The Next Time Someone Says, “Tell Me About Yourself,” Here’s How to Wow Them

_The following is adapted from Story Like You Mean It._

Imagine walking into a meeting your new boss has called. You’re meeting some of your colleagues for the first time, and you know that—even though you’re relatively new—it’s a great opportunity to connect with them and start to earn their respect.

It’s your chance, and you really want to be heard. You arrive at the meeting a little bit early. As you take your seat, a few other people trickle in. And then, inevitably—because it is almost inevitable—someone asks about what you’ve been up to: “Tell me about yourself.”

When that happens, you’re being given the chance to shape how someone judges you. You don’t want to miss it. An uninspired story isn’t just a poor story; it’s a missed opportunity. Instead of missing that opportunity, use it to tell what I call your PeakStory—the story that not only shows your value and worth but also shows how you got here and where you’re going.

If you do that, I promise you: no matter who you are, how much experience you have, or what sort of education you have, they’re going to be impressed. Chances are high they’ll remember you, because you seized your opportunity to wow them. Interested? Let’s dive in.

What Value Do You Bring?

When someone says, “Tell me about yourself,” what they’re really saying is, “Show me what you can add to my life. Show me why I should listen to you.”

It’s the same when they say, “Tell me about your company.” That’s not what they really mean. What they really mean is, “Tell me about yourself—and why I should listen to you tell me about your company.”

We’ve all been in those situations. We get put on the spot because someone wants to know something that’s not about our job, not about our product—but about us. The only reason we keep getting away with the same humdrum responses is that everyone else comes up with the same thing.

Whenever we walk into a conference, an interview, an orientation for work or school, or a sales meeting, people are wondering, “What value do you bring to the conference, the school, the service? Why are you trying to sell this thing or this service?”
Don’t Default to the Soundtrack

When they ask you about yourself, you see in their eyes that they want to hear something positive about you—but you default to the soundtrack: “I’ve got a dog and a cat named Felix, and they fight a lot.”

Or maybe: “I really like the school. My aunt went here.”

Or the old tried-and-true: “I’m really glad to be here working for ABC Fidelity, Elemental LLC, PQR, Z [whatever…plug in the name]. I’ve been with the company for eight years, really great company to work with. And like, yeah, it’s good to be here.”

In terms of telling your own story, this is the net sum zero. And that’s a problem, because when you tell your story, either you’re taking energy away from the people in the room, or you’re bringing positive energy to the room. Nobody ever walks away saying, “Boy, I met John. I’m completely neutral from having met John.”

Your Story Defines Your Value

Your story is a great source of energy. Any chance to tell it is an opportunity to provide energy to others. But the energy doesn’t come from the story alone. It comes from the value your story suggests you bring. That might be commercial value, social value or your value as a friend. It makes other people more willing to listen to you.

And that’s all that anybody needs, right? In an interview, a sales meeting, or at a conference or seminar.

We want people to listen.

What makes people listen is knowing that the very thing that you’re doing right now, you’re supposed to be doing. That you’re aligned with your story. That this is where your story has brought you.

When you tell your story, it provides not only an anchor in the past but also a compass that points to where you’re heading. It brings you to your current reality en route to a “somewhere” you’re projecting. Psychologists call this making a provisional identity claim. I call it storypathing.

Use Storypathing to Connect the Dots

If you want your story to succeed, you have to do more than just share some observations or talk about what you did last Tuesday. Those things don’t show the listener your value. You have to connect the dots for them. And you do that with storypathing.

Storypathing says to the listener, “Here’s where I’ve been. Here’s where I am. Here’s where I’m headed.” That stakes your provisional claim right there.
The next bit goes like this: “It all makes sense, doesn’t it? You feel energized. And don’t you want to support me? You think I have value and worth, and my story has shown that. Thanks. Because it’s my story, and I’ve thought about it and I’ve activated it.”

Your Story Has to Align With Who You Are

Connecting the dots is the first step to showing your value. By doing this—by storypathing, by making sense of where you’ve been and where you’re headed—you can show that you have more engagement and more value wherever you land because your story aligns with who you are.

If I understand that the very thing you’re trying to do right now is what you’re supposed to be doing, I will grant you some sort of opportunity. I’ll give you space or support. I’ll introduce you to more people. People have no problem extending a meeting or doing anything they can to help somebody get to this place of alignment.

We have an impulse to support people who are good at things. We buy tickets to see people who are good at singing; we go to plays to see good actors. If you’re good at telling your own story, people will buy in. They’ll see not only that you’re good at what you’re doing but also that you have evidence of your value because the evidence is embedded in the story. You’re talking the talk because you walked the walk. And that’s going to wow them.

Everyone Can Storypath

You might look at your life and worry that you don’t have the kind of experiences that will let you storypath. Wrong! If you’ve lived twelve years on the planet or ninety-two, you can tell your story to show your value.

We all can. Storytelling isn’t foreign to us. We did it habitually when we were younger. For whatever reason, we fell out of practice, but it’s still latent within us. It’s an unused muscle we can start using again—and storypathing can help you make that muscle strong.

Storypathing allows you to put together your best narrative in the best way to create your PeakStory. It lets you identify and prioritize life moments to build your story, which you can then share with others.

When you storypath, you first gather self-event connections, which are moments and experiences that echo through the rest of your lives. Then, you drill down into the meaning of what’s happened in the past. That’s vital, because we can’t express ourselves unless we can make sense of ourselves.

Next, you unpack the meaning behind your self-event connections. Finally, you show people how you’ve overcome obstacles, collaborated with others, and figured out where you’ve been and where you want to go.
Storypathing also gives you the tools you need to work through resistance in order to tell your story in a sensible way.

In other words, when you storypath, you activate your story muscle and get it moving again.

Make It a Conscious Process

When you learn to storypath and tell your PeakStory, you engage in a conscious process of bringing your identity together with your narrative. That becomes your story over time, and because it’s done consciously, you get to select which parts of your story to tell to get people to listen, understand, and appreciate.

For example, think about the experience we talked about earlier of walking into a meeting when you’re new in the company. When your colleague asks you about yourself, you could use your PeakStory to show them how the experiences you’ve had make you the perfect fit for the job. You could start to build their trust by showing them how reliable you are in a team. You could help them see you’re exactly where you want to be—where you need to be.

You could do all this, and do it confidently, just by seizing your opportunity to tell your PeakStory. In other words, by storypathing—engaging in self-reflection, identifying your value, finding your self-event connections, and showing you are aligned with your path—you’ll know exactly how to respond (and show your value) the next time someone makes that inevitable comment: “Tell me about yourself.”

And even better, you’ll know that you’re going to wow them.

For more advice on using storypathing to develop your PeakStory, you can find Story Like You Mean It on Amazon.

Dr. Dennis Rebelo is a professor, speaker, and career coach. He is the creator of the Peak Storytelling model, his research-based method for crafting the narrative of who you are and what drives you and why, utilized by former professional athletes turned nonprofit leaders as well as entrepreneurs, CEOs, guidance professionals, and advisers throughout the world.

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