Ignite is the modern leader's guide to communicating with impact. As the workplace begins shifting toward Generation Y, technology-fuelled 'information fatigue' is obscuring your message, and traditional communication styles are failing to get results. These upcoming superstars are the most educated generation ever, and they expect much more from their employers—so it's up to leadership teams to adapt and make authenticity a central tenet.

Author Gabrielle Dolan is an authority on real leadership. In this book she coaches you on how to communicate effectively for higher engagement and better results. Effective communication is vital to success. Talk less and communicate more as you learn to:

- respond and adapt to generational changes
- level up, step out and be real with yourself and your team
- communicate with impact across all platforms
- engage your people, your customers and yourself
- transform your style to get your message heard.

Ignite helps you lead more authentically, responsively and effectively in today's rapidly changing workplace.

Gabrielle Dolan is an expert in communication and a thought leader in business storytelling, as well as a sought-after keynote speaker, media commentator and coach. She is also the co-author of Hooked.
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Gabrielle Dolan launched her own practice in 2013 after successfully co-founding and then building One Thousand & One into Australia’s leading storytelling company.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A book is very rarely a solo effort and this is no exception. I would firstly like to thank my friend of over 30 years Gail Holstock, who undertook the vast majority of the research for *Ignite*. Her research and suggestions gave weight to my thoughts and concepts and was the catalyst for many inclusions in this book.

A huge thanks to graphic designer extraordinaire Jodie Brennan, who takes my scrappy drawings of models and designs them so they look cool and sleek.

The book was brought up a notch or three by Jo Stewart, who undertook the initial editing process. Her work has helped turn this book into something I am very proud of and I thank her for her tough love.

I would also like to thank Lucy Raymond from Wiley for her ongoing support for my writing and initial guidance when the book was still in its conceptual stage. Thanks also
to Ingrid, Alice, Pete and the rest of the Wiley team who provided valuable insights throughout the process.

Thanks to Wiley’s editor, Charlotte Duff. Charlotte enhanced the book even further and made the editing process a joy.

A very special thanks goes to Matt Church and Peter Cook of Thought Leaders Global. Both helped with the concept of the book and provided valuable input along the way. They continue to support, challenge and inspire me. They are legends and I am proud to be a Thought Leader Partner alongside them. Thanks for letting me play.

A massive thanks to Michelle Sales who encouraged me to go to Harvard with her for an Adaptive Leadership program. In the days following—between shopping trips and wines in New York—Michelle helped me make sense of many of the Harvard learnings and insights that we have since incorporated into our leadership program for senior women, called The Leadership Connection. This is a program we are both immensely proud to chair.

The book would not be the same if it were not for the people who allowed me to share their stories. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for being part of this. I would also like to thank the many people that took the time to read the manuscript and provide testimonials.

I also thank the clients who continue to grow with me and support me. Particularly Cindy Batchelor, Natalie Mina, Fiona Robertson, Georgia Russell, Sonia Aplin, Mark LeBusque and Jac Phillips. I love working with you.

A special thanks to Elise Turner, who is firstly my friend and secondly my executive manager. Elise has undertaken, and will continue to undertake, a lot of the marketing and logistics for Ignite—and just makes my life easier and work a hell of a lot more fun. Thanks mate!

Finally, a very special thanks to my husband, Steve, and daughters, Alex and Jess. They continue to support and
believe in me and always let me blog about them … granted, they don’t normally find out until after it has been published. They allow me to live the dream and they make everything worthwhile. Love you.

And, of course, thank you for reading this book. I hope after reading Ignite you will join me in the challenge to get real. The people you lead crave it and deserve it.
INTRODUCTION

The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.

— Socrates, Greek philosopher

I entered the workforce in 1985, smack-bang in the middle of the eighties. The eighties were good times. They were fun times. For many reasons, but maybe especially because of the music. I mean, it’s pretty hard not to enjoy yourself when your soundtrack includes ‘Walking on Sunshine’ and ‘We Built this City’.

Business was also a good place to be during the eighties because leaders were more real. Long lunches were the norm. Being in the office on Friday afternoon was for ‘try-hards’. Life was good. Then something happened in the late eighties…we had a recession. Demand for jobs far outweighed the supply. All of a sudden, the fun stopped.
Everyone was so scared of losing their job they started to work harder and longer. They tried to blend in so they would not get noticed.

As leaders, we enrolled in MBAs, hoping this extra qualification would help us find our next job or secure our current job. In our MBAs, we were taught about SWOT analysis and TOWS analysis, balance sheets and Porter's Five Forces model. We were shown how to measure and capture data, and use data to make business decisions. And we came out the other end a little bit…well, quite frankly—a little bit boring and full of crap.

‘If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it,’ became the mantra in businesses, and a strong focus on data, stats and analysis emerged. This reliance on data was not only how employees and managers alike were measured, but also how we were motivated. The common trajectory went something like this: ‘Here is the target, you can do it, this is how we are tracking, try harder, this is the result…oh, and you failed’.

All the data everyone was gathering, combined with the explosion of the internet and search engines such as Google, meant we had more information than we could ever possibly need or want.

At the same time, PowerPoint came along and with it the promise that how we presented would change forever—our presentations would now be interesting and engaging. We could choose how slides transitioned and which sound effects to use—and don’t forget how exciting clipart was. With these tools, you could transform any presentation into a masterpiece. And PowerPoint did change the way we presented, but just not as we expected. What PowerPoint (or should I say the poor use of PowerPoint) accomplished was to condemn us to a sort of presentation hell of bullet-point infinity.

Then during 2007 and 2008, the global financial crisis (GFC) hit and job security again became an issue. Considered by
some economists to be the worst depression since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the GFC meant we were all scared of what would happen. So we again bunkered down and didn’t do too much to attract attention. We certainly didn’t do anything to rock the boat—that would be too risky.

But in the business world today, something is happening that means that assumed safe place is actually a risky place to be.

We have a generation of employees who are expecting a lot more from the companies they work for and the leaders they follow. Within five years, generation Y (or the Millennials) will make up the vast majority of the workforce, and they will be the most educated generation in history. The focus of this generation’s loyalties has changed, and the expectations they have of their employers and leaders are significantly higher. They want leaders who excite them and ignite them. They want leaders who are real.

The possibility of more money or a promotion does not motivate employees as it once did. This generation wants purpose in their job, and they expect it to be interesting and fun. These expectations are also rippling through the rest of the workforce.

Businesses today are struggling with how to manage this new generation and workforce. But the solutions are available. More than ever, we are looking for leaders who can engage, inspire and ignite this new wave of employees.

The growing expectations of employees are also combined with the exponential growth in technology, social media and access to information. This has resulted in further information overload, making it even harder to get cut-through with your messages.

Organisations invest vast amounts of time and resources into developing strategy and defining corporate culture and values, only to see these efforts fail due to leaders being
unable to communicate values in a way that connects and engages with their employees—in a way that is real.

This book is about helping you find the real you. Knowing what you stand for, what you believe in and what you value will help you be your real self and the most authentic leader you can. It will help you to lead with courage and confidence.

Becoming real will not only ignite you but also ignite the people around you.

Read on if you believe in real leadership and real talk for real results.

**KNOWING WHAT YOU STAND FOR, WHAT YOU **believe** IN AND WHAT YOU VALUE WILL HELP YOU BE YOUR REAL SELF AND THE MOST AUTHENTIC LEADER YOU CAN. IT WILL HELP YOU TO LEAD WITH COURAGE AND CONFIDENCE.**
Chapter 4

Communicating the real you

The way we tend to communicate and engage our employees is not working and needs to change. The mindset and approach to communication continually evolves and we can’t afford to stop this process now. The trend towards such change is driven by the rise and ubiquity of social media, the disruption of conventional ‘top–down’ approaches to communication and the realisation that we need to engage people in the ‘why’ and not just the ‘what’ in our communication. In other words, we need to engage all three brains (refer to chapter 1) and we need to inspire people.

However, too many organisations and leaders still have a cascade mindset to communication, with a focus on the ‘what’. This top–down, one-way approach to communication often results in leaders communicating through obligation, with an attitude of just passing information on. This happens because they have not connected to the messages themselves, so it’s little wonder they pass on the information in a similar vein.

This approach just adds to the information overload that your employees are already dealing with, and means they either
ignore the message, don’t understand the message, don’t care about the message or feel completely overwhelmed by it.

What organisations and leaders need to do is move to a focus on the ‘why’ instead of the ‘what’. Organisations need to have a clear compelling ‘why’, and sell the ‘why’ as opposed to just the ‘what’ and ‘how’. Simon Sinek, author of *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, explains how this works — and the power that comes from it. Sinek states that people don’t buy what you do; they buy ‘why’ you do it. And leaders who start with the ‘why’ have the ability to inspire others around them.

When organisations start with the ‘why’, and empower leaders to communicate the ‘why’ in a way that is personal to them, they will have a more engaged workforce.

One aspect of authentic leadership is being able to make tough and unpopular decisions. Once a tough and unpopular decision has been made, leaders then have an obligation to ensure the people not only understand the reason for the decision but are also engaged in the conversation about it.

Engagement, however, is easier said than done. Organisations that conduct employee opinion surveys will testify that, when looking to see how they have fared, the measure leaders look for first is the employee engagement score. It is also one of the hardest measures to shift.

I was reminded of this in 2014 when I visited Boston in the United States for the first time. I arrived a few days before I commenced my Harvard program and, being a tourist, I took part in a sightseeing tour and went along to a Boston Tea Party re-enactment — which included character actors and lots of crowd participation. This would not normally be my cup of tea (pardon the pun) but it was quite educational. I had heard about the Boston Tea Party before but had never really known the details, nor the significance, of the event.
If you don’t know the story, here it is at a very macro level. Mother England had imposed a high tax on any tea exported to her colonies (America being one such colony). Many Bostonians were angry about these high taxes, claiming they were a violation of the English idea of ‘no taxation without representation’. In December 1773, three ships from England arrived in Boston Harbour with tonnes of tea. Boston refused to unload the tea in protest about the high taxes. The Crown ordered the tea to be unloaded from the ships. Led by Samuel Adams, a group of protesters boarded the three ships and threw all the tea into the water. England reacted by closing down the port of Boston, crippling the city over night. They also despatched over 4000 of its army (known as the ‘Red Coats’) to Boston.

Sixteen months later, the Red Coats came to arrest Adams, and this resulted in the Battle of Lexington, which was the start of the American Revolution. On 4 July the following year, America declared independence from British rule.

Back in my hotel room after the educational tour of Boston, I continued my pre-reading for the Harvard program. Much of this pre-reading focused on defining leadership, with a common consensus that leadership consists of providing a vision and then taking action to realise that vision. And that leadership is also about being prepared to take an unpopular stand but, once that stand is made, the leader...
has an obligation not only to explain it to the people but also to win their support and approval.

When I look at what Samuel Adams did, I think he ticked all those boxes:

- He had a vision of ‘no tax without representation’.
- He made and then acted on the unpopular decision by throwing the tea overboard. He knew this would be considered an act of treason and he knew the punishment for this.
- He explained the decision to the people and won their support and approval. This was later proven by the fact that many people risked their own lives to warn him of his impending arrest.

Authentic leadership is about making the tough decisions. Once a decision is made, you then have an obligation to communicate it effectively and to win the support and approval of people. If Adams had missed this vital step, who knows how different American history could have been?

This chapter focuses on how you can engage people to follow you—to be inspired, and to be inspiring.

**Your storytelling style**

Before you start using stories in business it is important to understand your typical storytelling style. Your storytelling style is determined by two factors: how purposeful you are with your stories and how engaging your stories are.

When you tell a story, do you have very high clarity on what message you are trying to get across? Are you clear on what the purpose of your story is, or are you not that sure?

When you deliver your story, how engaging is it? Are people with you all the way or have they stopped listening well before you have stopped talking?

The four styles are shown in the following illustration.
The **Bragger**\(^1\) storyteller tends to tell very longwinded stories about themselves and their successes, with a focus on ‘the good old days’ or sport. The Bragger’s stories are very low on engagement and provide no clarity around their purpose. It seems the only message they are trying to get across is how great they are. Stories are often about yourself, but you need to be careful that they don’t take on a ‘bragging’ feel. You can normally avoid this with a healthy level of self-deprecating behaviour.

The **Joker** tells lots of really funny, engaging stories that have either low or no purpose, except to make people laugh. It’s an admirable aim in life but the Joker misses many amazing opportunities when it comes to storytelling in business. The biggest opportunity they miss is connecting their stories to a business message, because people remember the story and its humour, but don’t remember the message.

The Joker can also tend to use humour for humour’s sake, which again runs the risk of detracting from the message.

The **Reporter** is the most common storyteller style in business. The Reporter’s stories tend to have lots of facts and figures and statistics in them. Reporters also tend to use a lot of case studies, thinking they act in the same way as stories, and they tend to use a lot of business examples. This means their stories are less engaging. So while the Reporter may have clarity on their purpose for the story, overall their stories are very low on engagement.

The **Inspirer** is crystal clear on their purpose in using and narrating stories, and because of this their stories are highly engaging. They achieve this high engagement because they are not afraid to share personal stories and they know exactly how they can connect a personal story with a business message.

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\(^1\)In *Hooked*, a book I co-authored, I used the term ‘Avoider’ for this style of storyteller but I have since started referring to this as Bragger because I think it is a more accurate description.
Communicating the real you

You may move around the quadrants but you will most likely have a normal or default style. This may be a case of stating the obvious but the Inspirer is who you should aspire to be.

Your storytelling grapevine

The most efficient and cost-effective communication channel you have at your disposal as a leader is the grapevine. In organisations, the grapevine doesn’t need a strategy or action plan, it doesn’t need a department to manage it and it can’t be controlled. Yet, it can be influenced.

It is worth your while as a leader to ensure that the stories being shared about you on the grapevine (and, whether you realise it or not, stories are being shared about you) are positive. You can do this in two ways: a ‘pull’ approach or a ‘push’ approach. Just like in marketing, using a combination of both approaches works best.

THE MOST EFFICIENT AND COST-EFFECTIVE communication CHANNEL YOU HAVE AT YOUR DISPOSAL AS A LEADER IS THE GRAPEVINE.

The pull approach involves stories generated by the actions and decisions you make.

The push approach involves stories you choose to proactively share.

Pull stories

You don’t have total control of your pull stories because these are the stories people create in their head and share based on your actions and decisions. Stories about you are
already out there! People are already sharing stories about you—about your leadership style, about your values, and about what you are like to work for and work with.

When Andrew Thorburn was appointed the new CEO of NAB in 2014, Australia’s national newspaper wrote an article on his appointment, and this article was circulated by NAB’s internal Yammer network. One employee wrote a comment about how proud she was when she read the article. Andrew responded with a comment of his own, thanking the woman and saying how proud his mum also was of the article.

This was only a small gesture by him but the impact was staggering. Over the next month, I can’t tell you how many NAB employees told me that story. All were sharing it because they just thought it was great that a CEO would do that, and they believed that it showed he was a decent, down-to-earth and approachable guy.

Another example of a great pull story comes from Mark Leopold, the corporate affairs director at Readify, an agile and growing technology company. The company’s managing director (and part owner) is Graeme Strange. Before Mark joined Readify, he and Graeme had known each other through golf; they’d played at the same club and occasionally bumped into each other.

As MD of Readify, Graeme has always valued people. Readify is built on great technologists; brilliant people who deliver innovative, custom software to help solve business problems. Graeme is not one to rest on success and, instead, is always looking to re-invigorate the company. In his eyes, retaining leadership in a fast-moving industry requires an even faster company.

To sustain growth, Graeme was looking for new ideas and wanted to inject new business thinking into the leadership team. The technology side of the business was strong but the time was right to now increase general business and management
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skills. Knowing Mark’s diverse business background, Graeme asked Mark to consider working at Readify.

Mark was surprised and interested in the idea. However, he had some concerns too. He did not have a background in technology and was also coming from larger ‘corporate’ type businesses; the idea was attractive but his concern was his own ability to add value in such an environment. Both spent time evaluating options after an initial discussion.

While considering options, Mark reflected on a number of things. A key consideration was Graeme’s optimism and confidence in the Readify team.

Mark reflected: ‘Looking back, I never remembered Graeme speaking negatively about his team or his company. Never. In truth, neither of us talks much about business on the weekend but when he did, it was positive. This is not always the case—in my experience, some leaders tend to have a more negative outlook.’ So Graeme’s positive outlook—even when he wasn’t ‘selling’ the merits of Readify—was a big tick.

Mark found the icing on the cake when he attended a company get-together in Queensland prior to formally starting. Graeme had gathered the Readify team for an annual ‘kick-off’—a time when the whole company celebrates success and discusses the future. Mark was staggered by the event, and it made him realise he was joining something different—and something a little scary for someone with 20 years’ experience in a conservative business environment. The main reason for Mark’s reaction was that, numerous times, Graeme divulged very sensitive information about Readify’s strategy and pending plans. Mark noted that other organisations would close off such information to a chosen few. But not Graeme, and not Readify.

Graeme asked his employees to keep this information to themselves for a few weeks until it was announced publicly. He didn’t ask for trust; he just trusted.
Mark thought this was idiocy and close to madness. He said, ‘I am hearing Graeme divulge very sensitive information to over a hundred employees, all with their smart phones in hand—meaning they are only a few taps away from sharing this information across multiple social media sites’.

Mark conveyed that he was amazed that the employees respected Graeme’s wish and the information never leaked. Mark shared that story with me to highlight the fact that he joined Readify because it reflected the culture he wanted to be part of. A culture where not only the employees had such high respect for the business but also the MD had such high regard and trust for his employees. This goes some way to explaining Readify’s sustainable success.

When Jac Phillips was appointed head of brand and marketing at Bank of Melbourne, she wanted to make it clear to everyone in her new team that she operated by a core set of values—inclusion and respect. One of her first priorities was to sit for an hour with each member of her team to find out what they loved about their job, what they didn’t love about their job and what their passions were. She sat beside them, not opposite them, because she wanted to show she meant it when she said she considered this an equal relationship. As a part of these conversations, Jac also included some suppliers who worked closely with the team.

Jac was living her values of respect and inclusivity because her actions were visible—and they were noticed. Her team started to talk about the congruence of her messages and her actions, and told her on many occasions the impact those conversations had. Too many leaders come into an organisation and say all the right things—but then their actions are in total contrast to what they say. These leaders are not being real.
Another example of actions having a greater impact than words comes from the CEO of the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, Judith Slocombe. Judith is a highly successful businesswoman who believes that the success of any organisation relies on every employee’s individual contribution. Before the annual staff Christmas party, Judith writes a personal card to every employee and thanks each and every person, individually, for their contribution. This is something she does on her own. Typically the CEO would ask her leadership team or executive assistant for help with this task—perhaps supplying details on what each employee has achieved over the year—but she doesn’t need to do that. She understands each individual’s contribution deeply.

The organisation has doubled over the past three years and, each Christmas, her support team suggests that Judith may not have the time to write personal cards to every employee. However, each year she does. This is another example of real leadership in action, and again shows how your actions generate stories about your true values, not your espoused values.

It is important to understand that your actions will generate stories. As a leader, be aware of this and work with it. Make sure your actions generate positive stories, not negative stories. Of course, sometimes a negative story is unavoidable, because one action could result in different interpretations. You only have to look at the world of politics to see how one statement or decision can divide a nation. However, you can still do your best to ensure your actions generate stories about the values you want to represent you.

ONE MEMORABLE STORY CAN **transform** YOUR PROFESSIONAL BRAND.
The other way to influence your story grapevine is to actively place stories into it—and this is the push effect.

**Push stories**

Push stories are those that demonstrate your values and that you strategically share. These stories become a valuable tool for you once you decide to step into real leadership, because one memorable story can transform your professional brand. These stories can be shared in a variety of situations—from one-on-one conversations, to team meetings, to job interviews or in presentations.

Here is an example Basma used in a job interview to demonstrate her leadership style and values:

Ever since my daughter Millie was born, she has sung. Even though it’s a cliché, I can say she was born screaming and hasn’t stopped since. From the moment she could talk, she expressed a desire to perform and sing. As early as the lower primary school years, she would tell anyone who would listen that she was going to be a singer when she grew up. I found myself, from her earliest years, strongly pushing her in other directions, telling her how hard it was to make a career in the arts. Yes, I lectured a primary school aged child about career choices. I heard that cliché ‘You will need something else to fall back on’ come out of my mouth more times than I care to remember. While I paid for singing and piano lessons, I don’t think I ever fully appreciated the fire that burned within this young girl to pursue her dreams.

When it came to choosing a secondary school for Millie, I took her along to a school with a strong reputation in the performing arts, thinking that she would be happiest there, but still secretly wishing that she would find something more ‘normal’ as a career choice. We sat in the Head of the Middle School’s office answering all the standard questions, and he asked, ‘What do you want to do when you finish school, Millie?’ She looked him straight in the eye and without hesitation said, ‘I want to be a singer’. And he looked straight back at her and said, ‘Brilliant’.
For me, it was the parenting ‘Aha’ moment that was long overdue. I was the only person in that office who didn't utterly believe this was her strength and her calling. I changed not only my parenting style at that moment but also my view of the teams I lead. Just as I stopped trying to have the child I wanted and embraced the child I had, I also now pay greater attention to the strengths of the people I lead, and I embrace differences and am mindful of the ‘singers’ I lead. It has made my style more patient and adaptive, and allowed me to build higher performing teams.

Another example comes from Catherine. Catherine had her sights on bigger and broader roles but the people making the decisions about her career had pigeonholed her in other roles.

One of the characteristics Catherine wanted to get across to her superiors was her ability to take calculated risks, and make tough and quick decisions in high-pressured circumstances. To communicate this she deliberately started sharing the following story in relevant situations:

Ten years ago I found myself scuba diving off the coast of Mexico. It was perfect weather and brilliant conditions. However, five minutes after descending, I got caught in a massive rip. It dragged me for kilometres and split me from my dive group. I was getting banged against rocks and thrown around. At one stage, I vomited into my regulator, which is not an ideal situation when this is your only access to oxygen. As you could imagine, my heart was pumping—which is, again, not ideal because you're using your oxygen supply at a much faster rate.

I emerged from the rip after what seemed like hours—even though it was probably only about ten minutes—and eventually found one of my dive group members underwater. Given the fact that we now had limited air, we surfaced relatively quickly but safely. I remember that feeling of my head eventually breaking the surface of the water and looking around to see the boat…however, there was no boat and no sign of land. We were alone in the vast ocean.
After many years of diving, I’d never encountered this situation before. Out of air, no boat, battered and in searing hot sun and now rough sea … and no way of communicating.

I had to think fast and quickly get control. I dropped my weight belt and tank to make myself lighter and conserve energy. I filled my buoyancy vest to the max to get my head high above the water and the waves that were crashing down on us, and I tied myself and my dive buddy together.

Two hours later, the boat eventually found us and we were rescued.

I am sharing this with you because I think it captures how I approach leadership challenges in general. I am able to make tough and quick decisions in a crisis, and I have resilience. Even though my experience in Mexico was unbelievably scary at the time, a part of it was absolutely exhilarating. I know in business we will encounter rips and rough seas, and I know I am up for it.

Another example of how to use storytelling to get across your values comes from Tristram Gray, head of human resources at Ericsson for the South-East Asia and Oceania region. Tristram is based in Singapore with a diverse team, and he wanted his team to know the importance of asking the right questions so that you solve customer’s real problems. This was something Tristram valued, and he used this story to convey this value to his team:

My family and I moved to Singapore in early 2012 and soon after my wife, Michelle, needed to take our eight-year-old son, Harry, to the doctor as he had developed a fever. The only appointment time she could get was 8 o’clock in the evening.

The doctor assessed Harry and prescribed some antibiotics. Michelle asked the doctor’s receptionist where the nearest pharmacy was. The receptionist provided directions to the nearest pharmacy, which turned out to only be a couple of kilometres away.
Michelle and Harry set off and within ten minutes arrived at the pharmacy, only to find that it was closed, and had been so since 6 pm.

Frustrated, they returned to the doctor’s surgery and asked the receptionist why she had sent them to a closed pharmacy.

The receptionist replied that Michelle had asked where the nearest pharmacy was, and this was the nearest one. She then gave Michelle directions to the nearest open pharmacy, which was a little further away, and Michelle was able to purchase the medicine Harry required.

This made me think about how many times we provide answers or solutions to the problem or issue that is being presented to us, rather than taking the time to ask the right questions to ensure we answer or resolve the real problem.

Every day we have opportunities to send our customers to the nearest closed pharmacy or the nearest open pharmacy. By asking the right questions, imagine the difference we can make.

This is another great example of using a personal story to demonstrate what you believe in and value.

**Coming up with push stories**

The first place to start when trying to come up with your own push stories is determining what you want to be known for. Think about what is important to you, what your core values are. Write them down on a piece of paper. Don’t try to list too many values or you’ll end up being known for none of them. Instead, choose your top two or three values.

Once you know what you want to be known for, find stories from your past that demonstrate these values. You can do this through taking some time to reflect on your life and then through answering some specific questions. Then, you can actively start to share the stories that demonstrate your values.

This three-step process, outlined in more detail in the following sections, will help you find your stories.
Step 1: This is your life

Pour yourself a cup of coffee, a cup of tea or a glass of wine—the choice is yours. Then grab a blank piece of paper and a pen and find a place where you can work uninterrupted for about 30 minutes. Next, reflect back through your life—from your earliest memory to today—and start writing your most powerful memories down. Whatever memories come to you. Do not analyse what you are thinking about or if it is relevant—just write it down.

When I did this for the first time, some of my memories were:

- falling out of a tree when I was five and cutting my knee open
- hitting a girl in Grade 2 and having Mum called to the school
- wearing long socks instead of ankle socks on my first day of secondary school
- my fiancé leaving me for another woman six months before our wedding
- running 32 kilometres across King Island
- doing the Oxfam 100-kilometre challenge
- not getting the promotion I thought I was going to get.

Give yourself ten minutes to make your list. After the ten minutes is up, go back to each one and, in a word or two, describe what the memory was about—what it represents overall. So, for example, the descriptions I added to my list of memories were:

- falling out of a tree when I was five and cutting my knee open—ADVENTURE
- hitting a girl in Grade 2 and having Mum called to the school—STANDING UP
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- wearing long socks instead of ankle socks on my first day of secondary school—FITTING IN
- my fiancé leaving me for another woman six months before our wedding—RESILIENCE
- running 32 kilometres across King Island—CHALLENGE
- doing the Oxfam 100 kilometre challenge—CHALLENGE
- not getting the promotion I thought I was going to get—RESILIENCE.

The final stage of this process is to identify any themes or words that occur in the descriptions more than once. For me, resilience and challenge each appeared twice. Just circle or highlight any words that appear more than once.

**Step 2: Q&A**

Now I want you to go a bit deep with your memories. On another piece of paper, write down your answers to the following activities and questions:

- What experience in your early life had the biggest influence or impact on you? Describe what it was, why it had such an impact and how it influences you today.
- Describe a recent experience that has made you proud. What was it and why did it make you proud?
- Describe three times when you felt fulfilled, content or happy. What were you doing? How were you feeling? Why do you value this so much?
- Describe one of your biggest regrets. What is it? Why do you regret it? Has it changed the choices you make today?
Ignite

- Have you ever been in a situation where you have had a clash of values? What were they and what did you decide to do?

- Have you done anything that scared the hell out of you but you did it anyway? What was it and what process did you go through to overcome your fear?

For example, recently, my youngest daughter, Jess, advised us that she wanted to participate in the Shave for a Cure fundraiser, which raises money for leukaemia and, as you may know, would involve her shaving her head. As her mother, I was both proud and horrified. I must admit I did try to talk her out of it by saying, ‘But what will you look like?’ She replied by telling me that, unlike Alex (her elder sister, who is the ballet dancer), she didn’t care what she looked like. This is slightly harsh on her elder sister, but true. Then she asked me, ‘What about the kids who get leukaemia? They don’t get a choice in what they look like because they just lose their hair.’ My horror subsided into absolute pride. Her words reinforced to me the importance of having a purpose and showing leadership around that, regardless of the consequences.

Step 3: Aligning your stories with what you want to be known for

Go back to the piece of paper where you wrote down the values you want to be known for, and then go back over what you wrote down for Steps 1 and 2 to see if any of the examples you have described demonstrate these values.

If they do, you have a suite of stories you can actively start putting onto your personal grapevine. I encourage you to share them at every relevant opportunity. In presentations, job interviews, team meetings and coaching sessions, and
with clients, peers, your team and your leaders. Just ensure you are sharing these stories in a way that is authentic and relevant.

If you are looking at your list of values you want to be known for and none of the examples and stories you listed in Steps 1 and 2 match, you need to ask yourself a very tough question. Are the values you listed actually the values you espouse and your values in action?

**The organisational grapevine**

In my practice, I work a lot with senior executives in charge of culture, in charge of leadership, in charge of employee engagement, in charge of communications, and in charge of strategy. All these are critical areas of focus within organisations. However, I think organisations are overlooking perhaps the most critical platform that has an impact across the entire organisation: the organisational grapevine.

The organisational grapevine is in every single organisation; every single employee is part of it, every single employee actively engages in it, and every single employee is affected by it. Yet very few organisations give it the attention it deserves. This needs to change. While the grapevine was always powerful, technology and all forms of social media have been giving it significantly more power.

If the grapevine were a piece of hardware, the software would be stories. If the grapevine is left unattended, the vast majority of stories in the grapevine will be negative, and while you can’t control the grapevine, you can certainly influence the stories that are fuelling it.
The organisation that understands the power of the grapevine and takes active and strategic steps to influence it can experience huge advantages in employee engagement, strategy awareness and organisational or cultural change.

In this context, it's worth looking at the evolution of organisational change. In the 1980s and '90s, cultural change followed a similar format—one known as the ‘rollout’. Corporate values and mission statements were emblazoned on beautifully designed wall posters. Along with the wall posters, employees would usually receive a mouse pad or a coffee mug with the organisational values printed on them. Business cards often had the mission or vision statement printed on the reverse side. They were literally rolled out through the organisation via a communication cascade starting from the CEO and moving down.

The intention here was good, and some companies did experience success with this format. Values and mission statements that were visible at every employee’s work desk did result in many employees being able to recite the corporate values and mission statement. Unfortunately, very few knew what they actually meant.

The next wave in the corporate cultural revolution saw the move from ‘rollouts’ to ‘road shows’, or a blend of the two. People started to realise that the cascade communication approach did not seem to be working, for several reasons. Many of the messages were being lost in translation and many leaders lacked the communication skills needed to connect with their staff.

The solution was to get only the executive leadership team out talking to the employees. Due to the vast number of employees, this was often done via a variety of ‘town hall’ meetings, where members of the executive team would fly into locations around the country delivering the messages of organisational change to up to a few hundred people at a time. The meetings normally consisted of communicating
the reason for the change, what was going to change, the process for change, how the change was going to be measured and how everyone would love their jobs more.

This approach, again, was based on good intentions but had limited success. Often nothing would change after the execs flew in with their ‘Are you on the bus or not?’ type talk, and then flew out again. Ultimately, nothing much changed because this one-off communication may motivate for a day or a week, but what happens after that? Employees need to be motivated and engaged day-in and day-out, and developing this engagement is not just the job of the senior executive team but also of all leaders.

THE ORGANISATION THAT UNDERSTANDS THE **power** OF THE GRAPEVINE AND TAKES ACTIVE AND STRATEGIC STEPS TO **influence** IT CAN EXPERIENCE HUGE ADVANTAGES IN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT, STRATEGY AWARENESS AND ORGANISATIONAL OR CULTURAL CHANGE.

Some of the shifts I have discussed—such as the unique challenges generation Y brings to the workforce, the concept of the three brains and the exponential growth of technology—will significantly affect the future of organisational change. The evolution organisational change will continue to go through is not dissimilar to the evolution of hardware and software. Each new version should bring a better way of operating by offering enhancements and fixing bugs of the past.

This need to improve on the way we undertake organisational change is brought about predominately by the generational
and technological shifts occurring. With generation Y becoming the most dominant generation, organisations need to address the accompanying challenges—including the greater expectations they have of their employers and the focus of loyalty shifting to purpose and lifestyle.

The exponential growth in technology has resulted in far easier access to information, and made it significantly harder for leaders to have an impact.

Organisations need to dramatically alter the way they lead and communicate. They need to obsess about engaging the whole brain and to communicate in a collective way, not in the traditional cascade or collaborative approach. For organisations to be successful in their organisational change, they need to move from the ‘rollout’ or ‘road show’ mindset to the ‘real thing’ mindset, upgrade to the new version and start using storytelling strategically.

**ORGANISATIONS NEED TO** _dramatically_ **ALTER THE WAY THEY LEAD AND COMMUNICATE. THEY NEED TO OBSESS ABOUT ENGAGING THE WHOLE BRAIN AND TO** _communicate_ **IN A COLLECTIVE WAY, NOT IN THE TRADITIONAL CASCADE OR COLLABORATIVE APPROACH.**

The following illustration compares these three versions, and the approaches and expectations of each.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version</th>
<th>1.0 - Rollouts</th>
<th>2.0 - Roadshows</th>
<th>3.0 - Real Thing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>Coffee mugs + mouse pads</td>
<td>PowerPoint + Town Hall meetings</td>
<td>Stories + the Grapevine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication approach</td>
<td>Cascade - one way</td>
<td>Collaborative - two way</td>
<td>Collaborative - multiple ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged the</td>
<td>Head</td>
<td>Head + Heart</td>
<td>Head, Heart + Gut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant generation</td>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>Gen Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty focus</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>Company + Lifestyle</td>
<td>Purpose + Lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation of employees</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to information</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>Inundated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to impact</td>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Hard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategic storytelling
Strategic, authentic, storytelling can be employed once you have clarity on the strategic direction or cultural change that needs to happen. The strategy involves four stages:
1. equipping your leaders and influencers with the skill
2. capturing stories
3. sharing stories
4. generating stories.
Authenticity is at the heart of this entire strategy, as shown in the illustration on page 101.

Skill
Formalising the business storytelling process and providing leaders with the necessary training is important—this allows them to skilfully apply the process.

Avoid training leaders purely according to hierarchy. Instead, identify and include key influencers in the organisation who could also be trained in storytelling to help achieve the change. And also include support people in the training, such as internal communications and human resources specialists, so they can support and encourage the use of storytelling.

Give leaders the opportunity to practise their stories and to obtain feedback.

Capture
You will need to develop formal and informal strategies to capture stories. The focus of the stories you capture should celebrate the past, acknowledge the present and paint the future. Therefore, it is critical to capture stories from a diverse range of people, including people of different age, tenure, position, location and race.
Authentic Storytelling

Generate  
Skill  
Capture  
Share
Ignite

You will also need to provide leaders with the tools, techniques and time to effectively listen to stories, because to be a good storyteller you need to be a great story listener.

**Share**

To encourage the sharing of stories throughout your organisation, you will need to create a culture that supports the use of organisational storytelling. This is best achieved via role modelling, starting with the CEO and senior leadership team, and through sharing stories in all formal and informal communications.

Find multiple channels to relay stories to other leaders, employees and customers. Your aim with sharing stories is to influence the grapevine without controlling it. Stories should encourage the behaviours and culture you want.

**Generate**

Understand the concept of ‘pull’ stories and how the actions and decisions of your leaders and employees generate stories. Empower all employees to deliver on the promise of the new strategy or culture, which will generate positive stories. Use stories to generate further stories and be aware of the ripple effect of stories—and know how to maximise that impact.

The stages of capture, share and generate are not linear and should be conducted in parallel and in an ongoing, circular fashion.

**Top 10 storytelling mistakes**

When adopting such a storytelling strategy, leaders and organisations often make some avoidable, yet common, mistakes. Here are the top 10:

1. Not having clarity on what type of culture the organisation wants to cultivate.
Communicating the real you

2 Expecting leaders to use storytelling in business skilfully and effectively but not investing in their training so they can learn the skill.

3 Only training leaders based on position and ignoring other key influencers.

4 Calling something a story without it being a story at all.

5 Developing stories by committee.

6 Attempting to come up with one story to communicate everything to everyone.

7 Capturing stories by going out to employees and asking them to ‘Share your story here…’

8 Over-engineering each element and not trusting the process.

9 Not being authentic and transparent with stories and communications.

10 Not acknowledging the current reality and trying to sugar-coat negatives.

Top tips for storytelling
The following specific storytelling tips are aimed at helping your stories be more real and helping you share your stories in a more engaging and authentic way.

Tip 1: Make it personal
The real power in using stories in business is to use a personal story and attach it to a business message.

Cindy Batchelor is Executive General Manager, NAB Business. She is a long-term client of mine and a woman I admire and respect. Cindy is tall, and extremely fit and healthy. She plays basketball, runs half-marathons and recently completed the Kokoda Trail. She is also strong
and forthright in her opinion and is not afraid of showing emotion. Cindy understands the power of storytelling and, if you ever have the pleasure of hearing Cindy present, you will no doubt hear her tell a story—and a personal story at that.

Here is an example of a story Cindy shares often to deliver the message of how important it is to be positive and to ‘reframe’ any situation:

Two years ago I lost my husband in a tragic paragliding accident. In our time of dealing with this loss, my youngest son Billy said to me that his greatest fear was, ‘If it could happen to Dad, it could happen to you’. As a parent, this is a tough one to respond to—there are no guarantees in life.

Ten months after John’s accident I was involved in a car accident while driving home from work. I had stopped at the shop on the way home to pick up some groceries and rang my eldest son Jackson when I was about five minutes away to get him to meet me outside to help with the groceries. Two minutes from home I was ‘T-boned’ in my car and instantaneously six airbags deployed. In a sliding doors moment I pulled up just before I ran into a power pole. The car was a total write-off but luckily both the other driver and I walked away a little bruised but okay.

The only thing that was going through my mind at the time was the memory of Billy saying, ‘If it could happen to Dad, it could happen to you’ and thinking that at that moment Jackson was standing outside at home waiting for me—and I was not going be turning up anytime soon.

A lady walking by allowed me to use her mobile phone to ring Jackson. He was 500 metres away and he immediately ran across the park in his school uniform and socks to find me. As you can imagine, I was pretty upset and I just said how scared I was of what could have happened. Jackson gave me a hug and calmly said to me, ‘Mum, you can’t think of it like that. You need to think of it like this—you drive a safe car and the airbags worked.’ I just hugged him with pride about his perfect, powerful and positive response.
Communicating the real you

I am sharing this with you because every day when I am faced with the challenges of running this business, I often ask myself, ‘How would Jackson reframe this?’

I spoke to Cindy about how and why she used such a personal story. She said,

It was a few weeks after this incident when I needed to address my team about the challenges of delivering outcomes in the face of obstacles and Jackson’s words of wisdom came back to me. So I told this story and introduced the notion of ‘reframing’ as a concept in business. Due to the power of storytelling to get your message across, ‘reframing’ quickly became the language of positivity in my business. This story has had the most incredible impact on my business and the way I connect with my people. There is a real strength in showing vulnerability as a leader.

Another example of sharing a personal story to great effect comes from Jenni Coles, director of care homes and rehabilitation at Bupa Care Services in Auckland, New Zealand.

Jenni used this story to communicate ‘extraordinary’ — one of Bupa’s organisational values. Bupa wanted to communicate to their people that extraordinary meant going above and beyond. This is how Jenny did so:

My dad had six young children when he was diagnosed with a severe heart infection. This resulted in him being one of the first people in NZ to have both a human-to-human heart valve replacement and a pacemaker.

He could have become a cardiac cripple and given up work. But he didn’t. He continued to work and support our family for the next 20 years.

Dad was a county engineer and responsible for roads and bridges for a large rural area. Within that area, there were about 100 small old one-lane wooden bridges. These needed to be replaced because they were dangerous for the stock trucks and families, but the county didn’t have sufficient funding to replace them all.
So Dad researched the options, including visiting Australia to see the latest methods, and decided the best approach was to replace the bridges with concrete two-lane bridges.

What he did next was extraordinary. He went above and beyond. In our own backyard he built a concrete plant, powered by an engine from a steam train, and got to work creating all the bridge piles and bridge spans for the 100 bridges.

When I think about my dad, a lasting image I have is of him standing beside a truck loaded with the makings of a bridge with a huge smile on his face.

I see my Dad as extraordinary…he battled through severe illness to provide for our family and he followed his desire to ensure our community had safe roads and bridges. Those bridges are still there today and will be for the next 100 years.

We might not be building physical bridges at Bupa but every day we have the opportunity to be extraordinary. To go above and beyond, to be the best we can dream to be—like my Dad did—and to deliver outstanding results both big and small.

You will notice with all these stories that, although they have a personal connection, people are not sharing their most intimate secrets. It is this misconception that often frightens people away from using storytelling in business—but business storytelling is not about that. Everyday stories are actually the most powerful, because these are the stories that people connect to.

Sharing personal stories that show vulnerability can be very powerful, especially for leaders in organisations. Sharing stories that are embarrassing, challenging, sad or hurtful, and then sharing the wisdom you gained from these events
Communicating the real you

in your life, can be incredibly inspiring for your team. But, you need to have reconciled with the event that happened before you share it with others.

If you are still angry or bitter about what happened, this emotion will come out and it won’t be inspiring. If time has not allowed you to heal from the events and the emotion is too raw for you, this will come out when you start to share your story. Some emotion in telling a story is brilliant; emotion that is too raw will result in both you and your audience becoming very uncomfortable. If this happens, you may not achieve the result you wanted when telling the story. You may have wanted to inspire people, but instead all you may receive is sympathy.

Many senior leaders today are being encouraged to share their ‘leadership story’. This story is typically a major event in their life that has had such an impact that it has influenced the person they are today and the way they lead.

I was once called into an organisation by their events manager, who wanted the executive manager to share his leadership story and wanted me to help him with this. In our time together, he told me his story—the one that they wanted him to share in front of more than 200 leaders. The raw emotion was visible and I could tell he was uncomfortable sharing it. He still had not recovered from the events that took place. Sharing that story would have been a mistake. So I worked with him on another story that he was more comfortable sharing but that would still produce the same outcome.

As the storyteller, you have the ultimate final decision on what stories you share and who you share them with. Personal stories of hurt and vulnerability are very powerful. But only when you have reconciled with the past events
will you be able to share your insights and learnings. When that happens, your stories will become very inspiring.

So first repair and then share your story.

Tip 2: Use humour wisely

In an effort to be more engaging, many people try to make their stories funny. Nothing is wrong with sharing a funny story—that people love humorous stories is undeniable. So humour definitely has its place in business storytelling and in business presentations and I encourage you to use it purposefully and appropriately.

But how can you use humour effectively in your stories? And what should you avoid?

Do use humour to break the ice

Humour has been scientifically proven to have physical benefits. The old adage that ‘laughter is the best medicine’ has wisdom. Laughter has been proven to:

- relax the whole body
- decrease stress hormones
- trigger the release of endorphins, the body’s natural feel-good hormones.

So getting your audience to laugh sooner rather than later, and you also being able to laugh along, is related to these three physical benefits. It will relax you, which is great for helping to ensure you narrate your story in your natural style. It will decrease your stress, which is important if you are feeling a bit anxious about your story. And it will trigger those endorphins in your audience and get them feeling good towards you.

I did some work with a group of four young graduates who had to present at their company’s yearly conference. The four graduates came together beforehand to practise their
TOP TIPS FOR STORYTELLING:

■ Make it personal
■ Use humour wisely
■ Use emotion over data
■ Start smart
■ End smarter
stories. One of the grads, Scott, was really nervous, even at this practice session. About halfway through the story he’d included a humorous line—at which we all laughed. After that point, Scott continued on with his story but in a more natural tone. When everyone laughed and Scott himself also laughed, it relaxed him and his story just seemed to flow better after that.

What we then did with Scott’s story was to use that funny line much earlier in the story. This helped Scott, who was still very nervous, relax into his story significantly earlier, making for a much more engaging story.

_Do use humour to bring in humility_

When you are sharing stories about yourself, you probably want to avoid telling stories about how great you are. Even if the story does involve you doing great things, you can use humour to bring in humility. This does not mean you have to belittle your achievements but some self-deprecating humour never goes astray.

_Do’t use humour for the sake of it_

Humour for the sake of it is self-indulgent and will distract from the purpose. If you use humour without a purpose, you slip into the Joker style of storytelling and your message may be lost.

_Do’t use humour that can be interpreted as sexist or racist_

The key word in this tip is ‘interpreted’. You may have seen many people overstep this mark without realising it. One client told a story about going to buy a computer for his wife and then proceeded to go on about how technically illiterate she was and how he had to do everything when it came to technology. So, in itself, the story may not have been overly sexist but it would be fair to say that he lost 50 per cent of his audience (the women), right there.
Political humour is also risky because it has the potential to divide your audience.

**Tip 3: Use emotion over data**

Another common mistake leaders make with storytelling is they include too many numbers in their story. I have a theory that you should try to avoid using numbers, unless absolutely necessary. You may need some numbers to set context such as ‘five years ago’ or ‘when I was ten’, but too many numbers can distract from your story. When you use numbers in your story, your audience naturally assumes they are important so unconsciously they try to remember all the numbers. This distracts from their emotional engagement in your story.

As I discussed previously, in business most leaders have a reporter style and by default use a lot of numbers or stats in their stories. However, stories are effective because, if done right, they tap into our emotion. The more facts, figures, stats and so on you have in your stories, the less room you have left for emotion.

**Tip 4: Start smart**

‘Four years ago I went on a trip to Vietnam with my family in August. Actually I think it was five years ago. Anyway before we went on the trip. Oh, sorry, it was four years ago and it wasn’t August it was September. Well, I think we left late August but came back in September—actually it was all of September because I know we were over there when the grand final was on and that is the last weekend in September…’ Have I lost you already? I bet I have.

You would be amazed at how many people start their stories like this and, believe me, people have stopped listening before they even get through a few sentences. I call this the ‘Grandpa Simpson start’. If you are a fan of *The Simpsons* you will know that Grandpa’s stories often start
with banal information—for example, ‘I had an onion on my belt, which was the style at the time. They didn’t have white onions because of the war. The only thing you could get was those big yellow ones…’

Your start should be short and sharp. The best formula is to quickly establish the time and place, such as ‘When I was a kid I grew up on a farm…’ or ‘Three years ago I ran a half marathon…’

The quality of their beginnings in one of the reasons we are seduced by the ‘off the cuff’ stories good leaders use—that is, how they start their stories. The start of your story should be very conversational such as, ‘That reminds me of a time when…’ or ‘As a kid I grew up in the country and…’ These conversational starts do two things. They are efficient, so they save time but, most importantly, they hook people in immediately. Imagine being in a business meeting and someone starts talking with, ‘This reminds me of a time when I went scuba diving’. As humans, we are hardwired to listen to stories so we intrinsically engage when someone starts to tell a story, and starts well.

**Tip 5: End smarter**

The way you end a story will make or break it. Your stories should link to your purpose in a subtle way. You can’t afford to be too direct—for example, by ending the story with comments like, ‘So the moral of the story is…’ or ‘So what this means is that I need you to start doing x, y and z’. Use more inviting hooks such as ‘Imagine what we could achieve if…’ or ‘I invite you to consider…’

You also need to slow down at the end of your story, and you can take guidance from the music world here and remember the term *ritardando*. *Ritardando* is an Italian word that means gradually getting slower; it is usually abbreviated to ‘rit’. A rit can be in the middle of a musical piece or at the end.
Communicating the real you

Similarly, in your storytelling you can have a rit in the middle of your story, when you slow down to make a point, and a rit at the end of your stories, again to make a point and signal that it is the end of the story. A rit can take the form of appropriate pauses and literally speaking slower. Without being too prescriptive, you could have a brief one-second pause before your final sentence, say your final sentence slowly and then have a longer pause at the end. So I think one of the ways to make your story a hit is to end with a rit.\(^2\)

When it comes to storytelling, I believe the ending of your story is critical—and this point in the story does involve a lot of hidden traps. Let’s look at the two most common rookie mistakes and the best ways to avoid them.

**Rookie mistake number 1 — not stopping**

Knowing when to stop is critical. Every story has a bell curve of emotion. By stopping right on the top of the curve, you get maximum impact. If you continue beyond this point, you actually get diminishing returns. The audience gets bored, misses the point or wonders when you are going to finish. Most people keep going longer than they should because they think their audience isn’t getting it. They got it but now you are losing them. If you have teenage children, you will no doubt have experienced this dropping off in interest—when you believe you’re still imparting words of wisdom and they walk off saying, ‘Yeah, I get it. You don’t have to go on about it.’ Your audience is thinking the same thing—they’re just more polite to your face than your children.

Many people share their story and then it just seems to merge into the next thing they are saying. The story doesn’t seem to have a distinct end. When this happens your audience is just left wondering, ‘What was that about?’

\(^2\)Sorry—that’s the best rhyming I could do.
To avoid this, know what your last sentence is and make sure you stop after it, pause and then segue into what you are saying next. And as Dorothy Sarnoff, an American operatic soprano, said, ‘Make sure you have finished speaking before your audience has finished listening’.

Rookie mistake number 2 — being too directive
Being too directive—for example, telling your audience what you want them to take away from the story—does not work.

In traditional storytelling, the stories often end with a ‘the moral of the story is…’ type sentence. This is a directive ending—you’re telling the audience what to think or what to take away from the story—yet this doesn’t work in business. In business, you have to trust that your audience understands your message. This is hard for most leaders to do, because we have been taught to spell everything out for our audience instead of trusting and respecting their intelligence.

If you are going to be directive at the end because you think your audience won’t get it, don’t even bother using a story—just tell them what you want. But remember, stories do a lot of heavy lifting for you and the white space at the end of a story is when your audience is relating the story back to them—in effect, creating their own stories. If you immediately jump into directive mode, you have gone back to command and control as opposed to engage and enrol.
DO PEOPLE REALLY LISTEN WHEN YOU TALK, OR ARE THEY JUST HEARING THE SOUND OF YOUR VOICE?

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GABRIELLE DOLAN is an expert in communication and a thought leader in business storytelling, as well as a sought-after keynote speaker, media commentator and coach. She is also the co-author of Hooked.