



BY DENNIS SPARKS

## Leaders Tell Stories That Motivate and Guide

**Good storytellers heal the world. . . . They open us up to new understandings and growth.**

—Mary Pipher

**S**tories are a powerful and often under-used leadership tool that can evoke emotions that can alter understanding of important issues and cause educators to care about issues or problems in new ways. (Read more about this in [Vol. 2, No. 7.](#)) Stories can assist healing when communities are beset by tragedy or when a school is seeking to overcome a history of distrust and strained relationships. Stories can provide energy and direction for action and offer a context in which the abstractions of professional literature and research have new meaning.

Because ill-considered stories can contribute to a downward spiral of emotions by engendering hopelessness and cynicism, it is important that leaders consider the various positive purposes stories can serve and intentionally provide stories that motivate, uplift, and offer guidance to educators. Leaders can mine their own prior experiences for such stories, even as they keep their eyes open for them within the day-to-day life of the school.

In *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath point out that the first step in storytelling is “. . . to spot the good ones that life generates each

day.” To assist readers in noticing inspiring and useful stories, they have identified four common plotlines. The *challenge plot* demonstrates how someone has succeeded in overcoming a significant challenge to motivate perseverance and courage. The *connection plot* shows how people build relationships to encourage listeners to be more tolerant and to work with others to achieve large goals. The *creativity plot* tells how someone used creativity to solve a problem or invent an innovative way to reach a goal. A fourth type of story, the *springboard plot*, offers possibility and hope to overcome cynicism, promotes commitment, and mobilizes people to act.

When used as a supplement to abstract presentations of research and professional literature, well-chosen stories overcome listeners’ natural tendency to judge and debate the speaker’s point of view. Such stories allow listeners to gain empathy by experiencing someone else’s world, provide concrete experiences to create shared understanding, and evoke emotion that motivates action.

When leaders tell stories that inspire perseverance and courage, connect people to one another, promote ingenuity, and offer hope, and when they encourage others to tell similar stories, they lead through learning.

*Dennis Sparks*

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