

Storytelling for Impact

EW MBA: Launch

Pre Read

Professor David Riemer

You can't tell a great story unless you have a great story to tell.

Storytelling for Impact will guide you through a process to build that great story and then give you the tools to express it in a way that can be magical.

Why stories?

A good cry that led to a great investment

"This is supposed to be the best day of my life," Matt Cooper told me. "It's the birth of my son...I'm standing there in the delivery room... then suddenly, the physicians are calling for life-saving drugs." Matt's voice catches as he recollects the emotions roiling through him in that moment. He pauses then recalls wondering, "Oh, my God, is this going to be the worst day of my life?"

Matt started telling me this story at a Berkeley-Haas Alumni event where I gave a talk on storytelling. He wanted to affirm what I was saying:

Stories matter.

Matt Cooper is a Ph.D. in Toxicology and a biotech entrepreneur who needed to raise money for his new company, Carmenta Bioscience, which sought a better way to detect preeclampsia, a potentially deadly complication of pregnancy. Matt thought the best way to hone his pitch would be first to find Venture Capitalists who didn't invest in this type of biotech. He'd work out the kinks in his presentation on these "friendlies," refine his story, then target Venture people who were *better* prospects for an actual investment.

Matt arranged a meeting with a woman in a firm that had *never* invested in a company like Carmenta. She was the perfect person to provide feedback. The pitch plodded along and finally she asked Matt, "Why are you doing this?" What do you mean, Matt wondered. She repeated, "Why are you doing *this*? Why did you choose *this* particular area of science?" Matt could hardly get a

word out before tearing-up. Through his tears, Matt told her the story that he shared with me that evening.

He described how his wife Amy nearly died of a misdiagnosis of preeclampsia during the birth of his son Zach. As they brought the life-saving drugs into the delivery room that day to save Amy, Matt made the statement that made me choke up when I heard it: “the best day of my life might become the worst.” Here they were having a baby in a top Boston hospital, and the OBGYN was a teacher at Harvard, and even *she* missed the diagnosis. Amy survived and so did their son Zach, but the experience was life-changing for Matt. As a biotech professional and entrepreneur, he knew *this* was a problem that needed solving.

Matt was embarrassed that he cried in such a professional setting. He certainly hadn’t planned to do so. He didn’t realize until later that he had employed some of the most powerful storytelling tools available to an leader trying to inspire others about his idea. He told a *personal* story. He tapped into emotion. He gave a purposeful anecdote. He “brought the customer in the room.” He “romanced the problem.” In short, he moved his audience in a way he never expected or even hoped.

Matt’s story so compelled the VC that her company made its first investment ever in this sector. Matt was off and running with his fund-raising. He never intended to tell this personal story -- and he certainly couldn’t imagine that he would ever cry in a business meeting -- but that was before he understood the power of a riveting story. Now Matt knows that telling just the right story is essential if you want your new idea to see the light of day.

In our virtual storytelling session, I’ll share how you -- as leaders -- can dramatically improve your products and programs by seeing your world through the lens of a strong narrative. You’ll be better equipped to grasp the relationship between your customer and your service, and focus your efforts at building better solutions. And by embracing “story,” you will be able to master how you talk about your work so you can inspire others to become wild fans of what you’re doing -- be they customers, investors, management or employees.

The Brain Science Behind Storytelling

At first blush, cynics believe that storytelling is a “soft skill,” but neuroscience is actually behind the power of stories! It turns out that our species is **Wired for Story**, which is also the title of Lisa Cron’s great book about storytelling. And

because it's in our DNA, it is a powerful tool in the hands of a leader. But let's start with the science.

Cron's book catalogs recent brain studies by neuroscientists and psychologists that explore how a brain processes stories. She describes how fundamentally different the brain behaves when consuming stories as opposed to straight facts and information. For most of the life of our species, we only *had* stories to share what we had learned. We told stories to help future generations understand how to navigate a scary world. And our brains became good at it.

In his seminal book, **Sapiens**, Yuval Noah Harari argues that our species enjoyed a cognitive revolution between 70,000 and 30,000 years ago, enabling us to separate from every other animal. Other animals could communicate, but they could not transfer large amounts of information about their world. We could. Stories helped us build better tools and become more skilled hunters. They taught us how to behave. Through powerful narratives we shared information more broadly so that we could organize larger groups. We could even paint a picture of what a future world could look like. Those stories inspired communities, and ultimately civilizations, to bring that vision to fruition.



Image courtesy of [Animator Island](#)

So, what actually happens when we hear a story?

When we listen to a story, we effectively put ourselves in the shoes of the protagonist. We ask, “how would I react in this situation?” The neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni describes how our *mirror neurons* are activated when this happens. They allow us to feel what others experience as if we were in the story ourselves. How else can you explain the fact that some of us cry at movies? (**Toy Story 3** was a killer for me).

A study by researcher Jeffrey M. Zacks describes how MRI scans of the brain support this phenomenon. He reports that the brain's areas that “light up”

when you are reading about an experience are the same as those that light up when you *have* that experience yourself.

Let's try this out.

In 2019, my wife Carla and I took our first trip to India. India is an assault on the senses. On a drive from Agra to Jaipur, in northern India, we passed food stands offering fresh-made roti, spices and roasted delicacies; we were “accompanied” side-by-side on the roadways with every imaginable animal (camels, dogs, pigs, elephants, water buffalo, and mules). Women in brilliant saris the color of marigolds carried shimmering silver water jugs on their heads; cars honked incessantly and hurtled seemingly directly at us before swerving into another lane. There were numerous wedding processions with dozens of revelers dancing behind slow-rolling trucks with massive speakers blaring Indian pop music. As we experienced that sensory overload, the parts of our brains that process those senses “lit up.” The *exact* same parts of *your* brain just lit up as you read that passage. When a story taps into our senses (touch, feel, sound, smell), it activates the insula in a way that doesn't happen when straight facts are related.

In his book, **The Storytelling Animal**, Jonathan Gottschall writes, “fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than writing that is specifically designed to persuade through argument and evidence.” Gottschall cites studies by the psychologists Melanie Green and Tim Brock, which argue that stories “radically alter the way information is processed.” The more absorbed people are in a story, the more the story affects them. Gottschall concludes that when we hear factual arguments, we listen to them, “with our dukes up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally and this seems to leave us defenseless.”

Great stories pique our curiosity; we must know what's going to happen next. The most captivating stories begin with a conflict (or a series of them) that the protagonist must overcome. Again, this all comes down to survival. If we know how others have handled certain situations, we'll be better prepared to handle them in our own lives. Stories were passed along to help our families and communities survive. It's in our DNA.

To be a successful leader, you must convey to your audience what your customer is going through at a visceral level. So when you're in front of an audience, put their entire brain to work and tell a story!



Michelle Crosby, the founder of Wevorce, tells a riveting story. She recounts the awful experience she went through as a child of divorce to help portray the characters in her product story and the problems they face. At the age of 9, Michelle's parents were unable to decide on custody, so a judge literally asked her, "Which parent would you like to live with?" What a heart-wrenching thing to put a kid through! When Michelle tells her origin story on camera, you see the pain of this moment etched on her face. She says, and her voice cracks a little, "when you're nine, you want to live with both."

Michelle created Wevorce to help couples through this extraordinarily challenging time and make the process of divorce more civil. Her story keeps her team focused on this problem and how to solve it; it's also instrumental in helping her gain a following. She was invited to join an elite start-up accelerator (Ycombinator) and has raised over \$5M to grow her business. Never underestimate the power of a compelling story. It's pure science.

Stories Work in All Cultures

I often hear from students who question whether storytelling will work in their culture. Jack Ma, Dara Khosrowshahi, and Shan-Lynn Ma are all leaders who demonstrate that storytelling is a genuinely universal experience. Jack Ma is the founder of China's Alibaba, one of the largest companies in the most populous country on the planet. Dara Khosrowshahi, an Iranian-American, runs Uber. And Shan-Lynn Ma founded one of the fastest-growing young retail companies, Zola, a bridal registry company, after she moved to the US from Australia.

During my days as a Marketing executive at Yahoo! in the early 2000s, I was fortunate enough to be around some extraordinary people. Stephen Spielberg, Tom Cruise, Ellen DeGeneres, and Jack Ma were among them. Yahoo! had been one of Alibaba's biggest early investors. It was not unusual to see Ma on campus with Yahoo!'s co-founder Jerry Yang.

Jack is charming, humble, and persuasive. He tells a wonderful story in a **60 Minutes** interview where he recalls how he was inspired to get into the Internet when he visited the U.S. as a translator in 1995. A friend in Seattle was showing him the Internet, and he describes the encounter this way, "I never touched (a) keyboard before. I never (had been) using a computer before, and I said, 'what is Internet?' He said, 'Jack, just search whatever you want on the Internet. I said, 'how can I search? What does search mean?' He said, 'just type.' I said, 'I don't want to type!' 'Computer is so expensive in China, I don't want to destroy it!' He said, 'It's not a bomb, just type.'"

Jack sits in his office in an unbuttoned sky-blue jacket with a Mandarin collar and a crisp white shirt. He's a slight man, but his eyes are so alive he appears oversized. He uses his hands to help tell the story as he goes on. "So, I typed the first word called 'beer.' At that time, very slow, come up American beer, Japan beer, German beer, but not Chinese beer. So, I was curious and type China. No China. No data. So, I come back to Hangzhou, one dollar in my pocket, scared, worried, and I came back and said, 'I want to do something called Internet.'" He went on to build one of the world's most significant companies.

Jack grabbed his audience from his first words. "I never touched (a) keyboard before. I never (had been) using a computer before, and I said, 'what is Internet?'" Here is one of the top technology leaders on the planet and the story starts with his fear of a keyboard. He then demonstrates many ways to tap into emotion. Jack used humor. Here's a man who created one of the ten biggest companies in the world poking fun at himself by describing his friend's reaction to his tech phobia, "it's not a bomb!" He uses a combination of pauses and animation to keep the audience hanging on his every word. He provides just enough detail to pull you into the story, "Chinese beer. No China. No data." He tells us his intent ("I want to do something called Internet") and the obstacle he faces, ("one dollar in my pocket").

In another famous video, he exhorts his early leadership team. In this speech, in a small, crowded room in Hangzhou, Jack creates an enemy, a classic storytelling technique. The enemy is "American companies." Jack said that Americans may be good at hardware, but if his team worked hard, they could do software as well or better than the Americans. He was right.

Born in Iran, Dara Khosrowshahi fled to France with his family at nine years old, at the beginning of the Iranian revolution. They eventually made their way to the United States and Dara followed his older brother to Brown University to study engineering. This proved to be a great training ground for his career as a problem-solver in business. But the most valuable course he took, that "marked me as an individual," Dara said, was European Intellectual History. "It was a tough course. Mary Gluck was a tough professor. But it really opened me up to

the power of storytelling,” Dara said during an interview at his alma mater in 2018. He learned how people developed philosophies, shared ideas, and changed cultures through narrative. “I’ve taken that into working and leadership in companies. Stories are such an incredibly powerful medium to inspire, to unite, to guide.”

During a different interview, Dara told a story about how he was discovered by the entertainment and Internet mogul Barry Diller when he was a young analyst at the investment bank Allen and Company. Diller had been working with the investment bank to launch a hostile tender offer for Paramount pictures while running QVC. “He’s this *giant* Hollywood Mogul.” Dara raises his hands above his head as he describes the moment. “It was a dramatic offer where we’d make bids, and they’d make bids, very competitive, public battle.” Dara is adding color to the background of the story so we understand how high the stakes are. “Barry would deal with an SVP, a VP, and an Associate, and somehow he found out that I was running the deal model... and I was on the trading floor, just this nobody.” Dara takes the time to introduce the setting and the characters in this story so we understand the power dynamic between the two of them.

Dara describes the encounter by “playing” Diller and himself. As he does so, he uses vocal variety to make Diller sound important and then modifies his voice to act sheepishly as he plays the younger version of himself. Diller: “You’re the one who built the deal model, right?” Dara: “Yes, Mr. Diller.” Diller: “I want you to explain to me *exactly* how it works.” Dara: “When?” Diller: “Right now.” Dara explains what he learned from the encounter. “Barry wanted to know everything about the deal model from the person who actually built it... he really believes in going to the source. Every time you get information that’s filtered, you lose fidelity in the information.” In the end, Diller didn’t get the deal, and Dara said his reaction was simple: “‘We lost. They won. Next.’ I wanted to be part of next.” Diller hired Dara and he ultimately ran Expedia, one of Diller’s companies. Dara shared something he learned from the experience; get information from the source and keep moving forward. This simple, well-chosen anecdote taught us a lot about Dara and what he values.

When he took over the leadership of Uber in 2017, Dara used those storytelling skills to shepherd a change in culture. Much of Uber’s early success stemmed from the “wild west” approach of its co-founder, Travis Kalanick. Uber grew rapidly and transformed urban transportation. But this explosive growth led to a myriad of problems, and Dara was brought in to temper the company’s methods and better accommodate its many constituents: employees, riders, drivers, city governments, regulators, and investors. Dara knew that running a complex corporation required the ability to set a True North and used storytelling to align the community accordingly.

I recruited Shan-Lyn Ma out of Stanford Business School to work on my Marketing team at Yahoo! in 2006. She was extremely sharp, motivated, charming, and had one of the world's coolest Australian accents. Years later, Shan-Lyn went on to create the bridal registry powerhouse Zola.

"When I was growing up, I was not like other little girls," Shan-Lyn explained at an industry event in 2017. "Many of my friends wanted to be pilots or astronauts, or fire-fighters or teachers." She continues, "I wanted to be Jerry Yang, the co-founder of Yahoo!" Shan-Lyn commands the dais at an industry event where she is promoting Zola. "He set the stage for Google, and Facebook and I idolized Jerry and wanted to be like Jerry. Looking at him, I saw another immigrant who started with very little, but worked very hard and now has a lasting impact on the world." Shan-Lyn is weaving a tale that describes the arc of her origin story -- from her beginnings as a Chinese-Australian girl to one of the leading women tech founders in America. She's also subtly using the technique of sharing an analog. She was effectively saying, here's this immigrant (Jerry) who came to America to create an amazing innovation, and now you're hearing from *another* immigrant (me) who's come to America to do the same.

"I saw that Jerry and other Silicon Valley founders had gone to Stanford, so I went to Stanford for my MBA, and of course I went (on) to Yahoo!. My best day was when I passed Jerry Yang in the corridor. He didn't see me, but I saw him, and I silently freaked out." Anyone who has ever seen their idol in person can relate to this story. Shan-Lyn is sharing a moment, which helps her audience understand her aspiration to follow in his substantial shoes. As of 2017, Shan-Lyn had never properly met Jerry or spoken to him. But that would soon change. Not only did he meet and talk with Shan-Lynn, Jerry also became an investor in the bridal registry company that she founded. His investment was part of the \$100 million she raised to grow her extraordinary company.