



## Storytelling's Hidden Power – A Leader's Secret Strategic Advantage

**By Richard Stone**  
*CEO, StoryWork International*  
*Strategic Partner TLG*

When you consider your personal assets and strengths as a leader, and the strengths and assets of your organization, you may unwittingly omit one essential set of assets that can give you a leg up and strategic advantage that you may never have considered—your *Narrative Assets*. Leaders who learn to master their personal story as well as the art and science of storytelling understand that their story directly impacts their world view, their mental model of what represents effective leadership, how they address and manage conflict, and their deep sense of purpose and meaning. Their personal history is also an invaluable reference point for their values and a guide to navigating the inevitable ethical quandaries that emerge when leading a large organization with multiple stakeholders. In our experience, nine times out of ten these leaders will outperform those who have little or no awareness of the fact that they are essentially a storytelling creature.

Likewise, leaders who recognize that storytelling may be the most powerful lever they have at their disposal to direct and mold their organization's culture will be infinitely more effective at leading their organization through both good and rocky times. Just as our personal potential is directly impacted by the story that we tell ourselves about our ability to grow and change, an organization's collective stories are the bedrock of its culture and can either open doors to new advances and remarkable business development or lead the company down avenues that severely limit its possibilities and even its viability. If you disregard the power of story to define you, your company, and your collective potential, you do so at your peril.

### **Are We Hard-Wired for Story?**

It's virtually impossible to imagine our personal world devoid of story making. In fact, perhaps the most enduring trait of our humanity that distinguishes us from every other form of life is our capacity to weave a story about our experiences and our environs, then to live inside that story as though it is more substantial than physical matter itself. Unfortunately, for most of us, most of the time, this story-making process is an invisible reality that at best lurks in the shadows of our endeavors and outside of our consciousness.

Fortunately, recent scientific advances are bringing this hidden process into the light. With the advent of sophisticated brain scanning technologies, we can now see facets of our experience that we could only previously surmise. For example, when people listen to a story during a PET scan (positron emission tomography), their entire brain is lit up like a Christmas tree. All of the regions of the cortex responsible for sensory processing are actively engaged along with the two centers responsible for language comprehension and processing.

In contrast, information that is not “storied” tends to activate only the two regions that deal with language processing and comprehension. This is something you probably already knew intuitively. Think back on times when someone was telling you a story or sitting in a movie theater and you seemed to forget everything else as you waited with anticipation for what happened next in the tale. Compare this to the many times you have sat in large lecture halls during your educational career listening to a didactic discourse or gathered for strategy presentations in your company. If you’re like most of us, these kinds of presentations barely keep our attention for long, and your mind inevitably wanders off to things like wondering how you’re going to manage getting the kids picked up from school and dropped off at soccer, or worries that you might not have turned the stove off that morning. What’s particularly interesting is that the areas of the brain that are activated in a real time experience are the same ones that are triggered by a story about it. Moreover, retention of information is increased by a factor of seven when it’s presented in the form of a story.<sup>i</sup>

Not only do telling and listening to a story change our brain, when we tell stories, we’re literally changing the brain functioning of those who are listening. Uri Hasson<sup>ii</sup> at Princeton has been studying this phenomenon by using fMRI scanners to track brain activity while people were telling and listening to others’ real-life stories. They discovered that people’s neural responses to the story being told entrain, literally locking together and changing in response to the story’s plot in a temporally coupled pattern. The implications of this finding are extensive. For example, if you want to get everyone in your company on the same page with your vision for the future, the best pathway to that goal is a well-crafted story. In contrast, when people in your organization tend to be working at cross purposes, it’s likely that they each have a quite distinct story about what is expected. Without consciously bringing those stories to the surface as a first step, resolving conflict is virtually impossible.

### **The Neural Roots of Empathy**

As it turns out, this process of mirrored neural firing may also evolutionarily be at the root of how empathy is possible. In a study conducted by Giacomo Rizzolatti<sup>iii</sup> he attempted to localize the actual neurons that fire when macaque monkeys grasp a piece of food and bring it to their mouth. Ingeniously, they were able to place probes into the brains of the monkeys in the areas that control motor actions, and they linked these up to a speaker. Every time the monkeys reached for some food and ate, the neurons in that area would fire and the electronic interface would generate a crackling noise over speakers in the room.

One day, without thinking anything of it, one of the researchers decided to eat a snack in front of the monkeys. To his surprise, the speakers began to crackle. At a fundamental level, they concluded that the monkey's neurons were "mirroring" the activity of the researcher as he ate. They ended up dubbing these "mirror neurons," hypothesizing that this process is the neurobiological roots of how empathy evolved within our species. It could also be the basis for how we can learn from each other through the action of listening to stories that recreate an experience for us, the listener, without our ever having to go through that experience firsthand. In the context of understanding the phenomenon of empathy, it would appear to explain our ability to feel another's pain and to metaphorically walk a mile in their proverbial shoes. Given this emerging research on how storytelling is an essential communication tool, why would you not want to improve this important personal asset and deploy it more systematically in every facet of your work?

### **It's Time to Recognize a New Kind of Intelligence**

The ability to become self-aware of the power of story in our lives is what we have come to refer to as *Story Intelligence*, or SI for short. Unlike the notion of IQ which points to somewhat immutable human capacities, Story Intelligence is a faculty that we are all born with. Because story is in a sense every human being's native language, our ability to master this language can be enhanced if practiced and understood. We believe that developing your SI may be one of your most important tasks as a leader. In fact, we suggest that developing your SI is more essential to your ability to succeed in business than any knowledge you could acquire through an advanced degree or from workshops on how to be a more effective leader.

In this sense, SI is a close cousin of Emotional Intelligence (EQ), a concept first proposed by Daniel Goleman nearly 30 years ago. Whereas Goleman's notion of EQ put emotions at the center of our aptitude for living, our notion of Story Intelligence explicitly puts the power of story at the heart of what it means to be an effective human being. While EQ is an accepted precept in leadership development and coaching today, we forget that it wasn't always the case. What prompted Goleman to propose this new way of thinking about intelligence was the plethora of research that emerged in the 1990s about the role of emotions and the heart in human affairs. Brain and cognitive studies strongly suggested that there's a whole lot more at play when it comes to successful living than intelligence as a pure function of the intellect. We are now at the precipice of a similar breakthrough in brain research as it relates to the power of story to impact every facet of our lives.

Goleman decried how our very name, Homo Sapiens, which means literally 'wise man' in Latin, severely obscures our invaluable emotional dimensions. Given that in the 1600s Descartes proclaimed, "I think, therefore I am," is it any wonder though that Carl Linnaeus who named our species in 1758 missed the mark when it comes to our essential nature? Goleman was right when he first began writing about this topic emphasizing that emotions are an even more distinguishing characteristic of our humanity and essence. But that didn't fully take into account the narrative structure of our brains that is now emerging in new studies.

We'd like to suggest that it may be time for a new name for us—*Homo Narrare*—loosely translated as 'Storyteller Man.' It's our capacity as storytellers that is truly our distinguishing characteristic among the multitude of species. As storied creatures, our weaving the tapestry of our reality has a decidedly dual nature, a yin and yang dance that determines nearly every outcome on the human stage. Wars are started by stories that are unconsciously or blithely told and retold. Relationships are destroyed by words that are carelessly uttered that are filled with lies and false innuendo yet presumed to be true. Our politics becomes polluted when we allow tales of others to limit our capacity to see their perspective and their humanity. Our well-being is disrupted and filled with angst and mental illness when we allow stories of the past to define us and worries about the unfolding of future events to consume our imaginations. But our capacity for storytelling can also help us to become more resilient; free us to build new connections and relationships; and, open us to realize our deepest calling in this life. In this way story is as rudimentary as the elements of fire and water—powerful and capable of warming the heart or burning down in an instant what has taken years to build; drowning us in despair or quenching our spiritual thirst to grow and learn.

One of the invaluable contributions of Goleman's work was in the arena of education. He provided the springboard for teachers to pivot away from traditional models of instruction and to take into account the whole person, adding weight and importance to the development of children's emotional capacities to manage complex relationships, resolve conflict, and to develop a deeper, more resilient sense of self. This thinking is now widely accepted in the realms of corporate training and instructional design. We believe that as the world awakens to the power of story, we will see a similar pivot toward educating youth and adults to the hidden ways that story can enliven and enlighten every facet of life. Story Intelligence education will become the next wave of exciting new curricula starting in early childhood, working its way all the way up to higher education and into the corporate sector. To ignore the power of story in human relations, education, politics, family dynamics, and in the realms of leadership and business is not only shortsighted, it will hinder our ability to manage the challenges of living in a complex, technological society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

That's why we say that mastering the art of storytelling and recognizing that each of us can become the true authors of our story is the essential task of leadership today. As we assist leaders and employees throughout our organizations to discover their latent Story Intelligence and recognize strengths they didn't know were there, we will develop a powerful resiliency in the face of challenges, acquiring skills and tools to enhance every aspect of our work and relationships, and tap into a new capacity to envision a life filled with greater meaning, relevance, and purpose.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.narrativeiq.com/what-stories-do-to-our-brain/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://blog.ted.com/what-happens-in-the-brain-when-we-hear-stories-uri-hasson-at-ted2016/>

<sup>iii</sup> "Mirror Neurons," NOVA, airdate January 25, 2005, PBS