I F THE PERSON who tells the best story wins, then where do you find these winning stories and how do you learn how to tell them? The practical path to telling winning stories is simply a matter of finding stories that:

1. Communicate your message.
2. You enjoy telling.
3. You actually tell in real-life situations.

Understanding that you should be telling stories and actually telling stories can feel like a chasm to cross for some of us. This is the point at which we leave the hypothetical and get real. Your personal storytelling will be all about you, your stories, and your definition of “win.”

You may have noticed that this book offers no overt definitions of “winning.” Winning could mean that your efforts ensure that a building project proceeds or that it is cancelled. Winning might mean that your company doubles growth or that your company intentionally forfeits profit to achieve human rights goals. Your
definition of “win” is up to you. Once you are clear on what you want to achieve and who you want to influence it is time to begin.

Nothing will improve your storytelling more than practice. Your personal experiences of watching your stories work their magic will be so gratifying that you won’t have to remind yourself to include a story—it will become second nature. Initially, you may experience a natural hesitancy due to thoughts that include “I'm not a good storyteller,” “This takes too long,” “It is unprofessional to share personal anecdotes,” or “I have real work to do.” These are escape doors to avoid discomfort, uncertainty, and risk.

I know all about escape doors. As a writer, my mind offers escape doors like, “Have you checked your e-mails?” or “You should really call X and confirm Y” or “Did you remember to turn the dishwasher on?” and the worst, “I wonder what is in the refrigerator?” At some point you have to decide to just “do it.”

In order to jump-start your storytelling practice, Chapters 5 through 10 will protect you from avoidable pitfalls, record what you learn, and accumulate good stories for future use. There is a chapter for each of the six kinds of stories that will give you ample opportunities to practice and cement the principles and philosophical approach that creates good storytelling.

In each chapter you will identify four different story ideas. Develop one of them immediately so you can practice translating an idea into a story, test that story, record your results, and refine your stories. By the end of the exercises you will have incorporated mental habits that make it easy to find, develop, and tell stories whenever you want to win hearts and minds to your point of view.

**Where Do I Find Stories?**

Researching the Internet, identifying case studies, or current events is a good way to find events that provide examples of your
ideas. However, stories are more than mere examples. Winning stories feel personally significant to your listeners. The catch is, only by finding and telling stories that feel personally significant to you can you expect to elicit the level of personal engagement that wins hearts and minds. An emotional and thus personal connection to your mutual (as teller/listener) experience of the “example” is what engraves your meaning. When this meaningful point of view is imprinted, future experiences are more likely to flow along the channel of interpretation left by the story.

This is a subtle yet vital distinction often overlooked in “professional” settings. Some people think personal stories are inappropriate. Sure, there is such a thing as too personal—anything that makes people cringe or that generates shouts of “TMI!” (too much information) is too personal. However, in most cases personal stories are always appropriate whenever “persons” are involved.

One advantage of using personal stories is that they are easy to remember. After all, you were there when everything happened. When people ask questions, you can answer them. Curiosity is a vital goal of storytelling and questions often follow a powerful story. If you are telling a story about Lou Gerstner at IBM, you may have trouble answering detailed questions (unless you are Lou Gerstner). In order to tell the story you need to know the back story. The amount of research required to know you could answer any questions about a story will make it your story. Your personal version of and response to another person’s experience becomes personal enough to make an impact.

Authenticity-in-action means sharing personal stories or personal feelings about someone else’s story. Sharing personal experiences earns you trust at the same time you share information or exert influence. To simplify and accelerate your storytelling I present four buckets full of many stories that tell who you are, why you are here, your vision, teaching points, values, and secret empathies. The four buckets are:
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1. A time you shined
2. A time you blew it
3. A mentor
4. A book, movie, or current event

These four buckets aren’t the only places to find stories, but they may be the easiest. Let’s leave it to the academics to pore over sources of plots and perfect arcs, we just need stories that work. As you read the examples for each of these four sources of stories in the next six chapters, jot down as many ideas as pop into your mind. Writing it down is no commitment that you will tell that story in public. Don’t be inhibited by second guessing yourself. Coming up with ideas is faster and more creative once you turn the internal editor concerned with appearances OFF and turn the internal compass that tells you who you really are ON. Inauthentic stories only happen when you try to hide who you really are or try to be someone you are not.

The first two buckets are clearly personal stories. These are specifically stories about something that happened to you.

1. *A Time You Shined*. This kind of story is about something good that happened to you. If you are communicating a quality like integrity, a value like compassion, or a learning situation, these stories will tell about a time in your life when it would’ve been easier to do anything but the “right” thing. All the outside pressures told you to do one thing, but you did the “right” thing and everything turned out for the best. You were being tested and you came through.

2. *A Time You Blew It*. This is about a time when something bad happened and it was all your fault. It sounds backwards, but telling a story that discloses a mistake can increase trust twice
as fast as polishing the story to give it a professional finish. The very fact that you are sharing a personal failure, flaw, or embarrassing moment means that in the trust dance, you trust them enough to go first. Trust often fails because neither side wants to go first. When you go first you get the ball rolling and people are more likely to trust you back. Don’t worry that people will think you are a failure—successful people always have failure stories. This story works because people can tell by the way you tell the story and the tone in your voice how you felt about failing your own standards and how hard you strive to never let it happen again.

3. A Mentor. The third kind of story could be personal experiences of an important person in your life, or the personal impact of someone you may have never met. You are sharing an experience or a story that taught you something important in an effort to share the valuable lesson with others. Telling a story of admiration and gratitude toward another person who embodies the qualities or goals you value not only communicates these qualities and goals, it demonstrates to your listener the very important qualities of humility and gratitude. These two qualities are vital in good leadership. Humility and gratitude are the essence of personal dignity. Another advantage in telling a mentor story is that people automatically assume that you share these qualities, values, goals. Particularly when you can’t come right out and say, “I’m humble,” your stories become clues for others to interpret.

4. A Book, Movie, or Current Event. There are millions of stories from books, movies, newspaper articles, or other media sources that might just be perfect to make your point. There are ways to make even these stories personal. Find a scene from a movie, book, or current event that exemplifies what you wish to illustrate. Choosing a well-known book or movie
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takes advantage of all the hard work the author or director put into stimulating senses and capturing attention. If you tell a story about the movie Independence Day, you don’t have to conjure up your own special effects to blow up the White House because the director Roland Emmerich has already done it all for you. Make the story yours by adapting the format and style, including the details of how you came across this story, or by elaborating on what this story has meant to you and why you are sharing it.

These four primary sources for stories are reliable for just about any situation. As you develop as a storyteller you will become aware of your favorite source for stories, and by then you’ll have your own methodology. These four buckets will get you started in the meantime.

**Getting Feedback**

If you are practicing storytelling with a work group or as a part of a training class you have ready listeners handy. If you are doing this alone you will need to find one or more listeners who can resist the urge to “critique” your stories. This sounds wimpy at first—but stay with me. Storytelling is more of an art than a science. The creative process thrives on a mysterious creative force that could be described as “feeling creative,” “finding your inspiration,” or “being in the flow.”

This creative force is a delicate and very subjective process. It’s like a timid wild animal you want to tame to eat out of your hand. Loud noises or sudden scary movements scare it off. Over time you can domesticate it to some extent, but part of that process will be feeding it and learning what it likes. I have a writer friend who writes with five sharp number two pencils, and is completely
put off if his wife sweeps away the eraser dust. Creativity comes to those who aren’t afraid to tune in to their own eccentricities.

Criticism is a tool that improves objective skills, yet it will kill subjective creativity if applied too soon. Professional artists sometimes seem eccentric to us because they have learned that their creative juices flow better with special treatment. Another metaphor that helps me is that a new story must be tended like a new fruit tree is tended by a gardener. The tree needs what it needs when it needs it. And in the beginning the tree needs water and light. It is too soon to prune. Pruning the tree can kill it before it has a chance to grow. Leave it in the dark for too long and it dies. Overwater it and it dies.

Think about your stories in the same way. They are little trees that first need water and light. Criticizing a story too soon just demoralizes the teller and invalidates the subject. Half the time I think criticism is more about the critic than the subject of critique anyway. If you are a perfectly secure, emotionally healthy person who is telling a story that does not carry any strong feelings maybe you want a critique. But please don’t let social pressures and ridiculous phrases like, “Don’t take this personally” bully you into listening to criticism before your story is strong enough. Storytelling is personal—of course you are going to take it personally. That’s why we are doing it: Storytelling brings personal engagement back into our organizations and social interactions.

The word feedback (as in “I need to give you some feedback”) has become a socially acceptable term in some dysfunctional organizations for what looks remarkably like emotional abuse to me. As long as you make your living doing something other than storytelling, my advice to you is to ask to hear “what works” (this is based on the appreciations model developed by Doug Lipman in his book, *The Storytelling Coach*). Understand that it takes more courage to ask for positive comments than it does to ask for feedback.

I’m not suggesting this method to protect your delicate ego.
I'm suggesting this method because it works. This method encourages the strong parts of your story to grow toward the light. Because it is too soon to prune—negative feedback (I don't care how self-confident you are) kills a baby story because it focuses on the wrong things—literally.

Training a Listener

In order to test your stories you need a listener or listeners. Practicing in a mirror or in the car alone is not good enough. Story is a co-creation in your mind and the mind of at least one listener. It’s not storytelling without a listener—it’s acting or preaching or something else. Your story should be different every time you tell it, in response to your listener. You can’t practice responding to your listener without a live listener.

For your first test-tellings, you’ll want a “no-risk” listener. Recruit a best friend, spouse, or coach, who will agree to give you positive feedback (only) for your first telling of any story that you intend to use later in a higher-risk setting. The second telling can be at work or in a “real life” situation, but your first telling needs to be “no risk,” so that you can explore the story and develop your skills.

Stories are distorted by premature feedback and suggestions. Sometimes you get negative feedback in the form of, “Can I make a suggestion?” One time I got a “suggestion,” and as a result I dropped a detail out of a story when next I told it. The story fell flat without it, so I put that detail back in. I’ve since come to the conclusion that the person who made the suggestion may have felt judged by his interpretation of what that detail meant. After reflecting, I realized that I wanted this detail to provoke self-examination. I had said, “Nasrudin had not prepared his words to touch the hearts and minds of the people, he thought he could wing it.” My choice of wording makes “winging it” sound like an
act of hubris. I'm okay with that. If I can save anyone from suffering through unprepared stream-of-consciousness ramblings, it is worth it.

Opening the floor to criticism often gives you more information about your listeners’ pet peeves than the quality of your story. Appreciations are much more reliable in finding the parts of your story that work and letting the other parts die on the vine. The secret of good storytelling is having the confidence to protect your creative process in the early stages from criticism—internal as well as external.

Use this format to ask for what works:

“What your story tells me about you is . . .”

“What I like about your story . . .”

“What your story helps me remember . . .”

“The impact I can see your story having in a specific situation (describe) is . . .”

It may feel wimpy asking only for positive feedback, but after a while you will see it actually takes more courage to protect your creative process—courage you can use in other situations to protect good boundaries.

**Note**