

Helping You Succeed with the Total Leadership Framework™ (TLF)

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## **Trouble Attracting and Keeping Top Talent? Here's Your Answer: Become a Story-Maker**

Imagine you're coming home one evening when the rest of the family is in the middle of watching a movie you've never seen. They briefly and barely acknowledge your presence, their eyes still transfixed on the screen. Your gaze follows theirs, and captured by the tensions, intrigued by the scene, and caught up with the characters, you squeeze into whatever space is left on the couch. You've joined the story.

But you have a ton of questions. Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys? What's happened so far? Where did it all begin? What's the big threat? Why is the guy in the blue shirt so anxious?

In the absence of answers, you begin making assumptions, so that the story as you are experiencing it can make sense. But at the back of your mind, you have this nagging feeling that you have the story wrong, that your assumptions are wrong. So you sit back, experience the scenes, and little more. You have no context. You don't know the story.

So it is when someone joins a new organization. Almost invariably, they land in the middle of the story, and they don't know what's going on. Who are the good guys? Who are the bad guys? Why is the head of such-and-such a department (the one in the blue shirt) so anxious?

This is where great leaders step in. They tell you the story. They hit the pause button and they give you the details of the plot. They tell you what's happened so far and what's led up to the scene you've just landed in. No wonder, you realize, the guy in the blue shirt is so worried.

But great leaders do more than that. They not only tell you what's happened so far, they consciously bring you into the story. You're no longer watching the movie, you're *in* the movie. You're a bona fide character with a role to play.

And great leaders will tell you how they hope the story will work out, and more than that, they'll make it clear why your role is so important. "We can't get there without you," they'll tell you. "That's why we picked you. We wrote your character into the story because we don't think we can make it without you. Help us write this story so that it ends well."

That kind of initiation, you might guess, is uncommon and unusual. More often than not, instead of a story, we're given a manual, whether real or metaphoric: here's *what* you do and here's *how* you do it. Great leaders don't ignore the what and the how, but they add the *why* and the *where*: why it's important and where it will get us. They are not just story tellers; they are story makers.

If you want to be not just a great storyteller but a great story maker—which is what leaders are—you need to know the ingredients of a great story. Writing a story, as it happens, is quite a science, and if you want to pull people into a compelling story, you need to know what's present in every good story.

Don Miller defines a story as a "character who wants something and overcomes conflict to get it." That's a pretty good definition. But there's much more. Here are ten ingredients for a good story, and they happen to be the same ingredients for great leadership, whatever the size and scope of your leadership responsibilities:

1. **The protagonist needs a clear purpose and a clear sense of vision.** It needs to be clear what he or she is going after. In the same way, a great leader stands up and points to the horizon, and everyone can see that point on the horizon.
2. **The plot needs to be clear.** If the plot is too complicated, too difficult to follow, if it lacks coherence, you lose interest. Great leaders not only point to the point on the horizon, but they also help people make sense of the path to get there.
3. **It has to have action.** “A character is what a character does,” as Don Miller puts it. The final output of all great leadership is meaningful and excellent execution.
4. **In every good story, there are obstacles.** The greater the obstacles and the greater the risk in overcoming them, the greater the epic. There are no great stories about easy victories and easy accomplishments. Great leaders don’t promise easy victories. They promise great victories, or glory in the quest.
5. **We have to like the protagonist.** Otherwise, we don’t care. Early on, we figure out whether he or she cares, and whether we can trust them. It doesn’t matter how down and out they are, or even how much of a jerk they are; they have to care enough that we want them to succeed. So it is with leaders: whatever your faults, they have to know that you care enough about them and the story so that they can buy into the journey to the horizon you are pointing to.
6. **Great stories are transformational.** They transform the protagonists and those that journey with them. And that transformation comes from what professional story tellers call the inciting incident: that moment or event that forces them to take action, with a door they have to go through ... and which slams shut behind them, propelling them on a journey they didn’t want to embark on but now they have to ... and which they then embrace. The protagonists typically don’t want to change; they have to be forced to change.
7. **A story is made up of turns—good turns and bad turns.** And the turns often come with a transitional dialogue, a dialogue that changes the direction of the story. Great leaders communicate widely and deeply at every turn—not just at the good ones, but at the bad ones too.
8. **Great stories have memorable scenes.** And great leaders create them. Think of *Dead Poets Society*, where Robin Williams, playing the role of a school teacher in a New England prep school, takes his student into a hall lined with the photos of past students, all long dead. As he presses the side of his face to the glass casing, he whispers hoarsely, “Can you hear what they’re saying? Can you hear their words?” And after a pregnant pause, he breathes out, “Carpe diem . . . Seize the day!” A powerful, memorable scene. He could just have easily have given the same message from the front of his classroom, but instead, he created a memorable scene his students were not likely to forget. Great leaders do the same . . . they think creatively about how to make their message stick. They create memorable scenes.
9. **Great stories contain pain.** The characters suffer. But they push through the pain and the suffering. And as the characters push through the pain together, they discover that the pain binds them. So it is with great leaders: they help people push through the pain, and in the process, they discover a unity and common identity that, without the pain, had eluded them.
10. **Most stories are made up of a quick beginning and a quick ending.** In between there’s a long middle act, and it never seems to end. The key is not giving up in the middle.

So what kind of story are you telling? What kind of story are you scripting?

To help you make your story one that people want to join and contribute to, consider these questions:

- Is the point on the horizon clear enough to those you lead?
- Is the plot (the path to the horizon) clear?
- Is the story transformational? Is it changing you, and changing them?
- How are you handling the turns, both the good and the bad?
- Are you creating memorable scenes?
- Do they see the value of pain?
- Are you or they flagging in the “long middle”?

The better your story, the more attractive you’ll be to the talent you need. And the better you integrate your new talent into the story, the longer they’ll stay.

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