

The Power of the Stories We Tell Ourselves

A Manifesto for Success
on Your Own Terms

New Story
Chapter One



Life is crazy enough without having to add to it all the crazy stories we tell ourselves! If we tell ourselves the right stories, we can find success. But, if we tell ourselves the wrong stories, then no amount of intelligence or hard work will bring about the success we desire.

Stories are what make us human. Most of the time, we are not conscious of the fact we have all these stories going on in the background. We have these secret and silent stories about money, work, relationships, opportunity... and even success itself.

How do we know when we are telling ourselves the wrong stories?

The answer is very simple: we are not feeling good about our results.

Bad stories= feel bad about our results 😞

Good stories= feel good about our results! 😊

Here is an example of how a change of stories saved someone's career and the company hundreds of thousands of dollars...

Your name is Gabriel, and you are the head of IT for a large financial technology firm. The fact you are brilliant and have plenty to offer doesn't matter. The fact you work many late nights doesn't matter. The fact the CEO hired you doesn't matter. The fact you were on the leadership team, and they wanted and needed your input, doesn't matter either.

Gabriel's problem was he *had the wrong stories going on* in his head, and that **secret and silent career killer** was preventing him from fully contributing as a member of the leadership team.

Gabriel became increasingly frustrated in weekly leadership meetings. He would be sitting in a meeting and not be able to listen or contribute to the conversation because he was so worried about what to say when it would be his turn.

The wrong stories kept spinning around in Gabriel's head. It was consuming his entire self-talk at work and home. He was having trouble sleeping because it's all he could think about. He kept telling himself the team was not listening to him and ignored his concerns. He believed they were sitting there just waiting to judge and dissect

anything he would say. Maybe they didn't like him. Maybe it was his accent. Gabriel wasn't exactly sure what it was...but *he knew it was something!*

When it came to his turn to report in the meetings, he would initially freeze up, creating an awkward silence. Teammates braced themselves because when he eventually spoke up, he would do so with a strong energy and would say, "we need to do this..." and "we need to do that" Not realizing he was speaking for the rest of the team by doing so. Needless to say, it didn't go over well.

Feeling under attack, the other team members responded by either dismissing him or arguing with him. It made no difference how "right" he was about anything. Unfortunately, his poor interaction with the leadership team caused him to *double down* on telling himself the wrong stories!

Over time, the stories Gabriel was telling himself (nobody else told them to him) caused him to start doubting himself. Maybe it is me. Maybe I'm really not that good. Maybe I'm an imposter. I don't like this anymore. Maybe I should leave.

Gabriel was falling to pieces.

The CEO finally had enough. He liked Gabriel, but he was becoming a liability. There was already a great deal of stress on the team to execute and Gabriel was slowing down progress. They didn't need this nonsense on top of it.

Hoping to turn things around, I was asked to coach Gabriel.

My job, as I saw it, was to help Gabriel understand that his stories about the situation were just that... stories. And because they were just stories, he could acknowledge them as such, let go of them, and **replace them with the right stories.**

We worked on developing a story that could work for both Gabriel and the team. A story where the team needed, wanted, and valued his input. A story where he was likable, and he, with his accent, added diversity to the team. A story where he understood that IT is foreign to most team members, and he would need to be patient with them. A story where his most important job was to be of service.

Fortunately...he got it!

Simply by changing his stories, Gabriel became a confident, contributing member of the leadership team. That's how powerful our stories are to our success!

Many people have created the story they are not capable or competent enough, although they are highly competent to do the job. On the other hand, there are a large group of people who are not competent who will lie to themselves about their limited capabilities. As a result, they make many business mistakes and then cover them up to avoid embarrassment.

Bottom line: never underestimate the power of the stories we tell ourselves. Replacing the wrong ones with a story by design is the fastest way to rapid transformation!

Our stories either make us or break us.



“Above all, the soul wants and needs stories.”

— JOSEPH CAMPBELL

Our secret and silent stories, often **hidden from our conscious mind**, determine our beliefs and actions related to *money, health, relationships, and career opportunities*. We are domesticated into these stories from dinner conversations as a kid, media images and messages, singular experiences, and other sources *not of our own making*.

I started my career as a trial attorney. I quickly noticed that while there was only one reality about a situation, people could come up with a dozen

different stories about it! Over time, I realized this phenomenon **of people having different stories about the same thing**, shows up everywhere- in boardrooms, in sales meetings, in arguments between managers, in the media, at home, and most importantly, in the conversations I was having with myself.

By the time I was 40, I was doing everything I thought I was supposed to do, but I was not getting the results I desired because I was secretly and silently telling myself the wrong stories!

It took a while, but I finally learned how to stop telling myself the wrong stories and start telling myself the right ones! The result was transformative.

I agree with writer and artist, Mo Willems, who said:

"If you ever find yourself in the wrong story, leave."



Telling yourself the right stories leads to success... in anything you do.

Now I will share nine quick examples of how stories impact company culture and success. Then I'll talk about a sales story, and then we'll turn to how your personal hero story impacts you!

Company Culture



Every company has a "culture." Some companies define it and improve it. Others simply wallow in it, for better or worse, while going about their business. Mainly because that's their story about the importance of defining their "culture!"

Before I can help any leader define and improve their culture, I try to understand what they mean by "culture." Get five leaders in a room, and you'll get five different stories as an answer. Even when they work at the same company!

What follows are stories I consider helpful when designing company culture. Of course, these stories will interrelate with each other to create the culture.

The Leader's story

It could be the CEO, not for profit director, or President. Whoever is running the show. The Leader. The Big Cheese. The face of the place! The story that person tells themselves about the company is where company culture begins. Many times, new leaders are brought in to share *their new story* of what the company could be.

One of my favorite questions for clients is, ***"What is your story about the company?"*** What is the past, current, and future story? We don't rush it. Take your time. Let it unfurl. Make it detailed and visual. Sometimes the exercise reveals they don't have the fully articulated story for the company they thought they did.

Once we clarify what the story is, we can determine if the story has, and will, produce the results they are after.

The story about commitment to the company vision, mission, values, and goals.

For example, Nordstrom's built its brand on a commitment to extraordinary customer service. That was, and is, their story. That commitment begins in the hiring process and is reinforced

through continuous training, policies, and procedures.

It is also reinforced by sharing stories of how customers have been treated gracefully, even in what might be considered a difficult situation. Like allowing someone to return tires to the store even though they never sold them. (It's a true story. The interesting thing is there was a tire store at the location previously.)

I can generally tell how well articulated a company's vision, mission, values, and goals are simply by walking around the place.

The story about relationships

Between management and employees, the company and its customers or clients, its vendors, and other stakeholders. I consider Southwest Airlines to have a high-relationship culture. Their story is to *love* their customers and employees. They give service with a smile and look to serve rather than throw off the vibe they are being annoyed by those bothersome people who want to use our planes. I love the Southwest story (it happens to be the most profitable one in the industry) and as a they are my first choice when flying.

The story about the quality

The Lexus story, adapted from the work of Dr. Edwards Deming, has been defined by "The relentless pursuit of perfection," which is why they produce the highest-rated sedan, year after year. They don't build a car allowing for tolerance; they strive to make the perfect car. That's the story they tell themselves, and they've executed on it. Interestingly, now they are shifting their story to become "the progressive luxury car of the 21st century." I am sure they will execute on that as well.



The story about compensation

The implicit story that runs throughout the workplace relationship is employers will pay employees as little as necessary to hire and retain them. The flip side of that story is that employees will work only as hard as they have to, so they don't get fired. In my experience, that story leads to mediocrity at best.

What would happen if you turned the compensation story on its head?

One of my young coaching clients, already financially successful by the time he was 25, bought a small manufacturing company and decided to pay each one of his employees at least \$100,000 per year, no matter their position. At that time, everyone thought he was a little bit off his rocker for doing so. However, ***the impact of that story on the workforce was transformative.***

They became the most dedicated, creative, and caring employees. He told me their productivity, customer satisfaction, and sales generated more than made up for the extra pay. Five years later, he sold his company handsomely and created an agreement with the acquiring company where existing employees would have job security, and at least a \$100,000 paycheck, for five years, unless let go for cause.

Now that is how you tell yourself an amazing compensation story!

The story about professionalism

I would expect a law firm, CPA firm, bank, or insurance company to have a very risk-averse story. I would expect the just opposite working for an Elon Musk or Richard Branson company. In my experience, the "new generation" of employees and clients are tired of the "old guard" story about professional relationships. Nobody wants a clown act, but enough of the stick in the mud approach already!

Having a professional culture doesn't mean you need to take the humanity out of your relationships. Perhaps the focus should be on being real, not just "professional."



The story about fun, creativity, and celebration.

This is not just about having a ping pong table or dartboard in the hallway. And it's not about an award ceremony. That story gets old soon enough.

Question: are your people allowed to have *fun while doing their work*? Pike's Place Fish Market in Seattle decided to have fun selling cold, smelly, and slimy objects. They even wrote the **Fish Philosophy** book about it. Is there any reason not to have a fun work story? What story is holding you back?

Fact is, you can have fun, invite creativity, be celebratory, and be profitable, all at the same time!

The story about when something feels unfair

We usually think of culture as a "sunny day" story. But the culture of an organization, team, or individual is on full display when something feels unfair. It's a cultural "tipping point."

How we collectively deal with our stuff is one of the true benchmarks of culture- at work or home. How often is the story about how we will deal with conflict ***purposely designed as part of our culture?***

The story about the work environment

Let me share an example of how a single "story" got in the way of financial opportunity and employee engagement. I was referred to the CFO of a printing company on the verge of bankruptcy. I consulted with them for one week. That work helped produce a \$1.5 million turnaround over the next six months.

On my first visit to the plant, I noticed how dirty and messy it was. The CFO also told me there were shift wars amongst the three shifts (they ran those expensive presses 24/7) about who left the area dirtier for the next shift, etc. When I asked the CFO why the place looked the way it did, he told me, "That's how all print shops look." Then I said, "**Well, that's one story**, what if your story was that a commercial print shop is a clean, organized, and inviting place?"

I encouraged the owners to hire a paint contractor and cleanup crew over the weekend, and also pay overtime to employees who wanted to help paint and clean. On Monday morning, their "new look" had an immediate impact. The fights stopped. The

three shifts took pride in leaving their workplaces neat and clean. The overall mood of the workforce elevated. The sales associates felt pride in bringing clients and prospects into the "back area" to watch how their work was being done.

I further encouraged the owners to use their printing prowess to line the walls with motivational quotes, client testimonials, and blown up pictures of their best work.

Every workplace tells stories.

Few workplaces are designed with the thought process "*what stories do I want my employees to be enveloped in every day?*" If I came into your workplace for the first time, knowing nothing about the work you do, what stories would it tell me? Those are the stories it's telling your employees... every day, day after day. **Show your stories!**

Then there are those companies where **it's all about their story**. Zappos being the poster child. People move to Las Vegas to work for Zappos so they can be part of *an amazing story*. After their initial training, Zappos offers to *pay people thousands of dollars to quit* who are not fully invested in the company story, ramping up the commitment even further.

Zappos **chose** to create a powerful company story about putting shoes in boxes, and it has produced amazing bottom-line results.



What powerful stories is are you telling to design your culture?

Powerful Sales Stories We Can Tell Ourselves



As the saying goes, ***facts tell, and stories sell!*** There are a ton of good books on how to use stories to sell something. However, I have yet to find a good sales book on *what stories to tell yourself when selling*. (If you know of that book, send it my way. I may just have to write it myself!)

In many sales situations, there is a prospect already intent on buying something. But then the salesperson blows the sale because, like Gabriel, they showed up with the wrong stories going on in their head. The stories spinning around are about things like needing the money, making quota, being liked, or how they could manipulate the prospect.

Now, because the prospect has come face to face with somebody showing up with the wrong stories, all that former eager prospect wants to do is ***get the heck out of there!***

People who tell themselves the wrong stories will lose a sale, no matter how perfect the product or service is. All the company's efforts at product design, operational excellence, training, marketing, and sales, are wasted in that moment... because that salesperson is operating with the wrong stories going on inside.

And then there's Gary...

Let me share an insight gained from one of the most successful salesmen I know. Year after year, Gary outsells everyone at his company by at least 3 to 1. One day I asked him if he had shared his sales secrets with the rest of the sales team. He responded they all sold the same products and had the same sales training. He didn't think he had any "secrets" to share. I suggested he may have unique insights, and I'd like to deconstruct what they are.

I began by bringing the entire sales team (9 people) together in the conference room and started by asking the question, "*What is the most important thing you do every day?*" If I asked you this question, what would your answer be? (Go ahead, try to answer it.)

All of the salespeople gave me a technical, task-driven response, such as create a plan, work the plan, learn the prospect's needs, address those needs, and so on. That was their story about what would drive sales success. And, if you executed on that approach, you would have a decent measure of success.

I saved Gary for last. The response he gave to that question was different in kind and affects me to this day! When I asked Gary, "What's the most important thing you do every day?" He said, **"I make people feel good about themselves."** After I recovered from the surprise response, I asked him, "Is that all it takes to be successful?"

Now isn't it true that the person who makes you feel good about yourself, you will do anything for, because they are such a rarity! How often are you focused on making the person you are selling to feel good about themselves? Is that one of the silent stories going on in your head when selling?

Then when I asked Gary how he made people feel good about themselves, he said, **"That's simple, I find the good in them."**

OMG. Rocket science!

Once I adopted Gary's internal conversation, my sales improved. And, so will yours. Even if the only thing you are selling is you.

Making people feel good about themselves by finding the good in them!

Now that's a sales story that sells!

Our Personal Hero Story

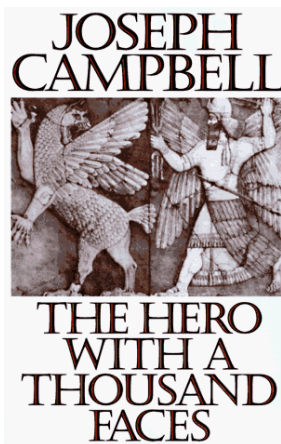


"The hero journey is inside of you; tear off the veils and open the mystery of your self."

- JOSEPH CAMPBELL

So now let's finish up this Manifesto talking about US. No matter who you are. There are many secret and silent stories we tell ourselves. One of the most destructive ones is the story that ***to be a hero, you must self-sacrifice.***

The hero's journey is a timeless story. One of its main themes is that of *the self-sacrificial hero*. I lived that Robinhood story for 17 years as a trial lawyer until it caught up with me. It resulted in a divorce, financial stagnation, and career burnout. Then I read Joseph Campbell's ***The Hero with a Thousand Faces*** and realized I had been telling myself the wrong story about how to be a hero!



Campbell's book goes through the mythology of the hero throughout history. In this mythology, *the hero is self-sacrificial*, generally dying by the sword. Today, we don't carry swords in the workplace, and we are usually not risking our lives, so all we have available to self-sacrifice with is... *our time*, or what I call *our energy*.

Unbeknownst to us, we have become domesticated in the story that self-sacrifice is an essential part of our hero journey. The truth is... ***that is nonsense!*** That story can only lead to *over-commitment, overwhelm, rejection, regret, and guilt*.

It's a no-win story. Ask yourself: **what are you sacrificing today for your idea of tomorrow?**

At the end of the book, Campbell admonishes the reader that today's hero can ***put down the sword and ideas of self-sacrifice***. He said today's hero can bring light to the bifurcated soul. Like Yoda did with the young Luke Skywalker. Interestingly, Lucas and Spielberg got much of their plotlines for Star Wars based on conversations with Joseph Campbell.

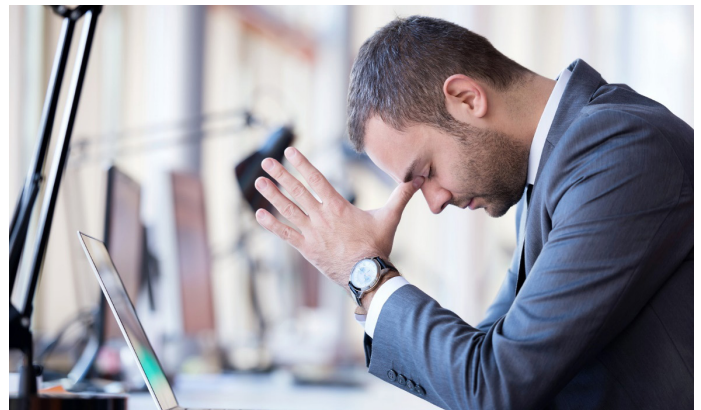


When we have the secret story that to be heroic or successful, we must self-sacrifice, that's what we'll

seek to do. We will ask family and friends to go along with our hero story. Daddy and mommy are not home because they are doing the heroic thing.

I will never forget a conversation I had with my wife when I was spending over 70 hours a week litigating nuclear power plant whistleblower cases. In my story, I was a hero working for "the cause." I suggested to my wife that she was supposed to support me on that hero journey. Her response, which stings to this day, was, "What about us, Don?" It's no surprise our marriage ended in divorce.

When Tim Ferriss' book, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, came out, he offered a different story for success and heroics. One where **we need not self-sacrifice or exhaust ourselves**. I decided I would better manage my time and, within a few years, went from working 70 hours a week down to 35 hours a week, making more money than I did in my litigation work. This time around, I had the right stories going on and it allowed me to be there for my family.



Is This Story True? - To be a Hero, it Has to be Hard.

Another part of the hero story is that our *work has to be hard*. The reality is that we have to take certain actions at work, and we can define those as either hard or easy or something else. ***It is a choice how we define our activities.***

I remember when I went to law school, the vast majority of my classmates had the secret story that law school would be hard. Many of them dropped out and many who didn't suffered for three years.

I didn't go in with the story that law school would be "hard." I'd already been through a bunch of "hard" stuff in my life. I told myself law school could be fun! All I had to do was read and listen to experts, which I love doing, and then repeat in either written or verbal form what I had learned. How hard could that be?

Even though many of my classmates and I did the same listening, reading, and studying, and had very

similar grades, I know *I had more fun* going through law school than the majority or them. **Because I told myself the story that law school would be fun learning experience, that's what it was!**

So, watch telling yourself the story that it has to be hard. Yes, you have to take action but you can consciously choose a story by design about those activities. Lucky for you, it's a choice.

The Story Quadrant

This is a tool to help you identify the secret, silent, and hidden stories you tell yourself. If you realize a story isn't working for you, then replace it with one of your own design. It is the most rapid methodology for personal and organizational transformation!

	ME	THEM
BE	<p>Stories about who I should be</p> <p>ex: I should be successful because...</p> <hr/> <p>ex: I should be fearful because...</p> <hr/> <p>ex: I will never be able to live my dreams because...</p> <hr/>	<p>Stories about who they should be</p> <p>ex: They should care about me because...</p> <hr/> <p>ex: They should be excited about _____ because...</p> <hr/> <p>ex: They should be transparent because...</p> <hr/>
DO	<p>Stories about what I should do</p> <p>ex: To be successful, I have to...</p> <hr/> <p>ex: To be attractive, I have to...</p> <hr/> <p>ex: To save my _____, I have to...</p> <hr/>	<p>Stories about what they should do</p> <p>ex: If they cared about me, they would...</p> <hr/> <p>ex: It's their job to...</p> <hr/> <p>ex: They need to make more money because...</p> <hr/>

Conclusion

It all starts with the ***secret and silent stories*** we *tell ourselves*. Those stories are usually hidden from our consciousness. We are domesticated into them. They are stories by happenstance, not stories by design.

Our stories impact the ability to become a whole person and do meaningful work.

Our stories about success, money, relationships, etc. impact not just us but also the people we love most in our lives.

The opportunity to understand the stories driving us, let go of the ones not working for us, and **replacing them with stories of our own design, is a transformative opportunity!**

As the author Neil Gaiman said, *"A story only matters, I suspect, to the extent that the people in the story change."*

Here's to change, transformation, and your...



Story Exercises



Get out your trusty journal (you do have one, right?), set some time aside, and write down your personal stories about...

1. What you're capable of.
2. What your opportunities are.
3. How to design a career that brings meaning to you.
4. How to be financially successful.
5. How to manage time.
6. How to show up in relationships.
7. Your health.
8. Your spirit.
9. The opportunity for fun and adventure.

If you are in leadership, you can also dig into your company stories about...

1. The company culture.
2. How to attract great employees.
3. How to get employees to perform in their highest and best use.
4. How to engage employees.
5. How to retain employees.
6. How to compensate employees.
7. When to let go of employees.
8. How to protect employees.

“Purposeful storytelling isn’t show business, it’s good business.”

—PETER GUBER



Don Phin is an executive life coach, strategic advisor, and professional speaker. He has worked with over 6000 CEOs, their teams, and professional associations to design better stories, so they can produce better results.

You can learn about Don and get a bunch of free tools you can use at www.donphin.com. He invites you to connect with him on LinkedIn too!