Best Story Wins

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Best Story Wins

Storytelling for business success

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The Economist

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To Sue, Sylvia and Georgia

About the author

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He began his career as a business journalist and for 25 years his writing appeared on a weekly basis in the *Sunday Times*. He is the co-author of *Belonging: The Key to Transforming and Maintaining Diversity, Inclusion and Equality at Work* and the author of *The Tao of Bowie: 10 Lessons from David Bowie's Life to Help You Live Yours*.

Praise for Mark Edwards's previous books:

Belonging: The Key to Transforming and Maintaining Diversity, Inclusion and Equality at Work

"The most important business book of the year" – *Esquire*

"Takes a complex and often uncomfortable subject and makes it truly accessible and absolutely achievable" – Sarah Jenkins, managing director, Saatchi & Saatchi

"Essential reading" – Mark Thompson, former president and CEO, *The New York Times*

The Tao of Bowie: 10 Lessons from David Bowie's Life to Help You Live Yours

"Quirky wisdom" – *Independent*

"A swirling, entertaining path of self-discovery" – *Publishers Weekly*

"A wise little book which will help you find clarity and creativity" – *Stylist*

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Introduction: The power of storytelling

Understanding how important storytelling is in the modern world of work; how storytelling adds value to businesses and benefits individuals; how anyone can be a storyteller; and how you can tell one of the world's most important stories in just two words

"Who is the most powerful person in the world?"

It's a summer's day in 1994, and Steve Jobs needs a snack. He walks into the breakroom at the Redwood, California headquarters of NeXT, the company he founded after being forced out of Apple. He grabs a bagel, turns to the others in the room, and asks them to name the most powerful person in the world. It's not standard breakroom banter, but this is the boss talking, so a few answers are offered, including major politicians of the day. "No," Jobs replies – confident in his opinions as ever. "You're all wrong! The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller."

It's arguably not the most obvious answer, so how had Jobs come to form this opinion? At the time of this exchange, Jobs was heavily invested in storytelling, both financially and personally. Having left Apple in 1985, following boardroom infighting, he had set up NeXT, but he had also funded the creation of Lucasfilm's graphics division as a standalone

company and was its major shareholder. By 1994, it had been renamed Pixar and was only a year away from unveiling *Toy Story*, the first ever entirely computer-animated feature film, with Jobs credited as executive producer.

As well as investing financially in a company that would become one of the great popular storytellers of the age, Jobs was transforming himself from a man whose signature communications style had tended to be relentless logical argument into someone who had an entirely different way of communicating with the world.

According to Pixar co-founder Ed Catmull, Jobs referred to his original tactic as "just explain it to them until they understand"; and Catmull noted that "until they understand" was a time period that would sometimes stretch over several months. But Jobs was starting to see the limitations of this approach based on logical argument, and was gradually evolving a new storytelling style that, following his return to Apple in 1997, would see his keynote speeches at product launches hailed as masterclasses in communication.

In 2002, for example, when software developers wanted to continue to work with Mac OS 9 but Jobs wanted them to move onto OS 10, he didn't just explain it to them until they understood. He eschewed logical arguments and instead staged a mock funeral for the old operating system.

At the annual developer's conference in the San Jose Convention Center, dry ice filled the stage, stained glass imagery went up on the slides, Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor played, and a coffin appeared. Jobs emerged with a box ostensibly containing Mac OS 9, walked solemnly over to the coffin and placed it inside. Slowly and deliberately, he closed the lid, placed a rose on top and gave a eulogy for the old system.

His speech was perfectly balanced between dignified

respect and gentle humour, exemplifying exactly the note you want the words at a funeral to hit: the deceased was wonderful, of course, but they had their little quirks, didn't they?

> Mac OS 9 was a friend to us all. He worked tirelessly on our behalf, always hosting our applications, never refusing a command, always at our beck and call, except occasionally when he forgot who he was and needed to be restarted.

Jobs's speech drove home the key point he wanted to make:

> We are here today to mourn the passing of Mac OS 9.
>
> Please join me in a moment of silence as we remember our old friend, Mac OS 9.

And crucially, Jobs never broke character. The audience laughed, but Jobs didn't crack a smile. This wasn't a logical argument as to why developers should support the new system. It was a new version of an age-old tale: the old system is dead; long live the new system.

Storytelling was integral to Apple's rise to become the most valuable brand in the world. The "Think different" campaign that quickly followed Jobs's return to the company derived from his belief that one of the key events in anyone's life is the moment when you realise that the world isn't fixed and that *you* can change it. This moment of awakening is at the heart of the classical storytelling form, the hero's journey, which can be found in cultures around the world. It's the moment when the hero accepts the "call to action" that sets the story in motion; the moment when the hero – who, until that point in the story, has no idea that this is in fact their destiny – actually *becomes* the hero.

As a metaphor it speaks powerfully to the transitional moments in our lives when we realise our agency, when we "grow up" and assume new responsibilities, when we define

ourselves as individuals. Job's understanding of this elemental power of storytelling allowed him to harness its strength in just those two words.

Stories sell

We're not all going to change the world in the ways that Jobs and Apple did; we're not all going to build the most valuable brand in the world or revolutionise whole industries. But we *can* all reap the benefits of storytelling.

Storytelling allows you to communicate more powerfully in pretty much every work setting. It's the most effective way to get your point across whether you're standing up in front of a crowd at a conference or firing off a quick email to get a stakeholder's support for a project; whether you're constructing a PowerPoint presentation or chatting with a colleague in a lift.

It works for leaders running major corporations through transitional periods, and it works for someone trying to get their first ever job.

It works in 90-second Super Bowl TV spots, and it works in 10-second social media formats.

In 2014, readers of the *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* encountered the headline "What makes a Super Bowl ad super?"[1] The article was based on an analysis of 108 Super Bowl commercials, analysing exactly what kind of ads consumers liked most.

The Super Bowl ad break is one of the high points of the US advertising and marketing year; not only are the ads seen by more than 100 million people live, but they are also the subject of much social media and word of mouth discussion afterwards. So, which ads did people like the most and which were the ads that got the additional attention, views, likes, clicks and social buzz?

The secret sauce of a Super Bowl commercial, it turns out, is not sex appeal, humour, catchphrases or adorable animals. What people like and want to talk about is story. The ads that followed traditional narrative form were the most liked, and the more complete the story (the more closely they followed the conventional dramatic form that the authors of the article used as their model, and which we will encounter in Chapter 2), the more liked they were and the more talked about they were.

"Does story and likeability sell? Likeable ads are more likely to be viewed and shared multiple times, increasing viral buzz and generating greater awareness," according to the article. "Advertisers can buy consumer attention for those 30 seconds during the game. But when advertising hits social media, it is all about likability. People are drawn to and give their attention to story."

But surely – you may well be thinking – people don't have time for stories these days. After all, according to the media, we're supposed to be suffering from ever-shortening attention spans.

This is a well-worn theory, but is it true? Perhaps you've noticed that the same people who are accused of having tiny attention spans are easily able to binge-watch a whole series of a dozen 60-minute episodes of a TV drama – *if the story grips them*.

The truth is, of course, that we 21st-century human beings are perfectly able to focus our attention on one thing for a length of time if it interests us. And story is what interests us.

Eight years after their original research, the same authors conducted similar research into viral ad videos online.[2]

Their analysis of 155 online ads found that average shares and views were higher for videos that featured full story

development than for videos that didn't. Even in the world of clickbait, people still like a good story.

Stories add value

Storytelling doesn't just get you shares and likes. It translates into hard cash.

Dollar Shave Club proved to be an extraordinarily successful start-up when it was bought by Unilever in 2016 for a reported $1bn. Did the deal make financial sense for Unilever? Increasingly, commentators are suggesting that it didn't. But it certainly made sense for Dollar Shave Club's founder Michael Dubin, who personally received $90m.

What was behind the exceptional price that Unilever paid?

Story.

The unconventional brand told its unconventional story with unconventional videos. One of them famously headlined "Our blades are f***ing great" featured Dubin's humorous delivery as he toured the warehouse. It made an immediate emotional connection with the audience: they were wasting money on overpriced razors and Dollar Shave Club was the answer.

The video was shot for $4,500. To give some idea of how cheap that is in the world of advertising, Gillette's annual marketing budget was recently reported in trade magazine *Marketing Week* at $600m.

At the time of the billion-dollar acquisition, Ryan Darnell, a principal at Basset Investment Group, a venture capital firm specialising in early-stage investments, explained the rationale for the high purchase price very clearly. "There are two things that drive multiples: the financial metrics and the story," he said.

It's hardly surprising, then, that so many business leaders

cite storytelling as a vital skill. "Entrepreneurs who make a difference are, in effect, professional storytellers," is Richard Branson's verdict; and, speaking of the Virgin group of companies, he noted: "We would be nothing without our story." Stewart Butterfield, co-founder of photo-sharing website Flickr and founder of team-messaging application Slack, said that:

> If there's one piece of advice I could go back to give myself, it is to concentrate on the storytelling part, on the convincing people. If you can't do that, it doesn't matter how good the product is, it doesn't matter how good the idea was for the market, or what happens in the external factors, you don't have the people believing.

Storytelling, it seems, is vital to success in business. Storytelling is also, fortunately, easier than it sounds.

Anyone can be a storyteller

You may feel that some people are just born storytellers – that it's a gift, and perhaps that it's one that you don't possess. But *anyone* can be a storyteller. Indeed, we all are storytellers in our daily lives; and we can bring those skills to the workplace.

I would even argue that, although we often encounter storytelling in the world of the Arts, storytelling itself is not an art. It's a science. Or, at least, it can be approached as one. There is a clear, proven way to create stories. There are simple rules or guidelines that anyone can follow. There is, if you like, a "best practice" for making a story.

There are books that have defined this best practice for those who want to write novels or films. The book you're holding now redefines that same best practice for those whose focus is on storytelling in the workplace.

As you read on, you will be reassured that storytelling is a

skill that is available to anyone. You don't have to be a natural storyteller, great writer or charismatic presenter.

The power of storytelling can be harnessed by following a simple, actionable six-step process. You can use this process (it's called SUPERB) to create stories; but you can also use the process (or elements of it) to improve the power of business communication in *any* medium – from emails to speeches, WhatsApps to one-on-ones, texts to town halls.

The SUPERB process will improve all your business communications, making you better able to influence, impact, persuade, sell, manage and lead.

How to read this book

You'll get the most out of *Best Story Wins* if you work through it in order, as each chapter builds on the knowledge learned in the previous one.

However, if you want to get straight to the SUPERB process to start building your own stories, then you can jump directly to Chapter 5. If you choose to do this, however, I urge you to look back over chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 at a later date, as the context they bring will enhance your use of the process.

Here's how the book is structured.

Chapter 1 explains why storytelling is so extraordinarily powerful. It compares and contrasts building a logical argument – the most common way in which people try to influence others at work – with storytelling, to explain exactly why storytelling is significantly more effective. You'll see how storytelling aligns closely with the decision-making process of your audiences. And you'll examine the neuroscientific and psychological evidence that demonstrates why people who may resist your logical arguments and other forms of

communication will be more open, and react more positively, to storytelling.

Before you can gain the benefits of storytelling you have to understand what a story is, and how it works. **Chapter 2 analyses the key theories and definitions of story from Aristotle to the present day**, taking in both the perennial truths of narrative form that have stood the test of time, and the new developments that have shaped our modern idea of story in the multi-media, multi-platform, utterly-spoilt-for-choice 21st century. This chapter will help you build up a comprehensive picture of what makes a story – and, importantly, what makes a *good* story.

Chapter 3 identifies the storytelling techniques that work best in a business setting. It also indicates the few aspects of storytelling that won't translate into your business communications and are best avoided. In this chapter you will learn who should be the hero of your story (spoiler alert: it isn't you), and we will explain why the writing style that gets great marks at school and college is completely inappropriate in the office.

Chapter 4 looks at the obstacles that can prevent us from telling powerful stories in a business setting, including PowerPoint, examining exactly how a piece of software has reduced so much of business communication to a boring sludge that is neither memorable nor persuasive. When you truly understand the pitfalls of PowerPoint you can avoid them, by using techniques like storytelling headlines, which will be a valuable tool in creating a sense of story throughout your communications.

Chapter 5 takes you through the six-step SUPERB storytelling model, explaining the role of each of the six steps and how they build to create effective communications that align with and engage your audiences.

The arrival of Big Data has revolutionised many businesses, but it has also led to countless horrendous communications. It's likely that some of the worst presentations and documents that you have encountered have been those heavy with data. The irony is that data can tell very powerful stories, if you let it. **Chapter 6 shows how the SUPERB model works as a tool to identify the story hidden in data**. This chapter also introduces a simple but powerful tool (*This is the slide/paragraph where they …*), which helps data-literate authors and presenters communicate more clearly with less data-literate audiences by seeing the material from the latter's perspective, naturally drawing the true importance of the data into language that everyone can understand.

The power of storytelling lies in its emotional connection and, having outlined technique and structure, I return to look more deeply at how the storytelling process meets an audience's emotional needs. **Chapter 7 moves your storytelling on to the next level by revealing the eight key emotional triggers that lie behind the SUPERB model.** They represent the emotional needs that most commonly have to be met for an audience to conclude that the meeting has gone well, that they want to work with a presenter, or that they have encountered an idea worth pursuing. Looked at the other way, they are the eight emotional needs which, if they are *not* met, will cause a meeting to end badly, a presentation to be stopped halfway through, a document to be consigned to the physical or virtual trashcan, or a business relationship to be terminated. This knowledge will

allow you to improvise around the basic storytelling structure while still maintaining the desired emotional effect.

Chapter 8 takes the SUPERB storytelling model and shows exactly how to apply it to different business uses, including speeches, presentations, emails and documents, as well as employing it as a structure for meetings.

So, now you know a lot about storytelling, but how do you confront the blank sheet of paper or the blank screen? **Chapter 9 outlines a simple writing process for those who may not consider themselves natural writers**. Many people for whom writing is not their primary skill create problems for themselves by fundamentally misunderstanding what the writing process is. This chapter will help you to achieve clarity and effectiveness in your writing while helping you avoid the most common writing mistakes.

As well as having to write your own documents and presentations, as you move up the corporate ladder you'll increasingly find yourself having to edit the work of others. Faced with an impenetrable first draft and an author who thinks the work is a masterpiece, you have the tricky task of improving the work without destroying the confidence of its creator (especially important when its creator will shortly have to stand up in front of a large audience and present it). Chapter 9 also shows you how to edit other people's stories. It advocates the use of editing models, which allow the author and editor to compare a piece of work against a set of clear objectives, rather than get into a subjective and potentially confrontational conversation.

Chapter 10 contains the stories you need to know, because you might be asked to tell them and because understanding these stories will give you valuable self-awareness and help

you in strategic decisions. This chapter shows how the SUPERB process can bring these stories to life, including your personal origin story, your company's foundation story, and stories about navigating change and overcoming challenges.

How *Best Story Wins* can help you

The SUPERB storytelling model, which lies at the heart of this book, is based on a deep dive into the principles of storytelling that reveals exactly why stories are such a powerful form of communication and gives you the tools you need to tell great stories.

But crucially, as well as helping you become better at telling stories, *Best Story Wins* shows exactly how the techniques that give stories their power can be applied to *all* forms of workplace communication. Remember: with "Think different", Apple was able to harness the archetypal power of storytelling in just two words.

On a theoretical level, this book will leave you with a clear understanding of why so much business communication fails, of how people make decisions and why storytelling is the most powerful way to influence that decision-making.

On a practical level, the storytelling skills and six-step process explained in the book can help anyone communicate more effectively in almost any work setting, from commanding the room when giving a speech or creating better presentations and pitches through to writing clearer emails and getting your point across in a casual conversation.

In other words, these are skills that most people could usefully employ pretty much every day.

On a company level, the ideas in this book can be used to help any organisation pitch for additional funding, connect with customers and prospects to drive brand awareness or

market share, or communicate a mission or purpose to their stakeholders.

Because of its power to persuade and influence, the ability to tell stories adds value to individuals and organisations. Anyone can learn to become a better storyteller and storytelling also comes with a lifetime guarantee. Although the pace of change in today's workplace means that many of the skills we learn quickly become redundant, human nature doesn't change. The power of storytelling lies in its ability to make a human connection. It has successfully brought people together for thousands of years and will continue to do so.

1
Why storytelling works

Understanding how people make decisions; why storytelling is the best way to persuade them to make the decisions that *you* want them to make; and why sometimes people just won't listen to your beautifully crafted logical arguments

Our brain doesn't instinctively like facts and figures. Of course, it can do logical reasoning; it's very good at it. But it has to *work* at it. So many of us prefer not to engage in it too much without a lot of motivation (for example, the need to earn money to pay the bills).

Stories, however, come easily. They just slip in. We get them. They're not hard work at all.

When someone sends you a document or a slide deck at work you tend to hope that it's short – that they get to the point quickly. But fans of Lee Child or Agatha Christie don't complain about how many books they wrote and the onerous task of wading through them all. They lap them up and wish they'd written more.

Hang on, you might be thinking, this isn't a fair comparison. Those stories are *entertainment*. Exactly. Stories are, by design, entertaining. Over the millennia the story form has evolved to

give our brain something it likes – and therefore stories interest and entertain us.

This doesn't mean that to be successful at work you have to tell stories all day long. But it does mean that if you can understand why stories work, why our brains like them so much, and then harness the elements of storytelling that are so powerful and apply them to your work, your business communications will become better.

Crucially, they will not only become more entertaining (they will, but that's not our primary objective); they will also become more persuasive.

Persuasion is at the heart of business success

Persuasion is one of the core skills that virtually everyone needs in business. A young person trying to find their first job has to persuade an interviewer or a panel to choose them over maybe hundreds of other applicants. At the other end of the career ladder, the CEO of a global organisation has to persuade thousands of people to fundamentally change the way they behave at work – whether that be adopting more inclusive practices or agreeing on a hybrid working solution that meets the needs of the business and all its people.

In between those two extremes almost everybody's day will include moments when persuasion is vital – whether it's getting agreement on a decision, persuading a client to pay on time in order to maintain vital cash flow, or simply persuading a colleague that the request in your email deserves their attention before the dozens of other requests they could choose to respond to first.

The better we are at persuasion, the smoother our day will go.

In a 1995 article economists Deirdre McCloskey and Arjo

Klamer suggested that the persuasion content of all United States economic activity could be as high as 25%.[1]

Having quoted Adam Smith ("everyone is practicing oratory on others through the whole of his life"), the authors then set about calculating exactly how much of each person's life is dedicated to the task (or at least how much of each industry's output). Would it be right to refer to their endeavour as an analysis, or is it more of a guesstimate? Certainly they deal in round figures. Public relations specialists, they decide, are 100% about persuasion, which seems unarguable; editors they rate at 75%, which seems reasonable.

Their verdict on the stock market is that it's pretty much *all* persuasion:

> The chatter in the stock market (that ideal of a marketplace) is another example of persuasion in the economy. Portfolio managers talk full-time to decide on buying or selling. Stockbrokers talk to clients and to each other. Technical elves spend their days researching the thoughts the brokers ought to have. Journalists spend their careers reporting the talk on Wall Street, elvish or human. Their reports nourish in turn the talk among stockbrokers, between stockbrokers and their clients, and among the clients themselves. Wall Street buzzes with chatter and is littered with paper reporting the chatter.

A quarter of a century later, Jerry Antioch, a manager in the tax division of the Australian Treasury and an admirer of McCloskey and Klamer's work, ran the numbers again, and suggested that persuasion now represented even more (29%) of economic activity. Following the growth of social media – and the vastly more complex communications that occur between businesses and customers (and between businesses

and businesses) as a result – we could safely argue that the figure continues to rise.

The better we are at persuading other people to do what we want – and indeed, when and how we want it – the more successful we'll become and the easier our lives will be. How can we get better at persuading people to do things? By understanding that the default method most of us use to persuade people to do things – giving them rational reasons, building a logical argument – is *not* the most effective way. In fact, it's deeply flawed.

Logic is not the best way to persuade people to do what you want

Many of us believe that the most effective way to persuade somebody to do something is to give them a reason why they should do it. Or a whole list of reasons why they should do it. This seems so stunningly obvious that many people never question it.

Actually, that last paragraph is not strictly true. If you are the boss or have superior status or power in a specific situation, then you know that sheer coercion can be the most effective way to persuade somebody to do something: "Do it because I told you to."

However, in many cases we are not the most important person in the scenario. And, in many cultures and many organisations, such aggressive power-based management and leadership techniques are either dead or dying out. Even in those more formal and hierarchical organisations where power is still wielded in such an unnuanced way, everybody knows deep down that this is not an ideal approach because although coercion may achieve short-term compliance, it builds up a great deal of resistance over the long term.

So, most of us rely on logical argument as our main tool of persuasion. "I would like you to do something and here is a very good reason why you should do it (and if that doesn't convince you I can come up with some more reasons)."

The problem is that building a logical argument is not the best way to persuade anyone to do anything. Often, it simply doesn't work.

Have you ever seen anyone at work make a decision that didn't seem to make any sense at all? Of course you have. We all have. Frequently.

Has anyone ever refused to do something that you wanted them to do even though all the logic in the world – the data, the case histories, the customer feedback, the client testimonials – proved that it was the right thing to do? Of course they have. It happens all the time.

The logical argument approach often fails miserably, and in these cases storytelling can be much more effective. That's because building a logical argument pushes people away from us, whereas storytelling draws them closer.

Building a logical argument encourages your audience to disagree with you

Essentially, when we try to use a logical argument to persuade someone, they immediately go on the defensive.

These defences take several forms. First, you are inevitably choosing *your* words to construct your logical argument and everyone that you talk to or write for will apply their own meaning to those words. It might sound odd, but words have very different meanings for different people.

Imagine you are selling a new product to a prospect. You're sure that they should adopt your idea because it's a new and exciting innovation that will revolutionise their business. And

you find it very exciting – so exciting that you add several good reasons *why* it's so exciting.

However, the person you're talking to has just come out of a meeting with their boss where they have been criticised for a mistake they made last week, been told that the company doesn't like risk-takers, and warned that their next major mistake might be their last. Every time you introduce another feature in your product and explain that it is based on technology that is new, innovative, exciting, ahead of the curve or game-changing they aren't hearing "new", "innovative", "exciting", "ahead of the curve" or "game-changing"; they hear "untried", "untested", "very risky", "a really foolhardy option" and "potentially career-ending".

The more persuasive you become, the less they are persuaded. The more logical reasons you give to support your argument, the more reasons they are hearing to have nothing to do with you or your stupid and incredibly dangerous idea.

In this kind of scenario, there is nothing "wrong" with your argument, and the prospect doesn't even disagree with you, doesn't even have any counter-arguments. And yet your own argument effectively destroys itself.

This may be an extreme example, but the same principle holds true in every conversation you have. The words you use do not have the same meaning or emotional impact for your audience as they do for you; and in some instances, their meaning might be the exact opposite of what you expect it to be.

Worse still, even if your audience doesn't disagree with you, the fact that you have begun to try to steer them towards a particular direction will make them want to disagree with you. This phenomenon – which undermines the strength of any argument, however logical – was first codified by the American

psychologist Jack Brehm.[2] It's called "psychological reactance". At its heart, it is the motivation to regain your freedom after it has been lost, or to defend your freedom when it seems to be threatened.

When somebody else attempts to persuade us to do something, we perceive this as a threat to our freedom. We believe we have a certain number of options, and when somebody tries to steer us towards one option, we sense that they are taking away our freedom to pursue the other options, and we don't like this – so we work to stop it happening.

When somebody pushes us in one direction, we push back.

This reactance is extremely powerful, and as the persuasive messages become more forceful and more controlling, the reactance gets stronger. What this means, ironically, is that the surer someone is of their arguments, the more powerful they think their logical reasons are, the more enthusiastically they communicate them, the more powerful is the reactance that they're creating.

Every time they land one of their killer points in their brilliantly argued presentation, they are strengthening the defences of their audience and increasing the chances that they will not agree.

A cursory glimpse at social media will show you this phenomenon in action.

Admittedly, the extremists ranting on social media may not be the same kind of people you will encounter in a work meeting. But the same basic principles hold true: the more logical reasons you give for your plan, the more logical reasons your audience will think up for themselves in favour of a plan B; the more fervently you argue for change, the more entrenched they will become in the belief that things should be left as they are.

It's tempting to believe that when you find yourself

presenting to, or debating with, more intelligent people, they will be able to open themselves up to your view. However, the evidence suggests that the more intelligent people are, the harder it is to persuade them to change their mind.

Smart people are simply *better* at psychological reactance. They find it easier to come up with counter arguments. They are more likely to be aware of data that suggests the opposite. They are more able to fashion a clever response quickly.

So how do you overcome psychological reactance? How do you get round people's defences? You won't be surprised to find that the answer is storytelling. Because storytelling takes things beyond logic and into the world of emotions.

Storytelling gives you access not just to people's thinking brain but also to their hearts

Oxytocin is sometimes referred to as "the cuddle hormone". It's a neurochemical that is released when we are shown trust or kindness or love. It's a signal that we are safe and that it is safe to approach and be with others. It motivates cooperation and increases our sense of empathy.

Oxytocin is released into the bloodstream during social bonding, during sexual activity, in the period after childbirth, and as mothers and babies bond when feeding. That should give you some idea how powerful it is, and what a positive feeling it generates. Oxytocin is also released into the bloodstream when we listen to or read a story.

Storytelling, then, is a direct way to make an audience more open, receptive, trusting and welcoming.

Why should storytelling create such a strong, positive feeling in us? Arguably, it has something to do with our origins – our beginnings both as individuals and as a species. For each of us, stories will have played a vital role in our lives. Not everybody

has a happy childhood, of course, but for the majority, listening to stories evokes memories of a time in early childhood when we were being loved, cared for and entertained all at the same time – an important moment of bonding with parents or other carers.

Now, contrast that safe, warm, loved and loving moment with the times during early childhood when you were given logical reasons why you should do something. What were *they* like?

Almost invariably, the times when, as a child, you were given logical reasons why you should do something were the times when you were being asked (and, sooner or later, *told)* to do something that you did not want to do.

Why else were you being given *reasons* to do it? If a parent or carer was suggesting that you might like an ice cream or to watch your favourite TV show or a trip to the park to play in the playground, they are very unlikely to have given you a list of reasons why you would want to do it.

It's only when parents are trying to persuade children to do something against their will that the reasons and arguments come into play; when, for example, a visit is planned to family member that the child doesn't like. That's when the "But they've got such a lovely big garden for you to play in" or "Maybe Aunt Sarah will have that chocolate cake again" or "Look, if you just behave while you're there, you can stay up late tonight" logical arguments are aired.

In other words, we all learn when we are very young that if somebody gives us reasons why we should do something, it is because we *do not want to do it*. When somebody gives us a list of logical reasons to do something, it is because it will benefit *them* but not *us*.

Think very carefully about that next time you plan to unleash

a list of logical reasons in a PowerPoint presentation. You are unleashing a deeply ingrained response in your audience that they do not want to do whatever it is you are proposing; and you are summoning memories of arguments and fights.

How is that going to help?

One of the primary reasons why storytelling can be more effective than building a logical argument is that it draws your audience towards you, rather than pushing them away. It resonates with fondly held memories, rather than unpleasant ones.

It's also more closely connected to how people make decisions.

To be persuasive, you need to align with your audience's decision-making process

When you communicate at work, and you naturally want your communications to be effective, it's not enough simply to push content out into the world. It's also important to think about how readers read, how audiences listen and, crucially, how people make decisions.

If you are trying to influence other people's decisions, you must take account of how those decisions are made. When you use storytelling, you can align your communication to your audience's decision-making process more closely than you can when basing your communication solely on logical arguments.

This is because people don't make decisions based on logic. They make decisions based on their emotional response. To persuade, influence, inspire or change people, you must make an emotional connection – and storytelling is a very effective way of doing that.

You may well feel the need to argue with that previous paragraph. What's all this about people making decisions based

on emotions? Maybe *some* people do, but you don't. You're a smart, rational, analytical thinker; you study the data carefully and you make decisions for the right reasons.

The neuroscience, however, suggests otherwise. Although most of us *think* we make decisions for good, solid, rational, logical reasons, in fact that's not what happens. We make decisions based on our emotions and then, having made the decision, we look around for a logical argument to back up our decision. When we explain our decision to others, or even justify our decision to ourselves, we reach for (and find) some logical reasons, but they are not what prompted the decision in the first instance.

Let me be very clear. I am not suggesting that emotions merely *influence* our decisions. I'm saying something more extreme than that. I'm saying that without emotions we cannot make decisions.

This is a relatively recent discovery, not widely known or understood, and deeply counterintuitive to those who have been raised to believe that emotions get in the way of good decision-making. In many organisations, where the admonition to "keep emotions out of it" can still be heard, this remains the conventional thinking.

Keeping emotions out of it is not only a bad idea, it's impossible.

The neuroscientist Antonio Damásio has written extensively on this subject following research conducted with a patient he refers to as "Elliot".[3] It is in the nature of neuroscientific research that much of our learning comes from studying the behaviour of people whose brains have been damaged in some way. The emotional centre in Elliot's brain was damaged so that he lost the ability to feel emotions. However, his IQ remained the same and he was perfectly capable of understanding and

making logical, rational arguments. He could draw up a list of pros and cons, arguments for and against, as well as anyone.

He could think about a decision. He could put together all the evidence. But he couldn't *make* a decision. Faced with overwhelming evidence that a particular decision was the right one, he still couldn't choose it because, without emotions, it turns out, there is nothing to guide a human being to a decision, even when it is logically obvious.

How do we know when a decision is the right one? It has to *feel* right.

Elliot's case suggests that all the logic in the world won't make us choose A over B, if A doesn't *feel* like the right answer.

Although Elliot offers the most graphic example of how emotions are the vital first step in decision-making – the catalyst without which the decision-making process cannot happen – other studies have indicated clearly that it is our emotions that guide our decisions, not our logical mind.

The Iowa gambling task[4] was constructed by Antoine Bechara, then assistant professor of neurology at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, along with Antonio Damásio and other colleagues. The research subjects were given four decks of cards and were able to win or lose money (from an imaginary budget) by simply drawing cards. However, the decks had been carefully prepared so that drawing from two of the decks led to consistent small wins with few penalties, whereas the other two decks had occasional high payouts but also long periods of losses (which outweighed the gains). The logical choice over the long term was to stick to the two "safe" decks with the consistent small wins and avoid the other two more erratic and "dangerous" decks.

Usually, after drawing about fifty cards, most subjects focused increasingly on the two safe decks. So, had they

worked out what was going on? Not exactly. In fact, it wasn't until around the eightieth card that most people could explain what was going on, and why they were now sticking mainly to just two of the four decks. This was the point at which they understood logically what was happening.

But the real insight into how we make decisions came from a variation of the research. In some of the studies, subjects were hooked up to a device that measured their galvanic skin response, which showed that they typically had a stress reaction as they reached towards the "dangerous" decks after only about ten cards.

So the emotion that triggered the decision to avoid the decks began to kick in after ten cards. It took them until fifty cards to respond to the emotional signals and make the decision, and then a further thirty cards before they understood the logical "reasons" why they had made the decision. I've put "reasons" in quotation marks because, of course, if someone can't construct the logical basis for the decision until after they've made it, then it clearly *isn't* the basis for the decision. The decision to move away from the unsafe decks happens because they *feel* wrong, they provoke anxiety and stress; the reason why they feel wrong is only revealed to the decision-maker much later.

Do the logical factors contribute to the decision? Yes. But do they *drive* the decision? No. The emotions drive the decision.

If you want to reach people and persuade them to make a decision, you have to align with a fundamentally emotional decision-making process; you have to have an emotional conversation with them as well as a logical one.

Of course, we still need the logical argument as well as the emotional factors because people like to have logical arguments to explain their decisions. But these are essentially retrofitted after the decision has been made. Why is this so

little known? Because our logical mind works hard to convince us that it is in charge – and has been in charge all along. (Right now, there's a good chance that your logical mind, alarmed that its supremacy might be under threat, is explaining to you that this is all nonsense.)

As the Iowa gambling task suggests, our logical, rational mind takes much longer than our emotional decision-making process. But once the logical mind has caught up, it rapidly claims responsibility for the decision.

Like a boss who only turns up for the final meeting on a project but who then assumes all the credit for the work of their team, our logical mind asserts itself as the prime mover in the decision. Our logical mind's desire to take the credit for whatever we decide to do is so strong that it does it even when it is provably false.

Michael Gazzaniga, professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, showed how strong our desire is to give a reason for a decision, even when we don't *know* why the decision was made.[5] Building on work that he had undertaken as a graduate student with Nobel prize-winning neuropsychologist Roger Sperry, Gazzaniga carried out research with subjects in whom the left and right hemispheres of the brain were severed. This meant that when a picture was shown to a subject's right hemisphere, the left hemisphere wasn't able to articulate what the right hemisphere had seen.

In a typical example from the research, a snowy winter setting was shown to the right hemisphere and the subject was then asked to point to a card that represented what they had just seen. They pointed to a shovel, which was the correct answer. But when asked to explain why they had chosen the shovel, they could not refer to the snowy picture. Since the left hemisphere hadn't seen the card, they didn't "know" that they had seen it.

Did they just shrug and say "I don't know"? Not at all. In each case the subject's left-brain hemisphere came up with a reason. It was a perfectly sensible, rational reason why somebody might choose to point to a picture of a shovel – but it didn't have anything to do with just having seen the picture of the snowy scene.

In similar research, each subject's right hemisphere was given the message that they should go to a water fountain outside the room and get a drink. When the subjects stood up and headed for the door, they were asked, "Where are you going?" The left hemisphere did not know anything about the water fountain and did not know it was going to get a drink. But, again, the subjects didn't just say "I don't know". They worked on the basis that there must be a reason and so retrofitted a reason that seemed to make sense (all the time unaware that this was what they were doing). Their left hemisphere came up with a rational sensible reason. For example: "I'm going to get my coat because I'm cold."

Gazzaniga and his colleague Joseph Ledoux christened this brain function "the interpreter". The job of the interpreter is seemingly to come up with a logical reason where in fact there is none.

In his book, *Tales from Both Sides of the Brain,* Gazzaniga writes:

> The interpreter not only took note; it tried to make "sense" out of the behavior by keeping a running narrative going on about why a string of behaviors was occurring. It is a precious device and most likely uniquely human. It is working in us all the time as we try to explain why we like something or have a particular opinion, or rationalize something we have done. It is the interpreter device that takes the inputs from the massively modularized and automatic brain of ours and

creates order from chaos. It comes up with the "makes sense" explanation.

Gazzaniga concludes: "Nice try, interpreter!"

While we are only at the beginning of truly understanding how the brain works, and certainly can't claim to know exactly how decisions are made, research like this offers the valuable insight that people like to make their decisions seem rational, even when they're not, and will offer a logical reason for their behaviour – absolutely convinced that it's true – even when it's demonstrably not.

When someone gives you feedback to explain why they didn't agree with your proposal, the reasons they give may possibly be partly true, but they are also likely to contain retrofitted post-rationalisations for a decision that was made based on emotions.

If you're the boss or a successful entrepreneur you can probably get away with saying "It just doesn't feel right" on occasion, but the rest of us will tend to think that we need to supply logical reasons to back up our decisions, and so the interpreter springs into action on our behalf.

So, to communicate effectively with someone, we must make what we say *feel* right, rather than merely make sense.

As well as being more involving, and better aligned with our real decision-making process than logical arguments, storytelling has another great advantage. If you try to persuade somebody by giving them a bunch of reasons, they will tend to quickly forget the reasons. If you use storytelling, they will remember much more of what you said.

Stories are more memorable

We know that stories are more memorable than facts, but there is some debate about exactly how much more memorable. A Google search will reveal repeated claims that stories are 22 times more memorable – an extraordinary difference, but this turns out to be one of those "internet facts" that is hard to substantiate. It is usually attributed to the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner, but a study of his books reveals that he never actually said it. What Bruner did say is this:

> Perhaps the most basic thing that can be said about human memory after a century of intensive research is that unless a detail is placed into a structured pattern, it is rapidly forgotten.[6]

Bruner describes human beings as "storytelling creatures" and concludes from his extensive research that human beings have "a readiness or predisposition to organise experience into a narrative form, into plot structures". So, if we can place our communication into a storytelling or narrative form, it is more easily assimilated.

Bruner doesn't put a number on this, but others have tried to do so. In a 1969 study at Stanford, students were tested on their ability to remember twelve words. Half of the group were simply told to remember the words; the other half were told that their task was to place the twelve words into a story which they would make up themselves – and to remember the words in this way

Of the students who created a story, 93% were later able to remember all the words, whereas only 13% of those who were tasked with simply remembering the list could do so. This suggests that stories may be seven times more memorable than facts alone. It's not 22 times, but it is a significant difference.

In their book *Made to Stick,* brothers Chip and Dan Heath recount a study which they undertook with students (also at Stanford) on a similar theme, but more structured, and more akin to a business setting in that the facts were delivered in presentations.[7] After a gap of only ten minutes, only 5% of the audience could recall any individual statistics from the standard presentations; but two thirds of the audience could remember similar details from those presentations which were in the form of a story. In this case, we might suggest that stories proved twelve times as memorable as statistics.

If you were asked to go to the supermarket and buy twelve grocery items, you would need to write them down or you would forget some. However, if you were going to the supermarket to buy twelve items to make a favourite recipe, you would have no trouble remembering them: the recipe creates the narrative structure – first this and then some of that – which will make the individual items stick in your memory.

Traditional show-business memory acts use this kind of approach. Comedian Nick Mohammed both genuinely uses this technique and spoofs it. He really does have the ability to remember every card in a pack of 52 cards in sequence after scanning the pack for a few seconds, but also in his comedy character, Mr Swallow, he spoofs the memory technique by creating the most outrageous storytelling links between different words. Finally, Mr Swallow admits that the real problem is remembering the *first* word in the list, because there is nothing to link it to. How does he do it? "By brute force!" is Mr Swallow's shouted explanation – the comedy reflecting the truth of just how hard it is for us to remember anything without the aid of a narrative structure.

After you spend hours creating a PowerPoint presentation filled with wonderfully relevant logical arguments, compelling

facts and unarguable data, then spend more time rehearsing, and finally give your vital presentation to the board, the first reason why they won't approve your idea is that they simply won't remember what you said. Ten minutes later they will not recall your arguments, facts and data – however compelling.

Unless you wrap them up in a story structure.

Why is a story so much more memorable? The neuroscience suggests that it is because when we listen to a bunch of facts only a limited amount of our brain gets activated; basically, only the language-processing parts. Just enough to decode the meaning but nothing else. But when we listen to a story, many other areas in our brain light up – the areas that we would use if we were experiencing the events of the story. As the speaker tells the story, we effectively live the story. As cognitive psychologist Roger Shank puts it: "Humans are not ideally set up to understand logic; they are ideally set up to understand stories."

Just as storytelling played a vital role at the beginning of most of our lives, it seems likely that it played a vital role in the dawn of our species: that storytelling was a means of passing on valuable, perhaps life-saving, information from one individual to another. Stories were a way to use language to condense key learnings into an easily understood form. Robert McKee, the Hollywood screenwriting guru, puts it like this:

> Stories are equipment for living. Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living.

This may also explain why stories tend to follow the problem/resolution structure that we will meet in the next chapter.

While it's intriguing to speculate on exactly *why* storytelling

resonates so powerfully with us, for now it matters only that storytelling *does* have this extraordinary effect and that we can harness this power in our communications. But before we can do that, we need to be clear on exactly what a story is.