

Sticky Stories – A communication lesson for Leaders



Andrew Griffiths is the Founder and Director of Coral Leadership, a strategic leadership development consultancy. In this article he explains how the power of sticky stories enables a leader to be a more effective communicator. This topic is part of a course he is delivering to a major client in 2012.

A friend of mine was recently on business in Las Vegas. After his client meeting he went to a local bar and struck up a conversation with a woman who offered to buy him a drink. He was impressed by the friendliness of the local people and when she brought him back his drink he took one sip. And that was the last thing he remembered.

Rather, the last thing he remembered until he woke up, completely disorientated, shivering in a hotel bath, his body submerged in ice. He looked around frantically trying to work out how he arrived there. Then he spotted a note: DON'T MOVE. CALL 791. His phone was on a small table by the bath so he picked it up and dialled 791, his body shaking and fingers numb from the ice.

The operator sounded calm and familiar with the situation. She said, 'Sir, I want you to reach behind you slowly and carefully. Is there a tube protruding from your lower back?' Anxious, he felt around behind him and sure enough, there was a tube.

The operator said 'Sir, don't panic, but one of your kidneys has been stolen. There is a gang of organ thieves operating in this city and they have got you. A medical team is on its way. Don't move until they arrive'.

You have just read one of the most successful urban legends of the past fifteen years. The kidney heist is a story that sticks. We understand it; we remember it and we can re-tell it later. If the story is true it might change our behaviour permanently, at least in terms of accepting drinks from strangers.

So let's look at the kidney story and ask why is it so effective? Firstly, it is Simple: easy to recall, Unexpected: man goes for a drink and loses kidney, Concrete: ice bath, tube protruding from back, Credible: we are already familiar with stories about dating and drugs and finally, it is an Emotional Story: conveying Anger, Fear and Disgust. I will let you work out the acronym!

In most organisations senior leaders struggle to communicate everything from strategy to getting new ideas accepted and acted out. It is no surprise with the amount of information we process daily, initiative overload and the constant of uncertainty that getting people to behave differently is a huge task.

So the challenge for senior leaders is to think differently about the Big Ideas they have and how they can make them stick. This is very difficult for experienced leaders who have immersed themselves in company logic, constructs and conventions over many years. It is time to re-learn how to take Big

Ideas and transform them into action. Should the CEO who communicates the top priority to 'maximise shareholder value' be surprised when the call to arms fails?

Take the example of John F Kennedy's famous 1961 call to 'put a man on the moon and return him safely by the end of the decade'. Simple? Yes. Unexpected? Yes. Concrete? Amazingly so. Credible? It seemed like science fiction but coming from the President it seemed credible. Emotional? Well it motivated millions of people for a decade. Had Kennedy been a CEO he would have said 'Our mission is to be recognised internationally as the leading country for space exploration, innovation and strategically targeted space initiatives'. Fortunately Kennedy knew empty words do not inspire and captivate people.

The Friends of the Earth Campaign

How do you get a strategic message across that polluted air pollutes? - With a sticky poster of course! In time dirt and pollution reveals the message and in doing so Friends of the Earth lets pollution speak for itself.

Friends Of The Earth - The Sticky Poster



During my military career I often communicated ideas, themes and strategies, using fabled 'war stories', 'dit spinning', (not always my own!) killer facts and colourful stories to get my point across. This is the role stories play, putting knowledge in a different framework that is more lifelike and true to our daily experience. To the listener it is like being in a flight simulator, being a recipient of a story isn't a passive pastime, it provides simulation and inspiration, both are geared toward generating action. All senior leaders can learn to be more effective by transforming their Big Ideas into sticky stories.

For more information on Coral Leadership programmes contact info@coralleadership.com