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# Can you lead without story?





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# Can you lead without story?

It may seem like a simple question – and you may even be tempted to respond with a simple “yes” or “no”. But the complexities that lie beneath the surface are as fascinating as they are important.

We first must ask: what is leadership?  
And then, how does story support effective leaders?

Once we're satisfied with the answers, we can begin to explore the role of story as a tool for leaders.



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# Leadership competencies

Edelman and van Knippenberg (2018:592) describe leadership effectiveness as a “...leader’s success in mobilising and motivating followers for collective ends...”.

As our purpose here is to explore the role of story in leadership, we’re going to focus on studies of leadership competencies. If Edelman and van Knippenberg are right, the core of leadership is ‘human skills’. We will explore competencies described by authors from four different perspectives to see whether human skills are a common feature. Included in our review are:

- a broad framework of leadership behaviours developed to facilitate wider conversation and study about leadership
- a framework of leadership competencies developed from the perspective of global leadership
- a study looking specifically at leadership competencies required for the digital age
- a study that explored the influencing skills of leaders in a military context.

You’ll see in the following paragraphs that while models and terminology may vary, each does include a human element.

Leadership models can focus on the personal qualities of the leader, leadership activity, context, and power and influence (Mendenhall, 2018). The many different models make research difficult. It’s hard to know whether each model presents new knowledge or whether, in fact, the models are the same but use different terminology (Langford, Dougall and Parkes, 2017).

Langford et al (2017) wanted to provide a means to talk about Western-style leadership behaviours using a common language. To achieve this they developed a framework of leadership behaviours that aligned with the Big Five human personality factors:

## The Big Five human personality factors

1. extraversion
2. openness to experience
3. conscientiousness
4. agreeableness
5. emotional stability (neuroticism).



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They recognised that while no individual model of leadership in their research encompassed all five characteristics, all five did feature in the leadership behaviours identified across the range of models.

The 'leadership big five' does align leadership behaviour with the Big Five personality factors. It's a set of multidimensional leadership behaviours, each of which is important for organisational outcomes: voice, organise, innovate, connect, and enjoy. As a means for comparing models, 'enjoy' referred to well-being, work-life balance and resilience, a group that included the self-focus aspect of emotional intelligence. 'Connect' referred to reward, develop and consult, and included the focus on others aspect of emotional intelligence (Langford et al, 2017).

Bird (2018:139) also noted that competencies identified for successful global leadership were often similar constructs using different terminology. Like Langford et al (2017), he saw value in creating a 'framework of nested global leadership competencies' to facilitate the study of global leadership. Bird focused on three broad sets of competencies:

#### **The framework of nested global leadership competencies**

1. business and organisational acumen
2. managing people and relationships
3. managing self.

The second and third groups are of particular interest for this paper. Managing people and relationships consists of:

- interpersonal skills
- cross-cultural skills
- valuing people
- empowering others
- teaming skills.

Bird (2018) noted that valuing people provides the foundation for the others.

Likewise, managing self has five subsets:

- character
- resilience
- inquisitiveness
- flexibility
- global mindset.



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Interestingly, the leadership big five behaviours identified by Langford et al (2017) straddle the three categories of competencies defined by Bird (2018) for global leadership.

Klus and Müller (2020) also examined previous studies to identify common leadership skills and traits. Their study focused on leadership needs for the digital age.

They distinguished between:

- skills, which they term abilities that can be developed, and
- traits, defined as stable constructs i.e. attributes that leaders have.

They divided skills into:

- surface structure skills, those things that are easily and quickly learned and usually self-focused, and
- deep level, or team-focused skills that take time and effort to learn.

Within a framework of core skills – technical, human and conceptual – the leadership skills found to be most relevant to leaders in the digital age were:

- communication skills
- subject-specific knowledge
- self-organisation
- self-reflection.

The study identified empathy, open-mindedness, calmness and creativity as necessary traits. It also noted that leadership skills are related to leadership activity, as opposed to levels of management (Klus and Müller, 2020).

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Ohlsson, Alvinus and Larsson (2020) explored the influencing skills leaders need for organisational adaptability. Although the context was military, they suggest it could apply elsewhere. Their model, smooth power, has three pillars that together create a set of influencing behaviours:

#### **The leadership model: smooth power**

1. structural smoothness is managing the formal and informal structures to achieve the organisation's goals
2. relational smoothness is using social skills and developing social capital to be able to work across organisational and external boundaries, developing networks and collaborating
3. emotional smoothness corresponds to the ability of an individual to be able to apply emotional intelligence effectively in their work.

Ohlsson et al (2020:307) describe emotion in leadership as "...a staple of modern leadership models,...".

We can see to this point that human skills are a significant aspect of the leader's role. Here we'll focus briefly on emotional intelligence and its role in leadership.



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# The power of emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence has emerged as an area of research from the study of personality and its influence on effective leadership.

Goleman (2004:3) refers to emotional intelligence as the “...sine qua non of leadership”. He argues that without emotional intelligence, executives won’t make great leaders. Goleman describes emotional intelligence across three areas of attention: focusing on yourself, on others and on the wider world. In explaining their importance, he says “...a failure to focus inward leaves you rudderless, a failure to focus on others renders you clueless, and a failure to focus outward may leave you blindsided.” (2013:4).

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Self-awareness and self-control are the competencies associated with looking inwards. Goleman (2013) describes the former in terms of listening to your inner voice and recognising gut feelings. Experience over time provides an authentic view of ourselves, meaning that we are the same person to ourselves as we present to others. Self-control is also described as cognitive control, or willpower, being able to control our responses to events and remain focused (Goleman, 2013).

## **Focusing on others encompasses three types of empathy:**

1. cognitive (understanding others’ perspectives)
2. emotional (understanding their feelings)
3. empathic concern (being able to recognise what people need from you in response).

The release of oxytocin in response to emotional stimuli enables us to respond to another’s emotional needs. Social sensitivity is an ability to understand the social context and behave appropriately. In combination with the other skills described, the leader can build rapport and develop networks. Attending more widely to the



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world requires a focus on strategy and innovation. Goleman (2013) refers to leaders with an ability to look wider and to the future as visionaries.

Miao, Humphrey and Qian (2018) showed that leaders demonstrating emotional intelligence are able to make use of effective leadership styles such as authentic leadership. Further research by Walther, Cole and Humphrey (2011, cited in Miao et al, 2018:681) additionally indicated associations between emotional intelligence, and leader emergence and leadership effectiveness. Edelman and van Knippenberg (2018)

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**to lead successfully, a person must demonstrate two active, essential, interrelated traits: expertise and empathy**

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showed that where a leader recognises and responds appropriately to followers' emotions, it has a positive impact on leadership effectiveness.

A lieutenant general in the US army, Pagonis (2001) believes the most important leadership skills are experience and empathy. Through his story he described the importance of self-analysis, how learning what and how to communicate was a challenge, and how he followed this advice: “Never pass up the opportunity to remain silent” (2001:99). There was evidence throughout of emotional intelligence in action. He says: “To lead successfully, a person must demonstrate two active, essential, interrelated traits: expertise and empathy.” (Pagonis, 2001:96).

This brief look at leadership competencies demonstrates that effective leaders need to be able to connect with their teams. Klus and Müller (2020) showed that leaders aren't only found in senior management – leaders exist across an organisation. Other studies demonstrated the link between effective leadership models and emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-control, empathy and social sensitivity. Our abilities in each of these areas starts to develop in early childhood, helped by stories.



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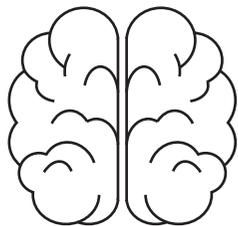
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# The neuroscience of storytelling

“Stories are fundamental to human experience, and stories experienced in early childhood can extend children’s thinking, foster new knowledge, and validate their emotions.” (Nutbrown, 1999:84).

Stories have huge importance in children’s lives. They provide a social-cultural context and help children to make sense of the world around them (Sheridan, 2000; Smith et al, 2003). They can be empowering, exciting and challenging (Sheridan, 2000). Stories provide children with models of experiences to come. They help them make sense of experiences they’ve had, develop self-awareness and the ability to understand others’ perspectives. And they provide opportunities to challenge and better understand reality; in effect providing opportunities to mix what’s known with what’s new (Sheridan, 2000; Smith et al, 2003). The early foundations of emotional intelligence.

It’s clear that stories play a significant role in children’s development, but it doesn’t end with childhood. In their study of leadership and storytelling, Mládková (2013) describes how stories are used, for example, to make sense of events, create identities, share values and knowledge and change social practices. A reflection of the childhood uses of story.



As well as providing an effective tool for learning, stories offer a means of communication.

Neural-coupling occurs when the brain activity in a speaker and listener are aligned. To examine the extent of communication taking place during the telling of a story, Stephens, Silbert and Hasson (2010) examined the brain activity of a speaker and listeners as the speaker told an unrehearsed, real-life story, told as if speaking to a friend. Listeners later completed a questionnaire to see how much they understood the story.

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**in their study of leadership and storytelling, stories are used to make sense of events, create identities, share values and knowledge, and change social practices**

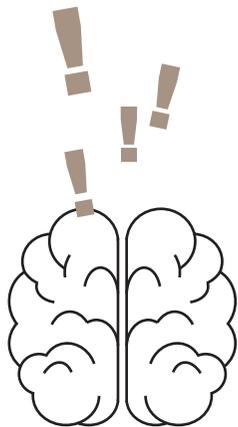
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The researchers created maps of brain activity for the speaker compared with the listeners, and the listeners



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compared with each other. While hearing the story, the evidence showed neural coupling between the speaker's and listeners' brains around the production and comprehension linguistic processes, semantics and social aspects of story. The listeners processed incoming verbal information in similar ways and there was also evidence that areas to do with speech comprehension also activate in listeners' brains during communication.

To make sure that the neural-coupling only occurred during communication, Stephens et al (2010) told the listeners a story in Russian. Neural-coupling only occurred in the early auditory system, showing that coupling only happens where information is successfully processed. A second test of the outcomes involved the speaker telling a second story in English. The speaker's brain activity of this story was compared with the listeners' brain activity for the first story and there was no coupling. This showed that the coupling isn't language dependent, rather it depends on shared understanding and communication.

In terms of timing of the brain activity, Stephens et al noted that initially the speaker and listener brain activity was aligned in the early auditory system, but later in

the process the listener was ahead of the speaker. It's possible the listener uses prediction to help process the input. Stephens et al (2010) suggest that there's strong evidence that prediction of what's coming next is an important part of successful communication. After analysing the questionnaires completed by the listeners, they found that the stronger the neural-coupling, the better the understanding of the story.

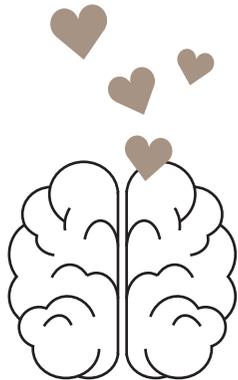
This research has implications for the need for stories to be clear when used in business to create effective communication. We've seen that story is both learning and communication tool, but how does it work on an emotional level?

Winston (2003) explains that there is a mechanism in our brains that decides what we take notice of and what we ignore. Research has shown that even in a noisy environment, we can follow one conversation and still hear when our name is said elsewhere. This is because the information is of emotional significance to us. It suggests why Zak (2014) advises that presentations should start with a compelling human story. It could also be something novel or surprising that attracts us, but once the new stimuli has the brain's attention, activity in other areas of the brain reduces (Winston, 2003).



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In addition to the neural-coupling taking place during communication, listening to a story creates an emotional response in the brain. The stress hormone cortisol is released by the adrenal glands in response to tension in a story, perhaps the arrival of a villain or dangerous incident. This keeps our attention. Stories that are character-driven encourage the production of oxytocin, making us feel more cooperative. The production of oxytocin is associated with being trusted or shown kindness (Zak, 2014). In an experiment Zak (2014) found that the more oxytocin the brain released, the more generous people became e.g. donating to charity.

Our brains contain mirror neurons that cause us to copy other humans and in doing so, we also produce the feelings associated with that action (Winston, 2003). When we listen to a story or watch a film, the mirror neurons cause us to feel the same emotions that we see or hear the story characters experience. As the cortisol and oxytocin mix, we feel empathy and experience 'transportation' (Smith, 2016). Denning (2007) explains that the transportation model of narrative involves the reader or listener going on a virtual journey to the place where the story takes them. When the story is powerful and the listener feels immersed in it, they may return to reality feeling changed by the experience.

If the story has a positive ending, the brain releases dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter associated with the limbic system and reward. As the brain receives new stimuli it registers feelings of pleasure and tags the stimuli with an emotional value, good or bad. The stimuli and tag are then stored in the memory. At some future point, if the brain experiences the same stimuli, it recalls the previous event and the emotional tag that accompanied it and uses this to decide an action. The limbic system is associated with reward and satisfaction (Winston, 2003).

Smith (2016) cites research that has shown that transportation can increase empathic skills and that these are transferable to daily life. Denning (2007) says, though, that to tell stories like this takes time and resources and can lead to exaggeration or fabrication to achieve the ends. Smith (2016) also warns of the negative effects that excessive cortisol and oxytocin can have and reminds us to pay attention to the stories that we're told and that we tell ourselves, fact checking to avoid manipulation.



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# Leading with story

Story has been shown to be a learning aid and means of communication, and to have an emotional impact on the listener. But how does story help the leader achieve effectiveness?

Collins (2020:2) provides an overall perspective that storytelling "...represents the primary means by which managers may usefully place their visions, their plans, in the company of others who can bring these to fruition."

Denning (2004) explains that different narratives are needed for different situations in business. Each has a purpose and specific format for success:

1. The first, 'sparkling action', focuses on communicating change and inspiring action.
2. 'Communicating who you are' is the means by which the leader gains the trust of the audience. This may involve sharing personal stories that help the audience to both understand and empathise.
3. 'Transmitting values' is important for setting organisation behaviours and norms.
4. Storytelling is an important tool in 'fostering collaboration', a means for encouraging sharing and discussion.
5. 'Taming the grapevine' is the use of story to defuse and manage rumours.
6. 'Sharing Knowledge' that often resides with a limited number of people.
7. 'Leading people into the future', using story to prepare people for what's to come.



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There is some overlap between Denning's model and that of Mládková (2013:90) who suggests that “properly prepared and told stories have high potential to help leaders...”, enhance the creation and presentation of the organisation's visions, solve conflict, explain objectives, develop culture and build relationships. In addition, they hypothesise that better leadership skills indicate greater use of storytelling and better storytelling skills.

Employees need to be connected to the organisation's purpose. How people view their role has an impact on their feelings about the organisation and familiar tasks can cause a disconnection. Leaders can use human stories to help reconnect the listener to the organisation's purpose (Grenny, 2017). To inspire others,

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**properly prepared and told stories  
have high potential to help leaders**

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leaders must first be able to identify their own motivators and connect these to the organisational purpose, then filter them down, so the purpose and culture of the organisation are shared by all (Coleman, 2015). Sharing personal anecdotes can help to create a common narrative of “...shared values, experiences, hopes and aspirations” in the community (Coleman, 2015:3).

Listeners want to be “engaged and entertained, informed, and inspired” (Gallo, 2019:470).

Gallo (2019) identifies stories about oneself, about others, or about the organisation as the types of stories to use when trying to influence people. Personal stories are, he advises, both the easiest to tell and the most impactful.

In preparing their stories, leaders must consider those already shared, what is already known. Leaders don't just share a single story, it's an unfolding drama where the leaders and their followers are the characters (Gardner and Laskin, 2011).



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Eckert (2001) told the story of being the new CEO of Mattel and how on his first day he faced a meeting of employees at which he needed to share the new vision and mission, reassure about better times ahead and build momentum for change. His successful icebreaker was the story of getting his new ID badge. With his story Eckert demonstrated humility and the change that was happening. When the time for questions arrived, the majority focused on his personal life. They wanted a leader they could relate to.

As this story shows, sharing authentic personal stories is a means for leaders to build trust while not presenting overly positive stories that can raise suspicion. It's important to share the challenges as well (Levine, 2017; Denning, 2004). To be seen as authentic, leaders must be seen modelling the values they implement (Gardner and Laskin, 2011). Storytelling is a tool that leaders can use to build credibility for them and their ideas (Gothelf, 2020).

Knowing their audience is essential for leaders. They can achieve this by listening to the stories employees, customers, and stakeholders tell, reviewing social media and other data and using the information gathered to

direct their stories effectively (Levine, 2017). Stories must make sense to the audience. Gardner and Laskin (2011) suggest that since most ideas and thoughts are set by the age of five, leaders' stories for a mixed audience should be aimed at the five-year old mind, to be relevant to everyone. Stories shouldn't be too detailed as you want the audience to be able to think about what they can do in response to the story (Denning, 2004). Stories should simplify the complex and support the audience's understanding (Levine, 2017). We're reminded that when the story is told in a way that makes sense to the listener, the better they understand it.

Gothelf (2020) tells us that stories must:

- be audience specific
- explain the context for the story
- have a human perspective
- give clear direction
- empower the audience to act and make the story theirs
- be humble and share mistakes so as to build trust.

Having that human perspective adds emotion to the mix.



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Neuroscience sees decision-making as a more emotional process than logical, so it makes sense to use story to help persuade people on a course of action (DeVries, 2021). As discussed above, mirror neurons are at play in the brain during a story and these cause the listener to feel the emotions of the characters in the story (Levine, 2017). While data and reason are important, emotion is the greater motivator and so telling human stories that incorporate both in a meaningful and memorable way will achieve more attention and credibility than either story or data would alone. Our brains respond to stories and remember their messages (Levine, 2017).

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**in effect, story enables leaders to achieve  
in every aspect of emotional intelligence**

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Leaders can use story to build culture, motivate people, build relationships (DeVries, 2021) and encourage empathy (Smith, 2016). Story provides teams with a means to share perspectives and learn about each other's cultures and lives (Rai, 2020; Choy, 2020). Telling and listening to stories helps people to overcome problems and divisions, demonstrate what they have in common, and creates an appreciation of each other's differences (Rai, 2020). "Storytelling makes business come to life" and provides a sense of being part of something (Levine, 2017:1).

The functions of story discussed above identify the leader as a communicator of purpose, driving change, developing communities, creating emotional connection, inspiring and displaying authenticity. In effect, story enables leaders to achieve in every aspect of emotional intelligence. And as a tool, story has the ability to impact individuals emotionally and as a means of communication.



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# Can leaders develop storytelling skills?

Denning (2004) says that being able to tell the right story at the right time is an essential leadership tool to achieve success.

Authors agree that storytelling skills can be learned (Levine, 2017; Coleman, 2015). Pulley and Sessa (2001) talk about leadership in the Net age. Leadership happens in different ways and as such there are skills that need to be learned at individual and team levels. At the individual level they cite storytelling as a skill to be learned.

Putnam (2019) offers tips for creating and using stories to persuade people to adopt healthy habits. Passon (2019:476) discusses the need to add “detail, heart and humanity” to data to make it into a story. Levine (2017) recommends listening to and learning from great storytellers.

In their book aimed at early years educators, Godwin and Perkins (2002) offer tips for storytellers. Among these is a reminder that personal anecdotes are powerful stories and from a confidence perspective place less strain on the memory of the teller. They advocate thinking about how to draw the attention of your

audience, perhaps with a prop of visual aid, and using your voice and body, especially your eyes and face in the telling. While these tips are aimed at educators, they hold good for adults, too.

Choy (2020) explains that good business storytelling training tasks the group with collecting stories and, in the process, learning about each other and building relationships. This may involve disrupting existing conversation patterns and providing story prompting questions as an aid.

Good storytelling takes practice, but will have a major impact on teams, the organisation, and the leader (Gothelf, 2020). Gardner and Laskin (2011) remind us that sharing stories needs linguistic intelligence since they're either spoken or written.



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## Conclusion

This paper started from the question ‘Can you lead without story.’ In looking at leadership competencies it’s clear that human skills feature strongly, and there’s evidence of links between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness. The development of these competencies in leaders actually began in childhood and story was a tool used for the purpose.

Story is a lifelong tool for learning and development as well as a means of communication, as evidenced by the research of Stephens, Silbert and Hasson (2010). Story becomes an even more powerful tool when the brain is engaged at an emotional level.

In our opening quote Edelman and van Knippenberg (2018:592) described leadership effectiveness as a “...leader’s success in mobilising and motivating followers for collective ends...”. To do this requires an emotional connection between the leader and their followers. Brains connect when there’s language and understanding, characters make us care.

The necessity of story in true leadership is clear to see.

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**brains connect when there’s  
language and understanding,  
characters make us care**

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## About Write the Talk

Write the Talk shape long-running organisational stories for organisations throughout the UK, US and Asia Pacific. Using flexible, resilient and influential narratives, we connect people to purpose, leaders to their teams, customers to brands and investors to the vision. Our process is unique; our work wins awards; our clients stay with us.

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Employee engagement. Storytelling. Narrative. Productivity.  
Change communications. Culture change. Leadership training.  
Strategy implementation. Internal communications.

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If you'd like more information or to chat about any of the above, please get in touch with [anthony@writethetalk.com](mailto:anthony@writethetalk.com) (UK/US) or [imogen@writethetalk.com](mailto:imogen@writethetalk.com) (Asia Pacific).



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