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The Downside of Storytelling

This is a tale about Amy, a busy leader with a vexing challenge. For 11 months, Amy had been the director of an emergency room in a large urban hospital. She is a seasoned, skilled nurse leader who is well intentioned and inspired to do her best.

Recently, she became very frustrated with William, one of her direct reports. During most of her tenure on this job, Amy found William to be a competent nurse manager. But lately, she experienced him as evasive and even secretive about a key facet of his role: providing timely, written feedback to his direct reports and completing the organization's performance review documentation. Amy knows that many nurse managers do not like this aspect of their positions, but most understand the importance of the task and do it anyway.

Amy was convinced there was something amiss with William. She described their interactions with palpable exasperation. She asked him for his written reviews many times, and each time he offered a different excuse and a new date by which she would have them. Each time, he did not come through, and Amy grew more upset. Each time, she went back and restated her need for those evaluations.

Eventually, William started looking dumbfounded when Amy approached him yet again. This look and what Amy believed was his "willful" disregard for her wishes ratcheted up her emotions. She said she became "furious." Although she had been reluctant to start him on a performance plan, she grew convinced that it was her only choice. She said she was mentally prepared to move him out of his role altogether.

If we step back from the details, we see that Amy continued to do the same things with William over and over again. When he did not comply—also over and over—she became emotionally overwrought and more and more engaged with her own story about what he was doing: stubbornly disregarding her wishes. By the time she discussed this with me, she was determined to levy serious consequences for his "insubordination."

Stepping even farther back, we can see that Amy is completely wrapped up in her own emotions, her need for resolution, and her interpretation of William's actions. When we talked,

Amy recognized that she had never asked him what was preventing him from turning in his evaluations. In hindsight, she wondered how she could have missed such an obvious question. Soon she realized that she missed it because, like most leaders, she had many responsibilities, needed to move fast, and wanted to obtain results in the most direct way. All she could see was that he was not cooperating, and those performance reviews had to be completed. They were in fact, many, many months late!

Amy's emotions were coupled with her need for speed and her story about the meaning of William's actions. This potent combination narrowed her ability to think. In that state, she neglected to understand that no matter how many times she told him what to do, she was not going to be successful.

In her book *Change Your Questions Change Your Life*,¹ Marilee G. Adams posits that truly effective communication is 20% telling and 80% asking. Amy and many of us have this ratio turned around. A profound change can occur in ourselves and those around us when we stop relying on our statements and start learning from our questions. When our leadership approaches are not working, we can expand our chances for success by opening our minds to the new wisdom that curiosity evokes.

Through this simple yet significant shift, we can detach from our steadfast but perhaps erroneous interpretations of "the truth." In this case, Amy's conviction about the "truth" of William's behavior was contributing to her ineffective leadership. She also realized that when she described William's behavior as "insubordinate," she became even angrier and more resentful. If anyone had asked, she would have said that his behavior was generating those feelings. But upon reflection, she knew that what actually created those feelings was the emotionally charged story she told herself about his actions.

Once Amy grasped that she had never asked what was preventing William from completing the evaluations, she accepted that she contributed to the impasse with him. She was willing, at least temporarily, to suspend her belief that she was right about the meaning of his behavior and became genuinely curious.

What she learned astounded her. Although William had been in the organization for several years, he had missed the training for performance reviews. He was a proud young professional, and he was embarrassed that he did not know how to do this part of his job. He didn't know how to tell Amy that he was simply not competent in this way. Her continual reproaches made it very difficult for him to break through his own fear and shame.

It may be difficult to believe this simple story, but it is true. A nurse leader who is dedicated to doing her best and acknowledged for her skill as a leader was about to dismiss an employee who was too proud to admit what he did not know. With her newfound knowledge, Amy supported William as he got the training he needed. He then ably fulfilled his responsibilities, and he and Amy began a new and more productive relationship.

What did Amy do to facilitate this turnaround?

1. She was willing to entertain possible limitations in her judgment, and she released her attachment to being "right" about William's behavior.

2. She was willing to calm down and suspend, at least temporarily, her anger and frustration.
3. She realized that the problem she was experiencing was at least as much her responsibility as it was William's. He was not performing as she needed him to perform, but she was not able to engage him in a way that allowed him to say what was preventing him from doing this part of his job.
4. She set her intention: she genuinely wanted to know the answers to the questions she asked William, and she genuinely wanted to listen.
5. She began a new dialogue by letting William know that she wanted to talk openly with him. She said she realized that her way of approaching him in recent conversations may not have been helpful.
6. Her previous belief that William was a good nurse manager helped Amy shift her demeanor with him. When she said, "I didn't handle this very well," her honesty sent a signal that gave William permission to be honest, too. (She may well have chosen a different stance with a manager who was not an otherwise good performer.)

7. Amy asked curious, open-ended questions. She stayed away from leading questions and avoided the word "why" because she knew it can evoke defensiveness.

Amy's tale illustrates the power of releasing, even momentarily, our certainty and strong emotions when they may not be warranted. The behavioral portal for this powerful change is a simple shift from telling to asking. Amy's change of course shows us how the best leaders can let go of their stories and habits long enough to stop talking, start asking, and keep learning.

Reference

1. Adams MG. *Change Your Questions Change Your Life*. San Francisco, CA: Barrett-Koehler Publishers; 2004.

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1541-4612/2012/ \$ See front matter
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doi:10.1016/j.mnl/2011.11.008