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Everyone Has a Story

Telling Stories

Using systems thinking to help your business clients attain meaningful outcomes

By Doug Gray, PCC, PhD

Throughout recorded history, for over 4,500 years, we have used stories to teach and entertain.

Coaches use stories. Coaches teach to add value to clients. By definition, coaching is a collaborative process for clients to attain meaningful outcomes. Are you using stories to add value for your clients?

Here are two case studies that you can apply to your corporate coaching business immediately.

CASE STUDY | 1

Recently I explained Systems Thinking to a client who owns a small

leadership development business using professional actors. This CEO was struggling to articulate the unique value of his company. And he needed to prepare for a big meeting with a prospective buyer that could lead to a potential 500 percent increase above his previous annual revenue.

He was excited and scared. I mentioned leverage, Archimedes, and the idea that “with a big enough lever one could move the world.” When he wanted examples, I told him a story about applied systems thinking that Macdonald, Burk and Stewart (2006) implemented at entrenched mining companies in Australia. Those

leaders were unable to see past the obstacles in front of them, such as safety incidents, high turnover and absenteeism, and erratic productivity costs.

When my CEO client wanted to find simple words to describe the cascading effects of organizational change, he drew a model with concentric circles like a bulls-eye. (I encourage you to take a pen or pencil and write this down. It is a simple model that works well.)

The smallest ring was unlabeled, to represent the chaotic core of deep change. The second outer ring was “individual” to represent the changes that leaders need to make. The third outer ring was “team” to represent

“Leaders, by definition, influence others toward a better future. They find the words. They seek partners. They use leverage to gain results.”

the group of two or more people that add leverage. If that group has one scoreboard, then by definition they are a team. The fourth outer ring was “organizational” to represent the scope of leaders influencing others toward a better vision of the future. The core skill of such leaders is public optimism. So, I encouraged this client to find the words to describe a better future for his organization. He developed a story using a pebble dropped into a pool of calm water. This CEO client needed to know that others have applied leverage. He needed a simple structure that he could adopt. You can adopt this model immediately.

One result from his client meeting is that he literally “found the words” and developed his own

story about leverage. He developed new marketing content. He improved his reputation. He asked for the business. Yes, he won the big engagement with that new prospect. And yes, he did grow his business 500 percent above the previous annual revenue. Outcome-based coaching is critical for any leader. Perhaps you can do something similar in your coaching business?

CASE STUDY 2

The second story encourages leaders to apply leverage to a bigger vision of a better future.

Like many International Coach Federation (ICF) members, I volunteer as a board member at our local chapter to plan annual activities. One of our colleagues leads the corporate Learning and Development group at Bridgestone Americas (a leading automotive company). She needed to develop programs using Systems Thinking. Specifically, she needed to prepare to replace an aging workforce, and had developed programs with the largest university in the state, using values from their company and partnering with the US Naval Academy and US Army at West Point.

They needed to teach essential leadership skills using their company values at a public university. Concurrently, Bridgestone needed to relocate 30-50 percent of their senior leaders from two other states to their new corporate headquarters in Nashville, TN, without losing significant intellectual capital or market capital. She was both excited and overwhelmed about the changes ahead for Bridgestone. She needed to discuss ways to apply Senge’s (2006) model of a learning organization to those changes. I volunteered some stories to help her design solutions. My hope is that she has the

executive sponsorship and required resources to implement systems thinking at that organization.

CONCLUSIONS

Notice the pattern? Leaders, by definition, influence others toward a better future. They find the words. They seek partners. They use leverage to gain results. Whether you are coaching a small business owner or a director in a large organization, you can help your clients attain meaningful outcomes.

The cornerstone of systems thinking is personal mastery, defined as “continually becoming” (Senge, 2006). In all major religions and most philosophies, there is a recognition that humans are aspirational. We stare at the clouds, stars and weather patterns and try to understand objective “reality.” We stare at social media and fear-based stimuli and try to determine useful “facts.” We work with clients who are stuck. We help our clients overcome perceived obstacles. Thankfully, humans are continually developing. Amid those chaotic stimuli, we tell stories to teach, entertain, and achieve meaningful outcomes.

As coaches, our primary role is to help others attain meaningful outcomes. Case studies are one way to help our clients make smarter decisions today.

A coaching query is: How are you using case studies or stories to help your clients attain meaningful outcomes? •

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