

Mastering Mentoring 16 Use Stories

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD**



A simple and highly effective method of conveying lessons learned is for the mentor to share true stories from the past. As we go through life, we all learn from our experiences. Sharing a good story is not only an entertaining way to convey a point, but it leaves a more lasting impression because it conveys truth.

One important thing to do is emphasize the lesson learned at the end of the story. If this step is omitted, the entertainment factor will still be there, but the connection to apply the learning may be weak.

I will share an example of a story I tell in all my leadership classes. It was a lesson I learned very early in my career about the importance of having a great culture. Here is the story.

The Sleepy Employee

Early in my career, I was working as an Assistant Department Head in a manufacturing organization. One day I was walking down a hallway with the Department Head, who was my manager at the time. I pointed to an inspector who had his head down and was sleeping on the job.

I said, "See that inspector? He is worthless! He has no initiative and is just a slug here at work. We are putting him on Final Warning and plan to fire him next week."

The Wake-Up Call for Me

My manager squared up in front of me and said in a low voice, "You know, you are right Bob. Here at the plant, that guy is just about worthless. He is always goofing off or doing inappropriate things. I don't blame you for wanting to fire him because he is a nothing here.

But I am the Fire Chief at the Volunteer Fire Department, and that young man happens to be a member of that Fire Department.

You should see what that guy is like when he walks through the door of that Fire Department. He is a ball of energy, he comes up with great ideas, he volunteers for extra work, he stays late to help clean up. He is a real ball of fire when he is in that culture. So, you tell me, Bob, who is the problem, is it him or is it you?"

Lesson Learned

The moral is that when you put people in a culture where they are **challenged** and **treated well**, almost all of them will perform like superstars.

Searing the Point Into the Brain

If you made that last statement in a vacuum, it might have some impact, but when prefaced by that true story, it makes a much stronger and memorable point.

Why it Works

People can relate to the story and get caught up in the narrative. When you get to the punchline of the lesson learned, it is jolting enough that people internalize the key message.

If you are in a leadership position and are not satisfied with the performance of your team, rather than blame the people for not being good enough. Instead, look into a mirror, and ask yourself who is the real problem here.

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