

“It’s the way you tell it” - influencing leaders with stories from the front-line

Introduction

A common way in which people communicate information is through a formal presentation. The format is familiar. Presenters prepare slides identifying the important points. They carefully rehearse what they want to say and how they want to say it.

Meanwhile, the audience sits quietly, listening and reading the slides. If minds wander then they can always refer to the hard copy of the presentation they have in front of them.

The format – and the conventions associated with it – helps people stay in their comfort zones. It fulfils expectations. But at the same time it can make the communication empty of emotion and the speaker’s personality.

Does this matter?

With a different approach, one that is more informal and conversational, the presenter becomes a storyteller communicating their values and passion. This transforms the experience of both presenter and audience: it is motivating, more informative and creates a lasting impression.

This article describes the impact of that approach and the facilitation process that enabled it to happen in the context of a large, formal conference.

As you’ll see, the changes involved are very simple. The facilitation required, although critical, is minimal. Yet the impact of this change is significant in terms of personal development and organisational learning.

The formal conference

The leadership team at First Group have an annual health and safety conference. The conference is an opportunity for the organisation to celebrate the safety achievements of those on the front line. Some award winners give presentation focussing on action and results.

The theme of the conference this year was Safety Leadership – how leaders can influence through trust, communication and respect. As a result, attention was paid to how this theme could be reflected in the way people presented. All presenters were offered coaching from Tess Allen, the designer and facilitator of the event.

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How award winners might present their work was particularly important. Here was an opportunity for the leadership team to see how managers in front-line services were successfully leading on health and safety.

John Evans, the Group HR Director, had the idea that the award winners should be interviewed on stage together rather than giving separate presentations. This would enable them to tell the story of their achievement.

This might appear to be a minor change. However, the right level of care and support were needed to enable it to happen.

The Challenge

The two award winners asked to present were Yoker Rail Depot in Glasgow (part of Scotrail) and Doncaster Bus Depot (part of First South Yorkshire Ltd).

Those representing Doncaster Bus Depot - the Operations Manager Peter Mair and Engineering Manager Alan Barstow – arrived prepared to give the usual power-point presentation.

“I’m comfortable with presenting things when the material is my own and I know the audience. The thought of presenting to managing directors of First Group plc and the visitors, that was quite daunting. I know my own MD and am used to speaking to him, but I don’t know what these other directors think.”

“We’d prepared a power-point presentation because that was what we were told was wanted. We’d delivered it to our local executive board to prepare ourselves. So we were comfortable in what we were saying and the type of questions that they might ask.” (Peter)

They arrived the evening before the ceremony to be told by Tess that the format had changed and they were to be interviewed live on stage.

“That changed my whole perception of what was going to happen. Again, the apprehension set in. We were comfortable with the media we had, we had it there on the screen behind us, we had it in front of us, we knew exactly what we were going to say. We felt we’d lost control of what was happening.”
(Peter)

On the other hand those representing Yoker Rail Depot – the Operations Manager Ben Doran and Deputy Neil Slavin – didn’t know until the last minute that they had won the award.

“We hadn’t prepared anything. We didn’t think we had to do a presentation at all. It was a shock!”
(Neil)

On their home turf these men were knowledgeable, experienced and confident managers. Their leadership capability had already been demonstrated by what their depots had achieved in terms of safety improvements. But faced with this alien situation they felt fearful, unconfident and out of control.

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It’s clear that they couldn’t be expected simply to walk on stage, sit down and start speaking naturally and comfortably in front of this audience.

Preparation

Tess had two hours preparation time with the award winners the evening before the ceremony. She had three objectives in mind - to:

1. rebuild their confidence that this was something they could do and do well
2. help them shape the story they wanted to tell:
 - what was the point at which you decided things needed to change?
 - What was happening before that point?
 - What changes did you make?
 - What was the result?
 - How will you sustain the changes?
3. reassure them that she would look after them throughout the live interview.

“We sat down with Tess and Neil and Ben and talked about it. Tess explained that we’re just going to talk about health and safety at your organisation and your thoughts about it. And I realised then well I’ve got control over it because everything we’re talking about is in the presentation. And we had control because we discussed all the points we wanted to raise and how we’d won the award. We knew that we had control via Tess as facilitator. So it relaxed me.” (Peter)

Creating ‘our space’

At the ceremony itself later the following day, Tess, Ben, Alan, Neil and Peter sat together in the auditorium waiting to go on stage. Tess:

“Everything was set up very formally. Five chairs had been put on the stage in a line facing the audience. I led the award winners up onto the stage. I turned to look at Ben and could see fear in his eyes. I made eye contact with each of them and then turned and said to the audience ‘welcome to my front room, we’ve just got to make a few adjustments here.’ When I said this I felt the tension rise in the audience. The five of us took the time to rearrange the chairs.”

Creating the space together was very important. It breaks the conventions of a formal conference and in doing so makes the atmosphere more informal. The physical activity itself helps to settle nerves and establish control: it communicates the message that “this is *our space* and we know what we’re going to do with it.” It also creates anticipation among the audience: “this is strange, what’s going to happen next?”

Changing the space also meant that they could design it with support in mind: “how can we make this space as supportive to us as possible?”

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“We created the space together. We created our own comfort zone. We changed the chairs so they were in a semi-circle. This meant that we were all in our peripheral vision and if we wanted to look at the audience we had to physically turn to do so.

“I wasn’t as aware of the audience as I would be facing them doing a presentation. When you’re looking out at all these people, they’re silent, looking at you and you’re left imagining what they might be thinking. But because the only people we were focussing on were ourselves, I felt more relaxed. It was more homely.

“Also, when you’re standing up giving a presentation with someone else, your partner disappears out of your view and all you can see is the audience. But this way, Alan was sitting next to me and I could see him clearly.” (Peter)

As facilitator, the priority for Tess was enabling the award winners to tell their story. At the beginning of the interview Ben couldn’t answer the question because he started coughing. She broke a convention again by standing up, getting down from the stage and fetching a glass of water from the nearest delegate table. While this was happening everything else stopped and the audience had to wait. This action increased the sense of informality.

“When I got down off the stage to get Ben a glass of water, there was a noticeable shift in the atmosphere with people (both on and off stage) becoming more relaxed.”

Delivery

Once they were seated, Tess introduced the award winners to the audience and set the scene by summarising what they’d been talking about earlier and telling the audience that they now wanted to share that discussion with them. In this introduction Tess was preparing the audience, but at the same time she was re-establishing with Peter, Ben, Alan and Neil their earlier conversation and reassuring them that nothing unexpected was going to happen.

“Tess asked the questions in the same way she had the evening before and we felt comfortable with what we were saying. Again, in a formal presentation, you each have prepared bits to say. Whereas here, it was more like a discussion - if Alan made a comment I could add something to it.” (Peter)

Having provided the support they needed to feel relaxed and confident about what they were doing, Tess’ role became far less important as the award winners themselves took over.

This changed format allowed the award winners to show more of themselves and tell more of the story of their achievement.

“(The format) allowed us to delve into our own expertise, what we do on a day to day basis in our own job. And it got you thinking ‘well we have been successful in winning this award, why shouldn’t we talk about it?’ (Neil)

While also naturally communicating their feelings:

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“The discussion felt natural so your true feelings come out. I felt more ‘this is me’. As someone mentioned afterwards, the audience could pick up that what we were saying we were really passionate about. I think that passion came out more than it would have done if we were standing there doing a power-point presentation.” (Peter)

The effect was to encourage people in the audience to listen – they didn’t know what was coming next:

“With power-point you put some figures up and you feel obliged to discuss those. You focus more on the points on the slides. The audience can see them and know what you’re going to say next. So are they really listening?”

“But this way, they didn’t know what we were going to say. They had to pay more attention. Also, the points could flow better, it was all less regimented.” (Peter)

Impact

The award winners experienced a tremendous sense of achievement:

“I would never have thought that I would’ve been able to do anything like that - particularly with that kind of audience with all the MDs. But the way it was set out with the comfy chairs and the informal environment with everyone having their turn to speak, we talked for 45 mins and it didn’t feel anything like that!

“Someone came up to me afterwards and asked whether I did public speaking.” (Neil)

They enjoyed the opportunity to communicate directly with the leadership team about their work and success:

“The audience realised that ‘these people are here because they’ve won the award so they must be doing something right’. They seemed genuinely interested in finding out how we did things so that they could pass it on to the rest of the organisation.” (Neil)

“Us attending an award presentation and receiving a certificate and round of applause from dignitaries is fine but they don’t know how we got that award.”

“The way this year’s conference went, we could give them the message that ‘you’ve got the ideas but we’ve driven it forward and you should listen to what we’ve got to say because we’ve won it’. In the past there was no sharing like this. Instead, it was ‘Doncaster’s won that award, well done’ but they wouldn’t know how we’d done it.”

“This year, the MDs and the rest of the leadership could actually hear and feel how we’d won it. We’ve passed the message on and they can take it up and utilise it elsewhere.” (Peter)

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Seamus Scallon (Safety Director, UK Rail) is a member of the safety leadership team. This was his experience as a member of the audience:

“As a leadership team what we were talking about was how we can influence others, how we can change mindsets by leading by example, by motivating and getting in amongst staff and telling them what’s expected of them.

“It was evident from their discussion, how these front-line managers had achieved so much. You could see it in their demeanour, in their passion for what they do. It isn’t about applying a big budget. It’s about transforming people’s beliefs and attitudes towards Injury Prevention through your own commitment and actions.”

“If you’re selling [safety improvement] you can look at the stats and see where we think improvements have been made but in terms of producing the slide that will motivate individuals it’s a very difficult thing to do in terms of communication.

“But with this style and method a lot more could be achieved. I was impressed by the response from the audience. You could see that some people were deeply moved. I could see them changing and adapting their views and values and as a member of the safety team that was important to me.

“It must have been very impressive to people to see front-line managers who are fluent and very eloquent in understanding what their roles are and appreciating others’ safety.”

At the end of the 45 minute discussion the audience gave the award winners a standing ovation:

“If you win an award of course everyone applauds. But this was different. I heard this noise and knew that people were clapping. Then I looked round to see that people were on their feet. Well they only do that for a celebrity and I’m not a celebrity!

“There was Sir Moir Lockhead giving us a standing ovation. It gave us a tremendous feeling. The audience must have felt the passion coming through from the stage.” (Peter)

“I was shocked, that was wonderful. I was pleased that I could carry it off without any hitches, but to get a standing ovation - the hairs on the back of my neck were standing up.” (Neil)

Conclusion

Formal presentations are usually adopted as the norm at conferences. A few people enjoy giving this kind of presentation and excel at giving a motivating and impassioned performance. But most of us are fundamentally uncomfortable with this form of communication. We focus instead on getting through the experience with as much clarity and coherence as possible and without exposing ourselves too much.

At this year’s First Group conference the format was designed to suit the people presenting rather than the other way round. This allowed the award winners to tell their story in their own way and to enjoy the process.

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Effective leaders come in many different shapes and sizes. Ben, Alan, Neil and Peter were able to show themselves as influential leaders who embody the values of the organisation and achieve results. In turn, the leadership team was able to learn from the skills and experience of those at the front-line.

This change in approach and the impact it had was made possible by Tess’ facilitation. What she did was very simple – none of this is rocket science – but it was essential in providing the award winners with the confidence and courage they needed to risk doing something different.

The last word to Neil:

“I now think - well what else can we achieve?”

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