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## Storytelling Brings Teams Together

This Essential Ability Unifies Groups, Allows a Shared Vision to Flourish

By Mark Dominiak

*Special to TelevisionWeek*

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There is a tactic media people can easily and effectively use to increase the productivity of interactions among team members. Believe it or not, it's storytelling.

Storytelling works very well in group settings or in one-on-one interactions. While it may seem odd in a business setting, it is more powerful than you'd think.

In his book "The Feeling of What Happens," Antonio Damasio dwells on the relevance to the human organism of telling stories. He thinks storytelling is what eventually led humans to create drama and books. Storytelling is also, he notes, why people are so

drawn to television and movies.

He hypothesizes that movies (and by extension many television genres, from high-end drama to reality) may be the closest real-life metaphor to the storytelling that occurs in the human brain. Think about it from the perspective of the life images playing out in the theatre of the mind. Instead of a cameraman or a sound editor, nature has provided eyes and ears and muscles to pan our internal cameras from scene to scene. Instead of a nicely packaged DVD, we end up with memories.

In a very real way, the telling of stories is how human brains register events occurring throughout the course of a lifetime. Mr. Damasio posits that those stories happen in the form of brain maps. He believes registering brain maps was a prerequisite for the evolution of language.

This is an important concept; storytelling is an essential ability, the tool by which our brains interpret life minute by minute. Our brains are wired for it. We respond to storytelling automatically as we store memories and use storytelling commonly in life interactions. Human skill with stories makes it a comfortable tool to use.

## Social Capital

A recent Insight Garden project focused on the problems a municipality was facing that seemed to be rooted in civic disengagement. In plowing through stacks of resources to find common themes in solving civic disengagement problems, one of the themes that came up in literally every source studied was the notion of storytelling.

"Better Together: Restoring the American Community" by Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein is an outstanding resource. Many illustrative instances of storytelling are recounted in the text, with some powerful conclusions related to the activity of storytelling. Perhaps most important is that storytelling is a tool that helps to create social capital.

What Putnam means by social capital is essentially stronger bonds of human relationship. Where strong bonds of human relationship exist, the endeavors of that community are more fruitful.

Storytelling is also a unifier. In personal and business endeavors, a perennial challenge is to get people on the same page. Brand and media teams are no exception. Unified teams can more quickly move to shared vision and concerted action. Shared vision is certainly a need among teams with members across many disciplines. For a brand team, that might mean people from the client side and across agency disciplines. For a media unit, that could mean planners and buyers, or the media team and vendor community.

The reason storytelling is such a good tool is because, according to Putnam and Feldstein, it helps people achieve common understanding. Even if backgrounds, viewpoints or agendas differ, the neurology and "language" (for lack of a better word) of storytelling help people find common ground. Through stories, people can reconstruct perceptions of others and points of view perhaps much better than they would via straightforward rationale.

Whenever people try to convince others of their point of view, discussions become competitive. They concern what people want, not who people really are. When storytelling is used as a catalyst in interactions, people learn more about each other; from the roles others have in stories to the emotions and resolutions of situations contained therein.

When people are able to better understand the people behind points of view, they are more likely to give attentive thought to that point of view. Further, when people have better understanding of others as individuals, they are more likely to treat those people with respect and compassion. Interactions stop being competitive and become cooperative.

Another interesting aspect Putnam and Feldstein cover is how the nature of storytelling evolves. As teams begin to integrate with each other, stories have an "I" nature. Early in social capital-building, individuals are learning about each other. But as the team draws closer together and works on solving problems together, an interesting thing happens: Storytelling still occurs, perhaps even more frequently, but becomes more "we" in nature. Evolution occurs from individual efforts to shared group vision.

## Benefits of Storytelling

Two benefits flow from the unification storytelling provides. First, storytelling helps create real value in the form of social capital. Media units pride themselves on the array of skill sets and proprietary tools they can bring to the table to help solve client media problems. Those skills and tools are real assets.

Storytelling is likely the best tool that can be employed to create social capital in the media unit. Social capital is an asset that can be drawn upon to help solve problems.

One day, the social capital asset may be a favor granted to obtain insight from an extended network of connections that helps solve a problem. The next day, it may be team members from other disciplines remembering to invite those not present to a meeting.

Whatever the case may be, social capital adds capability to the team, and the more social capital a team has, the better equipped it is to solve problems.

Creating teams with the best social capital asset potential requires the team include members from a variety of backgrounds with a breadth of experience.

The strategy's drawback is that it's hard to get an eclectic group of people working together because they have so little in common. Storytelling can be used to overcome that hurdle.

Once people begin telling stories about themselves, it exponentially increases the overall capability of the team because members learn about others on the team. They gain the ability to draw on their wide variety of backgrounds.

Second, storytelling helps to dramatically increase the efficiency of an organization's people resources. Teammates are more disposed to step up and cover for one another.

They become more reliable individually. Interactions are smoother. That may not sound like a big deal, but when there is no friction between team members, the team doesn't have to invest valuable time or resources in solving people problems. In the end, the team is more productive and happier.

## Opportunities

The clear implication for media people is to use the storytelling tactic. Where and how does use of storytelling make sense? Here are some suggestions:

Brainstorming sessions are a good environment for storytelling. Those types of sessions usually include a group of disparate people searching for ideas. Partnering a relevant story to an idea a media person might serve up would be a good way to inject storytelling into the group dynamic.

Another area in which stories work well is within interactions between team members from other disciplines. All media people have experienced moments of uncomfortable silence in discussions with account management or creative people. Early on in a discussion, especially when people are exchanging pleasantries, may be a good time to share a recent story.

Stories are also excellent ways to help make younger team members feel more connected to the group. Questions most asked by younger people of senior team members is "What was it like when you were in my position?" or "How did you start out in the business?" Not only does such an exchange give younger folks validation of their current situation, it also humanizes those for whom they work. It's easier to take direction from someone viewed not as a boss but as a planner who has been there before.

Finding ways to infuse clients' conversations with stories is also very valuable. Not only does everyone on the team learn more

about one another, but they start to see one another as more than just client or supplier. It also has the positive impact of changing the tone of conversations from one of "your agenda/their agenda" to "the brand's agenda."

Media people should always be on the lookout for things that can increase productivity. Old habits die hard, and in most respects, we tend to look for productivity by creating new, proprietary tools, developing ways to interpret data or perhaps discovering value in a new metric.

But we should not forget the good old-fashioned productivity that can be gained from people. A simple, no-cost tactic like storytelling is a wonderful way to make a media unit's human assets not only more productive but more valuable.

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