

Career Rx

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What is Your Story?

We all have a story. How we tell our story is critical for engaging the listener. How well do we typically know our audience before we begin our story? In an interview setting, we may not know enough to tailor our story, so how do we deliver it?

Think about when you go on an interview and you are asked the famous "Tell me about yourself" question. I have always wanted to say, "Do you want me to begin at birth?" just to see the interviewer's reaction, but I have always behaved myself. This question is best answered by using your marketing pitch (a.k.a. elevator pitch) and ending with a clarifying question such as "What initial challenges do you see as the key for success in this role?" This answer enables you to weave relevant stories into a coherent view of your strengths and how they can meet the organization's needs.

As a Human Resources Executive and Career Transition Coach, I do want to know one's story to see how they will fit into the organization's culture and how well they can mix with other employees, vendors and suppliers. Typically, the informal conversation when a candidate is initially greeted is more telling than the formal interview engagement. The candidate is usually not as formal and on guard, so the conversation is easy flowing. Case in point, when I asked one candidate "How was their commute to the office?" I was told how horrible the subway system was, how long it took them to get in and that their spouse insisted they take the baby to day care. Well, after their dissertation on the obstacles of getting into the office was concluded, I asked "If this was a typical morning" just to give the candidate a way to step out of their quicksand answer.

The key to sharing your stories is communicating your principle values. Your successes are based on these principle values which are your foundation - your fundamental truths. Personal values are subjective and may be influenced by cultural, religious, family, political, and generational situations. These values are developed very early in life. Research has shown that individuals involved in groups that connect them to others in school, their community, or religious institutions have a higher level of social trust and commitment for the common good. So developing relationships with others is a critical life skill that you will continue to practice throughout your lifetime.

Some principle values to consider for your stories may include: the value of truth; the importance of optimism; the value of relationships; the need for personal growth; the importance of helping others; being just; focusing on problems, not people; and building a better future. When you communicate during an interview, it is important to infuse your stories with your selected principals. If presented with a negative situation, focus on the solution. If there is question of human suffering, focus on resilience and healing. Make a list of the principals that you stand for and try to be the person that you want to be when you are answering a question and telling your story.

It is easy to become sidetracked into negativity during an interview. So if you are asked, "Why did you leave your last position?" Don't allow yourself to reduce your persona by going down a negative path. Negative answer: "My boss didn't appreciate anything I did..." Be a positive person and respond accordingly. Positive answer: "My position was one of several eliminated."

If life gives you lemons, make lemonade. I heard a popular song, *I'm Yours*, by Jason Mraz and it struck me as embodying especially positive principles: "I reckon it's again my turn to win some or learn some". Everyone experiences setbacks and disappointments. Resilient people aren't defeated, they are enlightened.

In Erving Goffman's book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" he presents the idea that the way we act is consistent with the kind of person that we want to be treated like. His premise is set in theater where the actor's goal is to keep coherence and adjust to the different settings through interaction with others. Building rapport with your audience is important in theatre as well in the interview setting. Manage your message. While you are speaking, also be an active listener. When communicating during an interview, it is important for both parties to show respect to one another. It is your responsibility as the interviewee to clarify your message so your listeners receive the correct meaning of your story.

As an interviewee, you are a storyteller sharing your abilities and successes. Storytellers typically weave their stories allowing their audience to participate in the creation of truth and wanting their listener to make an experiential connection with their message. As an interviewer of many over the years, the stories that remained with me long after they've been told are stories that enabled me see an experience through a different lens. The story may have provided an "aha" moment and the world no longer looked the same afterwards. These are the stories that engage that experiential connection within - touched an emotional or cognitive cord within me. I related to the situation or felt the person's emotion based on my own experiences or something that opened my eyes to a new way of viewing the story. These types of stories are critical when engaging others especially during networking and interviewing situations.

Typically, as an interviewee, you are instructed to communicate your success stories through STAR, SOAR, and PAR – just to name a few. For those of you who may not know these -- S for Situation, P for Problem, T for Task, O for Obstacle, A for Action and R for Results. During an interview, remember to keep to the interviewer's agenda and not your own. An interviewer will listen to you for their own reasons. Marketing basics stress the pitch (or story) is always based on the buyer's needs. When you learn to communicate your stories from this perspective, you are more likely to choose the best vocabulary, body language, and make sure you develop enough give-and-take in the conversation to allow the interviewer to become a part of your story as people support what they help to create.

Interviewing is a two way communication session – be mindful of the interviewer's agenda, company's culture, and begin to build rapport. Non verbal rapport is created with simple techniques such as direct eye contact and possibly mirroring the behavior and body language of the listener. Using appropriate humor and engaging your listener will help you to communicate your principle values. A song is a one way story with no clarifying questions allowed. So in today's market, lead with strong story telling based on your principle values as there are no second chances.

This column provides thought provoking strategies for getting unstuck along your career journey. A certified Executive and Career Coach can be instrumental in guiding you in your efforts to gain a new perspective. I invite you to contact me @ Lisa@ChenofskySinger.com

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Lisa's extensive human resources and coaching experience with Fortune 500 companies, small enterprises, medium-sized firms, and non-profit organizations gives her the unique ability to bring together wide-ranging perspectives on career transitions, executive and leadership development. She has consulted with a wide variety of sectors — consumer goods, financial services, healthcare, media and entertainment, pharmaceutical and life sciences, publishing, professional services, technology, and non-profit. Lisa has a passion for motivational speaking, conducts career forums, and provides executive and career coaching.

Lisa's greatest strength is that she enables individuals and organizations to see themselves in new ways, freeing them to achieve their goals. Lisa can be reached at Lisa@ChenofskySinger.com.