

Telling Tales

Storytelling can be a powerful way to convey corporate values and motivate employees

By Evelyn Clark
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If you like to become a better leader, what better way than to emulate the CEOs of FedEx, Nike, Costco Wholesale, and other top business leaders? Recognised as among the best executives in the corporate world, they know that communication is one of their most important responsibilities — and they use a tool that's been called the most effective in a leader's toolkit. That tool is storytelling.

Costco's co-founder and CEO Jim Sinegal is an example of a corporate leader who naturally uses storytelling and concurs that it is a powerful leadership tool. He says: "All you can do is relate the successful experiences you've had within the company. What else have we got besides stories? That's what really hits home with people; it's what brings meaning to the work we do. And when you have real examples, like our success in selling Calvin Klein jeans, that's what resonates. A picture is worth a thousand words, and a story told appropriately is priceless. Telling one of our own stories speaks volumes about our philosophy and our values."

Stories to Convey Corporate Values

One of the ways these leaders use stories is to convey corporate values, a practice that Costco has used very successfully since its founding in 1983. Particularly when a company is growing very quickly as Costco has — expanding from one store in Seattle, Washington, to more than 500 in several countries — it's a challenge to provide clear guidance to every new employee. By repeating key stories to new management trainees, Sinegal ensures that they understand the founders' values and know how to enact them as they carry out their daily responsibilities.

Stories to Attract and Retain Employees

Organisations that accurately convey their values and describe their culture attract and

retain employees. Nike does this very effectively by maintaining a corporate museum at headquarters, where new employee orientation includes a tour of the museum. The tour leader shares stories about corporate artefacts, such as the waffle iron that co-founder Bill Bowerman used to test his theory that a waffle sole would be ideal for a well-cushioned running shoe.

Telling stories about employees “caught doing things right” effectively conveys the mission and explain how to enact the corporate values in everyday activities. In addition to underscoring the company’s values, this approach recognises deserving employees and celebrates their successes. FedEx makes heroes of its employees on a regular basis. Most often the heroes are the delivery truck drivers because they are the ones charged with fulfilling the company’s promise to get the customer’s package delivered on time. Others may be office or store personnel who “go the extra mile” to help a customer solve a problem.

Stories to Build Cohesive Teams

Storytelling also creates the glue that helps team members bond and stick together. When a new team forms, effective leaders provide the time and space for each to share stories of their experiences in the organisation, their careers and their personal lives. This enables team members to get to know one another in a deeper, more meaningful way than they would otherwise, and it also helps them discover shared values and experiences that serve to strengthen camaraderie. People who know one another are more willing to support one another, and they also work together better in serving the customer. Everyone involved wins.

Stories to Guide People through Change

Another way that leading organisations leverage the power of storytelling is to help people thrown off balance by major change. When a company announces a merger, acquisition, or reorganisation, people can panic and productivity can dive. Managers and leaders who share their own stories of successfully adapting to change will minimise these negative

reactions, help people find ways to cope with their concerns, maximise workforce effectiveness, and even enhance employee commitment.

Stories to Increase Sales

Salespeople are natural storytellers. They naturally use success stories about existing customers to explain how a product will benefit prospective customers. The most successful sales people select and adapt the most effective stories for each prospect, finding the emotional “hook” that will connect on a personal level and convert the prospect to a customer. Also, spreading stories of exceptional customer service (rather than reciting raw sales figures) will honour salespeople internally and promote the primacy of the story.

Systematic, Deliberate Storytelling Is Key

Like Costco, Nike and FedEx, companies that systematically and deliberately tell their key stories, whether they be stories about the company’s founding, its values, its culture of teamwork, or its sales practices, in turn, attract and retain employees who fit well with the organisation. Low turnover is a common characteristic among companies that effectively articulate their stories, and it’s also a common trait among the world’s leading organisations.

Capable employees who understand how to succeed in their organisation and are recognised for their achievements become dedicated, loyal employees who help the company reach even greater success.

The executives who attract, inform, and reward those employees by communicating through stories are following a well-tested and proven approach to leadership. They are emulating some of the best leaders in the corporate world. Shouldn’t you, too?