IMPROVING SAFETY STORYTELLING
for More Memorable Presentations

Prehistoric humans did not produce data, spreadsheets and graphs to share vital safety information with each other. They drew pictures that told a story to improve safety. This is the origin of storytelling in safety, says Jonathan Klane, M.S.Ed., CSP, CIH, CHMM, CIT, and it speaks to the power of stories in the field.

Klane's ASSP webinar, "Leaders Need to Be Great Storytellers: How to Build Your Skills (According to Research)," underscores the value of storytelling to safety professionals, who often must share dry yet important information. Klane is senior safety editor of *Lab Manager* magazine and a Ph.D. candidate in Arizona State University's School for the Future of Innovation. His tips for effective storytelling focus on capturing the audience and aiding their knowledge retention to improve safety and change attitudes.

Construct Stories Using Freytag's Pyramid

Readers may recognize this model from elementary school: In the lowest left corner your story starts with exposition along a straight, flat line. Then the line shoots up on a 45° angle as rising action unfolds, followed by the climax at the highest point of the pyramid, then falling action as the line moves down the other side of the pyramid and finally flattens out in the resolution.

Klane says what you may not know is that these moments in storytelling are chemically powerful in our bodies. Research by scientist Paul Zak (2014) shows that we generate cortisol during the rising action, receive a spike of oxytocin as the story hits the climax, then finally get a dose of dopamine as it reaches an emotional and satisfactory end. Klane says two professors recently discovered that the most memorable Super Bowl ads over a 2-year period followed this model (Quesenberry, 2016).

Contextualize Data With This Creative Nonfiction Pattern

To deliver your message, you need to give both context and data, which you can weave into a narrative. Narrative, data, narrative, data, narrative: This is an easy-to-follow pattern Klane describes that is recommended by Lee Gutkind, founder of the Creative Nonfiction Foundation. If you start with data, your audience will attempt to contextualize it on their own, Klane says. Instead, start with the narrative framework so you can control the context and help them focus on your presentation.

See Through the Eyes of Your Audience

PEL, LOTO and similar safety jargon reflect what Klane and others call the safety professional's "curse of knowledge." Sometimes we know things so well we cannot put ourselves in the position of those who do not have the same knowledge. Stories are a good way to avoid a presentation that goes over everyone's heads, or as psychologist Steven Pinker puts it, "Stories are intricate examples that counter the curse of knowledge" (Leddy, 2012).

Lean Toward Stories Over Humor

While teaching 21 safety courses one semester, Klane conducted a study to determine which worked better: stories or humor. He administered a test to students at the start of the semester for a baseline, again after 3 weeks to test knowledge gained, and finally at the end of the semester to test retention. In terms of long-term retention, students who were told stories fared better. Klane says this is because stories lean into episodic memory (that of past experiences, but it can also be created by secondhand experience) instead of semantic memory (acquired knowledge).

Consider the "Identifiable Victim Effect" in Building a Compelling Case

The identifiable victim effect "refers to individuals' tendency to offer greater help to specific, identifiable victims than to anonymous, statistical victims" (Lee & Feeley, 2016). This is why organizations that fight childhood hunger, for example, often focus on a single child to solicit more donations. In a safety context, sharing the personal narrative of someone who experienced a major fall may be more impactful—and elicit greater compliance—than offering statistics on the prevalence of falls from height.

Deploy a Good Plot Twist

Our brains love to make connections and when we do, we feel good, Klane says. A plot twist that connects multiple elements makes stories even more memorable. "When you're communicating as a leader, think in terms of stories with a plot twist at the end; you can't do much better," he says.

Use the Hero's Journey Structure

Popularized by Joseph Campbell, the hero's journey structure includes 17 unique, recognizable parts. It is the structure behind many Hollywood movies, from *Star Wars* to *Back to the Future*. While readers may be wondering how a 17-part progression applies to a safety presentation, an analysis found the most-watched TED Talks also follow this structure (Zak, 2013).

Simplify Using Tusitala's Model

Plot, setting and characters are the three major elements of fiction. According to this concept from Tusitala (better known as author Robert Louis Stevenson), they are the only three ways to tell a story (Fernandez, 2021). "You may take a plot and fit characters to it, or you may take a character and choose incidents and situations to develop it, or you may take a certain atmosphere and get action and persons to express and realize it," he wrote. Consider how your stories can use any of these three approaches.

Tell a Story Within a Story

Klane shares a story of his father's service on the *USS Birmingham* during WWII fighting Kamikaze pilots. He describes gunners firing at a pilot, often well past the point of their own guaranteed safety, to take down the plane and save countless lives. The lesson: Sometimes you just have to go for it no matter the risk because the stakes are so high. Using this technique will help you to tell more compelling, authentic stories while maintaining connection with the essential safety information.

Finally, Klane says he is often asked, "Should I use nonfiction, fiction or fictionalized stories that combine both?" He answers, "Yes," meaning you can use all these forms with purpose. Safety and storytelling fit together quite well. He adds, "There is one thread and one thread only that connects and binds all great stories together. One word . . . risk." **PSJ**

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