

**let
your
people
be
people**

36 ways to use storytelling to transform your business, uplift your employees, and ultimately let your biggest asset—your people—be more human.

BY ANNA WALSH & NATE NICHOLS, PHD

narrative  science

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Foreword

By Stuart Frankel, founder and CEO of Narrative Science

*All of these lines across my face
Tell you the story of who I am
So many stories of where I've been
And how I got to where I am*

—“The Story,” by Brandi Carlile

This is a book about storytelling and the power of stories. We all tell stories every day. We tell them to friends, significant others, kids, and colleagues. Sometimes the stories are funny or sad, but often when we tell stories we're just trying to explain something to somebody.

We talk about storytelling a lot at Narrative Science. It explains what we do, but more than that, it describes our view on how to communicate to any constituency. We tell stories in the office all the time, and some of my favorites are about our customers.

One such customer is a large retailer. Every week, the store manager in each of the company's 2,000 stores receives a 14-tab spreadsheet that includes data about all aspects of the store's operations. The spreadsheet then gets printed in the store and used by the manager and their team to better understand performance. The retailer partnered with us, and now, in addition to the spreadsheets, each store manager gets a weekly story that hits on all of the critical data points in the spreadsheet. Notably, the story highlights what the manager should focus on for the upcoming week. When our team helped

our customer roll out this solution to each store, the responses we heard were incredible:

- *This is the second happiest day of my life. The first was the day that I got married.*
- *When I realized what this was, I had tears in my eyes.*
- *I just got five hours back in my week.*

That is the power of storytelling.

We started Narrative Science in 2010. Our first attempt to describe our business was bland but descriptive: we turn data into stories and insights. We got mostly blank stares. A typical response was, “Why in the world would anybody want a story when they can have a graph or chart?”

Almost 10 years later, we are still in the data storytelling business, but we no longer get the blank stares. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. We are not alone in pushing the idea that stories are the best way to communicate information, particularly when you want somebody to understand and remember that information.

In the pages that follow, Anna and Nate will walk you through everything from how to tell a great story, to how storytelling can fundamentally change the way you do business. I hope you find as much value in these stories as I do.

Stuart Frankel
October 2019

Table of Contents

Introduction	7
CHAPTER 1	
How to tell a good story	13
CHAPTER 2	
Share your stories	39
CHAPTER 3	
Give your people space to tell tell stories	61
CHAPTER 4	
Use stories to bring humanity back back into business	89
Call to Action	103

Introduction

This book shouldn't exist.

Seriously, it shouldn't.

We wrote a whole book on the benefits of storytelling, and how to tell good stories, when in fact there is nothing more human than storytelling.

According to “The Storytelling Animal: How Storytelling Makes Us Human” by Jonathan Gottschall, telling stories is core to our existence. Our brains are hardwired for storytelling and have been for centuries. He outlines that the “storytelling mind,” or the human mind, does not deal well with uncertainty, randomness, or coincidence. Through stories—verbal, written, or even song or poetry—we make sense of our chaotic lives and pass down tradition, processes, and more from generation to generation.

Storytelling involves an exchange between teller and listener, and this is something that is ingrained in us when we are very young. Our brains are wired to detect patterns in everything. From seeking out patterns in visual forms, such as faces, to attempting to detect them in sounds, such as songs, we are constantly looking to connect one experience to another to draw a pattern.

We are also conditioned to find patterns in information that we learn to help us make sense of the world around us. We attempt to connect facts that we learn to fill in the holes in our understanding. Those connections become our stories.

Storytelling can be traced back to when humans regularly began using fire around 400,000 BCE. When humans learned to control fire, it changed everything.

Fire provided protection from predators, improved digestibility of food, and allowed our ancestors to start controlling the timing and distribution of resources. It provided warmth, light, and most importantly, several more hours to our ancestors’ day.

What did they do with those extra hours? They told stories.

In a study conducted by American anthropologist Polly Wiessner, she compared 122 day and 52 nighttime conversations collected among Ju/'hoansi hunter-gatherers in Southern Africa.

She found that the day conversations consisted of gossip, strategy, and jokes, while the night conversations were dominated by storytelling. To put it in perspective, these hunter-gatherers spent 6 percent of their daytime telling stories and a whopping 81 percent of their time around a fire at night telling stories.

Storytelling has always been essential for human knowledge transmission. Thousands and thousands of years ago, and still today in some parts of the world, fire pits served as a place for humans to pass on their learnings of how to hunt, gather, and build new tools. Storytelling is universal, but as technology advances, so too does the way we tell stories.

Around 1450, the printing press was invented in Europe, and we saw the rise of books and novels. When the motion camera was invented around 1890, it set off an era of feature films in the early 1900s. Radio quickly followed, providing the ability to broadcast stories to much larger audiences in different locations. Television was invented around 1925, and we saw the rise of storytelling through television shows and sitcoms.

Then came the internet, and everything changed again. The internet is a conduit for all media—text, audio, and

video—and is interactive. Now, people can not only listen to and watch stories, they can participate, too.

Because stories are essential to human knowledge transmission, it became essential to use storytelling in business as well. Just like our ancestors discussed hunter-gathering techniques, modern businesspeople around the world discovered that they needed stories in order to survive in business.

There is no way you can learn everything about your job or company through firsthand experience, so you rely on data and your colleagues' experiences to inform your decisions.

So why did we write this book? Why do we think people could benefit from this information? Why do we need to retrain our brain to get back to doing the very thing that makes us human—telling stories?

In the past few decades, we have seen an explosion of tools and products designed to make understanding data easier, but it wasn't through stories. Spreadsheets reigned supreme, and eventually dashboards started to replace spreadsheets as the best way to understand data. We've been trying to retrain our brains to think like computers—in numbers.

Modern businesses are starting to see the shortcomings of this practice. In Amazon's 2018 Annual Letter, CEO Jeff Bezos reiterated his ban on PowerPoint in Amazon company meetings. His replacement? "Six-page memo(s) that are narratively structured with real sentences, topic sentences, verbs, and nouns."

Bezos isn't the only one to do this. In businesses around the world, people are realizing that humans don't learn from numbers. They don't learn from spreadsheets or dashboards, either. They learn from stories. Whether it is stories about the business or stories from your people themselves, we believe stories are key to a successful company.

At Narrative Science, our mission has always been, and will always be, to bring storytelling—and humanity—back into business. We're building software to help computers tell us the story from data, and we give those stories to every single employee in our company. At the same time, we are building programs to help our people realize their full potential through the power of human storytelling.

We want to empower you to do the same. These are a few of our stories about how we've brought storytelling back into our business—and how you can, too.

A note from the authors

A few months ago, we got together to have coffee and came up with a crazy idea to write a book. We decided to write it together, and most of these stories reflect our joint views on the world.

However, at times, we talk about our own experiences. One of the best parts about working together is how different we are. Nate is an artificial intelligence PhD, a father, and an expert on the future of work. Anna is recently married and loves to cook, paint, and talk about how psychology shapes almost everything in business.



Understandably, some of our experiences don't overlap. When that happens, we will call it out in the book.

What we *do* have in common is our passion for storytelling and the power of storytelling technology to change people's lives. In fact, when Nate was telling his 4-year-old son Abhimanyu about this passion project of ours, he shared the title of this book: "Let Your People Be People." After careful thought, Nate's son, with those big, innocent eyes that only a toddler can have, looked up at him and said, "That's a good title! 'Cause we want to be people, not anything else."

Nothing quite captures our passion as well as that quote. Let your people be people, and nothing else. We can't wait to share our best steps to create a storytelling culture in your company and get back to humanity in business. These are a few things that worked for us, and we hope that they work for you, too.

We can't wait for you to follow along with us, and we can't wait to hear your stories, too.

— Anna & Nate

CHAPTER 1

How to tell a good story

Introduction by Nate Nichols, PhD

My life changed in June 2018.

I spent two intense days in a funny little opera rehearsal place above Times Square in New York learning how to tell stories. The actual name of the workshop was “Communicating with Power and Presence,” run by The Actors Institute (TAI). It may sound innocent, but the actual workshop format was terrifying.

We all started as strangers, and within the first thirty minutes, we were each taking turns standing in front of one another, practicing communicating, and telling stories.

No lectern to hide behind, no slides to point at, no notes to reference. Just you standing in front of 10 people you don’t know, telling a story, getting feedback from TAI Director Sam Carter and the others, then telling it again.

I considered myself a decent public speaker, but it was unnerving to hear so much feedback from Sam and the other participants. It was all delivered constructively, but it was humbling to realize how much I could improve and how much space there was between being a “fine” and a truly great speaker and storyteller.

When I got back from the workshop, I immediately tore up and restarted a few talks I had in progress. They improved substantially, and other employees noticed. I also started noticing other folks making the same mistakes I had been making just a few weeks earlier.

After my experience with the workshop, I knew how fixable these issues were and what a big impact fixing

them would have. So, I started a similar workshop specific to Narrative Science (NS), just for us. With storytelling being such a big part of our company and business, I knew it was important for everyone in the company to actually be able to tell a story.

We've now run the storytelling workshop three times, and our 30 or so graduates are all certified storytellers (including my co-author, Anna Walsh). I'm super proud to have helped facilitate so many of my friends and coworkers improving as storytellers, and I'm excited to see what the workshop grows into in the future.

I also want as many people as possible, NS employees or not, to improve as storytellers. I genuinely believe that improving your ability to communicate makes you better at life—and makes you a better human.

It helps you professionally, and it helps your relationships. It helps others understand what is important to you and what you want. I want everyone to be able to tell a good story, and that's what this first chapter is about. The ideas here are coming from the workshop I took in New York City, the storytelling workshop here at Narrative Science, and my own experiences.

Part 1 | My point is... have a point

Every good story has a point, a reason for being told. The point of a story could be to motivate your listeners, inform, or give context for brainstorming. The actual point of your story is less important than you

understanding the point of your story and structuring it appropriately.

An easy rule of thumb is you need to be able to state the point of your story in a sentence. If you can't do that, then you shouldn't tell it yet. Your audience deserves to hear a story with a point; don't drag them through a meandering tale full of tangents or narrative dead-ends while you search for the actual point you're trying to convey.

Once you understand the point of your story and once you can tell your story in a single sentence, then you've gained two really powerful tools:

- Guidance on how to structure your story to support your point.
- Judgment on which information or details to include, or not include, in your story.

When you're telling a story, particularly a story based on events that actually happened to you, there is a natural tendency to structure and tell the story in chronological order.

But that's often hardly a story at all; it's much closer to just a recounting of events. That structure might be appropriate for someone who was super interested in knowing everything that happened, but most people aren't.

And who can blame them? We're all busy and focused on our own challenges and opportunities. We want to know the point of the story.

If the one-sentence version of a story is defined, then we can structure the story much more effectively. Having a

point also helps you judge which detail should be included in the story and which should be left out.

This book has a lot of good, concrete suggestions for how to tell a good story. But without understanding the point of your story, none of it really matters. You can think of your story as a house, and the one-sentence point of your story is the foundation to that house.

None of the fancy house stuff matters if the foundation isn't sound, so always begin with understanding the point: why are you telling this story?

Part 2 | Paint the old world and new world

Whenever we can, we want our stories to change the audience's lives. You don't need your audience to be forever transformed, but you're telling the story for a reason.

You want them to consider your product, or understand your point of view, or make different decisions in the future. If you don't want the audience to do something, why are you telling them the story in the first place?

You're selling your audience on a change. But people don't want change. They want the improved situation *after* they've made the change. Change is scary, but an improved situation is enticing.

There's an old product development expression, "People don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole." In fact, they're not even buying the

hole. Rather, they're buying a future world where they have a hole wherever and whenever they need it.

Too often, we get really proud of our drill bits. They're so shiny, they're so sharp, they last so long. Those are all wonderful features, but they're wonderful features of a product that people don't want: the drill bit. The right story here is not the many features of the drill bit but of how great life will be when the customer has exactly the holes they need.

To do that, you need to tell a story that starts with your audience's current situation (the "first world") and transitions into concretely describing the "second world" where your audience is now in the improved state. And then, your tool/technique/product is the bridge that will help your audience get into that second world.

It can be really tempting to speak of that second world in generalities. You want everyone in your audience to see themselves there, so you avoid going into specifics that may not apply to everyone and instead discuss the second world in generalities. "Imagine a world where you could easily drill a hole whenever you need it. Where your drill bits never break or need resharpenering..."

This is a mistake. General statements do not apply to everyone; they apply to no one. It's impossible to imagine a world where drill bits never break. It doesn't mean anything or motivate anyone. Instead, describe the second world as concretely and specifically as you can. Tell stories about how:

- Your friends come over for a dinner party, and they all compliment the new painting you hung by yourself. You're proud that you got it done on your own.
- Your parents come over to see your new place. There were some wobbly bits when you first got the place, but you fixed them up and now your dad says your place looks well-built.
- Your husband comes home from a business trip, and he's thrilled you got everything hung on the nursery walls.

These are the stories and examples that motivate people. It can feel counterintuitive, but specifics that *don't* apply to you are typically much more impactful and motivating than generalities that *do*. Be specific and be concrete.

Part 3 | Tell the story with your whole body

Often when we think about telling a story, we think about the words that are used. The words are obviously important, but language is only one of the avenues we humans have for communicating.

Trying to tell a story with only words is like trying to play sports with one hand tied behind your back. You may still be able to have an impact, but you make things unnecessarily hard on yourself and reduce the overall effect you could have.

Instead, embrace the notion that humans are animals, and like most animals, we can communicate effectively with our body language. Verbal language is an additional medium

for communication on top of body language; it is not a replacement.

You can't opt out of body language; what you do with your body is telling a story, whether you like it or not. The trick is ensuring that the story your body is telling is supporting and reinforcing the story coming out of your mouth.

When thinking about body language, we often make things harder on ourselves than they need to be. We can fall into the trap of thinking about body language as another thing to figure out or memorize. "Not only do I have to remember the story I'm going to tell, but now I also have to remember what to do with my hands!"

Nope! Memorizing the words in a story and nailing key phrases can make the telling of that story much more effective. But trying to memorize particular hand gestures or movement is a recipe for robotic, insincere storytelling.

Instead, you want to focus on the story you're telling and let your body do what your body does. If you find yourself counting on your fingers when talking about a list of things, great! If you separate your arms and use one hand to represent one option and the other hand to represent the other, terrific!

Remember, as humans, we knew how to communicate with our bodies long before we knew how to speak. Body language that supports your story isn't something you do *intentionally*; it's something that you do *naturally* as long as you don't get in your own way.

Of course, this can be easier said than done, particularly if you're speaking in front of a larger audience. We know there are times when we've been speaking to a room

and had panicked and mortifying moments of “Wait, what does a normal person do with their hands to look normal?!”

This kind of sudden consciousness and anxiety about what your body is doing is a symptom of focusing on yourself.

But when you’re telling a story, your focus needs to be on the story you’re telling, and more importantly, the audience you’re communicating with. Your mind and attention need to be committed to your audience.

Once that happens, you’ll find that you don’t have the brain power to commit to fretting about where your hands are or what your body is doing. Instead, your subconscious will naturally drive your body language, and the story your mouth is telling and the story your body is telling will reinforce one another.

Part 4 | Be authentic

When an audience is hearing a story, they don’t think of the storyteller and the story as distinct things. Instead, they have a single experience of the story being told.

This means, just like the audience needs the connection between your story and your body language, they also need the connection between your story and *you*. The audience needs to see that you are telling *your* story, not just reciting someone else’s.

This means that even if the story you’re telling has been or will be told by others, you’ll need to figure out how to

make the story your own. You'll need to figure out what makes the story authentic and true for you and then how to embody that authenticity in the telling.

One easy way of doing that is by incorporating personal experiences or anecdotes. If you're a sales representative, part of your company's standard pitch may be about how your product provides significant time savings for your customers.

To make that story authentic for you, you might tell prospective customers stories about what you have personally seen customers do with that extra time and how the time savings have impacted their work and their lives.

Being authentic in your storytelling gives you a number of advantages. First, it makes the storytelling much more effective. Audiences respond to authenticity. We would all rather hear a so-so story, told authentically by someone who was there, than an amazing story that doesn't ring true or that (supposedly) happened to someone's cousin. We're social animals, and we subconsciously evaluate the storyteller just as much we evaluate the story itself. Authenticity in the telling lets the story shine.

Secondly, authentic stories are easier to remember and tell. As Mark Twain said, "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." It's always easier to tell an authentic story from your own experience than one you've just tried to memorize. You'll do a better job telling an authentic story, too.

Finally, authenticity is important because it enables vulnerability, one of the most powerful tools in a

storyteller's kit. Being vulnerable is a risk. The audience knows that, respects and responds to that risk, and immediately feels a more personal and intimate relationship to the storyteller.

When you're telling a story, you're always asking something of the audience. At a minimum, you're asking for their time. Being vulnerable in your storytelling shows you're not just asking for something, but you're also willing to offer something. Vulnerability is so effective because it lets the audience see that the storyteller has skin in the game, just like you're asking your audience to do.

To build on the sales pitch example, a flat story might say something like *"Our customers report an average time savings of 18 percent six months after they've deployed our product."* A more authentic version of that story might add an anecdote like *"One of my first sales was to a new dad named Tom at a small manufacturer on the West Coast. Tom was so thrilled to get part of his day back after he bought our product, because it meant that he was able to leave the office earlier and spend time with his new baby."*

A truly vulnerable version of that same story might add further personal details: *"Growing up, my dad was always working crazy hours. It was hard on me to not have him around much. I know he hated it, too, but that was just what his job required. I don't blame my dad, but I refuse to accept that as the status quo. We should work to live, not the other way around. And that's why I'm so passionate about our products and the time they give back to people..."*

That last version of the story probably feels risky to you, and that's the point. It will feel risky to your audience, too. They'll intuitively understand and appreciate that you are

taking that risk and respond positively to the authenticity and vulnerability you demonstrate.

Part 5 | Use a hook

Picture this: you begin walking up on stage to tell your story. The second your foot touches the stage, your audience begins packing up. They're pulling out their phones, grabbing their bags, walking toward the exit. You only have a few seconds to get them to sit back down, to put their phones away, and to start listening to the story you have to share. What do you say?

This is just a hypothetical nightmare scenario; audiences aren't that rude in the real world. But it's closer to the truth than it may seem, and "I have five seconds to get people to sit back down and listen" is a great frame of mind when you're thinking about the beginning of your story.

The truth is, as soon as you begin speaking, you also begin losing your audience's attention. Everyone is busy, everyone has their own problems and concerns, and it's only natural for your audience to prioritize themselves over whatever story you're trying to tell. It's a shame then that so many storytellers start their story with unnecessary preambles. "It's great to be here ...", "When so-and-so first asked me to speak ...", "Before I jump in, I'd first like to ..."

If your audience were actually physically walking toward the exit, you would never try and get them back in their seat with something as banal as "It's great to have a chance to speak with you today." Instead, you would start

with something memorable. Something unexpected. Something funny. Something sad. Something intriguing. Something that compels the audience to hear you out and prioritize you and your story over the million other things on their mind.

That something is called a hook. A hook is a few sentences at the very start of your story that grabs your audience's attention and entices them to recommit to hearing you and your story. A strong hook makes your job as a storyteller much easier. You can think of a good hook as getting your audience "in the door" and open to hearing your story.

Your hook should literally be the first words you say when starting a story. This puts a lot of pressure on finding a compelling hook! Fortunately, there are a few different categories of hooks that often work well, and you can use these categories as a framework for helping you define your hook.

As part of the storytelling workshop, the participants put together a list of these categories and example hooks for each. The list below is definitely not all of the possible hooks, but this list should help get you started.

- Ambiguous hooks start in the chronological middle of the story, making readers want to catch up.

Examples:

"I knew my life was going to change."

"I knew I wouldn't speak again for 10 days."

"I got down on one knee, and she never said yes."

"There I was, showering in the O'Hare airport."

- Humorous hooks work well, as long as the humor is tied directly to the story and isn't just a joke thrown in. Examples:

“There I was, minding my own business, and a bird shit on me.”

“I spend 90 percent of my time not knowing what the hell I'm doing.”

- Hooks that are questions to the audience immediately ask something of the audience (always a good thing!). Examples:

“Think of your favorite childhood memory.”

“X, Y, Z. What do these things have in common?”

- Provocative hooks make a startling or confrontational claim. Examples:

“Everything you do is killing you.”

“Everything you read is a lie.”

“This book shouldn't exist.” (Recognize that one?!)

- Statistics work well, as long as the numbers used are “human-sized” and numbers we understand intuitively. For instance, “Someone in the room right now is likely to be in an automobile accident in the next week” is much more impactful than “Six million Americans are in an auto accident each year.” Examples:

“Fifty schools were shut down.”

“Eight aldermen have been indicted.”

- Anxiety-inducing

“Do you have a budget?”

- Wordplay

“What is the future for jobs of the past?”

- Juxtaposition

“Are you more scared of sharks or mosquitos?”

The hooks above are all real examples used by real Narrative Scientists in their storytelling. Feel free to use them and make them your own. It can be scary to start with a hook, but we promise you it will be worth it.

Part 6 | Give gifts

We’ve probably all heard how important eye contact is for human connection, empathy, and storytelling. The human connection is lost when the storyteller is looking down at notes, reading off a slide, or staring at some vague point a few feet above the audience’s heads.

But knowing that eye contact is important and actually using it effectively are two very different things. If you’re like me, you’ve probably used the “say and spray” approach to eye contact.

With say and spray, you tell (“say”) your story while “spraying” your eye contact around the room and audience. Your eyes roam over the audience independently of the story you’re telling, and you feel satisfied that you’re checking the “maintained eye contact” box.

It turns out that this kind of eye contact just isn’t effective at engaging the audience. We’re genetically wired to trust and engage through eye contact, and our brain literally

doesn't respond to the fleeting and transient eye contact received by the audience in the say and spray approach.

One of the most important things we've learned when researching storytelling is an alternative to say and spray: giving gifts. The idea with giving gifts is that instead of spraying your attention all over the room, you give small gifts of attention *to particular people* throughout your story. Each "gift" is really just a sentence or two of your story delivered to just one particular person in the audience.

Although giving gifts happens quickly and constantly, it's actually a three-step process:

1. Make eye contact with a particular person in the audience.
2. Tell a sentence or two of your story to just that one particular person.
3. Maintain that connection with them for just a moment before moving onto another person and giving another gift.

A metaphor might make this more clear. Imagine you're helping out on the sideline of a marathon. The runners are tired, they're distracted, they're thirsty, and it's your job to keep them hydrated and engaged with the race.

With the say and spray approach, you'd buy a firehose and blast everyone who runs by. You're certainly supplying water to the runners, but it's hard to imagine that any of them actually have their thirst quenched. What marathon volunteers actually do is give gifts: little cups of water, individually handed to the thirsty runners as they go by.

Less water gets distributed overall, but the actual value to each runner is much higher.

That's the power of giving gifts while telling a story. You may view your audience as a single, monolithic thing: the audience. But the actual people in your audience see themselves as individuals, the protagonists of their own stories, just like you see yourself.

They don't care if you're engaged with "the audience;" they want you to engage with *them*. You want every single person in the audience to feel like they're having a one-on-one interaction with you, and giving gifts is a great way to do that.

Labeling these little moments as gifts is important. They're not transactional or quid pro quo; they're gifts, offered freely and without expectations of returns. This has two consequences.

First, you shouldn't prioritize your gift giving toward senior audience members or the folks you perceive as "power brokers" in the room. Everyone in your audience has given part of their day to you, and they deserve to be engaged with and brought into the story. They shouldn't be made to feel like a third wheel, and good leaders will see your unbalanced gift giving for what it is.

Secondly, you're not allowed to be offended when your gift isn't received as you hoped for. You will give gifts to people who are checked out, nodding off, or sneaking a peek at their email. This is completely OK, and in fact, you should be actively targeting these people with gifts. Gifts are a great way to apply a little friendly social pressure to

them and encourage them to come back to the fold and re-engage with you and your story.

Part 7 | Welcome questions

If you're like us, follow-up questions from your audience is the scariest part of telling a story. We like to be able to plan and control, and you can neither plan, nor control, the questions the audience has for you! But storytelling is a two-way street, and your audience has generously given you a chunk of their time; they deserve the chance to have their questions answered as openly and honestly as you can.

So questions are a necessity, and you need to be prepared for them. We know there are two important components to this preparation: your emotional prep and prep for the actual questions themselves.

On the emotional side, you first need to understand that questions are not attacks. We spin out these scary fantasies/nightmares when we tell our stories, and then people in the audience start asking really aggressive questions and it becomes a personal attack on us. When you're being authentic (see part 3), it's even easier to imagine your audience asking confrontational questions.

But in reality, this kind of confrontation rarely happens. You're not defending your thesis or testifying at a trial in front of a hostile attorney. If your audience doesn't like your story, they're much more likely to disengage and check out than start attacking you.

Think of the times where you've been in the audience and something in a story didn't resonate or felt off to you. Did you aggressively question the presenter and tear them down in front of the room? Probably not! No one in your audience is going to do that to you, either.

Instead, you should expect questions asked in good faith. That means you need to do a little more emotional prep to internalize the idea that there are no dumb questions.

It's important to remember that it's the storyteller's job to communicate, and it's not the audience's job to understand. Your audience is not required to make things easy on you; as a storyteller, you're required to make things easy on them.

Once you have the right emotional headspace for answering questions, there's a couple of tactical things you can do to make follow-up questions fruitful for both the storyteller and audience.

First, for anything but the most straightforward questions, you should try to restate and answer the user's actual question, which is often different and broader than the literal question they asked.

Secondly, if you're planning on telling the same story again with different audiences, *remember the questions that are asked of you*. Those questions are very likely to come up again with a different audience.

If you're not happy with the off-the-cuff answer you gave, no worries. You can form and practice a better response to have in your back pocket for the next time the same or a similar question is asked. Or, if it's relevant, you can

incorporate the questions and answer directly into your story so that it doesn't even need to be asked next time.

Part 8 | Put in the time to practice

It is our firm belief that everyone should practice their storytelling more. Time is the most important thing we have, and you're asking for your audience's time. It's only fair that you put in a significant amount of time as well, practicing and tuning your story so it's as impactful as you can make it.

Most of us understand the need for practice before longer presentations or bigger stories. Most of us wouldn't feel comfortable winging a 30-minute presentation to our board, for instance. But what about presenting for a few minutes at an all-hands meeting or kicking things off at the top of a sales call?

Many of us don't practice these kinds of stories, but we should. Here's the formula that explains why:

Total cost of story = time of story x number of people in the audience

You may only speak for three minutes at a companywide meeting. Anyone can deliver a totally fine, three-minute presentation without much prep. But let's assume there are 100 people in the audience of that meeting.

Total cost of three-minute, all-hands presentation = 3 x 100 = 300 (or five hours!)

Your three-minute story that doesn't need to be prepped for is actually taking up five hours of time. Five hours of

people's time is a lot to ask for! You need to do your part by practicing ahead of time, so that you can ensure those three minutes are as good as you can make them.

Fortunately, practicing your story helps in a couple of different ways. First and most obviously, it helps you internalize your story. You get more comfortable and familiar with a story every time you tell it, and knowing your story backwards and forwards allows you to focus on your audience (giving gifts, telling the story with your whole body, etc.) and not worry about trying to remember which part comes next.

Besides getting more comfortable with the story, practicing also lets you improve the story itself via the “Tell/Write Loop approach” to building out a story. Using the Tell/Write Loop approach looks something like:

- First, tell your story. Record at least your audio, and hopefully video as well. You'll likely be happy with some parts of your telling, and in other parts, you may find yourself hunting for a useful metaphor or struggling over how to explain something. That is OK!
- Next, write down all the parts that worked—any phrasings that you liked, examples that worked well, humorous bits you discovered. If your story is short, try to write it all out. It's probably not feasible to script out a 30- or 60-minute long story; in those cases, shoot for a detailed outline that includes any phrasing or expressions you want to nail.
- Finally, loop. Tell the story again. Try to incorporate the parts that worked before and that you wrote

down, while giving yourself flexibility to discover what works in other parts of the story. Then, write down your new discoveries, loop, and practice telling it again.

After a few times through the loop, you should have a written document that captures the high water marks of your various tellings of the story, as well as a good amount of practice telling that story. You're now in good shape to practice your story in front of others and incorporate their feedback.

If you're going to be telling the same story multiple times, you should keep thinking about the Tell/Write Loop approach. Every time you tell a story, you tell it slightly different. The order of things may shift, you'll express things differently, you'll use different examples. Pay attention to when something new resonates with the audience, and incorporate it the next time you tell that story. The story should get better every time you tell it, because you have more practice and more chances to see how your audience is responding to it.

Part 9 | Respect the music of the story

Have you ever tried watching a movie in a foreign language with no subtitles? We're always struck by how well you can follow the plot without actually understanding any of the words being said.

Some of that is definitely due to the body language of the actors (see part 3), but a lot of your understanding is also coming from the actor's volume, pitch, and tone. An argument just *sounds* different than an apology, and

you can distinguish between the two even if you don't understand a single word being said.

We learned a great expression for this one day during the storytelling workshop, when one of the participants, Mike Pastore, complimented a storyteller with, "You really nailed the music of the story." There really is a sort of music to storytelling, and just like with body language, you can use this music to reinforce and support your story. It can be hard to perform the music of the story. In professional settings, particularly those where we're uncomfortable, we all have a tendency to keep our voice neutral and consistent. We all have a default volume, pitch, and tone, and we tend to stick to it. But this means we miss a big chance to engage and connect with the audience.

Audiences like novelty, and changing your voice is an easy way to provide it. Parents of young kids know this intuitively: part of reading a story to a squirmy, young kid is to do enough with your voice to keep them engaged and paying attention. You give different characters different voices, speak quietly when characters are sneaking around, and then Pop! when something sudden or surprising happens.

Those same techniques are just as useful when telling a story to adults. So how do you get yourself out of your comfort zone and singing the music of your story?

We've had success with two techniques. The first is to practice telling your story while imagining you're starring in a soap opera or telenovela. Really ham up your story—whisper the quiet parts, shout the loud parts, and try and make yourself choke up through any sad parts.

When it comes time to actually tell your story, you won't want to be that overdramatic, of course. But practicing laying it on really thick will help give your voice some muscle memory and comfort in singing the music of the story.

The other technique comes from an improv comedy game. (Practicing improv is a great way to improve your storytelling, by the way.) In the game, two players create an emotional scene. The twist is that they're not allowed to use any words, just counting up.

So if the first person says "1, 2, 3," then the second might jump in with "4, 5, 6, 7," and then back and forth. The goal of the game is to get the players to focus on the emotions and relationship without having to think of what to say.

Believe it or not, we've seen audience members tear up while watching this game—we all knew we were watching a really painful breakup, even though the players were just saying numbers. That's the power of the music of your story. You can move people to tears without using real words at all, just telling the story with your voice and body language.

You can practice this game yourself to improve your storytelling. Film yourself telling your story with no words, just counting up. When you go back and watch the video, do you recognize the emotional beats? Do you understand where you are in the story? Have someone who doesn't know the story watch the video, and ask them to explain to you what's happening. When are you being vulnerable? When are you asking something from the audience? When are you expecting a laugh?

If you're really singing the music of the story, they should be able to answer all those questions.

Part 10 | Have a call to action

If you've ever worked in marketing, then you've heard the term "call to action" before. It's basically just a phrase for "explicitly ask someone to do something."

Explicitly asking or stating something turns out to be way more effective than just implying it or making it available. For instance, website designers learned long ago that labeling a button "click here to learn more" makes it much more likely to be clicked than just labeling it "more info."

The same reasoning applies to storytelling. You want to explicitly ask for something, typically near the end of the story. We've learned from our experience with the storytelling workshop that this can be harder than it sounds.

For a lot of us, it's hard to ask for something. It can feel rude or like an imposition. It's also a risk: by asking for something, you risk people saying no. Many of us prefer to *imply* the audience should do something or *suggest* they take some action. We often butt up right against asking for something and then lose our nerve.

But we have a duty when telling a story to ask for something. You must *want* something from your audience, right? If you don't want anything from your audience, then why did you make them sit through your story? And presuming you do want something from them, and they

took the time to hear your story, then you *owe* it to them to make it clear what that is.

That's part of the contract you have with the audience. They agree to listen to your story and to consider acting on it; you agree to be clear about what you want and to ask for it in a clear, engaging, and open way. That's the deal you make when you tell a story, and you need to keep your end of the bargain by including an explicit call to action.

So what makes a good call to action? There are two big things to remember:

- Concrete is better than abstract.
- Sooner is better than later.

For instance, let's pretend your story is generally about encouraging your audience to eat less meat. A weak call to action might be "eat less meat." That's a pretty abstract goal with no real time frame; it's closer to a long-term goal or plan than a step someone can take. "Have one meat-free meal a week" is more concrete but still has no real time frame associated with it.

Instead, go with something like, "I challenge you. The next time you go out to eat, order a meatless meal." That is very concrete ("order a meatless meal") and has an explicit and near time frame associated with it ("the next time you go out to eat"). The fact that it will happen soon makes it more likely for your audience to remember and act on your call to action, and the fact that it's concrete removes any chance for confusion or indecision. You've made following your call to action as easy as possible on your audience, which is what you want.

CHAPTER 2

Share your stories

Stories live in all of us—they are how we motivate, how we inspire, and how we learn. Storytelling builds camaraderie, it builds confidence, and it builds a community.

For some reason, these things are often overlooked in business. Across every company, and every industry, we are focusing on the numbers at the expense of culture.

But storytelling is the glue that holds humans together. If you want your employees to be invested in your company—to try, to perform, and to stay—then you have to continually share stories across your business.

No matter where you sit in your company—from the CEO down to the entry level team member—it is your responsibility to help build your company's culture.

You help create the environment that you want to work in. Humans are extraordinary creatures—when something works and makes us feel good, we will naturally repeat it. If you are creating a positive, human-first working culture, then others will be motivated to do the same.

Storytelling is important in every single part of our lives. By sharing your own stories—putting your knowledge, your light, and your special talents out into the world—you are also investing in yourself.

At Narrative Science, we have witnessed firsthand the transformation that takes place after someone has a platform to share their stories. They become more confident, they become more creative, and they become more invested in your company or whatever cause they care about.

Humans need space to be human. To tell stories. To have conversations. And you know what? That starts with you. We've already talked about how to construct a good story—one that people will want to listen to. So if that's your fear, you can throw that one out the window right now. Or, read chapter 1 again.

Now, let's talk about telling your own story. It is important, and people want to hear it. The next chapter will serve as a way to get started with your own storytelling muscle—and set an example for your coworkers, your team, and your company.

Part 11 | Tell your own story

Yes, this probably seems obvious. But you'd be surprised at how many people think that they don't have stories to share or that people won't be interested in what they have to say. And they are dead wrong.

The beautiful thing about people is that each and every one of us has a completely unique life experience. You are a product of everything you've experienced and learned in your life, and that will be wildly different from your friends, your neighbors, and frankly, everyone in the entire world.

Everything that you've learned—every hardship you've overcome, every beautiful, or tragic, or even completely mundane and normal thing you've witnessed, every piece of information you've read or been taught—is the seed for a new story.

Talk about these things. Write about them. Tell a friend or journal about it. Whatever you need to do to tell your stories, start doing it.

We aren't the only ones who see value in sharing stories. Desiree Gruber, founder and CEO of Full Picture and creator of "Project Runway," spoke at *Fortune's* Most Powerful Women Summit in October 2018 and talked about the importance of storytelling for not only brands but for people. She urged everyone to move past the "cloud of fear" that surrounds personal storytelling by practicing.

We agree. The easiest way to practice is to start weaving this into conversation with others. Now, don't just word vomit your life story to everyone you meet. Stories are a two-way street. Ask people about their story, and share your own, too.

Where are they from? How did they get where they are now? What does their family (or chosen family) look like? What are their hobbies? These may seem like small talk questions, but they are actually magical jumping off points into the world of stories. Use them often.

Part 12 | Don't be embarrassed by what you know

When we talk about storytelling at Narrative Science, an extremely common response is, "I don't want it to seem like I think I'm an expert." Well, newsflash. Business is moving so fast, and technology is moving so rapidly, that

no one is an expert. You know more than you think, and you shouldn't be embarrassed by it.

As we talked about above, you are the product of your experiences—good and bad. The best way to combat “seeming like you think you're an expert” is to be honest. What has worked for you in your life, and maybe even more importantly, what hasn't? Share those stories, too.

This helps people in two ways. Maybe you can save someone from repeating mistakes you've made, and that's great. But, more importantly, you are showing that you're human. Humans aren't perfect—not even close. They make mistakes.

In this day and age, humans are trying more and more to be perfect. That's not what people want to hear. They want to relate to you—they want to see themselves in you and know that what you've learned and accomplished might be possible for them, too.

The only way to do this is to share your story—what works, what doesn't, and what you know based on your own personal experience.

As we've continued to evangelize storytelling throughout Narrative Science, we've of course encouraged our employees to share their own stories with the world—with varying levels of success.

However, no matter who we talked to about sharing their stories, we got the same responses:

- “I don't know enough about that.”
- “Who am I to tell people what to do?”
- “I don't feel like I'm an authority on the subject.”

This tells us two important things. First of all, it doesn't matter who you are. Whether you are entry level, or a manager, or part of the C-suite, sharing your story can be really scary.

Second, it told us that we needed to remind everyone what stories are. They aren't fact-based lectures that give you prescriptive directions on how to live your life or run your business. Instead, stories are a way to share experiences—good and bad.

The key to genuinely sharing your story with the world is to do just that. Share what's worked for you, what hasn't, and your observations about the world. The fear of perfection stops so many people from sharing their beautiful voices, which is completely ridiculous and sad.

Think of some of your favorite people. Are they perfectly put together? Do they know everything there is to know about the world? Do they know every answer? My guess is no—because that isn't real.

The reality is *no one is perfect*. Every leader, influencer, and manager is just like you—a human. When you share your story, good and bad, that is how you get people to listen.

To trust you. And, hopefully, find themselves in your story. If sharing your story helps even one person feel heard, or change their behavior for the better, isn't that alone worth it?

Part 13 | There is only “make”

Do you consider yourself an artist?

Trick question. Everyone is an artist or a creator in some form. During one of our storytelling workshops, a student shared a phrase that his artist friend used to say to him: “There is only make.” We loved it and think it applies perfectly to storytelling.

So what does that phrase even mean?

It means that within all of us, we have the ability to create something out of nothing or to remix our surroundings into a creation that would not exist without us. By sharing those unique creations with others, we in turn inspire whole new ways of thinking, creating, and making.

So the question is not whether you consider yourself an artist. The real question is:

Will you make?

You owe it to yourself to cultivate your creative process and share your unique perspective with those around you. This includes your stories. But how do you do that if you’re not used to making something from scratch or sharing your unique perspective?

1. Nothing’s original; everything’s a remix.

First, give up on the idea that you must “start something from scratch.” You don’t need to do something no one has *ever* done before in order to make a difference. In other words, creation is not the same as invention. Also, when you start creating, you’ll likely make something bad to start. That’s

normal. It's what American radio personality Ira Glass calls "The Gap." It's the sensation that when you have good taste in something, and then you start to create something in the same vein, there's a gap between your tastes and your talent. This can be disheartening, but if you're committed and put the work in, it's possible to close that gap. The end result is your creation.

2. Schedule time, and start small.

Making is like any other habit—you get better at it the more you do it. To get into the routine, we recommend carving out 90 minutes in your schedule at least once a week to get into some sort of creative flow. Whether you're drawing, playing an instrument, crocheting, or telling stories (perhaps a combination of all of those!), the important thing is to lose yourself in the process of creating. Don't worry too much about the end result. These sessions are all about getting comfortable with making and not getting caught up in perfectionism.

3. Listen and connect.

Over time, you'll find that when you've been actively making, you develop a sixth sense of sorts for connecting ideas with creative processes you're familiar with. You'll start having Eureka! moments throughout the day, as you remix the world unfolding around you with the creative processes you've been practicing.

Don't put creativity on a pedestal. Instead, reacquaint yourself with the innately human activity that is making, just like storytelling.

Part 14 | Share failures. Often

As you practice telling your own story—what has been great and what hasn't—it is important to share your failures. Often. This is especially important in a company.

It is absolutely essential to create a culture where it is not only acceptable, but expected, to fail sometimes. If you or your employees are never failing, that means they are never learning, and you are nowhere near as successful as you could be.

We aren't the only ones who think so. Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, has been quoted saying, "If the size of your failures isn't growing, you're not going to be inventing at a size that can actually move the needle." He continuously praises failure and how that will carry Amazon to the next level.

At Narrative Science, we often begin team offsites or leadership meetings with a roundtable of sharing our failures. They could be recent, work-related failures, family or life failures, or failures from our past that still affect the way we work today.

When we first started, this was *highly* uncomfortable. As soon as the exercise was brought up, our brains started spinning. "What do they mean failure? I fail all the time. What failure should I actually share? What puts me in the

best light? Or, conversely, should I start with my worst failure ever and only go up from there?”

But, just like anything else, the exercise began, and it turned out to be not only fine but really, really great. Sitting around a table and listening as people share their failures is truly astounding. People feel instantly connected to one another. They act with more empathy. And there is less pressure (WAY less pressure) to be perfect.

Something else magical happens when you make a habit of sharing your failures. You start to view yourself with more empathy. You’ve messed up, yes, but you’ve accomplished so much, too. When do you fail, you get back up and try again. It’s part of life. It’s expected and it is worth sharing.

Sharing stories helps us process them. When you share your failures, it helps you work through how you feel about it, rid yourself of guilt or self-hate, and ultimately reflect on how to do better next time. In many companies, employees are living in fear of failing.

Instead, let’s celebrate this completely natural and amazing part of being human. Make sharing failures part of your routine—with yourself, with your team, or across your entire company.

Part 15 | Celebrate the journey

There are many big moments in life—accomplishments, failures, large life events, and moments where you feel like you might break. Those moments, although they often

stick out in our memory, only make up about 1 to 5 percent of our lives.

So what about everything in between? That's the journey. Those are the troughs. That's the day-in-and-day-out grind of striving to be better, working toward a goal, or even just getting by. A collection of those days makes up our journey—and our life.

These are things we can and should talk about. Stores we should share. What is your journey? How did you end up where you are right now? No, we're not talking about your morning commute (although that could be a story, too); we're talking about your life.

Your journey is unique. Your accomplishments and failures are important, but so is your journey. Talk about how hard you worked to get your first interview in a new industry. Talk about eating peanut butter to afford rent in a new city. Talk about how difficult it is to have kids and grow a career. Talk about your life. Talk about how you found your career, how you found your voice, and how you found out who you wanted to be. Or, talk about how you are still figuring these things out. Better yet, *ask people about these things*. Give them a reason to share their trials and tribulations.

The more you share and celebrate the journey, and the more you ask about others' journeys, the more your brain is conditioned not to focus on just the outcomes. You can truly celebrate your journey every day—no matter how great, or terrible, work may be that day.

And, when you celebrate your journey with others, it will inevitably cause them to take a new, positive look at their journey, too.

Part 16 | Remind yourself of your “why”

We challenge you to think about your why. Right now.

How do you do this? Close your eyes and think about why you are in your current job. Really think about it. Why did you join your company in the first place? Why do you wake up every morning and come to work?

Maybe you wholeheartedly believe in your company’s mission.

Maybe you want to create a great life for you and your family.

Maybe you want to fund your travels or simply have extra money to spend with your loved ones on the weekends.

Maybe you just need to make rent.

Whatever it may be, the reason people work is often tied to another important part of life. Not always, but often. Your career is important—but so is your life.

It is easy to get resentful or unhappy if you think of work as getting *in the way* of your life. Instead, flip the narrative. Work is *creating the life* that you want to live. Keep this in perspective, and I promise that both you and your employees will be happier at work.

When you talk about your why, it forces you to remind yourself of what really matters to you. Work this into your interviews and programs at work. At Narrative Science,

we ask every single candidate why they want to work here—and their answer often makes or breaks their hiring.

Many companies do this. But do many companies *keep asking*? At Narrative Science, we have programs set up that continue to ask employees about why they joined Narrative Science in the first place and why they still work here (more on that later).

This is one of the easiest ways to change employees' mindset and morale. Remember your own why, and encourage your employees to talk about their why. Often.

Part 17 | Use stories to motivate

Think of a moment in your life before a big competition—a sports game, a recital, a hackathon, or even a big presentation. Now think of the hours beforehand with your team, coach, manager, or mentor.

You will never hear a coach say something like “run faster than the other team” or “shoot more accurately today.” These are great pointers, but they aren't particularly inspirational.

More likely, you'll hear coaches, mentors, and managers telling grand stories about the underdog overcoming a huge obstacle by persevering through incredibly difficult situations. We become more motivated than ever before and perform better than we ever thought we could.

Business is no different. You can look at statistics and create scenarios all day, but it's the stories that truly motivate us.

We can use this mysterious power of stories to create high-powered teams.

Share stories with your reports about big moments in your career that you almost failed, and tie it to their situation.

Celebrate your teammate's accomplishments, and tell them how awesome you think they are. They will continue to perform better, we promise you.

Talk about the hard moments in life, both at work and outside of work, where you had to endure hardship and how you came out better than before.

All any human ever wants is to be part of a group. We want to relate to each other. We want to see a path to our own success. Give that to them, and encourage the rest of your team to do the same.

Part 18 | Get it out there

Leadership in every company has a choice.

Behind door number one is the way you have always done business. You control every word, and you decide what to communicate and not to communicate. You edit away all personality and passion. You ensure what is on brand, on message, and "safe."

Behind door number two is a new way. A way that encourages your people to share, to be creative, to be themselves. This new way requires you to let go of some control, to trust your people, and to relish in imperfection and the notion that it's not what "I would have said," which is, in fact, the point.

The decision can be a real struggle within a company and one that needs to be discussed and agreed upon among the leadership team. The complexity and anxiety rise if you are a publicly traded company.

Author, entrepreneur, marketer, and public speaker, Seth Godin says, "Marketing is no longer about the stuff that you make, but about the stories you tell." If you are reading this book, you likely buy into the power of bringing storytelling back into your business. And if you buy in, this means you are on your way through door number two.

The question, therefore, isn't about ceding some control but how best to do it.

Here are a few tips:

- **Establish an editor-in-chief.** This isn't a role of command and control but rather facilitation. Without this role, it will be hard to get the stories of your people and customers out in the market in a consistent and sustained way. The points below are why you will want an editor-in-chief. This person ensures you and your people are learning and improving how to get your stories out there.
- **Create and share guidelines.** Write down and publish your concerns. These guidelines could be as simple as ensuring you don't mention your

customers by name without their approval or you don't talk about company financial information. Some companies have a 20-page document blessed by lawyers, but we recommend not doing this as it's a full-proof way to stop your people from sharing stories. Instead, whatever you write down should fit on one page, written in plain-English; not lawyer-speak.

- **Encourage and aid outreach.** To build a culture of sharing and promotion, establish a simple system to help your people get the word out. This system can be as simple as setting up a Slack channel (or any other chat software) or an email alert to notify your people of a new story. In larger companies, use a weekly newsletter to do the same. Go a step further and offer up suggested posts. Add email templates to Salesforce to make it easier for sales and customer success teams to forward to their future and current customers. The point is to remove friction, so your people share stories.
- **Help build personal brands.** Some of your people will be happy to share their stories, and others will also want to build their personal brand. Embrace both and help those who want to grow their brand. A common question is, "But what if that person leaves the company?" People leaving is a possibility, but the reality is you don't know. So you either obsess over something you cannot control or invest in your people unconditionally.
- **Have an open mind.** Your people are going to tell stories that you either don't fully understand or

wouldn't say in the same way. This reality is OK, and as mentioned above, the goal. Your people are your brand, and to uniquely stand out in today's world, authenticity is the best way. The reality is no one knows which stories will go viral, so let your folks be themselves and don't overthink it.

- **Learn from mistakes.** Yes, this is a cliché, but mistakes will happen. More than likely, they won't be the type that blow up on social media, but rather smaller issues that can shake confidence. Maybe a story communicated too much. Perhaps it's made a customer or investor uncomfortable. Mistakes happen all the time in business, and promoting your people's stories will be no different. How you react will be a test, so it's best to be prepared ahead of time.
- **Have fun.** The pride you will feel having your people being themselves, sharing what is most important to them, and watching them grow—both personally and professionally—is worth it. Any (or all) of these benefits will easily outweigh the concerns and fears you have by wondering what could go wrong. So lead by example and help all your people get their stories out there.

Part 19 | The link between storytelling and conversation

One of the most exciting things we've learned since we started focusing on storytelling is that the skills you develop when telling stories apply just as well to

basically all interpersonal communication—particularly conversation.

We know these skills and techniques have improved our communication and our relationships, with everyone from our bosses to friends, spouses, and kids (just Nate on that last one!).

In fact, you want the storytelling experience to feel like you're having a parallel one-on-one conversation with every single person in your audience. That's why you do things like give gifts and think of storytelling as a two-way street. You have a call to action, but that's not something "the audience" can do.

Rather, your call to action can only be fulfilled by each of the *individuals* in your audience. That's why you can't settle for just trying to communicate with the audience; you need to connect with each unique person in it.

It's no surprise then that many of the techniques in this book apply just as well to one-on-one conversations as they do to speaking in front of a large audience.

- **Have a point.** You obviously don't need to have a point for every conversation with your friends or chat with your spouse. But having a clear reason that you can articulate is a great way to kick off business conversations with your manager or with a vendor or prospect. It's also a great gutcheck for meetings. Why are you having this conversation or meeting? If you can't state it in a sentence, or you can't make it more specific than "check in" or "sync up," then you should think hard about whether that's a conversation or meeting worth having.

- **Be authentic.** Being authentic and vulnerable creates empathy, and that helps every conversation. Try hard to be as truthful and open as you can. If you're excited, say that. If you're confused, say that. If you're scared, say that.
- **Give gifts.** The power of eye contact and a sense of connection are universal to human communication.
- **Have a call to action.** You won't have something you want the other person to do in every conversation, but when you do, please state it explicitly. All too often people hint or imply what they want to have happen but back down from coming out and actually saying it. Then, miscommunication and hurt feelings happen when the action isn't taken. Remember that none of us are mind-readers. If you want something from someone and it's important to you, do yourself the service of coming right out and asking for it.
- **Two-way street.** It should go without saying that conversations should be a two-way street, but all too often they don't feel like that. We've all been stuck in a "conversation" with a windbag who is oblivious to social cues or someone who spends their time "listening" to you actually prepping the next thing for themselves to say. These are not effective conversations!

Part 20 | The link between storytelling and our brains

We've talked a lot about the magic and mysteriousness of stories. The interesting thing about storytelling is that our brains benefit from hearing stories *and* telling stories.

In neurologist and novelist Robert A. Burton's article "Our Brains Tell Stories So We Can Live," he outlines the link between neuroscience and storytelling. He gives a simple example of a story: "The king died and then the queen died."

The human brain is hardwired to wonder *why* the queen died. Without any further explanation, our brain is conditioned to guess at a pattern in the language. Did the queen die because of the king? Did they die in the same way?

Once our brain recognizes a relationship, we feel compelled to come up with an explanation of why. This forces us to turn to what we know and what we've already experienced. We are conditioned to compare stories to our own.

When we find an explanation, and believe that it is the right one, it kicks off the same reward system in our brains as any other addiction—drugs, alcohol, or gambling. The reward system lives in the limbic area of the brain all the way to the prefrontal cortex—two areas of the brain responsible for the expression of emotion and executive thought.

We release dopamine when we find these explanations, and when we compare someone's story to our own. Telling

stories, and hearing stories, helps us process the world, make sense of chaos, and ultimately find connections between two things that we know within that gray space.

This is why the most powerful influencers in the world are great storytellers. They tell concrete, specific, and personal stories that people can see themselves in.

Know that when you are sharing your story, you are not only helping yourself, you are helping others process the world, too.

CHAPTER 3

**Give your people space
to tell stories**

In chapter 1, we talked about how stories live in all of us and how to tell great stories. In chapter 2, we covered how and where to tell your own story in your career today. Now, we are going to talk about the absolute importance of creating a storytelling environment in your company.

Storytelling—whether we are telling our own stories or listening to others’—helps us learn. And that’s what we want from our employees, right? We want those with a growth mindset. Those who are *always* seeking to learn, to take on new challenges, and strive to get better every single day.

By giving your employees space to share their own stories, and creating a culture where people take time to listen, you are setting the foundation for a confident, comfortable, and high-performing team.

Maybe you lead a company. Maybe you just started your first job. Maybe both! No matter who you are, there are practical steps you can take to create a culture of storytelling, and ultimately a culture where you let your people be people.

Part 21 | Storytelling lets your employees be themselves

We’ve said it before, and we will say it again. The most important part of your company is your people. By far. The way most businesses are set up today strip *away* humanity. They tell people where to be, how to act, and what to do. And while there will always need to be some

direction, the real magic happens when you let employees truly be themselves.

But this can be hard to pull out of people. Your employees are conditioned to be “professional” or seemingly “perfect” from previous roles. However, when you get them to tell stories, something magical will happen. Their true selves will start to emerge.

For example, two of our best managers at Narrative Science lead our customer success and services teams. They are excellent at their jobs. If you know them personally, you know that they are also funny, warm, and inquisitive. But that wasn’t always their business persona—they were (and still are) known as the ones who got shit done. (Shout out to you, Peter Sherman and Teddy Griffin!)

Then, they started telling stories in what they refer to as the “TP Report.” TP standing for Teddy and Peter, not another common abbreviation for TP. They videotaped themselves and did podcast-style interviews of people around our company.

Through these videos, which they did on their own time and in addition to their day jobs, you could start to see their personality shine through. And that’s just one example. We push storytelling so much at Narrative Science, and we’ve seen so many people find their own personalities and voices as they do this.

If you want to let your people be people, and help them find their own strength, encourage them to tell stories. You’ll be amazed at what happens.

Part 22 | Give free training on storytelling—to everyone

During the past few decades, we have wildly overfocused on hard skills. Yes, those are important. Yes, you need to know how to do your job. However, you *also* need soft skills. In the era of technology and automation, it is emotional intelligence (EQ), not intelligence quotient (IQ), that will differentiate you and your employees in the long run.

There is nothing more human than telling stories. No matter what your role, you need to be able to tell stories. You need to be able to tell your manager what you accomplished, or you need to be able to tell the story of how your team performed this quarter, or you need to be able to talk about and sell your product. Wherever you sit, storytelling is essential to be great at your job.

The paradox here is that very few companies prioritize training their employees on this skill. Do this! Provide free, mandatory storytelling training for every single person in your company. If you read the beginning of this book, you know that we run our storytelling workshop every three to four months, led by our fearless storyteller and author, Nate Nichols. Any employee can sign up, and any manager can nominate someone on their team. It is an eight-week program that culminates in a 4-minute story told to the entire company.

This has become a source of pride for our employees. Who has graduated from the storytelling workshop? Who is going to be joining next?

It is extremely powerful to attend a storytelling workshop graduation. Watching 10 of your teammates put themselves in a previously uncomfortable situation and unapologetically tell one of their own personal stories is not only motivational but also moving.

This is an excellent way to celebrate what makes everyone different and unique. Throughout our workshops, we've seen passionate talks on calling your loved ones, the benefits of jaywalking, stopping phone addiction, how we help in the opioid crisis, and many, many more.

These graduations aren't just for the students. Yes, it is an excellent place to practice their storytelling skills. But, more than that, it celebrates stories—and humans—in general. It celebrates our passions, what makes us different, and what we have in common.

When you host one of these, the glow in the room is undeniable. The students are proud, the audience is engaged and impressed, and everyone gets to know one another better. Everyone has stories—it is our responsibility to provide a space for them to be told.

Anna was a lucky participant in the workshop during its second round. The following section covers Anna's point of view as a student in the workshop—and likely mirrors how some of your employees would feel after it, too.

The storytelling workshop was by far one of my favorite things I've ever done at Narrative Science, and possibly in my entire career. I sit in marketing, and I consider myself a fairly confident person. I thought I was a pretty good public speaker and a pretty good storyteller. I was wrong.

Throughout the eight weeks, I learned so much about what makes a great story. I learned everything from body language, to painting a picture of the scene, to actually showing emotion. Each week, I learned tactical things to make me a better storyteller, and I practiced.

I thought I was just learning a few practical “public speaking” skills. But something else was happening. Something incredible.

Through the storytelling workshop, I began finding my voice. I used to present in a very stoic, perfectly-put-together manner. Through coaching during the workshop, I pushed myself to be more genuine. I pushed to show how I was really feeling and to be my true self when telling my stories.

Since I work in marketing, this workshop had very literal applications to my day-to-day job. I specifically worked in product marketing and began to use these same skills to tell stories about our products to our users and our customers. The difference is that I wasn’t talking about what our products could do; I was talking about how they could change lives. I know, because they changed mine.

I found that the more I shared these types of stories, the better I got at sharing my own story, and the better I got at sharing the company story. I was so much happier with room to be creative and to act with empathy toward our customers.

On a whim, I told my boss (Cassidy, one of our contributors) a “story” that I put together for the

workshop that loosely translated to a company pitch. Surprisingly, that led me to the next step in my career.

It became clear that my skills would be best used storytelling. I moved from product marketing to growth marketing, and I spend so much more time thinking about how to tell our company story creatively.

I am so much happier, so much better, and so much more me. I spend time doing what makes me human. I get to be creative, I get to think big, and I get to bring my whole self to work. None of this would have happened if it weren't for the storytelling workshop.

There are a few ways to implement something like this at your company. If you are a contributor, pitch to your manager that you host a small storytelling seminar. Do some light research (or use chapter 1 of this book!) to structure a small storytelling session for your team.

Challenge your team to think of themselves as storytellers in addition to their day jobs. If leading a session makes you curl up in a ball in fear, that's OK, too! Start a Slack channel or an email thread with relevant resources to start a discussion on the topic.

If you sit in marketing, talk about your latest blog posts. Are they good stories? What about your pitches, or latest customer stories, or your last readout to your managers?

If you sit in product management, talk about user stories. How are we helping them day to day? How is that changing their lives? Is how we talk about our product the way people actually use it? Should we be focusing on different parts of their story?

If you sit in sales, practice pitches with actual stories. How will this change your prospects' lives? Why should they care?

If you sit in customer success, how has it *already* changed lives? How can stories help to grow relationships? How do you share these stories with your other customers?

If you are a leader, seriously consider a storytelling workshop for your employees. Reach out to us, we can help you get set up!

Part 23 | Give opportunities to share non-work-related stories

If you are going to start promoting and celebrating storytelling, and training your employees on how to be better storytellers, you also need to provide dedicated spaces to practice this.

At Narrative Science, we have several events dedicated to story sharing and are always open to adding more.

In addition to our storytelling workshop graduations, we host quarterly companywide lightning talks with a similar format to the graduation. The main difference here is that the speakers have not practiced the same talk for eight weeks; it is something they prepare on their own. Anyone can apply and give a talk at any point.

This provides an excellent way for people to continue to sharpen their storytelling skills. Lightning talks are never about work; they are about things like bike maintenance, travelling the world on \$5 per day, and more.

Lightning talks provide a space for our employees to share what they know so that others can benefit from their knowledge, too. Isn't that what storytelling is all about?

In addition, we have created numerous groups that gather to create a dedicated space to share stories about work *and* life. We have a social committee, a philanthropic group called NS Cares, a green team, a DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) committee, a women's group, and more.

The number of groups continues to grow. Why? Because they create a community within a community where our employees can share their own stories. Just like gravitating to books of the same genre, individuals can opt-in to groups that align with their interests.

Starting these types of groups is easier than it sounds. All you need to do is send an email to people you think would be interested in the group to gauge their interest. Grab a conference room, or a nearby lunch spot, and start the conversation.

We recommend bringing a few different conversation topics written down to keep the information flowing, but we doubt you will even need it. Once a few people start talking, and sharing their stories, the conversation continues easily from there.

Create space to share stories about what matters to people, and we promise you that your employees will be happier.

Part 24 | Share customer stories.

Constantly

And no, we don't mean you should share only stories about customers of your company. Share your experiences being a customer, too!

What companies have you been a customer of that really stood out to you because you had such a tremendous experience with them? What companies do you avoid because you had such poor experiences being a customer of theirs? What does all this mean as it pertains to how you treat customers at your company?

Connect these stories and reflections about being a customer to your personal story. Why did you join your organization in the first place? Why do you stick around when the going gets tough?

Now, gather a group of 10 or so people, share these stories, and watch the magic unfold.

Not sure on this one? Here's how we did it.

In chapter 2, we mentioned how at Narrative Science, we have programs set up that continue to ask employees about why they joined Narrative Science in the first place and why they still work here. Campfire is one of those programs.

At a time when Narrative Science was navigating a major technology pivot, we recognized that it was more important than ever to be hyperfocused on delivering great customer experiences and thus be more customer centric as an organization.

In order to achieve this result, we asked for individuals from every department across the company to voluntarily raise their hand to be part of a team that would create a customer-centricity training program. We imagined that through this program, we would catalog all of our customer stories, and then deliver those stories to each of our employees through a formal training program that we could deliver on a quarterly basis.

Applications came in, and we selected the individuals who expressed the most interest and determination in being part of creating a more customer-centric culture. Then, we gathered around a table and got to work. But when we tried to build the program, we kept getting held up. You can't force people to be customer centric, therefore we found ourselves stuck.

In an effort to get unstuck and to get the creative juices flowing, we decided to share our own stories, going around in a circle—a metaphorical campfire—and sharing one after another.

We asked ourselves, “Why did we decide to come together? What made us different from the rest of the employees at the company? Why did we raise our hands and volunteer to make customer centricity such a priority, that we were willing to take hours out of our weeks to talk about it?”

How could we start to unpack such a question? And then we landed on the answer: to continue telling our stories.

“Why did you come to Narrative Science in the first place?,” we asked each other. Then, we went around the

table and began to understand what motivated everyone to come here in the first place.

From there, we wondered, “Well, why do you stay at Narrative Science?” Again, we went around the table answering the question.

“But shit gets really tough here ...,” we thought. So what are your biggest challenges? But also, what gets you through those days when it feels like the walls are caving in and that we’d be better off rolling up the sidewalks and calling it a day? And we went around the table again...

As we continued storytelling, the conversations evolved. We talked about what customer centricity meant to each of us, and we talked about the experiences we had as customers ourselves—the ones that were incredibly memorable, as well as the good, the bad, and the ugly. Then, we talked about how we could bring the ethos of those amazing experiences closer to the Narrative Science culture.

What we found was this experience of telling stories, better understanding one another, and empathizing with one another literally lit a fire in us.

We went back to the original question that brought us all together, “How do you create a culture of customer centricity?”

Well, how do you create a culture? A culture is the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group. So therefore, culture starts with your people who create the customs, the arts, and the social institutions. Together, they are culture.

So if culture starts with your people, how do your people build relationships with each other? They share stories. Those stories get shared and reshared and then turned into drawings, pictures, and books. Collectively, they are the arts, which enable scale and enable social institutions to anchor themselves.

While Campfire came about as the result of wanting to design a top-down, mandatory, customer-centricity training program, what Campfire has become is so much more effective, motivating, and valuable to our team.

Why? Because Campfire doesn't exist for the purpose of sharing our own customers' stories; you can't force your people to share your customers' stories.

Campfire does exist for the purpose of sharing stories as a means through which to understand and develop empathy for one another and the experiences we've had as we've moved through the world. By creating a space and an accessible topic to share a story about, we've unlocked a new level of customer centricity and culture at Narrative Science that we are incredibly excited about.

So what can you do to get started? Start the conversation! Gather a group of employees from all levels and all departments across your company and answer these questions while sitting around a "campfire". Why did you come to your organization? Why do you stay at your organization? What does customer centricity mean to you? What is the best customer experience you ever had? What is the worst customer experience you've ever had?

Part 25 | Give your team the tools and space to tell stories

We've preached so much about telling and sharing stories. So how do you, and your team, actually do this? You need to give your team the tools and space to tell stories. At Narrative Science, we think of this in two buckets.

Bucket 1: Training

We've already talked about storytelling training, but we also offer every employee in our company help with social media. And we have an open call from marketing to the rest of the company to create any content they care about.

Anyone in the company can write a blog or record a video about a story that means something to them. They send it to marketing, which can help refine and stylize it, if needed. Then, it is published through the individual's social media channels or our company's channels (or both!).

At first, this was slow. People weren't prioritizing sharing their stories. However, there were a few fearless leaders who helped pioneer the effort in this area. We helped them, promoted their stories, and then praised them throughout the company. Often.

Once people saw that their coworkers were willing to take the leap, and the subsequent praise that followed, they became more comfortable doing it themselves.

Bucket 2: Tools

In fact, it became so common that we had to create a video room in our office. We now have a production grade camera, lights, and a tripod set up in one of our rooms that

anyone can use around the office. It isn't big, and it isn't fancy, but it is a dedicated storytelling space.

It was no longer scalable to have marketing take every video, but we knew we had to keep providing as many storytelling tools as possible. We experimented with this solution, and it was an overwhelming success. Now, people stroll in there and create videos all the time. Public videos, customer videos, internal videos, you name it.

None of this was possible at scale before, and now it is. People are starting to be more confident in their own voices and their own stories, and you can see a spring in their step whenever they write a new blog or create a new video.

These all might not be possible at your company, but we urge you to do what you can to create a storytelling environment. Encourage people to create what they can, and partner with a department like marketing for distribution. We promise you'll have more empowered, confident, and happy employees.

Part 26 | Share stories of the untold heroes

The speed of business is faster than ever today. Across every business and in every industry, there is a huge cohort of people who work really hard, drive change for the company, and largely don't get recognized for it. We call those the untold heroes.

You know who they are. They are quiet, they work hard, and they don't necessarily advocate for themselves. But

they are willing to put in the hard work when the light isn't shining on them.

Make it a part of your culture to share these people's stories. If you notice that someone is doing a great job, tell them so. And then, send a note to their boss and share what you observed.

Nobody does this, and *everyone* absolutely should.

Their boss would have no way to witness what you just did because they weren't there. They will feel great, and more often than not, they will share with their report the positive story that they heard about them.

It's like the innocent twin of office gossip—share the great stories about your untold heroes, and share them widely. This is amazing for a few reasons. It helps uplift your untold heroes, spreads goodwill throughout the company, and provides a great example for everyone you work with.

No matter what your role, if you start doing this, we promise you that others will, too. If word gets back to your untold heroes (and it will) that someone was telling stories about how great they are, it immediately sparks the thought that they should be sharing goodwill stories, too.

Over time, your culture becomes telling stories about how amazing people are—celebrating why they are human—whether they are in the room or not. Based on our own experience at Narrative Science, this creates a pretty awesome place to work.

Part 27 | Build storytelling into your meeting process

If you work in an American workplace, you spend a *lot* of time in meetings. In fact, Americans host about 11 million meetings *per day* on average. Meetings are set for tons of different reasons—getting on the same page, brainstorming, and more.

There are certain meetings that are meant to bring everyone together and to motivate the group. We're talking all-hands meetings, functional offsites, quarterly team meetings, and more. What better way to start a motivational meeting than with a story?

At Narrative Science, we've started experimenting with beginning motivational meetings with stories. At our all-hands meetings, we bring up one of our employees—not someone on the leadership team, not our top salesperson, just one of our team members. They then share their story—what their life was like growing up, how they ended up at our company, and why they are so excited for the future.

These stories are incredibly powerful, motivate the group, and continue our focus on humans first. In fact, at one all-hands meeting, the presenting storyteller cried, and the rest of the employees gave him a standing ovation. During another all-hands meeting, one of our employees told his story of being diagnosed with a terminal illness at a young age and how he deals with it now.

If you ask anyone at our company how they felt on those days, the answers would have been a combination of motivated, fired up, and grateful. After these meetings,

we've observed each employee come back the next day refreshed, extremely motivated, and feeling like they were making a difference.

This can apply to other meetings, too. At our functional offsites, each department has started sharing failure stories to kick off meetings. Yes, you read that right. Not our biggest accomplishments or facts about how we grew up. Our failures.

We talked in chapter 2 about the benefits of sharing our own failures, but we also think it is our obligation to create a dedicated space for a group to share failures together.

We have witnessed firsthand how powerful this is. There is something so humbling about sitting at a table with your team, looking them in the eyes, and having the courage to talk about your own failures and to really listen to theirs.

When you start talking about your failures and really making it part of your process, it becomes OK to fail, as long as you get back up and try again. In this day and age, if you aren't failing, you aren't trying hard enough or moving fast enough to keep up. However, this is in direct conflict with hiring people who have grown up in an era of perfectionism.

Today, it is expected that children get straight A's, *and* are star athletes, *and* are involved in every club, *and* are doing community service, *and* are maintaining a healthy social life. It is exhausting just to think about. For those straight-A students, failing at work, even slightly, can be absolutely terrifying. By sharing this in a group, you can

start to get people comfortable with the idea of thinking big, failing fast, and getting back up and trying again.

This exercise forces a certain level of self-reflection and humility that can be hard for some employees to reach. However, this is an essential skill. Where did you fail? How can you get better? What are you doing to put yourself in a position to excel next time? *This* is how companies start to grow. Employees think bigger, take more risks, and become more resilient.

In addition, telling stories about failure creates a new level of empathy in the group. The workplace is an amazing sociology experiment—a bunch of different humans, all with their own lives, personalities, and communication styles, are put together and expected to collectively move a company to success.

However, in business today, we tend to forget the most important part of this: the human side. It can be easy to resent a coworker if you forget to see them as what they are—a human. When you get your team together to talk about failures, it is inevitable that they will start to see each other as people, not just coworkers. Conflicts get resolved faster, people are more willing to help each other, and people feel like they have room to improve. It's a win-win for everyone.

Part 28 | Sometimes one-on-one conversations are the best places for stories

We've been talking a lot about sharing stories with audiences, big and small. We also know that not all stories are meant for everyone to hear. Maybe you're having a hard time, or are struggling with your career direction, or have an amazing life goal that you aren't quite ready to share with the world yet.

Sometimes you don't need an audience; you need a confidant, or just an unrelated conversation with someone new who you can get to know better. At Narrative Science, we want to ensure that we give our employees the time and space to do just that.

We recently started using a Slack app named Donut. One of our engineers is very involved in our DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) program and is passionate about bridging any gaps between our employees. So, she started our Donut program.

The Donut program is simple—it is an opt-in program that is meant to facilitate one-on-one conversations between our employees. We have a Donut Slack channel that employees can join and be automatically set up with another employee every two weeks. If you post a selfie with your new friend in the Donut channel, you are automatically entered into a contest for a coffee gift card.

This sounds so simple, but it has been such a lovely addition to the Narrative Science culture. Our entire leadership team has opted in, as have most managers and other team members. Our leadership has made a public

statement that you can take a half hour twice a month to get to know your employees and swap stories.

We've started to see more cross-functional friendships, more cross-functional collaboration, and more opportunities to see one another as a human. And we get some coffee and donuts out of the deal. What could be better?

Donut meetings aren't the only way to have impactful one-on-one conversations. It is imperative that you also set aside dedicated time for sharing stories with your managers and peers.

As managers, it is your obligation to spend time getting to know the people who work for you. According to one of our favorite culture resources, the Radical Candor blog based on the book "Radical Candor," author Russ Laraway bluntly says "It's simply not the case that all managers are holding regular 1:1s. This is a cardinal sin."

According to Laraway, one-on-ones are focused time for people to connect—to share their stories. It is the most important chance, and sometimes the only chance, to hear from your employees. If you are a manager, you must create the space for this. If you don't have one-on-ones with your manager, ask for this.

Then, most importantly, make sure that within those one-on-ones you take time to learn each other's stories. If you are just spending time crawling through tactical tasks, that is a waste of both of your time. Spend time getting to know each other, asking questions, and sharing stories. You'll work together better and come up with better ideas on how to tackle your day-to-day work.

In addition to meeting with management, it is important to spend time building up your network of peers. We call this the “five dollar mentor” after Gabe Aul, vice president of Oculus at Facebook. Who do you admire? Ask them to coffee and treat them (hence the five dollar name). Ask them questions about who they are, what they like, and more. Tell them that you admire them and want to learn.

Fun fact: five dollar mentors are a huge reason this book exists. That’s actually how we (Nate and Anna) started our collaboration (and friendship!). We started as each other’s five dollar mentors. That grew into biweekly coffee, brainstorming, dreaming big, and then the crazy idea to write our own book.

When you get together with someone and start to just share your stories, magical things can happen. This book is proof!

Part 29 | Provide ways to create new stories

At the very beginning of the book, we talked about what makes a great story. We talked about painting an old world and a new world. Most stories have a significant, memorable event that changed the trajectory of the storyline.

Memorable moments are born from opportunity. It is times when people try something new, push the envelope further than ever before, or simply just act differently that become the best stories.

At Narrative Science, like many technology companies, we run multiday hackathons where we give our extremely talented engineers the space to create something totally new, without the constraints they normally have to deal with.

However, at Narrative Science, we take it one step further. We have an entire Incubator program dedicated to bringing our innovations—writing the next chapter of our company’s story—to life. And luckily, that program is led by one of our authors, Nate Nichols. Read a few words from him on the subject below:

One of the best parts of my job at Narrative Science (NS) is leading our Incubator program. Like other successful software companies, NS has a constant focus on making our products more valuable to users. A major component of this is maintaining a roadmap of potential features and improvements, informed by research into users and customers. A laser-like focus on the most valuable thing we can provide next is critical but also introduces the risk of missing the forest for the trees.

Ideas that are experimental, likely to fail, or undefined can be difficult to accommodate in a model focused on continually adding incremental value. Of course, it’s exactly these same ideas that are also often the most impactful. Besides regular companywide hackathons, we’ve created an internal Incubator program specifically to explore these types of ideas that are too risky or undefined to slot into a roadmap.

It’s easy to say, “We should have a research and development program,” but it’s much harder to

actually pull the trigger and get one started. It's tempting to consider such a program a "nice to have"—something your organization will take on in the vague future when you suddenly find yourself with more money and employees than you need. Not surprisingly, this happy future can feel just a quarter or two away for years. We decided in mid-2017 to put our money where our mouth was and form our Incubator program, based primarily on two beliefs:

1. Our products were sufficiently far along for us to be able to move high performers off of our products and into Incubator.
2. Our core intellectual property is a strategic asset of the company and should be granted a commensurate commitment.

Since its founding two years ago, our program has heavily influenced our thinking, our roadmap, and our strategic vision for the company and the types of value we can ultimately provide to our users. Our Incubator team members are also inventors on more than a dozen patents coming out of this work. Not bad for a team of two to three people!

Everyone at our company, from the C-suite down, is aligned with the goals of the Incubator function and has a shared view of what success looks like. The objective for our Incubator program is to push the limits of our products; tackle complex and revolutionary projects within artificial intelligence (AI), natural language, and more; and ultimately define our company story. This helps our products

stay at the forefront of innovation while still building near-term needs for our user base.

Of course, keeping a dedicated group of people working on ideas that might not work requires a lot of trust from senior management. I've found the best way to maintain this trust is by tying everything we do back to value to our users. We don't take on projects because they're neat or fun to work on; we take them on because we believe they may provide huge additional value, despite not knowing enough about the idea or approach to slot it into our ongoing roadmap.

By empowering our team to be part of the future—artificial intelligence, storytelling, and our company—they begin to believe in their own potential. They reach for more, work harder, and have created some amazing things.

Through our hackathons and Incubator team, we've modified our natural language generation (NLG) engine to write in Mandarin, we've built out full conversational AI chat bots that integrate with Slack and Alexa, and we've overall pushed the limits of anything we thought we could do.

None of this would be possible without letting our employees be part of our story. You can do this at your company, too. If you work in technology, pitch that you set aside time to innovate and create through a hackathon, or eventually an incubation function. If you don't work in technology, there are plenty of opportunities to drive the same thing in your company.

You can take anyone, regardless of role or team and get them together in a dedicated space to talk about the future. Once you start with a few icebreakers (maybe start with a few stories on failures), you can give the team space to innovate. Some good conversation starters include:

- If you could change one thing about our company, what would it be?
- If you had to double our company's profits next month, what would you do?
- If you had to double our company's size by this time next year, what would you do?
- What would make our company a better place to work?
- How can our company help define the future?
- How can our company better help our customers or users?

Once you've decided on a focus, divide the group into a few teams and let them think on the ideas with no judgement. Then, have them present their ideas to the group at the end of the day. Some ideas will be great, and some won't be, but everyone will have a great experience. It will be fun, yes, but more importantly, it will help the team to think differently. To reach outside of the box. To believe that they do have a place in defining your future. And you may get your next company project out of it—so you can write the next chapter of your story.

Part 30 | Sell on emotion

When you read about storytelling in business, often the first thing that comes up is using stories in sales. People

will tell you to tell your company story while pitching, tell stories about how your products and services help people, and more.

And we agree with all of this. With one small change. Most company “stories” start with talking about founders, a customer list, and a laundry list of features. That’s great for an extremely pragmatic buyer if you hit their exact pain point, at a price you both agree to, which never happens.

Instead, you need to pull at their emotions. What exactly is their pain? Dig deep. Yes, a certain process takes a long time. But *why* is that painful? Is it something they hate? Does it keep them in the office late? Does it keep them from their families? Does it make them feel undervalued and like they are meant for more?

Those are the stories that we should be telling. Take some time to really think through their pain scenarios, and then tell a story about how you can take them from their old world to a new world (remember part 2?!).

This has been proven over and over again. In “Significant Objects,” a literary and anthropological experiment by Rob Walker and Joshua Glenn, they explored the effect a story can have on an object’s value.

They bought various pieces from thrift shops, worth just over \$1 a piece, and sold them on eBay. The kicker? They had talented authors write the products’ elaborate backstories. The products sold for a collective \$8,000—several times their original value.

When it really comes down to it, everyone buys based on emotion, not function. And the absolute best way to appeal to people's emotions is to tell great stories.

CHAPTER 4

**Use stories to bring
humanity back into business**

At this point, we've covered many aspects of storytelling. Now that you know how to tell a good story, and have gotten pointers on how to start a storytelling culture in your company, we want to talk a bit more about how stories themselves can bring humanity back into business.

What exactly does that mean? We can use stories to actually help us get back to what makes us all unique, what makes us excited to come to work, what makes us human.

This seems simple, but in reality, it's very difficult to execute. Hopefully this next section will serve as a guide to create an environment that lets your best asset—your people—be more human.

Part 31 | Storytelling begets empathy

One of the keys to being a good storyteller is simple—be a good listener. In Steven Pinker's "The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century," he outlines that good writers are good readers. They absorb patterns from good writing through the experience of reading.

Storytelling is no different. Ask questions, listen to people's stories, and you'll start to recognize what makes a good story.

During part 3, we talked about how sharing stories of failures helps our employees see each other with more empathy—as the humans that they are. That's true, but

storytelling in any form creates an empathy that wasn't there before.

One inspiring woman named Melinda Gates recently wrote a book called "The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World." One of our authors, Anna, recently read this book and was extremely touched by it. The rest of this part specifically comes from Anna's point of view.

"The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World" is an amazing book for many reasons. The book follows Melinda Gates' work with The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and her path to helping millions of women throughout the world. The book is one long story but also a collection of stories about the women Gates has run across through her work.

The stories are harrowing and inspirational in the same sentence. The confidence and strength of these women around the world is astounding. They've endured all sorts of abuse and lack of access to basic human necessities, and Melinda Gates set out to help as many of them as she could.

Gates writes about her experiences in learning how to help people, specifically these women, with cultures different than our own. How do you convince women in Sub-Saharan Africa that a cold baby being born isn't the sign of a devil? Convince a sex worker in India that she doesn't deserve to be raped in the police stations?

These injustices, plus many, many more outlined in the book, are a result of deep biases and community beliefs

that could be traced back dozens, and in some cases hundreds, of years.

When Gates and her volunteers went into these communities and offered to help in the ways they knew how—providing supplies they thought were needed and proclaiming education on the way things are done in better countries—their efforts fell on deaf ears.

As Melinda Gates so eloquently writes, the *only* way to make a real and lasting change in a community is to listen to their stories. To really listen. She, and therefore all involved in her foundation, make efforts to actually visit communities, talk with the people they are trying to help, and just listen.

They sought out stories about traditions, about the current state of the community, about how these people feel, and in many cases, the incredible burden of living in extreme poverty throughout the world.

Once they started listening to these people's stories, *that's* when they started to be able to make a difference. By framing the proposed changes in a way that made sense to those they were trying to help, they started to see real changes. Their aid was being used, and their programs were being implemented.

None of this would have been possible if they didn't take the time to really listen to these people's stories.

Now, we don't want to suggest that the modern workplace compares in any way to the horrors many of the people Melinda Gates wrote about had to endure. However, there

are principles in the book that we can carry over to our own workplaces.

Listen. Really listen to the stories of those around you. When you are empathetic to actual humans, you can much more quickly figure out how to create real change in a company.

If people aren't happy, or a certain team or department isn't hitting their numbers, dig deep and really listen to find out why. When you do this, you can think of solutions and frame them in a way that actually resonates with people. If it isn't something that can be solved, there is power in just listening. People feel heard, and you become more empathetic—all because of storytelling.

Part 32 | Treat your employees like adults

Just like you, your employees and coworkers are adults who want to understand what's happening in the business. Understanding the state of the business helps employees feel connected with the organization.

That feeling of engagement is tied directly to company success. In fact, according to a recent Gallup's 2016 Q¹² Meta-Analysis report, businesses with highly engaged teams had increases in profitability (21 percent), sales productivity (20 percent), and output quality (40 percent).

But all too often, management is afraid to be open about the state of the business with their employees. Sometimes metrics or decisions really do need to be kept under wraps.

But in general, sharing as much information as possible with employees helps them feel trusted, respected, and

like part of a team. In short, they feel engaged. So why is management often hesitant to be open?

One concern that we've heard a lot is that employees "won't understand the context." Employees will see low sales for a product and worry, without realizing that product is being intentionally sunsetted. Or they'll see that sales are down this month, without appreciating the seasonality of the business and being excited that the drop in monthly sales is significantly lower than in previous years.

If all your business does is make your dashboards available to everyone in the company, then loss of context is a real concern. Dashboards rely on a lot of domain knowledge to be useful, so it's very difficult for an engineer and a sales manager to look at the same sales dashboard and draw the same conclusions.

Instead, give your employees data stories about your business. Data storytelling software turns your business data into plain-English stories. Stories that contain language, visualization, and context about what's really happening behind the numbers.

By providing stories to every employee, leaders can provide anyone in the company with information about what's happening with the company and ensure that everyone has the same, correct understanding.

At Narrative Science, we do this with a data storytelling product (our own, called Lexio).

By giving our entire company access to stories about the business, we are providing education that will be useful well beyond the walls of our company. Most companies do

a decent job teaching their employees how to do their day-to-day tasks but are terrible at teaching people key skills outside of their everyday responsibilities.

By giving daily, easy-to-understand access to stories about our company's performance metrics, we are providing a way for all our employees to learn more about our business and business in general.

By making this information available in an easy, consumable way, we are finding that people actually take the time to read and understand what's going on in our business. Our team is also talking about the business more, which is really the goal of all of this. Instead of just giving our team dashboards and saying "best of luck," we've given them access to real information that they can now use to inform their efforts every day.

Now, we are giving every single person in our company the ability to think and act like a CEO. We are respecting their judgement and their skill set. We are treating them like the adults that they are.

Part 33 | Make it fun

The title of this section references business, but this really could be about any group that you are a part of. In every team, every group, or every company, there are the amazing, hilarious, scary, and sometimes downright ridiculous chains of events that shape who that group is today.

These moments—of nearly ruining the company, of laughing so hard that you cry, of terrible times that you

had to go through together—are part of the glue that holds groups together.

Tell these stories, and tell them often.

There's no better way to reminisce with veteran employees, or to make new employees feel welcome, than to share stories about the company's past. At Narrative Science, we often talk about when one of our engineers almost deleted our entire database on Christmas Eve or about one of our previous interns who sent our engineers requirements without clearing it with our product teams first.

Every family and every group in history has roots in old stories. As a rule of thumb, if something makes you smile and starts with “Remember when ...”, it is something worth telling.

More traditional leaders may say that this is a waste of time. It isn't. As long as you don't spend a majority of your day doing this, continuing to keep company lore alive is time well spent.

This is particularly powerful during the troughs of a company's journey. In every company, there are peaks (great moments) and there are troughs (the daily grind). More often than not, we are living our lives in the troughs in the hope that they will bring us to another peak.

Although there are some people who truly enjoy the grind, it can be hard to keep a group motivated during those times at the company. If you notice those creeping up, take the time to share company lore and have a few laughs. That's some of the magic of storytelling:

recontextualizing painful memories into triumphant stories that represent the best of your company's culture.

People will remember why they love the company, remember all of the hard work that brought them to where they are today, and they will ultimately be happier and more motivated through the inevitable troughs.

Part 34 | Remember what matters most to your team

We've both had successful careers at Narrative Science and gotten to do a lot of memorable things. But definitely one of our proudest moments was presenting to our moms and dads and over a hundred other parents and loved ones at our Narrative Science Parent's Day.

We host Parent's Day every other year, and it's well attended. Last year, we had parents travel from 20 states, and everyone from interns to our CEO had their parents attend. The explicit goal of the event is to help parents and guardians understand the important work their kids are doing. We want our coworkers' parents to be proud of their kids' work, and we want our coworkers to be proud to show off their work to some of the people who are most important to them.

Now, we have a young workforce at Narrative Science. But we're all *adults*, and honestly, we were skeptical when we first heard about the event. We knew *we* would be pumped to show off NS to our parents, but we weren't sure how many other 20, 30, 40, 50-plus year olds would care about showing their parents around our (admittedly,

pretty swank) offices. Or how many parents would be willing to travel to learn more about where their grown children work.

But the event has been a consistent hit! And a lot of that is attributable to the stories we tell during the event.

There are three main types of stories we tell at events like Parent's Day:

- **Stories about the business.** Parents want to feel good about where their kids are working, and part of that is believing that the company will be successful long term. So we told stories about how the business has grown to date and what the future looks like, as well as how artificial intelligence in general is progressing and how Narrative Science fits in. Stories are the perfect medium for these messages. We're not trying to get the parents to invest in NS or take a test about the history of AI; we're trying to provide some intuition and memorable anecdotes so that parents have the same belief that we do: NS is a great company with a strong tailwind and bright future ahead of it.
- **Stories about our customers.** It's really hard to explain what a lot of tech companies do and how that work helps people. Thankfully, this is not the case at Narrative Science. We build software that explains in words what's happening in data, so that people can understand data better and more quickly. Our customers are always telling us stories about how our software has directly made their lives better, so it's easy for us to tell our parents those same stories!

• **Stories about our employees.** And, of course, we take as many opportunities as we can to shout out and brag about our employees. Happily, this is another easy one for us! Like with all storytelling, it's better to prioritize details over total coverage. It's more meaningful for the audience to hear details about how one particular employee went above and beyond to satisfy a customer than it is for the audience to hear a list of everyone who works in customer success. Details matter!

It's a lot of work to put on an event like Parent's Day, but we always find it's worth the effort. Your employees and coworkers are all adults like you, with whole lives outside of the office. They want to feel good about where they work, and they want the people they love and respect to be proud of them. Storytelling can help make that happen!

Part 35 | Use technology to aid humans, not replace them

One of the important and wonderful aspects of stories and storytelling is how human-centric they are. Computers “think” in math, databases, and step-by-step rules. We humans do not. We think in intuition, examples, and cause and effect. We think in stories.

Centering stories and storytelling in your business then is almost a political act. It's an explicit prioritization of humans over machines. We think this is great—humans matter more than machines. Technology is a means to an end, but we are the end. We create technology to make our lives better. That was true when we were inventing the

wheel and controlling fire, and it should be just as true today.

But it doesn't always feel like that now. Our society currently has a lot of anxiety around artificial intelligence. The anxiety is understandable, because so many of the applications of AI we hear about can sound dehumanizing. Super-smart advertising that knows when you're most likely to buy. Fake stories, images, audio, and video, specifically designed to press our buttons. Automation that threatens jobs.

That's why we're so proud to work at a company that is using advanced AI to center people and storytelling. We're not trying to take your job, or get you to buy something, or fool you into believing something that isn't true. We're working to elevate and empower *you*, by making computers smart enough to think and communicate like we do—in stories.

Our vision for the work of the future isn't a lonely employee babysitting ten thousand robots or a person in a chair with their brain directly wired into the internet. Our vision is Iron Man. Tony Stark is the hero. He gets to be creative, and he gets to be super-empowered. He's open, and he has awareness of everything that's going on. He has a little million sensors on his suit, but his attention and focus is always where it needs to be.

Ironically, it's the technology that lets him be so human. It's what allows him to leverage his heart, his judgment, his experience, and his intuition, all scaled up to a superheroic level. That's the vision we're building toward. That's where a story- and human-centric approach will take us.

Part 36 | Spend more time doing what you love

The entire point of this book is letting people be people. Getting back to what makes you, you. This is different for everyone. Are you creative? A people person? A problem-solver engineer?

The reality is that each of us has unique talents, and that's what makes up a great company. During the past few years, we've been pushing everyone, no matter who they are, to be more data-driven. To spend more time looking at the numbers and trying to get value from them.

And you know what? We think that is absolutely ridiculous. There is no comparable skill that we are insisting everyone learn. Are we teaching our entire companies to pitch products? To balance financial statements? No. Because that would be taking them away from what they do best.

We know that people should look at data to be better at their jobs, but you don't have to strip away their humanity while doing it. If we can provide everyone—any industry, any level, any skill set—the ability to understand data without actually having to analyze it, we can get back to what really matters. To what makes us human.

Spend more time perfecting your pitch. Spend more time thinking about the next creative marketing campaign. Spend more time solving the next big engineering problem. The list goes on and on. Whatever makes you, *you*—use data storytelling technology to spend more time doing that.

Our Call to Action for You

We challenge you to try at least one of these tactics within one week of finishing this book. Just one.

What have we missed? Tell us something else that you've tried.

Then, share your story with us. You can reach us on LinkedIn or via email.

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We can't wait to hear from you.



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Thanks from Anna

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