

Chapter XX:

Stories of Leadership

Myths and stories are part of the fabric of our lives. As children, we listened to stories of fantasy and dragons, learning lessons and morals from talking animals and imagining ourselves fighting the forces of evil, attending a magical school, or exploring new worlds. As we grew, our stories changed. We read about epic odysseys and star-crossed lovers. Songs and poems pulled on our heartstrings and challenged or confirmed our beliefs. Movies and TV enthralled us as we dissected plot lines and twists, elated or disgusted with the latest season or newest film. All around us, from video games to news articles, TV to art, we are surrounded by a shared history, culture, and society built on stories both true and fanciful.

A book about self-development – and a leadership book at that! -seems an unlikely place to find an audience for stories. After all, you are here to learn about leadership, not read a story about a tricky fox or a disastrous meet-cute. But think back to the last in-depth training you had in the workplace about leadership. What is more memorable to you – that long PowerPoint presentation on the theories and definitions of various schools of leadership? Or the story of a naked emperor learning the cost of vanity?

In case you missed this classic childhood tale, the story of The Emperor's New Clothes is about a self-centered emperor who cared about little outside of his own image and finery. Two swindlers appear in the kingdom and convince the emperor that they can weave the finest magic cloth, but it would be invisible to anyone unfit for their position or too stupid to understand it. Fearing to admit that they cannot see the "magic" cloth, officials and emperor alike rave over the (invisible) finery the con men make until eventually, the emperor is dressed

in the "magic" clothes and parades down the main street in his kingdom. By then, everyone has heard the story of the cloth only visible to the best and brightest, and everyone is too fearful to be the first to say they cannot see the cloth at all. Until a small child points out that the emperor has no clothes on, and the charade falls apart. (H.C. Andersen Centret, 2023)

This story has been adapted hundreds of times in modern society, but it is best known as a literary folktale written by Hans Christian Anderson, first published in 1837. Anderson actually based his version of the story on a collection of medieval Spanish stories from 1335 that were, in turn, inspired by even older stories from even older stories, including Aesop, the Greek fabulist from 600/500 BCE.

2,500 years later, we are still teaching and learning from tales like The Emperor's New Clothes, so why shouldn't we use stories as part of our learning and development as leaders? After all, inspiration is literally everywhere around us if we allow ourselves to find it.

This section is all about stories: The ones we know by heart, the ones we hear every day, and the ones we write for ourselves. Let's start here with these two short fables about **change**:

The Frog in a Pot

There is a saying about frogs in hot water. If you placed a frog directly into a pot of boiling water, it would jump out immediately. However, if you placed the frog in tepid water and slowly heated it up, it would stay in the water relaxing and never try to jump out.

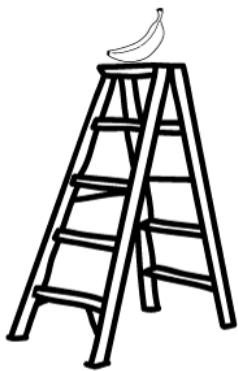
The Monkey Ladder

There is another urban legend about monkeys in a cage. Inside the cage, there is a ladder with a bunch of bananas hanging from a string. Every time a monkey attempts to climb the ladder to get a banana, the other monkeys are sprayed with cold water. Not liking being cold, wet, and banana-less, the monkeys prevented each other from climbing the ladder. Over time, the original monkeys are replaced, one by one, until none of the original monkeys are left. Despite none of the monkeys having ever been sprayed with cold water, they continue to prevent each other from climbing to the bananas because "that's how it's always been done."

Reflection

Both of these short fables have to do with **teams**.

Consider these questions and reflect as you choose: Can you find a leadership lesson in these stories? Are the messages complimentary or contradictory? Does a story have to be positive to learn from? Is it a valuable message? Is there a better story you could tell, maybe even from your own life that conveys the same or similar learning opportunities?



Leadership Tales and Fables

Stories surround us. Nearly any fairy tale or fable can hook to a lesson or discussion on leadership. After all, what is a fairy tale, if not a story, about someone (or something) facing the most difficult of challenges and either becoming a cautionary tale or becoming a better version of themselves? For a moment, indulge your inner child and imagine yourself a knight on a valiant steed facing down a Great Dragon named *Excel Project File*. Or perhaps you prefer to be a brave tailor engaged in a magnificent quest to create the best PowerPoint Presentation ever seen and win the heart of Princess *Very Important Client*.

Okay, those are silly – but maybe also a little fun. Whether we know it or not, we tell ourselves stories every day, with no dragons or spaceships or flights of fancy required. We cheer for sports teams whose player stories bring deeper meaning to each game. When we talk to friends and colleagues, we share our slice-of-life stories. When we talk to clients, we share the story of what our successful business relationship will bring. But why does any of this matter to you? This is a leadership development book, after all, not a college course in creative writing.

It matters because stories *connect* us. As a leader, storytelling in any of its forms is an important way to create a feeling of connection and inclusion and creates a memorable opportunity for learning and development. In the 2023 Gallup State of the Global Workplace survey, the organization notes that analysis shows engagement – that is, an employee's feelings of involvement and enthusiasm in the workplace – has 3.8 times as much influence on employee stress levels as work location does. With all the discussion on whether it is best to work from home or the office or somewhere in between, the actual data shows that it is far

more important for leaders to build feelings of engagement and connection with their teams than it is to worry about where that team happens to be sitting. To put it even more bluntly, if employees aren't performing well when working remotely or in a hybrid setting, you have to ask if the issue is truly one of geography or if it is actually a leadership issue.

Ineffective leadership can't be "fixed" with a great central city office location, and a nice workspace doesn't guarantee a happy staff. (Gallup, 2023) It is estimated leaders can drive as much as 70% of team engagement, and low levels of employee engagement can cost as much as \$8.8 trillion dollars every year in the global economy. (Gallup, 2023) That's a huge impact that leaders at all levels are a part of.

Reflection

What is one of your favorite or most memorable stories?

A fairy tale that you could tell with no preparation at the drop of a hat, a favorite parable, a memorable legend...anything.

Reflect on it and consider one or some of these questions: Why is it memorable? What emotions do you have tied to this particular story? What is the message? What connection can you find to leadership?



It's a Sports Story

There is a Hopi-American Indian saying (sometimes incorrectly attributed to Plato) that "those who tell stories rule the world ."And while it is unlikely any of us will be crowned ruler of the world any time soon, the proverb emphasizes that part of being in a leadership position includes telling stories, just not the "once upon a time" kind. Think for a moment of a politician you admire and support. While you may like them because of their policies or actions, a large part of what makes them attractive is that they tell a good story. They are engaging or powerful speakers, they share a clear vision, they are telling you a story that invigorates, inspires, motivates, or urges you to some kind of action. That is how storytelling becomes a part of leadership. Imagine...

A locker room. It's a big game, but the odds are stacked against the team. Everyone has told them they haven't got a chance against the defending champs. They are defeated before the first whistle blows. Does the coach pull out data and numbers and go over again the importance of adding numbers up until they are on top? Do they promise sprinkles on post-game ice cream? Do they do a review of every mistake the team has made, reinforcing the expectation of perfection and using shame to criticize past performance as an example of what not to do? Not if they want to motivate the team to bring their best to the competition. Instead, they *tell a story* of the hardships they have already overcome. The amazing things the players are capable of. What this game can mean.

Ray Lewis, former Baltimore Ravens star and motivational behemoth, gave a memorable pre-game talk to the Stanford men's basketball team prior to the 2012 NIT semifinals. Those players showed up in the locker room warmed up and ready to play a game: they walked out

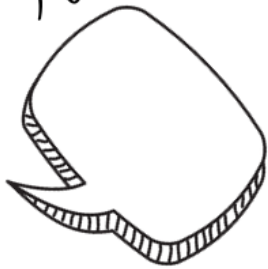
ready to leave their mark on history. "Forget everything else...We get one opportunity at life, one chance at life to do whatever you're going to do. So, lay your foundation. Make whatever mark you're going to make. Whatever legacy you're going to leave, leave your legacy." That team left the locker room and took home the championship. There are countless examples from movies, books, and real life of how the right words and the right story can change the trajectory of a game. Here is one of them.

The Story of a Hockey Team

The Soviet Union men's national hockey team won at least one medal every year from 1954 to 1979 in hockey. They had outscored opponents 175 to 44, and were a powerhouse in the sport, dominating on the world stage year after year. The team boasted some of the most legendary hockey players on the ice at that time, giants of the game with long histories of playing (and winning) internationally. The International Olympic Committee's amateur-only policy during this period meant most nations had to use young, less-experienced players, but the Soviet Union team was made up of de facto professionals who played hockey full-time for industrial firms or military teams, neatly sidestepping this rule and lending even more weight to their dominance in the sport. In 1980, the U.S. men's national hockey team had an average age of 21 years and weren't just underdogs...they were hardly even considered a speedbump on the road for the Soviet Union's fifth consecutive gold medal by most predictions. The whole world was telling the 1980 U.S. men's hockey team that they would lose. Those players were constantly bombarded with the story that no one could be the Soviets. But when Coach Herb Brooks walked into the pre-game locker room, that's not the story he told them. He had a different story for the team. "Great moments," he said, "are born from great opportunity. And that's

what you have here tonight, boys. That's what you've earned here tonight. One game. If we played them 10 times, they might win nine. But not this game. Not tonight." Captured in the 2004 film *Miracle*, the power of changing the story being told meant that the team went on to win not just against the Soviet Union but become champions who ultimately claimed the 1980 Olympic gold medal. (*Miracle*, 2004)

Reflection



Think about the locker room speech.

How does the locker room speech - whether pre-game, half-time, or post-game - impact not just the game but the players? There are a million different ways coaches give these speeches, from the wit of Pete Carroll to the intensity of Bobby Knight. Think about your team: what situation are you all in now, or have been in the past, where a "coach speech" could impact the way the team feels, acts and performs? If you were to give the team your version of the locker room speech, what would it look like? What would you say? Locker room speeches have to be pretty short by their nature - what is the most important thing you could say to your team right now, today, to inspire them?



Challenge

Do it. Tell the story your team needs to hear right now. Use this space to reflect on what you said and how you feel about it now.



It's a Future Story

Leadership and storytelling are not the strange bedfellows they may initially seem. Many scholars have made the connection in research, especially in the last two decades. (Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist, 2013; Bolman and Deal, 2013; Boje 2001; Denning, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Weick, 2000) What research has shown time and time again is that storytelling can be directly connected to developing organizational culture (Brady & Haley, 2013), strategic management (Sonenshein, 2017), employee loyalty (Gill, 2011), and more. Leaders can use stories to motivate, inspire, build trust, create loyalty, establish influence both up and down the organization, generate shared visions, encourage hope, and champion change. (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Bolman & Deal, 2013; Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist, 2013) Essentially, it's a tool in your leadership toolbox with a thousand uses.

That doesn't mean that you can just ramble on about your weekend and expect magic: there has to be some kind of clear message or purpose behind your stories, or they are just words. Stories need to be part of your authenticity as a leader and should never be used to manipulate or mislead others in bad faith. (Auvinen, Lamasa, Sintonen, & Takala, 2012) Stories can be powerful, and there are plenty of examples demonstrating this.

In 2009, Rob Walker and Joshua Glenn asked a question about stories: Can a narrative on any given object's subjective value be measured objectively? And with that question, they created one of my personal favorite literary and anthropological experiments they called Significant Objects. In brief, Walker and Glenn purchased about \$129 worth of items to sell on eBay. Nothing extraordinary, just normal objects they were able to thrift. A shot glass. Knick knacks. A snow globe.

But they didn't just post the items on eBay and hope for the best. They had people write stories to go along with the significant object. One knick-knack, a wooden horse, was accompanied by a story of heartbreak and betrayal written by Meg Cabot. Original price: .75 cents. Selling price: \$108.50. In total, the collection of objects sold for nearly \$8,000 in total (with proceeds given to the authors and non-profits) – a more than 6,000% increase in value. While this was decidedly a social and not a rigorous scientific experiment, it does demonstrate quite clearly that *stories* can have an immense impact on how we perceive things. (Walker & Glen, 2009)

If anyone knew the importance of storytelling when it came to leadership and influence, it was Steve Jobs, co-founder, chairman, and CEO of Apple; chairman and majority shareholder of Pixar; Member of Walt Disney Board of Directors; and founder, chairman and CEO of NeXT. Perhaps best known for his time at Apple, Steve Jobs is one of the most recognizable and well-known visionary entrepreneurs of our time. Although Jobs was involved in a number of different cutting-edge technologies throughout his life, by the 2000's, Jobs was synonymous with Apple and innovation. His product launches are master classes in how storytelling doesn't just make or break a product launch but how the right story at the right time can redefine industries and change the world. The success of the Apple iPod over the Microsoft Zune is one example of how creating a narrative around a product and service can bring success, even if the competition is technically comparable or even better. Jobs knew that what he was creating and selling to the world wasn't a product. It was a lifestyle, a story. It wasn't about what the iPod could do; it was about what *you* could do with an iPod. That is most evident in one of the most world-changing product launches of all time: the iPhone.

The Story of an Apple

It may be difficult to remember, but long, long ago...there were no smartphones. At least not in the way we understand it today. "Smart" phones of the day were operated with a keyboard or stylus rather than touch screens, the idea of having "apps" strictly referred to whether you would get the mozzarella cheese sticks or the potato skins at your local TGI Fridays before dinner, and the mobile gaming market was dominated by Snake. To get you in the right frame of mind with the technology of the day before the iPhone launched, the place I worked still relied almost exclusively on pagers to contact anyone outside of the office after hours.

If you have yet to watch his keynote speech launching the iPhone in 2007, take a moment to find it on YouTube. Jobs doesn't just go on stage and unveil a new product and start listing specs. He starts with a story. "Every once in a while," he opens his keynote with, "a revolutionary product comes along that changes everything..." The crowd applauds, but they think they know what is happening. Apple makes computers, they make music players; this is just the next step in that evolution. But Jobs isn't telling that story; he has a different one in mind. Apple, he tells the crowd, changed the whole computer industry with the Mac. Apple, he says, with an image of an iPod appearing on the giant screen behind him, changed not just how we listen to music but changed the entire music industry. Apple, he pauses dramatically, is about to change the world. Again. He starts by listing what initially seems to be different devices: a widescreen iPod with touch controls, a new mobile phone, and an internet communication device.

You can feel the excitement of the crowd as they go from the initial excitement of having a launch of not just one device but three. Until they realize... it is one device. This is unlike anything anyone has ever thought of, much less seen. Apple, says Jobs, is going to reinvent the phone. Not just a next step: The iPhone is a "leapfrog product," something completely new. The iPhone and smartphones in general are such a common part of our everyday life that we forget that not so long ago the idea of a phone being able to connect to our email, much less the internet at large, was the stuff of sci-fi stories, not everyday life.

Steve Jobs knew this and knew that he would never sell a single iPhone if people didn't have the right story. They already had phones, cameras, computers, and music players – why do they need another device that does the same thing? Especially some weird future device, one with features and abilities people couldn't even imagine a use for, much less actually using. So Jobs didn't go on stage and tell them about the iPhone. He went on stage and told them about *how their life was going to change with all the ways they could use the iPhone*. He demonstrated how easy conference calling could be and how people could be connected to others with emails and photo sharing right in their pocket. He showed how easy to use the huge touch screen was and the intuitive nature of the new technology of touch screens and gestures. Even the idea of having an interactive map in your hand able to be immediately manipulated was completely new to people. Jobs told them a story about their future and how the iPhone was going to be a part of that future.

By the end of his keynote presentation, the world had changed. There would forever be a mark in history: the time before the iPhone and the time after the iPhone.

Reflection

Tell the Story

Choose an ordinary object around you or use one of the images on this reflection and think about what its value is. Not its price: what is the story about the simple object you choose that creates its value or builds an emotional connection. Write that story here.



A Story About Us

Stories do more than connect us. They can bring us closer and build trust. Stories are more memorable than dry facts alone, and they can help build or reinforce behavior, culture, and motivation. A good story can take complex ideas or difficult-to-explain concepts and create meaning and relatability, sometimes creating layers of different meanings that can change based on perspective or time while still remaining true. Stories inspire lasting influence where data alone fails.

These next short stories have to do with **Teams**. They are very different in format, intentionally so. The first is an observation originally widely published and shared by Filipino journalist Ninotchka Roska in 1987. It is short and simple, creating a memorable image that represents a more complex idea. After reading this story, you should know exactly what someone is really saying if they compare an office environment to a bucket of crabs.

The second is a recognizable folk tale from Eastern Europe featuring a soup recipe consisting of a rotating cast of stones, axes, nails, and buttons. It is much longer than any of the other stories you have read here but still conveys a complex and multi-layered lesson in... well, I think that is for you to decide.

The Bucket of Crabs

Every fisherman knows that you always have to keep two crabs in any bucket. If you place only one crab in a bucket, it will try to get out by crawling up the side and likely make its escape. But if you place two or more crabs in a bucket, every time one climbs its way close to the edge, the others will pull it back down, no matter how full the bucket is.

The Traveler's Soup

Once upon a time, in the hills of Eastern Europe, a traveler came to a small village. The people in the village eyed him with suspicion, but the traveler was unbothered. He parked his wagon and began to set up a fire with a large cauldron of water over it. The village matron approached him and asked what he was doing, warning him that the town had nothing to share with a wanderer like him as they were all poor and hungry themselves. "Oh, no worries," said the traveler, "I have all that I need here. I was actually thinking about sharing my good fortune with the town and making a large pot of stone soup." The matron eyed him warily. "What is stone soup?" she asked.

The man smiled and leaned near her ear to whisper, "Ah, it is perhaps the greatest soup in the world. And it's made with this stone," With a flourish, he produced a small draw-string bag with a normal-looking stone inside. With great ceremony, he dropped the stone into the pot of hot water, his actions and words of food drawing the curious gazes of the rest of the villagers. As people came from their homes to watch the man cook his soup under the watchful eye of the matron, they heard him say, "Oh, I love stone soup. But once, I had stone soup with carrots. It was delicious!"

The matron frowned a little and walked away, only to return with a bunch of carrots in her hands. "I suppose if you will be sharing it, I could spare some carrots," And into the pot they went. The other villagers began to come closer. "This will be a great soup," the traveler declared. "Why, once, I had a version with carrots and onions! It was fit for feast." A villager approached a few moments later with a bag of onions that was added to the soup. Again and

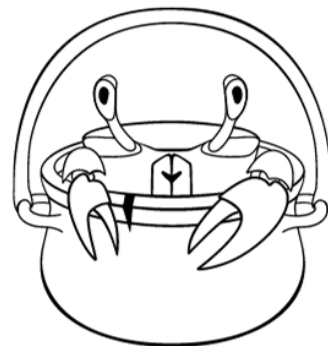
again, the traveler would mention a variation of the stone soup he had tried before, and again and again, a new villager would appear with a little bit of food to add to the pot.

Cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes, salt, herbs, meat, and even more went into the pot until the pot was overflowing with the smell of a delicious and hearty stew. The villagers all came, and everyone ate their fill of the stone soup while talking and laughing long into the night. The traveler had many offers for his amazing stone, but he denied them all. The next morning, he took his leave from the village waving goodbye. Just on the outskirts of town, he saw a young boy playing by the river. He stopped his wagon and called the boy over, handing him the pouch with the stone in it and whispering the secret of the recipe to the wide-eyed child before continuing on his way.

Reflection

Both of these short fables have to do with **teams**.

Consider these questions and reflect as you choose: Can you find a leadership lesson in these stories? Are the messages complimentary or contradictory? Does a story have to be positive to learn from? Is it a valuable message? Is there are better story you could tell, maybe even from your own life that conveys the same or similar learning opportunities?



Telling Your Story

Our stories can come from anywhere. They may be memories we have or insights we glean from a wide range of inspirations - children's stories, art, or conversations with friends. Our stories may come from common sayings or a reflection of our values. They may be stories about the future that can be achieved or the triumphs of the past. They can be inspirational and thought-provoking or funny and relationship-building. Our best stories include some small reflections of ourselves and create connections. They can be big, or they can be small. What matters about them is that it feels authentic to you.

These last activities will walk you through creating your own leadership story. Don't get caught up in academia of it: there are no right or wrong answers here. Don't even get caught up in the word "story" – it's really just another way of communicating ideas and values. There is no template or format to follow. Each "story" in this section took a different form, but there are infinitely more ways that you can choose to tell your own. It can be as simple or deep as you make it. Use the prompts as a guide if you need them, but they are only a suggestion.

It's your story to discover.

Reflection

Creating your own leadership story

A good leadership story is not only authentic to you but targeted to the right audience. The story you tell to your immediate team may be different from the story you tell to potential customers or to other managers. Start by thinking about who your audience might be and why you would want to share a story

Audience <small>(ex: my immediate workgroup / team)</small>	Purpose <small>(ex: Build trust, bring a team together, share expertise, envision the future, etc)</small>	Notes and Thoughts

Challenge: Look for opportunities where you could share your story. Think about times over the past week where you can reflect and see opportunities. Add notes on this chart to start connecting potential audiences to a purpose - this will help you learn to identify the right time, place and audience for different stories.

Reflection

Creating your own leadership story

Keeping in mind your audience and - most importantly - your *purpose* for sharing a story with that audience, it's time to start brainstorming some ideas. Fill out some of the clouds with ideas. Some prompts are included for you, but don't limit yourself.

Things that inspire

What story or memory really showcase who you are or what you value?

Way you have made a difference

Biggest Challenges

What successes are you most proud of?

What are your values?
How do you live those values as a leader?

A story or experience that impacted you in a meaningful way

If you could go back to a younger version of yourself, what advice would you tell yourself?

Reflection

Creating your own leadership story

Choose your two or three favorite questions, topics or prompts from the last reflection and brainstorm out some additional ideas and details.



Reflection

Creating your own leadership story

Choose the idea that resonates the most with you and start writing it out. This isn't English class, so do what works best for you! Bullet points, a detailed narrative, a sketch or outline...something to help you get a feel for how you can tell the story. It doesn't have to be long (500 words is roughly 3 minutes of speaking), it just needs to be authentic to you.



Challenge: Now that you have the shape and flavor of your story, the challenge is to share it. Find your opportunity and tell it.