

From the APPEL Director

The Power of Stories

BY ED HOFFMAN



What is your story?

That question can be taken in many directions. It can express powerful interest or doubt. In Brooklyn, where I grew up, people said, “So, what’s your story?” to make someone reflect on and change foolish behavior. But the same question can be a request for insight and inspiration from a life’s journey.

Telling the right story is an essential requirement for any person, project, or organization that hopes to succeed in a complex world. Individuals and projects thrive or fail because of stories, and the stories we ignore are just as powerful as the ones we tell. We proceed at our peril if we leave the stories of our mission to chance.

Stories change people and projects. Several years ago, teaching a course on leadership, I required students to share two stories that reflected leadership challenges they successfully encountered. I wanted to force honest learning based on real-life experiences. One student seemed particularly distant and cold toward the class. I developed my own internal story of him as a skeptic and resistant to this type of learning.

When the first stories were submitted, that student’s vignette of the impact of racism stirred me to my core. Believing the military was a place where he would not encounter discrimination, he started his army career filled with anticipation. He was emotionally broken when an officer’s racist label went unchallenged. In the twenty-five years since then, he had never described the incident, but he told the class that he felt compelled to tell it now. He was a different person after telling the story: engaged, alive, smiling. At the end of the class, he said he never realized the weight he carried until telling the story helped him let it go.

Every project or organization has a story that can promote or retard the effort. When the Apollo 13 movie came out, the International Space Station and the Supercollider were in a life-and-death struggle to survive political scrutiny. The Supercollider was canceled while the International Space Station survived by one vote. A commonly held view at the time was that NASA benefited from the film that powerfully conveyed a story of struggle, passion, and purpose.

Projects are modern-day quests that can tell tales of challenge, complexity, and meaning. They are purposeful journeys that involve personal commitment to overcome challenges that are sure to arise. Successful project leaders skillfully shape stories that communicate the value of the goal and the importance of collaborative effort. The stories can include challenges represented by milestones and feature everyday heroes who make sacrifices for the good of the mission.

Everyone lives a story and every project has a story, which unfolds whether or not conscious effort is made to shape it. A dysfunctional team tells a story of poor communication, distrust, ineffective leadership, and competition. A successful team benefits from a story of purpose, collaboration, trust, and focus.

Effective leaders communicate stories in ways that connect with people and create energy and support. Crafting and communicating your project story is a vital skill. The story must include a clear sense of purpose and value. It paints an honest picture of challenges and risks and provides action plans showing the path the journey should take. It values the team’s everyday heroes and what they learn from the trials and tribulations of the journey to project success. ●