

Use stories to inspire success and create buy-in

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Storytelling is more often associated with kindergarten than the world of business, but companies are fast waking up to the widespread benefits of organisational storytelling. This year sees the launch of the UCT Graduate School of Business's new course aimed at teaching business leaders and organisations how to leverage the power of narrative.

Organisational Storytelling for Inspirational Leaders will run for the first time this September. According to course directors, Peter Christie and Nikki Friedman, it will help leaders to use storytelling to influence others and lead more successfully. It will also equip businesses with the tools to develop and communicate a unique and congruent organisational story.

“Given the widely perceived power of storytelling it is no surprise that business has woken up to its benefits and found interesting ways of leveraging it within an organisational setting. Recent years have seen stories popularised in the business world - with several businesses finding creative ways to put the power of words to effective use,” said Christie - who has lectured at on the topic for several years.

Popularised to a great degree by Steve Denning - former programme director of Knowledge Management at the World Bank and author of several books on the subject - storytelling, in an organisational context, works because it creates an emotional response that leads to real learning and action. It catches, and maintains, people's attention in a way that simple fact-sharing cannot; stories simply anchor facts into the memory more easily.

“Storytelling is often the best way for leaders to communicate with people they are leading. Why? It is inherently well adapted to handling the most intractable leadership challenges of today - sparking change, communicating who you are, enhancing the brand, transmitting values, creating high-performance teams, sharing knowledge, taming the grapevine, leading people in to the future,” states Denning.

He adds that, “Storytelling is a crucial tool for management and leadership, because often, nothing else works. Charts leave listeners bemused. Prose remains unread. Dialogue is just too laborious and slow. Time after time, when faced with the task of persuading a group of managers or front-line staff in a large organisation to get enthusiastic about a major change, storytelling is the only thing that works.”

The benefits of storytelling in the organisational context are, however, not limited to leadership.

Friedman - owner of Big.Words.Scare.Me (a Cape Town-based Story Engineering Agency) - maintains that an organisational story is a powerful tool that can create a coherent organisational culture, and identity, that filters through every level of a company. It even reaches the organisation's customers and helps build, and strengthen, a strong and unique brand identity.

She believes that, “Creating a powerful story for an organisation ensures that every department speaks the same language. Marketing, HR, management, customer service and the frontline staff all start to live the same organisational story. When all sections of a company are telling the same story a coherent, and believable, organisational culture is fostered and lived out.”

Organisational Storytelling for Inspirational Leaders is aimed at leaders and managers, change agents and consultants, marketing and sales specialists, HR specialists, those involved in any aspect of the tourism industry - or anyone who is looking to strengthen their personal power and influence within an organisation, through a positive means.

Delegates will develop practical storytelling skills; learn how storytelling can build trust, build brands and increase sales; understand the influential power of stories and how they can sustain lasting relationships; as well as how to use storytelling to create an inspirational, innovative and inclusive corporate culture.

“The world is in a constant state of flux creating a terrifying, yet exciting, modern leadership paradox. Our customers, employees, partners and those who have yet to hear about us want to relate to our businesses, our brands, our people and our products on an emotional rather than on a logical level,” said Friedman. “Stories are the key to connecting us on this emotional level - helping us to bypass logic and create stronger buy-in and real brand identification,” she concluded.

Elaine Rumboll, Director of Executive Education at the UCT GSB, added that stories are particularly powerful when tough economic times threaten to destabilise organisations.

“Stories create communities. Communities create energy and support in difficult times. All companies desire communities who can hold, develop and deliver on their brand promise - and stories are a great way to leverage the power of work-based communities,” said Rumboll.

The programme runs from 16 - 18 September 2009, and is offered by the Executive Education unit at the UCT Graduate School of Business. SMS 'story' and your email address to 31497 or call 021 406 1268 for more information.

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