



Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact

Annette Simmons

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Reviewed by Paul Harmon

As readers of BPTrends must realize, I read a lot of business process books and I have been writing book reviews for BPTrends for several years. In most cases I find that I admire the clear and systematic presentation of ideas, and I often discover a nugget that I can incorporate into my own practice. It's rare, however, that a book causes me to think about making a major change in the way I perform. *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins* did.

This is a book about effective communications. More specifically, it's a book about how to give better presentations. I give lots of presentation at conferences and at client sites, and I immediately saw how I would use the concepts suggested by Simmons to improve my effectiveness and I imagine that others who are making presentations and seeking to sell process ideas within their organizations would find this book helpful.

Many of us involved in talking about business process change rely on graphics to explain our concepts. We show diagrams of processes and graphical images of process architectures. Our goal is to teach concepts to our listeners. Simmons, commenting on typical presentations, remarks on the fact that the presentations tend to emphasize information and concepts: "People float in an ocean of data and disconnected facts that can often overwhelm them with choices...."

More important, however, most people aren't disposed to try and figure out what you are saying. "Your ability to influence people is directly related to what those people know (or believe) about who you are – you personally and your organization... Your attempts to influence others are filtered through people's judgments about who you are: your trustworthiness, values, ambitions, and integrity. The disadvantage we all face in today's world is that people actively protect themselves from external influences. Who can blame them? They can't afford to do one more thing today; they don't want to hear of yet another issue that needs their attention or money. In today's world, influence is actively resisted, not only because people are up to their eyeballs in information but because cynicism is justifiably at an all time high."

In other words, most presentations fail to have an impact because the facts and diagrams presented just roll over the audience, never really engaging them because the speaker can't get beyond the natural defenses of the audience. Annette Simmons goes on to argue that the way to surmount this resistance is by means of telling appropriate stories.

Stories are subjective and personal. They emphasize reimagined experience and subjective feelings rather than facts. Stories are personal – they tell the audience something about how the speaker feels or has reacted to the world. They engage the audience and build trust that can engage the audience in a way that facts and data never can.

Simmons points out that we all tell stories in our casual conversations. Moreover, good speakers have always relied on stories to engage their audience. This book is simply designed to teach speakers how to build effective stories into their presentations.

In fact, this book would be better termed a workbook. Simmons begins by motivating readers and then offering a theory of stories. The subsequent chapters take the reader through the process of creating a number of stories. The book includes blank spaces for writing stories, so that, in the end, the book is a journal of your learning exercises.

The key to understanding the role of stories in a presentation is to realize that stories are subjective and that they reveal something about the presenter.

Simmons begins to lay out her theory by defining six basic types of stories:

Who I am Stories

Stories that demonstrate the qualities I possess that earn me the right to influence this audience.

Why I am here Stories

Stories that tell them what you get out of making this presentation.

Teaching Stories

Stories that teach a moral or that provide an example of relevant experiences.

Vision Stories

Stories that describe an exciting future that results from overcoming today's challenges. (Stories that focus the audience on the goal and suggest that it's worth the trouble it takes to get there.)

Values-in-Action Stories

Stories that demonstrate that the application of a value will result in a positive outcome. (Hypotheticals sound hypocritical or preachy – be very specific.)

I-Know-What-You-Are-Thinking Stories

Stories that show that you can imagine what concerns the audience has – and show how those concerns have been overcome in a specific situation. (Overcome objections without sounding defensive.)

In each case, by inserting a story in your presentation you say something about yourself – at the least because you thought the story worth telling. You begin to reach out to your audience on the basis of shared interest and experience rather than positioning yourself as someone with data that may or may not be relevant to the types of problems your audience faces.

To help you develop your own stories, Simmons offers four templates:

- A story about a time you shone
- A story about a time you blew it
- A story about a mentor you admire
- A story based on a book, movie or current event

At this point, in essence, Simmons has a matrix with 6 types of stories on one axis and 4 templates on the other. In subsequent chapters, Simmons considers each type of story in turn,

and walks the reader through the steps involved in using each of the templates to create some useful personal stories.

As I worked through the later chapters I went a bit further. I printed out outlines of several of my recent presentations with my slides on the left and blank space on the right. I inserted bold lines to mark the sections of the presentation and began by identifying the goal of each section. Then, I went back and asked myself what type of story would be useful in supporting each section of the presentation. In the opening section of each presentation, for example, I needed to establish who I was and why I was speaking to the audience. I worked on stories that provided insight into my background and my concerns – stories about when I began process work and some of my successes and failures and how they had led me to write a book and launch a website, etc.

By combining Simmons' exercises with a review of a few of my own presentations I began to form an idea of exactly how I could use her approach to generate more effective presentations. Simmons suggests that telling appropriate stories can become second nature. Until that happens I intend to use an outline and some planning to keep myself focused on the use of this important communication tool.

As I suggested earlier, this book really impressed me. It's straight forward and easy to read but it offers a profound insight into why presentations succeed or fail and a very concrete approach to generating more effective presentations. For those of you who routinely tell stories as you present, perhaps you can afford to ignore this book. But for anyone who is inclined, as I am, to rely on logic, data, facts, process diagrams and conceptual graphics, I strongly recommend this book.

Paul Harmon is the Executive Editor of BPTrends, Chief Methodologist at BPTrends Associates and the author of the best selling book, *Business Process Change, 2nd edition*.

Postscript: The title of the book comes from an incident in a recent movie, *Amistad*, a true story about a slave ship on its way to the new world. The slaves revolted and took over the ship, but as they were trying to get back to Africa they were apprehended by the US Navy and brought to the US. In the trial that followed, the Africans pleaded their right, as men, to resist being enslaved and to revolt. Their case was ultimately appealed to the US Supreme Court where they were represented by ex-president John Adams. Adams won the case by getting a translator so that the defendants could tell their own stories. In pursuing this approach, he remarks in passing, to an abolitionist, "In a court of law, I've found that whoever tells the best story wins."