

How can the movies inspire companies?

SAVING THE BEST FOR LAST AND WORKING WITH ELEMENTS THAT RANGE FROM THE PROTAGONIST TO THE TRIGGER EVENT ARE AMONG THE LESSONS EXECUTIVES SHOULD LEARN, ACCORDING TO WHAT EXPERT JONI GALVÃO, FROM SOAP, SUGGESTS

Storytelling has spread so suddenly that it has been considered trite in the corporate environment. Many executives view storytelling as a ready-to-use product that lies on the shelf and is capable of immediately solving any communication problem. They are completely wrong. It is necessary to begin at the beginning. Once upon a time...

One's will to tell a story is not enough to make it powerful. The correct technique should be applied and, above and beyond it, one must have principles. Robert McKee, who teaches screenplay in Hollywood and is the greatest expert of the world in storytelling [read the interview with him in this edition's "dossier"], uses to say that stories do not have to do with rules that define what is right or wrong. They have to do with principles that show what does and what does not work.

If you are able to engage the audience, make people create identification with what you tell them, touch them, and take them to wherever you want, no doubt you have a story that contains principles.

The principles of the movies can help any executive to plan and tell a powerful story. How does a film tell a story?

The first minutes are used by the characters to introduce themselves. The protagonist is portrayed as someone who has

a desire. Such a desire has to be, at least, acknowledged by the audience as authentic, because an emotional connection with the narrative will not arise if empathy and sympathy towards the main character do not exist.

Empathy is the strongest feeling. We think: "We are like him". Sympathy, despite being desirable, does not have much impact, since it leads us just to think that "we like him". As you tell a story, try to get both of the feelings; if you must decide among them, choose empathy.

Let us get back to the desire, which is what drives all stories. But pay attention: desire is different from motivation. A desire is objective, tangible; the motivation is intangible. If the motivation is greed alone, we will not like the story. Yet, if the main character's motivation is saving his or her little child's life, we begin to feel empathy towards him or her. In fact, you might as well try to work with both in your story, desire and motivation [see application of these concepts in the movies and in the corporate word on page 95].

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BEYOND THE BIG SCREEN

I have learned, in the day to day experience, that there are eight aspects that are extremely important in storytelling. 150

TELL THE TRUTH. Have you already noticed that the stories that are told in public presentations sometimes fail badly? This happens because the speaker believes he has to show only to the positive aspects and hide the negatives. Doing so is somewhat like lying – or, to say the least, to tell a half-true.

The audience increasingly wants to know the truth, to know who you are, to see you with no mask – no matter if it is in a thirty-second TV commercial, or in a thirty-minute lecture. People do not accept to listen only to successful cases; that would be easy. They need to know what you did when you failed, when you were under pressure or when you experienced the dilemma of choosing between two bad alternatives (since choosing between something bad and something good is no dilemma).

Compare two speakers. One of them tells not only his or hers successes, but also the defeats, fears, and vulnerable spots, and demonstrates that he or she is conscious of these weaknesses. The other person speaks only about what

differentiates him or her from other people, success cases, and values, showing he or she is nearly perfect, impeccable, and has no personal conflicts. Who will you believe in? Who is authentic and who has something to hide?

REMEMBER THE BRAIN HAS TWO SIDES. Making public presentations terrifies executives. When we train a client based on a created script, our first action is to provide for a mock environment in which he or she feels comfortable to tell stories in a natural manner, as if among friends. After the executive begins in such a way, we then provide for the “stage”. We make everything to avoid the “speaker mode”, that is, the state in which the IQ of the person on stage is lessened.

An old paradigm that says that people are rational, particularly executives, is one of the reasons for the fear of public speaking. If you are one of the people who believe we are rational, I will try to break such an assumption, speaking to the left side of your brain, the rational one. Several researches prove that emotions guide and drive our thoughts and the way that we interpret facts.

Do you doubt it? When the rational people defend their points of view saying that “if everyone thought in a rational, objective, and impartial manner, leaving emotions aside,

things would be much better”, they are, in an unaware fashion, using the power of a story to convince the other, that is to say, the mainly emotional part of ourselves.

I do not aim to defend the end of facts or to minimize the importance of data, reason, logic, and objectivity. Nevertheless, when you wish to connect to an audience, no matter what audience, you should, first of all, elaborate on your story, showing what your starting point is and where you aim to arrive at. Then, being faithful to yourself, put the facts in between both ends, so as to sustain the story.

DO NOT TRY TO EXPLAIN THE STORY. Explanations are boring. Telling a story is much more powerful influence than simply presenting facts. “Show, don’t tell” is one of Robert McKee’s principles in storytelling. Everything you can say through means of dramatization, without making use of too much dialogue, is much more powerful than explanations. That is true both for the movies and corporate presentations.

No explanation is necessary to avoid the audience feeling lost while a story is told; all you need is a core message that is there from the very beginning to the very end of the story. Such a message is called “governing idea”. It has to be strong enough so as to make the audience understand exactly what you want to convey, despite the ups and downs that are added to the narrative. The spectator should feel the difficulties that the protagonist face to make a desire come true –these are human and authentic difficulties, as if the narrator were naked in front of the audience– and no logic should be able to prevent that. Speak with no need to explain what you say.

USE SUBTEXT: NOTHING IS WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE. Saying something without having to say it in details can have a high impact on the audience of corporate stories. If you wish to tell that your company has ethical values, for instance, choose a real experience that makes them evident. Consider an executive who has gone through a dilemma and has given up personal advantages so as to guarantee that other people had jobs when the company was going through a crisis.

In storytelling, the subtext is the message we do not want to express in an explicit manner, but rather in an indirect way. A child does not use subtexts; everything a child says is what he or she wants to say. While we grow up, we learn how to use subtexts in order to adapt ourselves to social and cultural situations. Such skill is nor good, nor bad per se, since it depends on the way we use subtexts.

Saying something without having to say it in details can have a high impact on the audience of corporate stories

Soap teaches how to apply storytelling to public presentations

Soap defines itself as a company that specializes in creating presentations. Its name is an acronym for “state of the art presentations”. Founded in 2003, the company has about 100 employees and offices in São Paulo, Lisboa, and New York. Joni Galvão, who has written this article, and Eduardo Adas are cofounders of Soap and the authors of *SuperApresentações* (Panda Books).

Joni Galvão



Foto: Eduardo de Sousa

From the movies to your business

CONCEPT	INTHE MOVIES	AT THE COMPANY
Trigger event	The moment in which an event eliminates the balance of the protagonist's life. A desire for balance, then, arises. In crime films, the trigger event is not the occurrence of the crime, but the moment it is discovered.	An important –either positive, negative, or both– event that eliminates the balance from the lives of the company people or from the brand at the marketplace. For instance: a new law, a crack in the stock exchange market, mergers and acquisition, layoffs, new competitors, something that requires urgent action or solution.
Protagonist	A story is about one or more protagonists that wish to solve a problem. In order to create identification of the audience with their desire, the protagonists should have human traits, even if we are talking about a car (as in <i>Cars</i>) or a robot (<i>Wall-E</i>). The protagonist is the center of the story. He or she should be presented in more than one dimension: weak, strong, bold, coward –human. A perfect protagonist is boring. What about Superman without kryptonite or his personal dilemmas?	The protagonist may be a brand, a client, the audience or any character that makes people identify themselves with the protagonist's desire and recognize the conflicts portrayed as theirs. One of the most difficult tasks in corporate storytelling is the creation of a strong protagonist, instead of a sequence of slides that show how pride the company is of itself, bringing up only the upside of the situation.
Creation limits	“Create the story of an idea”, Aristotle used to say, 2,400 years ago. The smallest the universe of your story, the greatest the identification of your audience, because it will feel like it is the owner of that world. It may seem that this principle limits creativity, but creative people really like it, because, within the given limits, there are no restrictions.	While creating a presentation, you always have some restrictions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The subject (that gives reason for a meeting). ● The audience's desire (what is it there for?). ● Time (five minutes? An hour?). ● Resources (visual apparatus? Is it a corporate dinner?). Never try to tell everything, like narrating the company's timeline. It is often better to tell the story of a single day of a client's life and add to it all the values you want to communicate.
Desire	From the trigger event on, the protagonist expresses a desire. Kevin Spacey, in <i>American Beauty</i> , had such an awful life that he considered himself “dead”, in a metaphorical sense. When he saw his daughter's friend as a cheerleader, begun to dream of her and to desire her as a woman. The narrative makes us believe that his goal was the girl, but his real motivation was to have meaning in his life again. When a desire is defined, some antagonistic forces are set; other forces appear along the story.	One who sits to hear a story in the corporate world wants or needs to have something. That is the person's desire, and it is necessary to find out what desire is that. If you are able to create a story in which the protagonist expresses exactly the same desire as your audience's, identification and empathy towards the character are immediately established. As the speaker, you also have a desire, and it may be selling a product. However, if you do not penetrate the desire world of the audience, you will most probably not achieve your goal. According to Spinoza, we do not long for things because they are good; they are good because we long for them. Make your audience trust you and demonstrate that your idea will help it achieve its desires (an increase in productivity, differentiation in the marketplace, a promotion etc.)
Antagonistic forces	Imagine Batman without The Joker. Antagonistic forces are all those forces that have the potential to prevent the protagonist from getting what he or she wants. In order to overcome them, the main character's abilities must be stronger than all the antagonistic forces together.	While creating a presentation, you should be aware of everything that may try to prevent your audience to have what it desires: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Internal forces (fears, resistance, lack of skills etc.). ● Personal forces (conflicts with the boss, conflicts with subordinates, relationship difficulties etc.). ● External forces (competitors, government decisions, natural events etc.).
Crisis and climax	“Save the best for last.” This Robert McKee's statement synthesizes the importance of investing in the climax of the narrative. The crisis is the most difficult moment in which the protagonist has to overcome himself or herself and take the most important decision of his or her life. That may mean loosing everything (danger) or conquering all that is desired (opportunity). The crisis comes before the most important moment of the film –the climax. The end must not be happy to be good. The audience longs for emotional fulfillment, and a happy end is not always possible. After all, life is contradictory, conflictive, and ironic.	Leave that unforgettable moment of the story to the end. A good ending can save an average story. You should make it clear that a great transformation has happened in the protagonist's life: he has learned something, his life has been changed, the company's, the brand's, or the employees' lives have changed, that is to say, something that the audience really wanted has occurred. The end of a story may be the beginning of another, since not everything can be discussed in one single meeting. Your objective will often be to set the next meeting.

In a film or a presentation, we may make use of images, gestures, sceneries, dialogues, and performances with the objective of conveying the meaning of the message far beyond the meaning of the words. The audience looks at an image and immediately makes a connection with it: if it is a Mercedes Benz, rich; a Ferrari, the richest; a Harley Davidson, dangerous. We attribute meanings to everything we see, hear, and feel.

This is the reason why, when telling a story, an executive uses a powerful weapon. When we go to the movies, we surrender ourselves to some fantasy, because we are open to live emotions that we seldom live in real life. For a couple of hours, we dive in the world of emotions, feel fear, happiness, sadness, and many other emotions. However, when we watch a conventional business presentation, we are full of filters, barriers, resistances, and worries about the time. That is the reason why the speaker needs to apply techniques that surprise the audience and make it feel as if it were in a movie theater.

FRAME THE STORY WELL. A good screenplay not necessarily leads to a good film or presentation, but a bad screenplay certainly leads to an awful film or presentation. That is why principles and techniques are necessary.

Nearly 2,400 years ago, Aristotle applied the same structure that good films use today. In his book, *Poetics*, he simplifies the structure of a story in beginning, middle, and end. It may seem obvious, but try to create a story with all the elements that it requires to distinguish itself from other narratives; it is a huge challenge.

Such a structure should contain a dilemma that unrolls itself into a crisis that makes important decisions, actions, and solutions happen, in order to captivate any audience.

A story is made of turnarounds, I mean, it switches from one situation to another. The greatest turnaround is the story's arch, if we take its beginning and its ending points into consideration. Has a transformation occurred? Who has been transformed? How did it happen?

A story has to do with someone that wants to reach something, but will find it difficult to obtain. In order to leave rhetoric and land in the heart of people, a story needs to have somebody that, to begin with, seems to be quite distant from what he desires, but, in the end, finds a solution that is not necessarily a happy end.

The audience of a presentation seats there because something is missing to that people. They know it will not be easy to get that missing object or part.

Steve Jobs always used the three-act structure: he would describe the problem, introduce the hero, and close the speech with a solution.



Turnaround after turnaround, the good story gets increasingly complex until it reaches the climax.

A story has to have at least three acts to be complete and emotionally rich. An act is the biggest structure. Steve Jobs always used the three-act structure. He used to begin with the problem (act 1), then he would introduce the hero (act 2) and express his final message, or the solution (act 3).

When I refer to the turnaround, I am talking about a change in the charge value, from positive to negative and vice-versa, in terms of what the main character wants.

EMPHASIZE THE WORST SCENARIO. A movie screenwriter gets inspiration in the dynamics of life, which is made of ups and downs, and you should do the same in the corporate storytelling. If you are going to speak about productivity, speak about lack of productivity. If the subject is sales, describe the worst possible scenario, the one that might happen if the company does not reach the expected results. Bring up the fears of your audience. Make your message sound true, by exposing weaknesses, conflicts, and problems, as well as strengths, solutions, and victories. A story in which



everything begins well, goes on well and ends up even better would not have any audience.

DIFFERENTIATE YOURSELF AS A LEADER. The old school boss uses to say that the door of his or her office is always opened and assures that he will answer the team's questions and solves the problems it cannot solve. Other types of bosses, younger than that one, do not say such things. They are different: they expect that their subordinates bring both the problem and the solution to them. Neither one is correct, since both, anyhow, create dependency.

The good leader mobilizes the team making people think about their attitudes. Such a leader brings in stories that contain real conflicts, shows that there is a way out, that the road ahead is not easy, and that they are ready to overcome problems. You can also become a leader like that, if you use storytelling correctly.

Good news mobilizes people. Since you cannot have something new to tell everyday – because people or companies seldom have it – and you want to be a good leader, you should become a storyteller. Not much is necessary to announce

that someone has won the lottery, but, when situations are not that interesting, you should know how to tell stories.

A leader may want to motivate the team to double sales, for instance, and decides to tell a story that is totally over-used, but emphasizes its upside: "We will all win. This company will be better off..."

Does anyone believe that leader?

Would it not be better if he said "the company must double sales, because competitors are investing a lot and conquering market share"? He or she may also tell a story about the company's president that "used to be in the same position they are today and did not put money as priority. Instead, he was driven by passion and was also very competent. He went after what the market needed and achieved such a great success that, after that journey, he got a promotion and became a director. That does not mean everyone will get promoted, but it shows that money is a consequence".

A story does not need to have happened to be true. It does not have to do with lying or creating unreal facts. It is possible to use a metaphor, tell something about a famous person, something the audience already knows. *Star Wars* is fiction or reality? It is fiction as a genre of film, since we will never see fights with light sabers nor Death Stars, but the film brings up truths that are universal values. One of them is our dark side and the need for understanding and controlling it.

Likewise, a leader should communicate values by means of stories. Thinking deeply, every story is an interpretation of the reality, so it is not reality in itself. Therefore, every story is fiction!

In the film *Inception*, one of the characters says that the greatest weapon a human being has is the idea implemented in a person's mind. So, by what means does that happen? Storytelling is the answer.

CHALLENGE THE CRISIS (AND THE LACK OF TIME). Storytelling is going through a crisis: despite being profoundly human, it is distant from people's and company's lives, as well as from the selling of ideas and leadership. If the Story Seminar that has been presented by McKee for 20 years, were held in the decade of 1930, it would not have any audience, because, at that time, people knew how to tell stories and had time for that. Not today.

In the root of this crisis lie three factors that dominate our lives currently: urgency for results, obsessive competition, and scarcity of time. These factors turn people into direct and rational beings who speak without structuring the thought and without using principles. Change that. Learn how to tell stories.

HAPPY END

One last recommendation: in the stories that you tell, do as McKee suggests: save the best for last. **M**