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# Using stories to develop future leaders in China

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# Using Stories to Develop Future Leaders in China

Approximate time 2:00

**Talent Shortage**

**Driving Learning and Change**

**The Art and Craft of Storytelling**

**Bibliography**

**R·I·T**

## Acknowledgments

### Project Team

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## Talent Shortage

Approximate time :10

*China can close the talent gap if companies invest in more training.*

*—Pete Engardio, senior writer for Business Week*

***f*ormal leadership programs have become important to attract and retain talent in China, and so have on-the-job learning opportunities achieved through mentoring, coaching, succession planning, and job rotations.**

—Adrienne Fox, *HRM Magazine*

## MEETING THE CHALLENGE

All eyes are on China, as the country becomes the globe's fastest growing economy. Issues of talent shortages, educational gaps, and inexperienced leaders plague workforce development efforts. This interactive workshop focuses on developing leadership talent in this region, using the art of storytelling to broaden the experience base of high potential employees.

According to Workforce Management's feature series, "Why China Matters," China's growth combined with their lack of homegrown leadership talent has resulted in problematic HR practices. It will take decades to build bench strength in the area of leadership yet companies based in China need leadership capability now. Storytelling is one tool to speed up the competency development of China's inexperienced managers. (XX. Workforce Management. XX. pg XX)

The challenge is that companies must carve out time to adequately develop leadership capability and talent. It is critical and can be a long-term process. Yet, leadership development programs must compete for attention during this time of exploding economic growth with the need to address shorter term and more immediate problems.

According to Pete Engardio, senior writer for Business Week, China will need 70,000 new corporate leaders for international operations between 2006 and 2011. Engardio, at a recent conference, Talent Management Strategies, hosted by the Conference Board observed that connections (guanxi) or good personal relationships are critical for managers to be successful in China. Engardio believes China can close the talent gap if companies invest in more training. (DDI 2006.)

Richard Wellins, senior vice president for Development Dimensions International, in his presentation at the same conference, noted that programs for leadership development are not typical in China, outside of multinational corporations. (DDI 2006)

Benjamin Zhai, principal, Egon Zehnder, notes that individuals who graduated from Chinese universities around 1990 are one pool of potential leaders. This group, in his opinion, has the education required for leadership positions but lack the experience necessary to be successful out-of-the-gate. Another source of leaders, says Nandani Lynton, vice president, Thunderbird Asia, are Chinese citizens living abroad who are willing to return to their home country. According to Lynton, leadership development in China must reflect a thorough understanding of Chinese culture. In her opinion, effective programs address individuals and their teams simultaneously. (DDI 2006.)



## Driving Learning and Change

Approximate time :20

*Rather than be a one-time event, executive development experiences should be built to drive sustainable, transformational change – both for the organization and the individual.*

*—David Tessmann-Keys and Richard S. Wellins, Ph.D*

*DDI: The CEO's Guide to Preparing Future Global Leaders*

? How can stories be used as a developmental tool for managers in China? First, we must respect the unique and positive aspects of Chinese culture that may influence how stories are "heard."

Note: Invite perspectives from the group

## CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

The importance of "face" must be considered in constructing stories. While demonstrating collective wisdom or how mistakes were avoided may be stressed, it would be advisable to avoid exposing anyone's wrong deeds or actions.

To uphold the value of collectivism, stories should not cause anyone embarrassment or stress the accomplishments of one individual.

"Trust comes with understanding the world in the same way, accepting knowledge through internal and external cultural filters and from dealing with situational challenges via socially accepted actions. The repeat of this behaviour inspires confidence and order. Focusing on the understanding of knowledge management across cultures will facilitate knowledge sharing and innovation, smoothing the path towards learning and transferring knowledge across cultural boundaries." Jeremy Rucker, KnowledgeBoard.



# The Art and Craft of Storytelling

Approximate time 1:30

*“...telling stories is a vital form of communication and a crucial process of expressing what we mean in a sensible manner and passing on that meaning to others. I think we have forgotten how important stories are to us and how good we are at using one of the first skills we developed as children.”*

*– Jeff Gold, Senior Lecturer, School of Human Resource Management, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK*

## **POWER OF STORIES**

### **Purpose**

To experience the power and value of stories first hand

### **Instructions**

Listen to the stories the facilitators share. (Moss 1998.)

Read the following with feeling.

Two individuals in the same company have each hired employees into mid-level management positions.

The first individual welcomes the new managers at their orientation session by saying, "You have joined a great company and if you work hard and remember to make our customers and employees a priority, you will succeed. Happy customers and happy employees are your responsibility."

Debrief after first story:

? What do you think the new managers learned from this statement?

The second individual welcomes the new managers at their orientation session with a story. (read queen bee story)

Debrief after second story:

? What do you think the new managers in the second situation learned? How might this lesson affect the way in which they manage others?

? Which approach was likely to drive learning and insight? Why?



## ORAL LEARNING TRADITION

**C**hinese proverbs are admired for their simplicity and wisdom and establish a tradition of sharing wisdom and promoting learning with words

### Purpose

To examine lessons that can be learned from some Chinese proverbs

### Instructions

1. Work with your group to document the lesson each proverb is teaching. The proverbs are listed in the table that follows.

<b>Chinese Proverb (translated to English)</b>	<b>Lesson (meaning)</b>
<b>Like ants gnawing at a bone.</b>	A task may be overwhelmingly big, but by approaching it bit by bit with perseverance, you'll succeed.
<b>To cultivate trees, you need 10 years. To cultivate people, you need 100 years.</b>	It takes a long time to produce a generation of educated and competent people/employees
<b>Learning without reasoning leads to confusion; thinking without learning is wasted effort.</b>	This is perhaps the most quoted saying on learning by Confucius. Confucius said that if you only learn (spoon-feeding) without thinking over what you had learned, then you have learned nothing. (Spoon-feeding leads only to regurgitation of undigested knowledge.) On the other hand, if you do "idle-thinking " without the basis of solid facts from learning, you will end up nowhere.



## USE OF STORYTELLING IN CHINA

According to Vibeke Bordahl<sup>1</sup>, in the article, “Chinese Storytelling: The interplay of traditions,” storytelling as a professional genre dates back more than a thousand years in Chinese society. The art of storytelling has always had a significant impact on the daily life of the Chinese, communicating culture and knowledge in an entertaining and simple way. (Bordahl 2007)

! Whether in the form of a proverb or a story, important lessons are commonly conveyed in an oral fashion in China.

Whether in the form of a proverb or a story, important lessons are commonly conveyed in an oral fashion in China.

! Vibeke Bordahl, a researcher in the field of humanities has studied the art of storytelling in China. He observes that the transformations taking place in Chinese society may speed up the demise of this ancient tradition, or if new information technology, for example, may drive resurgence.

Bordahl asserts, “The transformation of Chinese society at the end of the twentieth century is reflected in fundamental changes in the areas of human communication and performance. It remains to be seen if the modern lifestyle and new information technology will further speed up the demise of the age-old genres of oral entertainment in China, or whether the new conditions may bring about a renaissance.” (Bordahl 2007 pg 1)

? What are your thoughts?

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<sup>1</sup> Vibeke Bordahl is a senior researcher at the Danish Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities, and an affiliated researcher at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.

... ***t*he most effective lessons are often couched in good stories...**

—Warren Bennis, *Harvard Business Review*

## ONCE UPON A TIME...

Stories are an effective tool to convey information and meaning. An effective narration helps us learn new facts and how to integrate them into our lives. Storytelling has become a powerful knowledge management tool in today's organizations. Companies that have embraced storytelling have found they actively engage and inspire employees and involve them in a process of daily learning in a unique approach that cannot be replicated with methods that are more traditional.

Storytelling is an age-old vehicle for exchanging information and generating understanding. From early childhood through adulthood, stories are a vital means of learning. According to Steve Denning, noted author and former program director, Knowledge Management, at the World Bank, a primary purpose for using storytelling in organizations is individual growth. (Denning 2000)



**S**ometime reality is  
too complex.  
Stories give it  
form.

—Jean Luc Godard,  
French Film Maker

! An effective narration helps us learn new facts and how to integrate them into our lives. According to Steve Denning a former program director of Knowledge Management at the World Bank, a primary purpose for using storytelling in organizations is individual growth.

? Which of these benefits do you think corporations in China are likely to experience if they adopt storytelling for leadership development and why?

## POWER OF STORIES

Stories are the foundation for how we communicate. They enable us to make a personal connection to content on a deeper and more meaningful level than a list of facts can. One powerful way to promote leadership development is to accumulate and share stories.

The National Health Service's Knowledge Management initiative realized that among the many benefits of storytelling are:

- Stories communicate ideas holistically and so they are an excellent way of communicating complicated ideas and concepts in an easy-to-understand form
- Storytelling provides the context in which knowledge arises as well as the knowledge itself, and hence can increase the likelihood of accurate and meaningful knowledge transfer.
- Stories are an excellent vehicle for learning, as true learning requires interest, which abstract principles and impersonal procedures rarely provide
- Stories can provide a "living, breathing" example of how to do something and why it works rather than telling people *what* to do, hence people are more open to their lessons
- Stories often lead to direct action – they can help to close the "knowing-doing gap" (the difference between knowing how to do something and actually doing it)
- Stories can nurture a sense of community and help to build relationships

(Denning 2005 pg 1)

**S**elf-knowledge is the  
root of all great  
storytelling.

—*Robert McKee*

Larry Todd Wilson and Matt Loeb identify four of situations in which storytelling can be particularly beneficial in organizations:

- New or unexpected situations – Are you working in an unfamiliar situation and could benefit from the stories and lessons learned of others who have already “been there”? Have you discovered a better way of doing something?
- Situations that require feelings as well as thoughts – Do you need to facilitate acceptance of a new person into a group and also show them “how things are done around here”? Do you need to persuade someone of something?
- Complex situations – Are you dealing with a situation that involves many aspects or variables? Do you need to help others to bridge a gap between theory and practice?
- Situations in which you need to help people understand “why” – Do you need to capture lessons learned, and to help people understand why something did or didn’t work out as planned?

(Wilson, Larry Todd and Matt Loeb 2002)



! Does telling stories help leaders develop new insights and abilities? According to some of the organizations we profile here, the answer is definitely, "yes."

## SUCCESS STORIES

### RBC Financial Group

RBC has 70,000 employees serving 15 million clients through offices in North America and 34 countries. RBC offers a full range of financial products and personal and commercial banking services, wealth management services, insurance, corporate and investment banking and transactions processing services on a global basis.

Elisabetta Bigsby, Senior Executive Vice President of Human Resources and Public Affairs at RBC Financial Group, has taken leadership training beyond the usual courses designed around competencies. RBC has developed a program, led by top management, to teach leadership through stories. (Reality HR 2004)

In a recent interview with HR.com, Bigsby shared, "About four years ago we re-visited how to assist the development of leadership capabilities. We had become somewhat distanced from the typical, more or less academic approaches to leadership development and wondered whether a more integrated approach was possible. We wanted to do something based on who we are, on what our successful leaders have experienced, and to draw on the lessons they learned in the course of becoming leaders. We thought the direct involvement of our leaders would have a lot more impact than any external intervention." (Reality HR 2004 pg 1)

***i*n the beginning, leadership theory was very much rooted in storytelling. Shakespeare told us stories in theatrical form of leaders, their behaviors, traits, styles, and situations before leadership theory was born.**

—David Boje

She further explained, “We asked our senior leaders to conduct day-and-a-half sessions with leaders one level below them. In these sessions, the leaders shared their formative experiences: telling stories, discussing the stories and discussing people’s reactions to the stories. The story became an opportunity to discuss what our leaders had learned over their career. That’s what stories are, a way to share lessons. They involve the audience in an attempt to learn the moral of the story and to understand the characteristics of successful leadership. The characteristics became the seeds for additional discussions.” (Reality HR 2004 pg 1)

“Typically a program starts with participants stating what they think leadership is. Then there are two initial stories and discussions about the story and how it applies. There are comments like, “I’m surprised by the fact that you said...”, or “Could you expand on...” and “I’m particularly interested in...” The initial stories are not the work stories, they are light ones along the lines of, “What I remember in growing up is...” In the second part of the day there are two work-related stories and again work by the participants to understand the story, to ask questions about the story, and to interpret it. (Reality HR 2004 pg 1)

In the second half-day the CEO visits so that the participants who have reflected upon leadership have a chance to discuss their evolving ideas. The last segment gets participants to ask, “What am I going to do about my own leadership?” (Reality HR 2004 pg 1)

In response to HR.com’s question, What evidence do you have that this program is working?, Bigsby shared, “We have several forms of evidence. The transfer of knowledge is obvious and the ability of people from different business segments to connect and generate solutions is much more rapid. If one goes back two or three years, the questions were much less sophisticated. People now are clearly on a much different level in terms of how to form alliances to go and do something with someone else.” (Reality HR 2004 pg 1)



### **Corning Inc.**

Corning Incorporated is the world leader in specialty glass and ceramics. Drawing on more than 150 years of materials science and process engineering knowledge, Corning creates and makes keystone components that enable high-technology systems for consumer electronics, mobile emissions control, telecommunications and life sciences. Their products include glass substrates for LCD televisions, computer monitors and laptops; ceramic substrates and filters for mobile emission control systems; optical fiber, cable, hardware & equipment for telecommunications networks; optical biosensors for drug discovery; and other advanced optics and specialty glass solutions for a number of industries including semiconductor, aerospace, defense, astronomy and metrology. Corning operates in many companies, worldwide, including China.

Corning is known for its technology-based innovation and credits story telling as a practice driving their success in this area. Their practice of collective self-examination provides a mechanism for transferring shared memories from generation to generation. Corning translates key knowledge, experience and perspective into new products and innovation through storytelling as well as knowledge management systems. Story telling and oral histories preserve the lessons learned from even failed efforts. (Carter L, Ulrich D and Goldsmith M. Best 2005)

### **GE Capital**

GE Capital, now known as GE Commercial Finance, was one of the fastest growing financial services companies in the world in the late 1990s. GE Commercial Finance plays a key role for client businesses in over 35 countries including China. The industries served include healthcare, manufacturing, fleet management, communications, construction, energy, aviation, infrastructure and equipment, as well as many others.

With the fast pace of their global expansion, the company was concerned with maintaining one of their competitive strengths, leadership talent. They launched a global leadership development initiative that included the use of storytelling. Their belief was that stories lend themselves to retention of information and as such would be a vital tool for learning. (Carter L, Ulrich D and Goldsmith M. Best 2005)

! Effective storytelling is much more than relaying something that happened. It requires crafting a message to convey information, aid meaning and knowledge transfer, and inspire others.

### **Realizing the power**

Effective storytelling is much more than relaying something that happened. It requires crafting a message to convey information, aid meaning and knowledge transfer, and inspire others. Stories can be used to convey the organizational messages each manager needs to embrace, learn from, and pass on to others.



! Stories used to build leadership capability may be formal tales like the queen bee story told earlier. Or, they may be more informal and reflect individual experiences.

! To demonstrate a more informal approach to story telling, we'll each tell a personal story using the framework outlined here.

Tell the stories.

! Let's see if you can craft stories to convey information, transfer knowledge, and inspire other.

Note: Describe the activity, and then divide participants into groups of three.

Allow groups 40 minutes for the activity.

Debrief:

? What was the experience of telling and hearing stories like?

Reinforce honoring cultural tenants for storytelling to be successful.

## TELLING YOUR STORY

### Purpose

To practice using stories to promote learning about leadership

### Instructions

1. Consider a personal experience you have had that influenced your thinking about leadership
2. Use the Story Spine to prepare to tell your story to your group. **You will have ten minutes to prepare. Your story should only last five minutes.**
3. Take turns sharing your stories. While one person is the storyteller, the others act as guides.
  - Whenever the guide hears something that s/he wants to know more of s/he says, "*Expand on the (blank)*".
  - The storyteller then describes, in as much detail as possible, that element of the story.
  - When the guide is satisfied, s/he says, "*go on*" and the storyteller should continue with the next part of the story.

– Continued

### **The Story Spine**

The Story Spine is a template originally created by Kenn Adams, a playwright and improvisational actor, to help actors and writers create effective stories. (Kat Koppett and Matthew Richter 2001)

The flow of a story is very important. While many of us know a good story when we hear it, few of us can build a good story without some assistance. This template can help us create well-built narratives.

Begin each sentence or part of the story with the following...

#### **“Once...”**

- This is the introduction to the setting and characters in the story. It gives listeners the context and sets the stage.

#### **“Everyday...”**

- The platform continues and develops.

#### **“But one day...”**

- This is the catalyst. Or the reason that the story is being told.

#### **“Because of that...”** (Repeat as needed)

- This is the heart of the story. The consequences that follow from the catalyst. Each event leads to another event building suspense and tension.

#### **“Until finally...”**

- Here is the climax. The moment for which we all listen eagerly.

#### **“And ever since then...”**

- This is the resolution or the conclusion.



# Bibliography