

# Storytelling is at the Heart of Leadership

*By Alexander Mackenzie*

**NEVER HAS THERE BEEN A TIME WHEN BUSINESS HAS BEEN SO HUNGRY FOR STORYTELLING THAN TODAY**

In companies all over the world right now executives are sitting around tables with the same three questions, 'How did we get here? What has enabled our success and most importantly, where do we go from here?' These are the same three questions that underlie every epic since the dawn of time.

## **A good leader is a good storyteller**

Storytelling is at the heart of every business success. It is the stories that are told around the board table that define the quality of leadership in the executive team. It is the executives that connect the story of the 'bigger picture', the vision to their teams that shape company morale and it is the kind of stories told to clients and stakeholders that determine the deals that are made and delivered on.

No one is surprised at this news. It has always been the case that a good leader is a good storyteller. In the past two decades storytelling as



the first social art has re-emerged in companies all over the globe. The arts have now a significant profile in companies wanting to raise the bar in raising staff commitment and energizing business focus.

Any senior management intent on personal development will certainly have encountered the arts if they have been doing any training or learning development in the past decade.

Emotional rapport, power and influence and integrity of intention are surfaced in the kind of experiential learning that define the leaders of tomorrow.

Universities renowned as epicentres of contemporary learning are increasingly bringing to attention research that points to the relevance of

the arts and storytelling to improve corporate success both in the office and on the bottom line.

## **So, what does storytelling do that other interventions don't?**

Firstly, as a verbal communication it calls upon the person speaking to take the focus away from technical props that can so easily occlude learning and instead to use the voice as a resource for getting attention and sharing knowledge. Speakers and orators from Winston Churchill to Socrates have shown time and again that if you want to move mountains, the voice is mightier than the shovel.

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If we allow ourselves to remember who are the memorable educators in our lives whether that be politically, educationally or socially we will usually quickly land on those who we remember because of their voice and presence. We often also associate these people with stories we remember about them.

### What's in a story?

We aim to deliver on three levels when we tell a story. We aspire to:

1. Inform: share intellectually what we know
2. Engage: to communicate in a way that captures the attention of the audience
3. Inspire: to stimulate imaginative curiosity

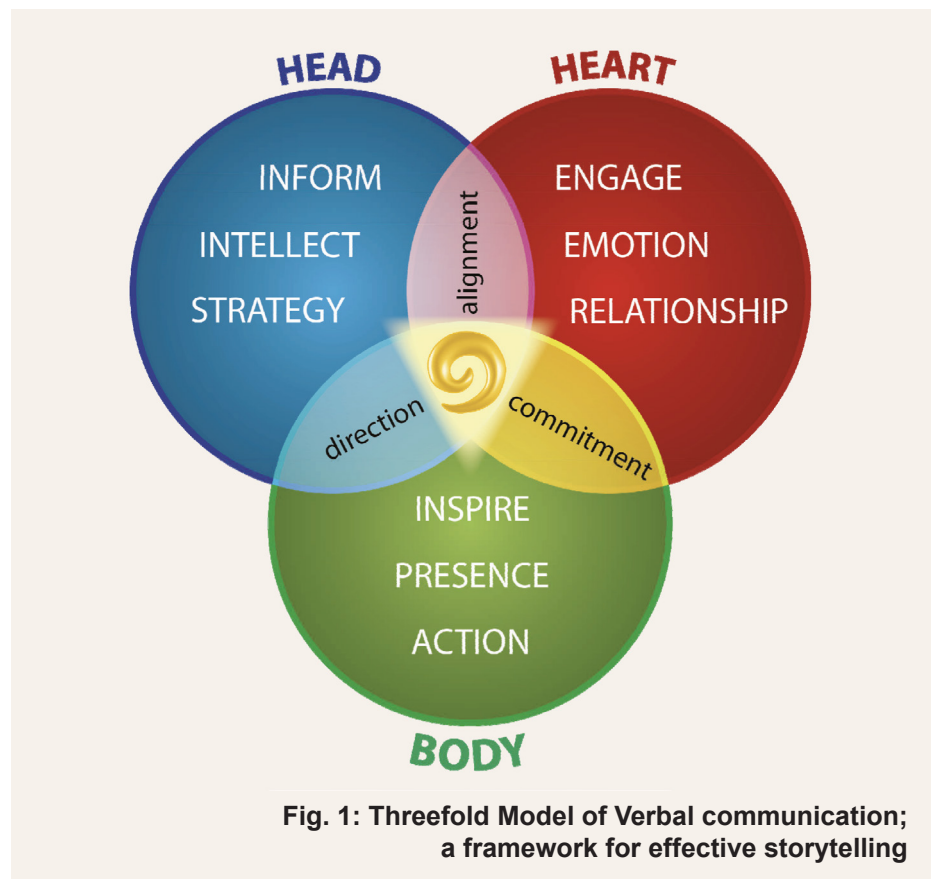
These three words point to three different faculties of communication and three different states of mind.

When we are communicating well we move seamlessly between the three states naturally.

Unfortunately all too often in a business environment we find ourselves landlocked in the first, the kingdom of information.

No story worth its salt would survive a single telling if all the storyteller did was remember the story. That is only step one. Once learned the storyteller must learn the art of engagement which is the language of the heart. A good story leaves the listener inhabiting a place of imaginative curiosity. It is no different for an excellent communicator and an influential leader.

The leader must know the difference between what information to share with whom, which relationships to bring emotional leverage to, and to inhabit a vision of the future that is compelling to be in the presence of.



**Fig. 1: Threefold Model of Verbal communication; a framework for effective storytelling**

### What kind of teaching is this?

Learning to inform, engage and inspire is a holistic style of learning that draws upon three levels of education:

1. Thinking – the homeground of informative learning
2. Feeling – the homeground of emotional intelligence
3. Action – making things happen

See Fig. 1 above.

The underlying competency that is required and developed is a personal sense of being fearless because of the unexpected and challenging nature of taking oneself on in an open and proactive way.

### Why Cranfield School of Management?

Alexander Mackenzie is the Programme Director of Storytelling at the Praxis Centre at Cranfield School of Management and has designed and delivered the very successful storytelling programme Winning Hearts and Minds.

The Praxis Centre at Cranfield has been offering highly innovative and groundbreaking management and leadership programmes there for over two decades.



*Cranfield School of Management is ranked as a top Business School in the 2015 Financial Times Executive Education Rankings.*

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