

# **How to Find Stories to Use in Your Presentations From Your Everyday Life**

David Lee



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*Excerpted from [Powerful Storytelling Techniques](#)*

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## How to Become a Story Catcher

### **Pay Attention To Your Everyday Life**

Pay special attention to situations or stories that surprise you, make you think of something from a new perspective, or elicit a strong feeling. Ask “What did this experience teach me?” “How can I use it as a teaching or coaching story?” , and “How can I use this directly or as a metaphor to explain, illustrate or add impact to a concept or point?”

The following story is an example of taking an experience I had and using it as an analogy. A few hours before speaking on organizational resilience at a conference, I walked in a nature preserve next to the college where the conference was being held. I had been musing on how I wanted to start my talk, more specifically, what story I wanted to open with. While I had some of my tried and true stories ready, I wanted to try something new. As daybreak lightened the forest, I heard a shuffling noise. Off to my right I spotted a skunk racing about the forest floor, peeking under logs, nosing in the leaves, foraging for breakfast.

He was coming right at me, so engrossed in his mission that he was totally

unaware of my presence. I didn't want him to see me at the last minute, get scared, and spray me, so I said in a loud voice: "Hi, it's just me walking. No worries" because, of course, skunks understand English.

He didn't even break his stride. He clearly didn't consider me as a potential threat.

I found myself thinking amusing his non-response, especially compared to other wild animals, and then, because it was an unusual and amusing experience, I immediately shifted to asking "This thing that just happened...what's it like? How could I use this as a teaching metaphor?"

The answer was almost immediate.

It would be a perfect metaphor for the difference having a resilient workforce makes. Because the skunk has the tools to handle just about any predator, he doesn't get anxious or fearful when he sees a human, like other animals do. He just keeps on his merry way, getting his work done. It's like resilient employees. The more resilient your workforce, the less they sweat the small stuff, the less anxious they feel in the face of challenging situations. Because they trust they can handle them, they focus their energy on their work, not on all the other "scary things" that distract stressed out, overwhelmed employees.

I opened my presentation with that story, both as a way to immediately get people's attention—which it did—and to illustrate through an analogy the difference this material can make to their organization, and is therefore worthy of their close attention.

## **Pay Attention To The Stories Other People Tell You About Things That Happened To Them Or Someone They Know**

Listen to them with an attentive “storyteller’s ear.” Just as with your own experiences, if you find yourself surprised, moved, or seeing things in a new light, make note of the story and use this INFOLINE to decipher how you could use this story.

## **Jot Down Your Story As Soon As Possible**

Don’t trust yourself to remember a story, especially if it’s about an experience that is not particularly dramatic. I believe often the more subtle, easily forgotten experiences provide us with some of the most useful teaching stories. The problem is, they’re so easily forgotten, especially the subtle details that contain the true “teaching gold.”

Even with the more dramatic stories, it’s easy to forget. When I go through old notes from programs I give, I often find references to stories that I had forgotten, and was glad to be reminded of them so I can use them again.

Perhaps the simplest way of cataloging stories is to make a two column table or database with each row holding a story. The left column contains searchable key words and phrases that the story can be used to illustrate or dramatize, such as “employee morale, EQ, stress, change”. The right column contains a short description of the experience, with enough detail that reading it will refresh your memory enough that you can tell the story. If the experience will be used as a Constructive Conversation Story, make sure you write down the important wording you (or the other person) used, so you can teach that.

By using this simple format, when you are searching for stories to illustrate specific points, you have a searchable database.

# **How to Build Your Storytelling Skills by Strengthening Your Analogy Creating Muscles**

Analogies are the building blocks of effective storytelling. As you build your skill at recognizing and creating analogies, you will grow your ability to identify stories that will make your ideas “sticky”. Being able to think in analogies is especially important in finding and creating Explanation and Impact stories. Because these stories are used to make ideas more understandable and memorable—which is what analogies do—developing your analogical thinking skills will especially help you with this important category of stories.

To cultivate your ability to generate analogies, make it a practice to ask the question: “What is this like?” You want to ask this question from both ends of the analogy creation process:

## **For Each Abstract Concept You Are Going to Share in a Presentation, Ask “What is this like?”**

When you identify an abstract concept and you want to make it more concrete and understandable by translating it into an analogy the listener can relate to, ask “What is this like?”

To answer this question, draw from common everyday objects, activities, or experiences that most people can relate to.

So for instance, when I first started developing my program on resilience, I wanted to come up with an analogy that explained both what resilience was and how you develop it. Since resilience in many ways is similar to the concepts of “mental toughness” and “emotional strength”, I found myself thinking how resilience is like physical fitness. So here are some of the ways I explain resilience:

*“Developing greater resilience is like becoming physically fit. You need to engage in practices that develop strength, endurance, and flexibility. In resilience, ‘strength’ is our ability to handle challenging situations and be at our best in difficult circumstances, ‘endurance’ is ability to handle the stressors and pressures of day to day life without burning out. The ‘flexibility’ component of resilience refers to our ability to adapt to changing circumstances and feel comfortable during times of change. Developing resilience is also like becoming physically fit because recovery time plays an important role in cultivating both.*

*Also, just as in becoming physically stronger, we become mentally and emotionally stronger—i.e. more resilient—by challenging ourselves. Instead of ‘pumping iron’ to build physical muscle, we ‘pump anxiety and fear’—by stepping outside our comfort zone—to build our ‘resilience muscles.’ Finally, resilience is like physical fitness in that you need to continually ‘work out’ if you’re going to ‘stay in shape’. In the case of resilience, this means not only engaging in the practices that build resilience, but also continually learning how to recognize and challenge stress-producing self-talk.”*

### **When you experience something interesting in your life, ask “What is this like?”**

Whenever you experience something that either evokes strong emotions, surprise, a new perspective, or is amusing in an ironic way, When you have these experiences, or you hear someone tell you about theirs, ask yourself: “What is this like?”, “What is this an analogy for?”, How might I use this experience (story) as a metaphor for some concept or teaching point?”

So for instance, years ago when broadband internet service was quite new and expensive, I went through a long process of debating whether it was an extravagance or a justifiable expense. Then, I estimated how much time I spent each day waiting for my modem to connect, for email and files to download and upload. When I multiplied this by hourly rate, I realized it was costing me hundreds of dollars a month of time wasted waiting. By not investing in

technology that allowed me to be more efficient, I was being “penny wise and dollar foolish.” Once I got broadband, and experienced the increase in productivity, I realized how foolish I had been all that time I thought it was “too expensive.”

Later, I asked myself, “What is this like”? “How can I use this simple experience as a teaching story?” What came up for me was that my decision to stick with dial-up for so long because broad band was too expensive is like organizations not investing money on management development because its “to expensive”. They are trying to use management practices that worked (somewhat) in the Industrial Age, in the far more complex, sophisticated, and demanding world of the Information Age. In essence, they are using “dial up management practices in a broadband world.” Because of that, they are only getting a fraction of the true productive potential of their employees. Just like I was, they are being “penny wise and dollar foolish.”

# Analogy Building Exercises

Directions: You can do these alone or better yet, do these in groups of five or six. If you are doing these in groups, take turns finishing the sentences.

- 1) "Life is like a grocery store because...."
- 2) "Relationships are like a game of tennis because...."
- 3) "Great work teams are like a great orchestra because...."
- 4) "Being a good manager is like being a good parent because..."
- 5) "Being a great leader is like being a great tour guide because..."

When I do this exercise in workshops, some of the analogies people come up with are fun and whimsical, but not accurate or particularly useful (e.g. "Relationships are like a game of tennis because it's more fun when you win" or "Relationships are like a game of tennis because they involve love") while others embody teachable wisdom (e.g. "Relationships are like a game of tennis because the more present you are, the more enjoyable it is")

To cultivate discernment in creating analogies, have someone in your group jot people's responses for each sentence and then afterwards, go through your list and analyze which analogies make the most sense and offer the most useful insights. Here are a few questions you can ask to help in this process:

1. "Is the analogy really accurate; are these two things really alike in this way?"
2. "Does this similarity represent something trivial or significant about the idea I want to explain or point I want to make?"



# To Become a More Interesting and Compelling Communicator

Contact David Lee at 207-571-9898 or email [david@storiesthatchange.com](mailto:david@storiesthatchange.com) to discuss your communication goals, including:

- Becoming a more comfortable, confident, compelling speaker.
- Telling your business's story in a more interesting way.
- Increasing your persuasiveness without being pushy, by using stories and analogies to make your ideas more fascinating and relevant.
- Becoming a more inspiring leader by making your ideas and vision come alive, through the use of stories.

## About David Lee



David Lee is the founder of [HumanNature@Work](http://HumanNature@Work) and [StoriesThatChange](http://StoriesThatChange).

He has worked with organizations and spoken at conferences throughout North America and Australia, and is the author of nearly 100 articles and book chapters on maximizing employee and organizational performance. David has been using and teaching storytelling for over 25 years.

Before focusing his work on how to use storytelling in business, he practiced and taught hypnosis and therapeutic storytelling in the field of mind/body medicine both domestically and abroad.

His work was featured in the clinical book *Tales of Enchantment: Goal-Oriented Metaphors for Adults and Children in Therapy*. He is also the author of the *Add Powerful Storytelling Techniques to Your Training* published by ASTD Press.