and retention of learning: use of stories in executive development program

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## Introduction

Stories (narratives, anecdotes, fables, proverbs, sagas, or allegories) lay the foundation of how people communicate; they paint pictures in the minds of the audience. Stories are recognized as a powerful means for information retention and transfer of learning. Researchers report that storytelling makes the listener more engaged, their attention and interest are fostered, and information is more quickly and accurately remembered (Conger, 1991; Kouzes and Posner, 2012).

Based our own experience of teaching in executive development programs (EDP) for more than 30 years and several research studies, we have noticed that:

- Stories inspire, entertain, and delight the audience. Beginning a session with a story gives an impression that the session is going to be fun. This makes the audience more attentive to the presenter.

- We find stories a convincing way of communicating intricate ideas. A short 2-3 min story can help deliver a message which otherwise may take a long time to explain. Weick and Browning (1986) observed, "Stories withhold more inputs than arguments do, yet stories convey more meaning".

- Listeners find it easy to relate stories with their own experiences. It either reinforces their beliefs or results in cognitive dissonance. Either way it results in better reflection. There is strong evidence in extant literature that reflection is a powerful tool for individual and organizational learning.

- Stories often become the starting point for bonding between participants who come from different organizations. Stories act as social glue. In informal gatherings (dinner in a hotel) with participants, we always noticed participants beginning their conversation with the story/joke shared by the instructors in the session. A story thus gets repeated. Studies show that retention improves with increased rehearsal. This improvement occurs because rehearsal helps to transfer information into long-term memory (Wayne and McCann, 2007).

- Stories help participants transfer excitement to their peers and subordinates. When participants go back to their respective organizations on completion of the program, their colleagues often ask them about the program. It has been observed that stories are the most common thing they share with them. In this process, the tacit knowledge also gets transferred which otherwise is difficult. In the process of sharing a story, they again tend to repeat it. When something is recalled again and again, the chances of its loss are reduced substantially (Wayne and McCann, 2007).

### Research gaps and objective of the study

Having seen the utility of stories in executive development program, we thought to examine whether stories have greater retention value and whether they have lower memory decay. Most of the studies that argue about greater retention value of learning with storytelling have been conducted in classroom settings – in which students were asked to recall a concept a few days after it was discussed in the class using stories. Extant literature has not captured the retention of learning over a longer period and nor looked at adult learners over 25 years of age. Also, there is no study that compares decay in memory between stories and the concepts in two time frames – a time lapse of six to nine months (1) and one of 9-15 months (2). This paper attempts to fill this research gap.

### Methodology

The study. was conducted on participants of EDP in a business school in India between April 2014 and March 2015. Participants who had attended a session on leadership conducted by the author, as a part of their EDP, were selected for the study. The most recent respondents were those who had attended the program at least three months before their responses were sought. A total of 370 participants from 15 programs were sent an e-mail and were asked to:

■   list four leadership issues discussed during the session;

■   list any one story used in the session and connect it with the issue covered; and

■   list the stories used during the session.

A total of 259 participants responded of which 105 belonged to time frame 1, having attended the program between three months and nine months, and 154 belonged to time frame 2, having attended the program more than nine months but less than 15 months from the date of data collection.

#### *A note on the theme of the session*

The session on leadership was aimed at letting participants know that leadership is about initiative. A leader initiates a change rather than adapting to a change. The session was also aimed at demonstrating to the participants that to be an initiator, a leader should have three attributes – daring, caring, and sharing. Thus, the theme of the session revolved around four issues: initiative, daring, caring, and sharing. For each theme, a story was used to support the concept that was being discussed. The duration of the session was 75 min.

#### *Findings*

Results of the survey are given in Tables I-III.

### Discussion and conclusion

It can be seen that 75 per cent of participants were able to recall two or more stories even after a gap of more than three months, whereas only 50 per cent of the respondents could recall two or more issues (Tables I and II). While 9 per cent of respondents could not recall any of the four issues, only 5 per cent could not recall any story at all (Tables I and II); 95 per cent could identify one story and its linkage with the issue discussed (Table II). Because we asked the respondents to list only one story and connect it with the issue,

**Table I** Recall of number of issues and stories

| Recall of | Recalled four (%) | Recalled three (%) | Recalled two (%) | Recalled one (%) | No recall at all (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Issues | 26 (10) | 48 (18) | 56 (22) | 105 (41) | 24 (9) |
| Stories | 47 (18) | 85 (33) | 62 (24) | 51 (20) | 14 (5) |

Note: N = 259

**Table II** Connecting the story with the issue

| Story used for initiative (%) | Story used for daring (%) | Story used for caring (%) | Story used for sharing (%) | Not able to recall any story (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 80 (31) | 46 (18) | 90 (35) | 29 (11) | 14 (5) |

Note: N = 259

**Table III** Decay in memory in two time frames – issues vs stories

| | Issues | | | | Stories | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. of issues | Time 1 (%) | Time 2 (%) | Difference between time 1 and time 2 (%) | No. of stories | Time 1 (%) | Time 2 (%) | Difference between time 1 and time 2 (%) |
| Recalled all the four issues | 18 (17) | 08 (5) | −12 | Recalled all the four stories | 23 (22) | 24 (16) | −6 |
| Recalled three issues | 28 (27) | 20 (13) | −14 | Recalled three stories | 38 (36) | 47 (31) | −5 |
| Recalled two issues | 31 (30) | 25 (16) | −14 | Recalled 2 two stories | 28 (27) | 34 (22) | −5 |
| Recalled one issue | 53 (50) | 52 (34) | −16 | Recalled one story | 23 (22) | 28 (18) | −4 |

Notes: N time 1 = 105; time 2 = 154

it was a kind of forced choice for them to pick the one they found was the best fit. The personal story of Mr Kalam, the former President of India, and its linkage with the issue had the maximum recall score of 35 per cent (Table II). The possible reason for this could be that the story was authentic. A comparative study of decay in memory in recalling issues over stories in two time frames reveals that decay in issues ranged from 12 to 16 per cent, whereas decay was between 4 to 6 per cent in the case of stories. Thus, decay in issues was between two and four times that of stories (Table III). This strengthens the argument that stories have greater retention value and is in line with the observations of Wayne and McCann (2007) who said that this improvement occurs because rehearsal helps to transfer information into long-term memory. We mentioned in our introduction that participants often repeat stories narrated in the EDP with their fellow participants or with their colleagues in the work place. Barrouillet et al. (2004) also opined that, in mature individuals, decay is counteracted by processes that refresh the representation, thereby preventing duration-based forgetting. We conclude that stories result in memory consolidation and this reduces the possibility of time-based forgetting. However, a more convincing argument would be possible if a comparative study was conducted of two sessions on the same theme, one with and one without the use of a story. Further research into whether improved recall translates into any change in behavior would also be useful.

The noted leadership guru, Dr Warren Bennis commented, "Man cannot live without stories any more than he can live without bread"! Management professors should not overlook the impact that stories can have in conveying their messages and, thanks to Google, finding a relevant story these days is not difficult. Now, once upon a time [. . .].

### References

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## Further reading

Barrouillet, P., De Paepe, A. and Langerock, N. (2012), "Time causes forgetting from working memory", *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, Vol. 19, pp. 87-92.

## About the author

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