

Motivating People

Great Storytelling Connects Employees to Their Work

by Joseph Grenny

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Summary. Let's face it. Most of us go through the motions, phoning it in, but engage in our work less than we are capable of. The consequence is not just lower productivity; it is lower quality of life. Half-hearted effort isn't fun. The first responsibility of leaders — whether... [more](#)

I once spent a few delicious days studying Union Square Hospitality Group (USHG), a collection of high-end, casual eateries started by the famed New York restaurateur, Danny Meyer. He had recently

claimed the key to his success was creating a “culture of hospitality.” I set out to discover how.

One day, at his Shake Shack (now a juggernaut global chain) in Madison Square Park, an employee I’ll call Bert was dragging a bit. Bert was relatively new and hadn’t really bought into the whole *hospitality* thing. He was sneaking peeks at his cell phone while pretending to be busy around the outdoor dining area when his supervisor spotted him and torpedoed toward him.

Most organizations have a few Berts in them. In fact, let’s be honest. Most of us are somewhat like Bert much of the time. We go through the motions, phoning it in, but engage in our work less than we are capable of. Measures of discretionary effort — the gap between what we’re giving and what we’re capable of giving — show that most of us are *checked out* more often than *all in*. The consequence is not just lower productivity; it is lower quality of life. Half-hearted effort isn’t fun.

Fortunately, there is a lot a leader can do to help employees feel a deeper sense of motivation (and resultant satisfaction) in their work. And the first place to begin is with connection.

Connection happens when you see past the details of a task to its human consequences. When you feel connected to the moral purpose of your work, you behave differently. Now “moral purpose” might sound lofty but it needn’t mean saving a puppy or curing cancer; it can involve any kind of human service. And at the end of the day, all business is about service.

That’s where leaders come in. The first responsibility of leaders — whether front line supervisors, middle managers, or executives — is to compensate for the inevitable alienation that complex organizations create, and provide employees with a visceral connection to the human purpose they serve. And that’s what I observed Danny Meyer’s leaders doing better than most.

What would you guess the Shake Shack supervisor did with Bert? Deliver a reprimand? (“Pick up the pace, Bert!”) Lay on a guilt trip? (“The rest of the team is picking up your slack!”) Discipline? (“I’m

putting you on notice!”). The supervisor did none of these. Instead, *she told a story.*

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As Bert scrutinized his phone he stood next to spattered and cluttered dining tables. Guests passed him on their way to order food. The supervisor pulled up in front of him, put her hand on his shoulder, and said in a serious and sincere tone, “Hey Bert, twenty minutes ago a young mother left her two-year-old daughter on one of these chairs while she went to the order window to buy their food. When she walked away, her daughter began sweeping her hand back and forth over the table that was smeared with catsup from one of our previous guests. Then she began licking it off her hand.” Bert

cringed. Panicked, he looked at the tables to see which ones might put the next two-year-old at risk of catsup-borne disease and began wiping them down.

Leaders can maintain a lively sense of connection, as the Shake Shack manager did, through storytelling. It needn't be an elaborate ritual involving an audience gathered for a relaxed evening. It isn't. Most storytelling is brief. It involves using concrete examples that reframe a moment by personifying human consequences.

People's feelings about their work are only partly about the work itself. They are equally, if not more so, about how they frame their work. Do they see what they're doing as a mindless ritual? Do they see it as empty compliance? Or do they see it as sacred duty? If you change the frame you change the feeling. And nothing changes frames faster than a story.

For example, in one study we did at a large healthcare provider, we examined why some employees were somewhat casual about hand hygiene while others were zealots. Hand washing in hospitals is one of the most critical factors in avoiding hospital acquired infections. While many doctors, nurses, housekeepers, and technicians were *mostly* attentive to this innocuous act, a handful of employees were relentlessly vigilant. It turned out this group was far more likely than their peers to have *personally* been infected in the past while they were a patient in a hospital—or had a family member who was. They were motivated because they had a personal or vicarious experience with the human consequences of a seemingly simple task, and that made them *feel* differently.

It's easy to go on autopilot like Bert did. Research shows that once a task becomes familiar, our brains devote far less cognitive resources to it. One of the downsides of this brilliant evolutionary design is that we *disconnect*. We stop seeing past our work to the people we affect.

Our company, VitalSmarts, has around 120 employees. One of our regular rituals in our monthly all hands meeting is the *Mission Moment*. This is an opportunity for my colleagues and me to share stories about the impact our work has on our own lives or those of the people we serve. Recently, my colleague Mary described a conflict in her neighborhood that was escalating horribly. In a moment of clarity, she offered an apology and a cucumber from her garden rather than the next volley in the pointless fusillade. The neighbor was deeply moved by the gesture, responding with gratitude, apology, and noting that some of what she said, “was an answer to a prayer he desperately needed.” I was deeply affected when Mary ended her story by saying, “None of this would have transpired the way it did had I not dug deep into the gray matter of my brain and surfaced the skills that have been my life’s work/life at work for all these years.”

As I later boarded a plane for a long and familiar flight to Singapore, I found an extra spring in my step. I felt I was heading toward something worthy, not simply logging miles.

In every organization we've ever studied where there was a strong sense of moral motivation, the leaders were always storytellers. They understood and acted on their responsibility to overcome the inevitable alienation of routine organizational life by connecting employees with those they serve.

Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and leadership development.