

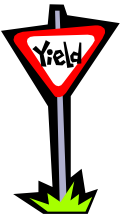
Engagement and Buy-In: The Use of Stories in Project Management

To be presented to: Project Management Institute, Local Chapters
New Orleans, LA and Jackson, MS

Larry Forster
Shell Exploration and Production Co., Inc.

Synopsis

I recently witnessed a presentation of a well-organized, well-structured project plan. “We need engagement and buy-in,” the project manager repeated over and over. As he talked through the Gantt chart, describing tasks and milestones, I kept asking myself, where is the “engagement and buy-in” in the project plan? Where does this appear on the chart?



“Engagement and Buy-In” is the people thing. How do you do it? The question keeps coming up in project management circles, in performance benchmarking circles, product innovation circles, round and round we go. But there is a secret, a secret language, which will make a difference. The secret language of stories.

There was a project I led not too long ago, where the team got really stuck over the use of a new design concept, a new way of working, a new way of thinking about a project. All their time was spent debating the concept, no time making progress. A special, technical review meeting was scheduled, to break the logjam.

“Does anybody want to kill this idea. Does anybody believe that it’s a bad idea, that it should be abandoned,” I asked the team. Nobody did, but did they have stories to tell! And when they started telling them, the project traffic light, which had been a solid red, quickly changed to a bright green. I’ll relay some of these stories to you, and how the logjam was resolved. It was this experience, which showed me that my technical reasoning, my technical skills, my logical arguments, were not going to be enough to succeed in the future. I was going to need something else.



The most important use of stories in business, or in any endeavor where people need to work together, is connecting people. Connecting, not just to their minds, but also to their emotions and to their spirit. Connecting them to what they care about. Stories make this happen, and I’ll show how this works.



Stories are an art form, and so one could rightly ask, what do they have to do with business, technical issues, or project management? One could ask the same question about mathematics, (just ask a pure mathematician!). We all know that the esoteric science of mathematics has been very effectively tailored to business, to technical issues, and to project management. In recent years, stories have been recognized as important to modern communications, and much work has been done to formally tailor the art to the



real world we live and work in. I will give you a number of references (as well as more stories) where this is happening.

In contrast to stories whose main purpose is to entertain, stories can be crafted for a number of purposes. In addition to connecting people in a meaningful way, and getting your team to collaborate, stories can further serve you as a leader. Stories can: (1) help you communicate who you are, what your values are, and build trust with your team; (2) facilitate knowledge sharing; (3) inspire others to adopt (or at least listen to) a new idea; and, (4) lead people into the future. I will give you examples – stories – illustrating each of these.

Where and when are stories told? Most often, at the coffee pot. But at times, they may need to be part of specially designed workshops, investments of time for the teams. Certain stories are told by the leaders to the attendees, sometimes, the attendees are guided to tell their own stories to each other (below). I will explain more how this works, and how the workshops are structured for effectiveness.

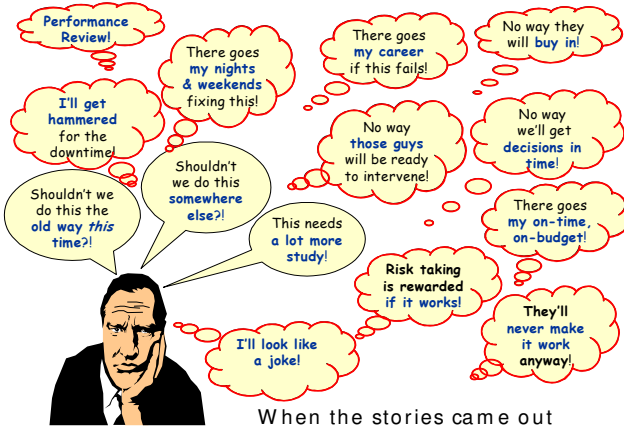
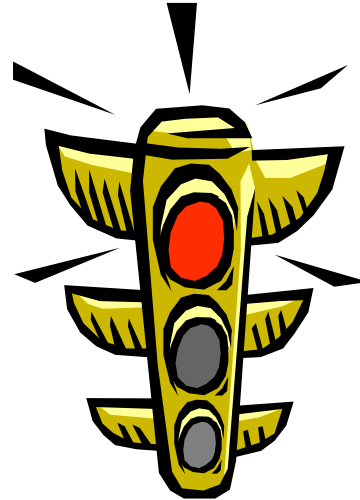


The inherent power of stories gives rise to other issues: the ethics involved in their use. As this is a relatively new field, ethical considerations are actively being discussed, and to some degree being formulated. I will share the latest developments, and invite your comments in this important area.

Stories are basic to our nature, and likely pre-date formal language. The development of logic and analysis, along with the scientific method, while essential to the success of our civilization, has unfortunately diminished our view of stories as part of our nature. Fortunately, as the pace of technology and change has accelerated, stories have re-emerged, and are taking a new role in helping us remember who we are and why we're here. Not to mention making sure those project milestones are met!



When we were still stuck



When the stories came out

