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The Power of Storytelling

Skills and Professional Development



Today's in-house legal leaders need to be excellent communicators. The higher up you go in the hierarchy, the more critical this skill becomes. So much of what we do as senior in-house counsel is about persuasion. Unfortunately, despite the glories of *Perry Mason*, many lawyers have never been taught how to communicate persuasively. Instead, most emphasize technical jargon that leaves listeners cold. In the in-house context, that is definitely not enough.

Ultimately, what you say is less important than how you say it. To be persuasive, you need to learn how to tell stories. The reason for this is simple: Our brains are wired to connect with them. Good stories surprise us and stick with us. In that sense, a powerful narrative can act as a peg and can make the underlying ideas you are trying to convey more impactful. Stories are persuasive, while mere facts are not.

Good storytellers go beyond just giving an account of what happened. They never recount an event; they construct a story around it. They draw out a central, organizing theme that makes the event meaningful. At its core — in its deepest sense — they convey what the story is really about, and what central problem or crisis needs to be addressed.

The best communicators start with a question rather than a statement. They think carefully about the first and the last sentence. They provide examples rather than spell it all out. They focus as much on what they want the audience to think and feel, as they do on the information itself.

Here's an example:

Imagine an in-house lawyer is presenting on her company's code of conduct to an audience of bored executives. It is hot and late in the day, and the attendees have been killing themselves softly with

PowerPoint since 8 a.m. She walks them through the code, with detailed slides on the nuances and finer points, referring to paragraphs and page numbers. Six months later, no one will remember the presentation, let alone what was said.

Now imagine a different version. Same room, same temperature, same time of day, except now the in-house lawyer starts firmly by telling the executives that she is not going to walk them through the code of conduct, because they should know it already — and if they are still unfamiliar with it, then shame on them.

She stares at the audience for 20 seconds — in silence. Tension begins to build. People look up from their iPhones. This is different! Then, the lawyer shows a slide with just one picture on it; a picture of a man. No words, just the picture. She asks people to guess who the person is. Competitive instincts awaken. Names are shouted out until the audience correctly guesses that the person is a former CEO of a highly regarded company that lost his job due to an ethics infraction. People are now engaged. Then, she shows another picture: a happy scene of a couple on their wedding day. She asks the audience to guess who this is. It is someone from the company who committed insider trading and is now facing prosecution.

Next, the lawyer shows a slide with a picture of the front page of the SEC indictment. She quietly asks people how they think his wife is feeling now; what his kids must be going through. She displays a slide with 50 anonymous faces. “Who are all these people?” she asks. “These are the people who were involved in ethics cases that I dealt with last year across the company,” she says firmly. “Who do you think is responsible for this?” She pulls out a mirror and walks down the aisle, showing everyone his or her own reflection. “We are responsible — as leaders we are responsible,” she says. She leaves a long pause. After the session, she distributes a hand-out with details on the code of conduct.

Which of these presentations will be most impactful? [Maya Angelou](#) once remarked that “people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”¹ How right she was.

The above has been adapted with the kind permission of Globe Law and Business from Bjarne’s upcoming book, [Building an Outstanding Legal Team: Battle-Tested Strategies from a General Counsel](#), which launched in April 2017.

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