

Using Stories to Make Data-Driven Change Stick

HOW STORYTELLING AIDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF BIG DATA PROJECTS & DATA-INFORMED DECISIONS

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A data-driven solution is the beginning of the change process.

Whenever someone says “big data,” you should hear “big change.”

Businesses around the world are analyzing large data sets to uncover new ways to save money, improve response time, increase efficiency, and target prospects. In each instance, big data solutions are also a harbinger of change.

Chief Data Officers (CDOs), Chief Informatics Officers (CIOs), Chief Analytics Officers (CAOs) and their information technology leadership counterparts are providing solutions to previously unsolvable business problems. The promise of big data analysis lies with the truths it reveals, the opportunities it uncovers, and the competitive advantage it delivers.

Although compelling data points might be enough to persuade some members of management that change is needed, this is not the norm. Too often, when data-driven initiatives leave the test environment, they collide with entrenched people, processes, and systems that resist the adoption of novel solutions.

A Story of Success

Long-serving employees of the European division of a global tech company were getting restless. They felt career opportunities were lacking and that outside hires were taking the best open positions. Management wanted to halt the discontentment before it led to disengagement.

The first response of the head of human resources was to inundate employees with data. Lena directed the HR analytics team to crunch the numbers. They found that upward mobility was exceptional and that career advancements were far more prevalent than the perception. Establishing that management was in the right was a smart step by Lena, but it failed to change employees' opinions.

The fuel for overhauling the perception came from the stories we collected. There was Carlos who was able to stay with the company when his wife's promotion required the family to relocate from Spain to Portugal; and Gabby, who made a lateral move into a different division to take on a new challenge; and Ella, who stepped into a senior management role after her third promotion in two years. Sharing stories like these highlighted the opportunities available to all employees and shifted opinions.

For most experienced leaders and frontline employees, their minds and behaviors will only change when the new data is presented within a logical context *and* with an emotional appeal that they find attractive –

a powerful combination that is uniquely offered by storytelling.

This paper offers communications solutions for CDOs, CIOs, CAOs, and other IT leaders confronting the big-data-related change leadership conundrum, as well as the human resource, operations, supply chain and marketing leaders who are using data to inform their decisions and drive their business.

The Unique Case of Data-Driven Change

In most facets of management, experts in data, analytics, and technology are similar to every other leader today who must adeptly navigate large teams and entire organizations through a rapidly shifting business environment. However, you face an additional hurdle: the weight of evangelizing a new paradigm of data-backed solutions that have the power to shake the business, leadership team, culture, and budget to its core.

Another challenge unique to the domain of data is that your teams of programmers, mathematicians, and computer scientists all speak the language of numbers. In your world, the truths the data reveal are absolute; therefore, data predicts outcomes, guides your decisions, and points the way toward optimized processes.

Although the numbers make perfect sense to you, they are a foreign language to most everyone else. This communications disconnect hinders the effectiveness of data and technology leaders who

must sell their ideas both up and down the org chart to the executives responsible for approving budgets and strategies, and to the stakeholders who will operationalize your solutions.

Types of Data-Driven Change

1. Make the business case
2. Sell the strategy
3. Acquire resources
4. Modify the culture
5. Operationalize the data-enhanced solutions

In both cases, data executives will face resistance because of the numbers. Although executive leaders responsible for allocating resources, determining organizational priorities, and approving initiatives are eager for data-driven solutions to their biggest problems, they might not be keen to invest in the resources your work requires. That's because the numbers on leadership's mind are different from the numbers on yours; they think in terms of the bottom line, inventory, stock price, and market share.

Meanwhile, the mid-level managers and front-line employees responsible for implementing your data-driven solutions represent another

barrier to change. They do not understand your data and they think in terms of a different set

of numbers: bonuses, sales goals, and productivity targets.

The secret to making your data-driven change stick is to find a common language. It is the responsibility of CDOs, CIOs, and CAOs, as well as their team members who are leading change, championing initiatives, and heading teams to learn to translate data into the language of people: stories.

The Confusion about Graphs and Stories

The evolution from the simple graph to the beautiful infographic is an advancement that makes it possible to visualize the complex insights gleaned of big data projects. However, for many concerned with communicating complex information, the terms “big data storytelling” and “data visualization” have become synonymous. Contrary to the popular adage, a picture alone is not a story.

Data visualization plays an important role in enhancing the understanding of a project’s results, but to say that an illustration “tells a story” is false. That’s because regardless of how well dashboards and infographics make big data more accessible, visualization alone won’t persuade the non-believers.

Illustrations are not a story, nor does the data speak for itself. The only way to “tell a story” is to say one using words.

We know that stories are universally engaging – we tell them informally and people listen, understand, and remember. Yet few people in business - especially in the realms of big data, informatics, and analytics – systematically harness the natural power of story in the workplace to influence, engage, and inspire others through change.

This lack of focus on communications skills in general – and storytelling in particular – is a detriment to both change projects and the career progression of data and analytics professionals, according to big data expert Bernard Marr. He wrote on *Forbes.com* that, “As well as being able to wring unexpected and game-changing insights from the unlikeliest of data, [data scientists] must be able to explain them to a room full of (often non-technical) business executives and marketing suits....someone who has this combination of skills can rise to the top very quickly”¹

The Roadblock between Big Data and Change

What happens in the analytics department matters in the boardroom because the big data revolution is also a “management revolution”² that is arming leaders with dynamic measurements and real-time information tracking. This second-by-second view of performance means that today’s managers are more aware of the factors affecting productivity than was ever before possible.

Because companies that characterize themselves as data-driven have been proven to outperform their peers on objective measures of financial and operational results³, organizations are rapidly embracing big data. More than 80 percent of enterprises report that they are deploying or are planning to deploy big data projects. This means creating data strategy, building analytics departments, and investing in infrastructure to the tune of \$13.8 million, on average.⁴

Assuming that leaders are synthesizing all this data, translating it into actionable insights, and modifying their decision-making methods at the same speed that the data crunchers are provide it is unrealistic. Even in this era of big data, the speed of business continues to be hampered by the organization’s pace of change adoption.

Without the buy-in and engagement of your people, the promises of analytics will never be realized.

Despite management’s hunger for unlocking the power of big data, most firms will face organizational resistance that defies the facts. The true communications challenge for leaders is how to actually implement the optimized processes that the data has revealed. Without the buy-in and engagement of your people, the

promises of analytics will never be realized.

Why Data Alone Doesn't Change Minds

Even when confronted with overwhelming mathematical evidence, most people won't change their minds or their behaviors. Facts, statistics, and numbers aren't enough. Data without a story that motivates new actions and drives performance is just another dust-gathering report that depicts a perfect solution on paper only.

The reason that fact-based arguments don't compel people is because hard evidence is fundamentally devoid of emotional attachment. Whatever emotive reaction we *might* have to a shockingly outlandish fact is derived from the feeling we assign to them – perhaps outrage or disgust at revelations of massive amounts of wasted time, raw materials, or energy.

However, strong emotional responses such as these are both rare and fleeting. Facts are hard to remember because human brains are wired to recall our reactions, not the sterile facts. Rebecca Todd of the University of Toronto, who studied the effects of emotion on memory said, "We've discovered that we see things that are emotionally arousing with greater clarity than those that are more mundane."⁵

The conclusion is simple: facts alone are not powerful enough to permanently shift anyone's worldview, nor are they capable of inspiring sustained action.

For that reason, bringing the data to life using stories is the best possible solution. If data projects as driving your change initiatives, then stories are the vehicle for the message. Stories prevent the change from stalling because they are an attractive container for fact, emotion and surprise. Stories enable your change message to take on a life of its own as they are shared, remembered, and repeated.

Therefore, framing the hard data into the correct story is one of the keys to successful change management programs for data-driven initiatives.

Spotting Business Stories

To be clear about what a business story sounds like, here's a quick overview:



courtesy of Anecdote

A business story starts with a time, place, or person marker ("Last Tuesday..." or "In the board room..." or "The new CEO...")

It contains the following:

- a series events that have causation
- people who have names and/or dialog
- a surprising event
- a business point

Business stories are about 90-seconds long, but can be shorter or longer depending on your circumstances.

Storytelling Guidance for Data-Driven Change

The mathematics and semantics used to generate your data-driven solution won't be much help during implementation of the solution. Operationalizing the solution should signal a shift to a new messaging methodology that harnesses humans' natural proclivity for storytelling.

This is a big leap of faith for all business leaders, but especially for technology leaders. Even if you accept that introducing data-driven change with an anecdote or colorful example will ease the way for the new processes you're proposing, the reality of storytelling in the workplace can be daunting, but it needn't be that way.

Leaders of data-driven change should employ these practical techniques and frameworks to move storytelling theory into a communications practice:

- 1. Anticipate the anti-stories**
No matter what change you've proposed, your naysayers will be armed with compelling counter arguments and competing stories. Your first line of defense is to identify and acknowledge the anti-stories; don't hide from them. Expect to be told that your solution might work in theory, but it doesn't take into account certain realities; that your change project is the next short lived flavor-of-the-day initiative; and that your solution will cause more problems than it eliminates. Anticipate these objections and expect many more.

Preparing for the negative backlash will give your new stories an advantage over the old stories that are already circulating.

Start with, "I know some of you think this is a bad idea because..." Acknowledging their stories will startle your skeptics and soften their objections.

2. Build trust in the results

Instead of sterile use cases that talk generally about groups, departments, or market segments, insert people into the story. People have names and people say words. Bring your use cases to life by focusing on a particular person, her problems, the specific improvements that will be made to her life, and what they mean to her.

3. Connect to the strategy

For organizations with a clear business strategy, every initiative that gets leadership approval already has a strong tie to strategy. Communicate that connection to the masses and answer the "why" questions that underpin their reluctance to participate.

Turn your strategy into a story that serves as the answer to every "why" question that is raised in your organization. By taking the strategy beyond the boardroom, you will increase the understanding that your big data change initiatives are truly part of a larger plan.

The first three parts of the strategy story framework are:

- In the past...
- And then something happened...
- That's why we're going to...

4. Paint a vision of the future

Conclude by looking toward the future. The final part of the strategy story is, "so all these good things can happen..." to get everyone excited about the change.

Every person impacted by the change you're proposing is silently doing a mathematical calculation to determine if the effort is worth their time. A visualization of the future that is specific and realistic will inspire your stakeholders to understand the promise and possibilities that are achievable.

5. Hit with a one-two combo

Demonstrating the negative impact of failing to act is an obvious choice for communicating the need for change. When I advised an executive who was reluctant to use storytelling in his communications, I recounted to him a time that one of his non-story communications was ineffective. This got his attention, but it was not enough to change his mind. When I followed the failure story with an example of a success another executive experienced when using storytelling, the combination of the negative and positive examples was compelling enough to work - he started using stories.

Always couple your doomsday scenario story with one that has a happy ending. Studies show that a negative example might get their attention, but positive motivation spurs action.⁶ For instance, point out the competitor who is filing for bankruptcy in part because their outdated computer systems led to lost market share, with a story about an industry leader that emerged from the shadows in recent years because of a concerted investment in technology.

6. Tell a story with a twist

Stories are the perfect vehicle for your message because people repeat them. Make sure you are not telling the same tired stories; tell them once and let others repeat them for you.

To make it something worth repeating, the story itself should contain a surprise. Telling a story that ends in an unexpected way will be memorable and emotional enough to stick with the audience and make them want to re-tell it.

7. Make a connection

We're naturally skeptical of the messenger until we understand who they are and what is motivating them. Overcome this barrier by letting your audience know through a story that you are like them.

George, the young new COO who arrived at a company in desperate need of a turnaround, had an impressive reputation of working for top-performing

companies. He was also physically intimidating because of his athletic build and piercing green eyes. The employees assumed his successes had been easy and that his rapid ascent up the corporate ladder had been smooth. George demystified himself and endeared himself to the team when he shared that, in fact, the companies he had worked for were once in far worse shape than theirs. George's description of the challenges faced and successes achieved by his previous teams was a turning point. The employees suddenly felt reassured that George understood what it took to transform an underperforming company. No longer were they working with an unapproachable superstar; now they had someone on their team who had been where they were and could help them improve. With this one story, George made a powerful connection with the thousands of employees who were listening to his speech.

A good resource for building your story repertoire is the [free eBook Character Trumps Credentials](#). It contains 171 story-eliciting questions to help you recall the events that shape your leadership style and define your value system.

8. Trigger a story

Doing something remarkable gets other people talking. Use this phenomenon to your advantage by signaling change without saying a word.

Liza became the CEO of a tech start-up in a male dominated industry at the age of 28. Acutely aware that she needed to claim her rightful position from the very beginning of her term, she broke a habit and instead of opening her own notebook, she started her first team meeting at the company by saying, "Gentleman, who will take notes for me?" She never had to ask this question again because in every subsequent meeting – even with people who weren't present on that first day – someone volunteered to take her notes and the respect and deference followed suit.

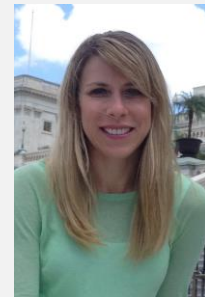
Stories Plant a Microchip in the Brain

Stories work because they are a pull strategy - they pull at the heart strings. Meanwhile, facts and figures extracted from big data just push against the established belief systems and don't make a dent.

This is frustrating for most IT, data, and analytics leaders, who would be content to swap the emotional side of human nature for a microchip planted in the brains. Until that point in the future when the Synths or Cylons take over, business leaders should consider stories to be the microchip. The stories people remember are emotion-packed memory chips that filter how information is processed and determine what data will motivate action.

Reprogramming the memory chips is as easy as systematically

replacing the existing stories. Best of all for geeks, the facts behind your stories have an added advantage: they are grounded in data, verified by advanced analytics, and supported by high performance machine learning techniques. Combining data with stories is **the** most powerful tool in your arsenal for leading change.



About Amanda Marko,
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Technology leaders and business executives from around the world have looked to Amanda Marko for communications coaching and strategic guidance during times of change.

After more than a dozen years heading communications teams for a U.S. Senator, a major economic development organization, and two global companies, she founded Connected Strategy Group to concentrate on helping leaders make powerful connections that increase their influence and the effectiveness of their business strategy.

Amanda's employee engagement and change leadership consulting practice is complemented by storytelling work. She was the first in the U.S. to partner with Australia-based Anecdote to deliver their sought-after *Storytelling for Leaders* program.

Additional Resources

Character Trumps Credential: 170 Questions that Help Leaders Tell Great Stories that Influence, Engage and Inspire
[free eBook](#)

(www.connectedstrategygroup.com/how-to-find-stories-to-tell)

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Stories that Change: Winning Hearts and Inspiring Action

[SlideShare presentation](#)

(www.slideshare.net/AmandaMarko1/stories-that-change-winning-hearts-and-inspiring-action)

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When Managing Change, Don't Just Defer to Data
LinkedIn Pulse [article](#)

(www.connectedstrategygroup.com/when-managing-change-dont-just-defer-to-data/)

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Four Storytelling Frameworks to Lead Change
[podcast interview](#)

(www.engagingleader.com/106-4-storytelling-frameworks-to-lead-change-podcast)

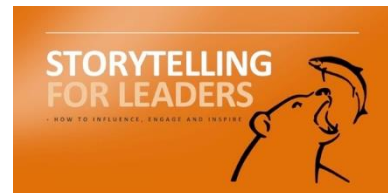
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Seven Communications Tools for Data-Driven Change

- ✓ Anticipate the anti-stories
- ✓ Build trust in the results
- ✓ Connect to the strategy
- ✓ Paint a vision of the future
- ✓ Hit with a one-two combo
- ✓ Tell a story with a twist
- ✓ Make a connection
- ✓ Trigger a story

Storytelling for Leaders is communications training that creates change agents who influence, engage, and inspire.



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