

THAT'S MY STORY AND I'M STICKING TO IT!

The Power of Storytelling in Training

By
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Let me tell you a story. Imagine you're out walking and you come upon a construction site. You ask the first person you encounter, *"What are you doing?"* He says, *"I'm making \$12 an hour."* You continue on, stop at the next person, and again ask, *"What are you doing?"* This worker says, *"I'm a stone mason. I'm building a wall."* You walk on and pause beside a third individual. You ask the same question, *"What are you doing?"* He looks up, smiles and replies, *"I'm building a cathedral to the greater glory of God."*

Each of these workers is doing the same job but they have very different visions of the work. Which vision of police work do the recruits or officers you train have? Are they earning a paycheck, feeling pride as a professional, or do they see the importance of their work in something that has greater and lasting meaning than even their career? Do you think their vision influences how they do their job? Do you think it might influence how they respond to your training?

How might you help the recruits or officers you train see themselves as building a cathedral to the greater glory of protecting and serving others? What if you told them this story at the beginning of your training? What if you asked them which vision they had regarding policing? Regarding the training? Did they ever feel that policing was "building a cathedral?" When? If they don't still feel that way, when did they start to change? What caused the change? What if you continued and asked them who is responsible for how they view their job? The training? Who can change their view? Do they think their view of their job might impact anyone else? Who? How? Do they want to impact these people this way? How might they regain the vision of building a cathedral in their work?

NOW – let me ask you, what is your vision of your training? Are you earning a paycheck, taking pride as a professional? Or are you building cathedrals? If you're not building cathedrals, put yourself through the rest of the questions you might pose to officers.¹

What just happened here? You were told a story. And then you were debriefed on the story with questions intended to pull you in, to have you connect the story to your life and work experience, to help you see how you might apply the story in your law enforcement training. If you had been in a training where this story was told, as soon as you heard, *"Let me tell you a story,"* you likely would have put your pens down, relaxed in your chairs and opened up your body postures, you would've taken the words in.

When was the last time you overheard anyone come out of a training and talk animatedly about a bulleted Power Point slide? Storytelling, when done well and appropriately, is a powerful training tool.

To tell stories well, you must learn them and practice aloud. There is no quicker way to extinguish the light of a story than to drone on and read it verbatim. You must get off the page. Explore the dramatic range and possibility of your voice and body in the story. Are there multiple characters? Vary your voice to express that. Use movement to portray the action of the story, including bringing the story out into the audience or pulling them into it by proximity, touch and gesture.

To tell stories appropriately, you must know *why* you are telling them. There is nothing that gives storytelling a worse rap than trainers who go on and on with “war stories,” especially ones in which they star, as a substitute for content. Regardless of the purpose of your story, it must serve your training topic.

Stories can appropriately be told for the purpose of entertaining. Entertaining stories can establish rapport between the trainer and recruits or officers. We are generally more open to spending time with and learning from someone we like. And entertaining stories can provide a much-needed break from concentrated physical or mental training. They can help clear our minds and bodies to receive more new information. They can clear the air of tension. They can raise the energy level in a room when it begins to lag.

Stories can also engage, educate, encourage and evoke exploration and self-discovered learning. Information, insights and applications that are self-discovered through a story and its debriefing not only develop critical thinking skills – essential to modern policing -- they stick with us.

To maximize the training punch of stories, they should be debriefed with officers or recruits. Stories can be effectively debriefed through questions, as was done with “Building a Cathedral,” above. They can also be debriefed using a personal application statement. For example, “Our vision of our work can profoundly affect our lives and those around us. I ask each of you to reflect on where and how you have experienced this. In a moment we'll share our insights.” Or, “The point of this story is that each of us is in charge of how we view our work as police officers. I ask each of you to think about what your view is and how you are responsible for it.”

Debriefing is commonly overlooked, mostly because trainers don't view stories as part of the training content. But planning a story's debriefing will ensure it has a training purpose. The only exceptions to debriefing a training story are: (1) when it is solely for the purpose of entertaining; (2) when it is used to close a training; (3) when it is powerful enough that it compels people to debrief it on their own.² “Jesus didn't stop to do a group activity after he gave the parables of the New Testament. Great stories can be self-sufficient.”³

This article began with a story you might tell officers or recruits at the beginning of any law enforcement training to challenge them to truly invest themselves in the training and the work they do. It also challenges you to wholly commit to the glory of your work as a law enforcement trainer. Let me conclude with a story.

One of the greatest football coaches was Lou Little. President Eisenhower included Lou Little as one of the greatest leaders he ever knew.

When Little was a coach at Georgetown University he had a reserve end named Dennis Flaherty, who came into scrimmage every afternoon with an older man. On the day of their big game with rival, Holy Cross, Flaherty asked, *“Mr. Little, can I start in today's game?”*

“Son,” replied Little, *“you're too small. I know you give your heart out in scrimmage. That's why I sometimes put you in at the end of the game when it doesn't matter.”*

“Well, Mr. Little. I've prayed. If I don't do everything an end should do, pull me out after the first 5 minutes.”

Coach Little let Flaherty start and the young man played all 60 minutes that day. He blocked a kick, sacked the quarterback twice, intercepted one pass and caught another for a touchdown.

After the game, Little asked, *“Flaherty, how did you know you could even play such a game?”*

“Well, Mr. Little, that was my Dad that came with me every day.”

“I gathered that,” said Little.

“Dad was blind,” explained Flaherty, *“and last night he died. So you see, Coach Little, today was the first time Dad could ever see me play.”*

Do you have someone you love and respect watching you play? Play the game for them. Why? Because, in the end, that is the story your life will tell.

1Story and debriefing *adapted from* Stories Trainers Tell – 55 Ready-to-Use Stories to Make Training Stick , 85-86, Mary B. Wacker and Lori L. Silverman, Pfeiffer, an Imprint of John Wiley & sons, Inc. (2003).

2Chip Bell, Performance Research Associates, Inc., *quoted in* Stories Trainers Tell , 96.

3Chris Clarke-Epstein, owner, SPEAKING!, *quoted in* Stories Trainers Tell , 96.