

# The Power of Stories

Business legends use storytelling to inspire, educate and motivate.

BY CARMINE GALLO

Ideas that catch on are wrapped in story. Stories inform, illuminate and inspire. Storytelling is something we do naturally. In fact, it's part of our DNA. We are hardwired for story and we can prove it scientifically.



Some studies show that at least 400,000 years ago humans gained control of fire. It's an important milestone in human development. Sitting around the campfire, people began telling stories instead of hunting and gathering like they did during the day. Stories informed others about potential threats, educated them and ignited their imaginations. Stories do the same today.

British entrepreneur Richard Branson, best known as the founder of Virgin Group, which comprises more than 400 companies, gathers his team to share stories around a campfire at his home on Necker Island, British Virgin Islands. "Storytelling can be used to drive change," says Branson. "Telling a story is one of the best ways we have of coming up with new ideas."



Branson also plays host to a group of young entrepreneurs who have been invited to the island for a few days of fun, food and pitching ideas. The 10 entrepreneurs are the finalists for a competition called the Extreme Tech Challenge, which Branson has judged for a couple of years. The winner receives Branson's funding and support. Speakers who grab Branson's attention are concise (winning presentations are no more than 10 minutes long), they speak from the heart, and they use the language of narrative to spark Branson's imagination with a villain (problem) and a hero (solution). Winning presentations end with a picture of a better world. Branson loves ideas that are pitched in the form of story because, like all of us, Branson is hardwired to love story.

Branson is one of 50 entrepreneurs, business legends and TED speakers I interviewed or featured in *The Storyteller's Secret*, a book I've researched for two years to help business leaders understand the language of narrative and the role it plays in their success. I discovered that business leaders who are storytellers fall into one of five categories: those who inspire, educate, simplify, motivate or launch movements.

### **Storytellers who inspire**

Storytellers who inspire embrace their own story of triumph over adversity and by doing so, they challenge us to dream bigger. For example, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz often tells the story of



*The longest standing ovation at TED, to date, went to human rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson for the story-rich talk he gave in 2012 in Long Beach, California.*



*Tesla and SpaceX founder Elon Musk explained a complex idea in simple terms to tell about a home battery that stores sunlight and converts it to energy.*

growing up in a Brooklyn housing project and watching his family struggle after his father was injured on the job. They had no health insurance and found it difficult to make ends meet. The story underpins Schultz' initiatives such as offering health insurance for all employees. Schultz, one of the great storytellers in business today,

California. Personal stories made up 65 percent of Stevenson's now famous TED Talk.

As another popular TED speaker, Brené Brown, once said, "Stories are just data with soul." She's on to something. Scientists have found that humans are essentially storytellers, which means we relate better to stories than to mountains

speaks to the general public in language the average third-grader might understand.

When Musk introduced the Tesla Powerwall in April 2015, he explained that the product is a home battery that captures sunlight from solar panels and converts it to energy. Although it's designed for the average consumer, the technology behind the Powerwall is highly complex. According to its website, "*The Tesla Powerwall is a wall-mounted, rechargeable lithium ion battery with liquid thermal control. It delivers a 5.8 amp nominal current and 8.6 amps at peak output.*" And that's the easy part. While Musk understands every word of the underlying technology, he explains it to consumers in the simple language of compelling narrative.

All great stories have a hero (protagonist) and a villain (antagonist). Elon Musk's presentations are no different. Musk introduces villains and heroes in the form of problems and their solutions. In the Powerwall presentation, fossil fuels are the problem and the sun is the solution.

"*This is how it is today,*" Musk began as he showed a photo of a power plant spewing carbon into the air. "*It's pretty bad. It sucks. This is real. This is actually how most power is generated, with fossil fuels.*"

Musk continues: "*The solution is in two parts. Part one, the Sun. We have this handy fusion reactor in the sky called the Sun. You don't have to do anything. It just works. It shows up every day and produces ridiculous amounts of power.*"

## “Telling a story is one of the best ways we have of coming up with new ideas.” — Richard Branson

once said, "The more uninspiring your origins, the more likely you are to use your imagination and invent worlds where everything seems possible."

If you've overcome adversity in your life, in your career or in your business, it's important to share that story because we are hardwired to love rags-to-riches stories. And we love them because we *need* to hear them. We find meaning in struggle.

### **Storytellers who educate**

These are the men and women who offer a new way of looking at the world, and they do that through the power of narrative. Human rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson has won cases he's argued at the U.S. Supreme Court. He also received TED's longest standing ovation for his "We need to talk about an injustice" speech at TED2012 in Long Beach,

of data. Effective educators use data to support their ideas, but they rely on stories to move people to action.

### **Storytellers who simplify**

Storytellers who simplify are often entrepreneurs, like Richard Branson, who once said, "If your pitch can't fit on the back of an envelope, it's rubbish," or Tesla and SpaceX founder Elon Musk, who explains complex ideas simply, clearly and concisely.

In one presentation Musk introduced a home battery that stores sunlight and converts it to energy. The entire presentation lasted less than 20 minutes and Musk used short, simple words to describe the problem and the solution. The words were so simple, in fact, that his presentation could be read by a grade school student. Musk reads obscure Soviet-era rocket manuals for fun, yet he



Stories like the one Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg told at TED2010 make an emotional connection that can go viral.



Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai uses storytelling and speaks from the heart to change the world.

The two previous excerpts return a reading score of 2.8 as measured by the Flesch-Kincaid readability test, a system that measures the complexity of text for the U.S. education system. A score of 2.8 means the average second- or third-grader should be able to read the text because the sentences are short and most of the words are made up of just one syllable.

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Musk is a rocket scientist—literally—but when he speaks to consumers he makes his ideas really easy to understand.

### Storytellers who motivate

These are inspiring individuals, of course, and they're also leaders who build brands like Southwest Airlines, the Apple Store, Whole Foods, Starbucks or Wynn Resorts. "Storytelling has changed my business and my life," says Las Vegas hotel mogul Steve Wynn. Wynn believes that storytelling taps into the strongest force in the universe—self-esteem.

For example, at the beginning of every shift at Wynn hotels, a supervisor asks, "Does anyone have a story about a great customer experience they'd like to share?" The stories serve to educate the rest of the team on model behaviors. More

importantly, stories motivate employees because customer service heroes are recognized by their peers. Pretty soon employees compete for better stories. Recognition is a powerful motivator.

### Storytellers who launch movements

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg launched the movement *Lean In*,

encouraging women to speak up in the workplace. Millions of young women wouldn't be 'leaning in' if it had not been for a personal story. When Sandberg delivered her first major public presentation on the subject on a TED stage in 2010, she was prepared to deliver facts and figures and "no personal stories." A friend noticed that Sandberg was upset about something. Sandberg confided that it was tough to leave her daughter at home while she attended the conference. "You need to share that story," Sandberg's friend suggested. Sandberg was reluctant to do so at first, but realized that she had to open her heart to make an emotional connection with her audience. The story went viral and led to a bestselling book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to*

*Lead*, which lead to the movement. Facts don't trigger movements; stories do.

Behind every movement, there's a great storyteller. Remarkably, storytellers who change the world are often inspired themselves by the storytellers who came before them.

For example, Malala Yousafzai, the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, grew up in a storytelling family. Malala's grandfather was famous for his sermons and Malala recalls that people would come from far and wide to hear her grandfather tell stories. Malala entered public speaking competitions in Pakistan where she learned to deliver her message from the heart rather than from a sheet of paper, she once said. A bullet nearly ended Malala's life, but the art of storytelling has become her most powerful weapon in the war of ideas.

Storytelling is not a luxury, wrote American novelist Robert Stone: "It's almost as necessary as bread. We cannot imagine ourselves without it, because the self is a story." If the self is a story, then we're all storytellers. The sooner you accept it the sooner you can get started on the work of shaping your future. **T**

**CARMINE GALLO** is the author of *The Storyteller's Secret: From TED Speakers to Business Legends, Why Some Ideas Catch On and Others Don't*.