

# Every professional has stories to tell.

by Seth Kahan

Human beings have been telling stories since the dawn of language. Evidence points to narrative as the way the human brain is wired. We learn by making sense of the world through the stories we hear and those we tell ourselves.

In business meetings we tediously review charts and graphs, build and recite from PowerPoint, and write in outline form. But, what do we do when the meeting is over? Run out into the hallway and begin to tell stories! It's a relief! Why? ...because it is our nature.

John Seely Brown, former Chief Scientist of Xerox PARC, called stories, "the smallest portable context." Stories carry with them little worlds that make their know-how situational, allowing us to remember them easily and adapt them to new circumstances.

So, how do we get our colleagues to tell us the stories that will matter, enlighten us, and guide us on the road to growth? Learn the guidelines here and begin acting on them. Soon you will be enjoying the company of your colleagues every time you have the opportunity to be together. You may even find yourself watching less television, and seeking out friends and family just to listen to the stories they have to tell!

## Guideline #1

We build our stories around memorable events and the people & things that impact our lives. Look for cues from your colleagues about what they value and ask them to tell you about it.

### Examples:

You sit down in someone's office and see an award or certificate on the wall or a special paperweight on their desk. The fact that they have chosen to display this item means that it holds some unique value for them. You might ask, "What's the story behind that paperweight?" or "Why is your certificate for Project Management Excellence important to you?" Find a way to inquire into their world, and always ask them to tell you a little more.

## Guideline #2

Stories form in our mind around turning points, experiences of marked change including both crises and positive developments. Ask colleagues about the milestones of their lives.

### Examples:

- "Do you remember where you were on Sept. 11, 2001? Tell me about it."
- "Has there been a time when your career changed direction significantly? If so, how did it happen?"
- "What was the most important factor that brought you to work here?"
- "Who has influenced you most in your work? Tell me how you see their impact on the way you do things."
- "When did you decide to study lasers (or whatever their profession entails)? Tell me about that time in your life."

## Guideline #3

It is easier to recall a story when you have the time to draw out, or unfold, some of the memories associated with it. As you listen to another's story, ask them to elaborate on points that seem to have particular significance.

### Examples:

- "You said, 'That one comment made more of an impression' than anything you have read on the subject. Tell me why. What did that comment mean to you and how did it change the way you look at the world?"
- "So your mentor was eccentric... how did you know? What made you draw that conclusion?"

## Everyone loves to tell a story.

Story is a fundamental way that we create our identity: constructing meaning around our life experience. Become a *storylistener* and the world will stop at your feet. When you ask someone to tell their story and take the time to listen, you are performing a magical act that opens both of you up to new worlds.