

EPISODE 1543

[INTRODUCTION]

Paul Smith (PS): Storytelling is learnable. You know, I mean, it's definitely an art, it's not a science, but you can learn it. So, just like, you know, if you wanted to learn how to play the guitar, or the piano or learn to paint with pastels or something that may not be your natural gift. But you know, take a class, read a book, watch some videos, spend some time with somebody who does it, you can definitely learn these techniques.

[INTERVIEW]

Whitney Sewell (WS): Paul, welcome back to the show honored to have you on and be able to do a segment of shows with you so we can dive into this important topic of storytelling so we can all become more effective leaders. Thank you, Paul. But welcome back.

PS: Yeah, thanks for having me back. I'm just starting to get the hang of this now.

WS: This is great. No, this is such an important thing. I just know this personally. But I have personally not spent enough time on it that I know there's specific stories I have spent time on where I, if I'm speaking, you know, in front of a large group that, you know, it's helped me tremendously. So I know the value, but I've got to spend some time on it. So for other contexts, other stories, and you've made a great list for us, I did break that down. So it doesn't seem maybe as daunting for us to get started. Well, there are also a ton of storytelling techniques that I know you're an expert in that are going to help us in a big way. And let's dive in there today. And again, I want to encourage the listeners to go back and listen to the last couple of days, Paul has broken down the importance of storytelling to become an effective leader, and even eight questions that you should ask, you know, as you're thinking through the structure of your story, but let's dive in. And what makes you a natural storyteller? Uh, you know, are there natural storytellers? Or maybe people say, Paul, they're a natural salesman, you know, or whatever. Is that true? Or, you know, what do you think, Paul?

PS: Oh, yeah, I'm sure there are, but I'm definitely not one of them. Which is why I think I told you a couple of days ago, I, you know, I spent a long time trying to research and figure out how to do stories, because they just didn't come naturally to me. But the good news is, what I found out was that, you know, I mean, it's definitely an art, it's not a science, but you can learn it. So, just like, you know, if you wanted to learn how to play the guitar, or the piano or learn to paint with pastels or something that may not be your natural gift. But you know, take a class, read a book, watch some videos, spend some time with somebody who does it, you can definitely learn these techniques.

WS: That's helpful to know. I can do it, and no doubt about it, we can all learn. I think it's the time right? We don't have to spend the time to figure out you've walked us through these 10 different types of stories and eight questions to ask. And so maybe when does a story fit into this process? Whether it's sales, or in our case, you know, talking to investors or maybe to our team and thinking about, you know, when do we fit a story in? Are there better times?

PS: Some people say, if you got a meeting or a speech, kick it off with a good story, or close it with a good story. And those are true, the beginning and the end are certainly good times to tell a story. Because your audience tends to remember, somebody had done this research about what parts of a conversation or a speech or presentation do people remember the most and it's typically the beginning, the end, and the high point, the most memorable or the most emotionally salient point. So yeah, you want your presentations to kind of start and end with a story would be great. But the more important place to put the story is where it just fits in the conversation. So, I wouldn't overthink it and throw off, gotta have one at the beginning. I gotta have one at the end. I mean, just put them where they belong. And oftentimes, you can't even predict that because it just happens in conversation, right, you know, somebody brings up a problem that they're having. And if you've had experience with that problem before, well, that's a great time for you to share the story of, yeah, you know, I had that problem a few years ago, when I was in that job, here's what I did. Okay, now, you told them a story. You weren't planning on telling the story but the time came. I think the unplanned moments are even more important than the planned ones.

WS: Yeah. You know, I feel like stories don't have much weight if the listener doesn't trust you, right? Often, it seems, or they're probably not even gonna be listening hardly if they don't have some trust or expectation of trust or something. What makes someone trust the storyteller? And we talked a little bit yesterday about those first couple of questions, but what helps them to build credibility or trust?

PS: Yeah, I guess. So, two or three things come to mind. First of all, just earn trust with somebody, if they've just met you, people naturally don't trust people. They don't know. Okay, that's just a human fact, a fact of nature, right? And we, the other side of that coin is we naturally trust people who we know until they'd give us a reason not to, right? So, just knowing somebody personally, moves them into our circle of trust. Alright, so how do you get to know somebody? Or how do you let somebody get to know you? And the answer is, well, you can either spend six or 12 months working with them, which just takes a long time, or you can tell them some personal stories about you. And for whatever reason, people will now that I've heard a few personal stories about you, I kind of feel like I know you personally, you automatically get inside that circle of trust. Now you need to stay there. You need to not violate that trust, but it gets you in that circle much quicker just sharing your personal story.

PS: So, the storytelling as a technique actually does earn you some trust, okay, but in the story itself, so whether you've done that or not, when you find yourself telling a story, the thing that earns credibility is that question number two that I think we talked about yesterday, when and where does the story take place? If you tell them exactly where and when the story takes place. You know, when I was 18 years old in Poughkeepsie, New York, bla bla bla bla bla, okay. All right. So now they, they know exactly where and when the story takes place, which communicates to most people that this is a true story that I can believe, because obviously, you've done your research, you know exactly where and when it happened, which is more effective than saying, Now, this is a true story, which just sounds kind of defensive. In fact, I think when people say that it makes it sound less believable when they say, oh, this is a true story. Well, okay, I guess I'll just trust you. But if you tell them, look, this is exactly where and

when this happened. You know, I've done my research that makes it believable, it lends credibility to it, which gives, which lends trust to you as the speaker.

WS: Yeah. And speak to the, you know, the element of surprise, the element of the unknown. Does it make stories more compelling? How do you feel about that?

PS: You need to have it. I mean, surprises, of course, you know, the movies we watch, and the books we read, you love a surprise ending because it makes the story more fun. But even for leadership stories, it's an important component. But not just because it makes it more fun. Even though it does that too. It's important for a leadership story, because it, literally, physiologically, makes the story more memorable. And here's why. It turns out the human brain forms memories. It's not instantaneous, like a digital camera. It turns out, it works more like old-fashioned film cameras that you're probably too young to remember. But you know, you'd have to take a picture and take the film to the film store, and they develop it in a dark room. And there's a period of time after something happens, where the story is kind of being developed in your memory can be just from a few seconds to a few minutes to a few hours sometimes after something happens. And that that period of time is called the memory consolidation period. That's what psychologists call it.

PS: And during that period of time, the memory is vulnerable. It's vulnerable to being forgotten. First of all, like if you're in a car accident, or have a sports injury, and you get your head hit, and you get a concussion. But what happens to people's memory when they get a concussion? You know, they lose it. And it's not uncommon for somebody to wake up in the hospital and go, oh, how did I get here? Oh, you're in a car accident? Don't you remember? No, I don't remember. I mean, that's very typical. The reason is that the memory of that car coming at them was in the memory consolidation period being developed when the impact happened. So, it interrupted it, so it never finished, therefore, the memory was lost. Now the good news is, if there's something that can interrupt the memory consolidation process, there's something that can enhance it too. There are several things that do that. One of them is caffeine in your morning coffee. But another thing that does that is adrenaline, the kind of adrenaline that gets released in your system naturally, when you get frightened or surprised. So, a surprise, literally,

physiologically, makes the story you're telling, more memorable. And if it's more memorable, people are more likely to act on it for longer, and it's more likely to be a more effective leadership communication tool for you. So, surprises play a very pragmatic role in your storytelling.

WS: Interesting. Seems like, I don't know, let's think about this coming up with a surprise versus, you know, being so expecting. You know, whatever, you know, the theme of the story, I felt like often, you know, like you talked about a couple of times, you know, somebody's coming to you, oh, I've got this problem. And you say, well, when I did this, you go through the story of how you took, you know, what happened to you when you were in that position. It's gonna be hard, I feel like, to create the element of surprise, or is it?

PS: You think so but there are actually techniques to do it. Folks in Hollywood figured this out a long time ago and we can use some of the same techniques they do. So, the easier ones are, if you've got a surprise somewhere in the story, you can choose where to put it. If you want it at the beginning to get their attention, you can put it there and then kind of use flashbacks like they do in Hollywood and then go back and tell the story up to that point. But if you think there's no surprise in your story, you actually can create one. So I'll give you the easiest technique to do this. I'll just give you an example of it. And then I'll explain how it works. You may remember this from the class a few months ago. So there's a young boy named James, a nine-year-old kid. He's in the kitchen with his mom and his mom's sister. And while mom and auntie are sitting at the kitchen table having a cup of tea, James is standing at the stove watching the tea kettle boil and he's just fascinated with it. He's watching the jet of steam come out of the tea kettle and he's got a spoon. He holds it up there into the jet of steam and watches his little drops of water condense on the spoon. They trickle down and they drip into a coffee he's got sitting there so it doesn't make a mess in his mom's kitchen and just watching the cycle go over and over and over, just fascinated with it.

PS: Well, eventually his mother gets a little frustrated with him. She kind of barks at him. She's like, James, like, go outside, read a book, do your homework, you know, ride your bike. Do something. Aren't you ashamed of yourself because you're literally staring at the tea kettle

boiling for like an hour now. That's weird. Well, fortunately, young James was undaunted by that admonition because 20 years later, in the year 1765, James Watt reinvented the steam engine, ushering in the industrial revolution that we of course all benefit from today, and all based on that fascination with steam that he developed at the age of nine in his mother's kitchen.

PS: Now, to you, since you've heard that story before, it probably wasn't a surprise but to your audience members who haven't heard that story. It was probably a surprise that that turned out to be James Watt, the guy that invented the steam engine. And why was it a surprise? Here's the technique, because I didn't tell you his last name, and the year. So there it is. The technique is, I took one or two small but vital pieces of information that belonged at the beginning of the story. And I didn't give them to you until the end of the story. Presto! Surprise ending. Now you can't just reverse the story around, you know, you're violating the structure. But notice, so question number two was where and when did it happen? Well, I didn't ignore that question. I told you it happened in mom's kitchen, where. I didn't tell you when. I didn't give you the year. The third question is, who's the main character? I didn't just ignore that question. I told you, James, I didn't tell you James Watt, right? So, you have to answer some of the questions or the audience gets confused. And you're kind of violating your storytelling contract with them. But find part of the question to leave unanswered. And don't answer it until the end, and you just created a natural surprise in the story. You can do it with almost any story.

WS: Yeah, as we build out our own story, and then maybe you could provide a technique around this to even as we write our own story out, you know, how do you suggest someone does that? Get a Word document, and actually type it out. And then think through these elements like that. How do you give a couple of techniques maybe on just physically building that practical steps?

PS: Yeah, well, so the building of it, you know, when you're actually typing it out, again, I would suggest just answering the eight questions in bullet point form, not full sentences, because if you script it out word for word, you're going to be tempted to memorize it and deliver it word for word. And then it's going to sound really awkward. It's going to sound like

you're delivering a memorized story. And that just doesn't sound good. You want it to sound, extemporaneous, and conversational. So just bullet point answers. And then every time you tell the story, it'll come out a little bit different, which is exactly the way you want it to come out. But as far as building in these surprises, for example, that technique I just taught you, the most common way that is executed in a story is similar to that when you kind of withhold the identity of the main character.

PS: So, imagine earlier, I told you, you know, if you come to me with a problem, and I say, oh, yeah, that's an interesting problem. Let me tell you what I did five years ago, when I had your job, and I ran into that problem. You could do that. But now you've told them who the main character was. You could execute it by saying, basically, telling them the story of their you know, there was this vice president of whatever department, a few years ago who ran into this problem, and she did this. And she tried this, and that didn't work. And then she tried this, and that didn't work. And finally, she did this and that worked. And you know, whatever, that you finish out the story. And then you say, oh, by the way, you know, that person in that story? That was me. And those first few mistakes that she made, I'll never make that mistake again. You know, because it almost cost me my job. And you know, so you just notice how much more powerful of an ending it is when they find out that oh, that was you? Oh, you did that? Oh, you were the one that did that stupid thing. Yeah, yeah, that was me. And I wanted you to know, you know, so you can use that technique with just about any story.

WS: One final thing I wanted to ask you about, too, because I know this comes up in our business a lot is that elevator pitch, right? We've all heard that terminology, and try to think through what we're going to say. We have two minutes with this person. And I've talked about it a lot on the show, you know, because if we're at a conference, and you're talking to a hundred investors, and you're all talking about the same thing, or that next multifamily deal, or whatever it may be, they're not gonna remember or have a clue of who you are a week from now. And so I wonder about your thoughts on a story, you know, during that the two minutes you have with somebody or less in that "elevator pitch"?

PS: Yeah, so the real elevator pitch is probably not two minutes. It's probably, 30 seconds, right?

WS: That's right.

PS: Yeah, so all the stories that you and I just talked about are really in the two to three-minute range, you can shorten them, but the way to do that is not just to cut things out that you think are less important and random, but just based on your gut instinct, what you're likely to do if you do that is you're gonna end up cutting out answers to an entire question. And now you don't have a complete story, you just have a partial story. So a better technique is you know, write out the bullet-pointed answers to the eight questions and then go through and delete a few of the bullet points but don't delete every bullet point in when one box if an answer to one question and that because now you don't have an answer to that question at all right? So it's smarter to delete that way than just cut out entire chunks. Now, if you want to get down to where it's 10 seconds, you might have to do that. And so I guess the advice I'd give you there is the shortest effective storytelling structure is problem resolution, right? So, if you wanted to cut through all the so like, I'm assuming on the elevator, I've got their attention I don't need to use a hook I don't have time to deliver the recommendation and the lesson I just need to trust that they'll you know, so you're gonna I'm gonna cut those out. If you want to skin it down even further, it's basically problem solution. Here's the problem. Here's what we did about it. And then you can let them figure out if that was a success or failure, you know, later. But at its nub, every story is a problem resolution.

WS: Paul, what are the techniques would I not even know to ask you about before or in anything else you want to leave the listeners with, as far as around stories, the importance of storytelling before we move to a few final questions?

PS: Yeah, so probably the biggest one that we need to at least spend a minute or two on it would be emotion. Emotion is an important component of a well-told story. You need to engage your audience emotionally. Remember, that's why you're telling the story in the first place is so that their subconscious emotional brain will have something to think about right in

making the decision. And there's some pretty simple techniques to make sure you've got, you know, some kind of emotional engagement. Your stories and dialogue are the easiest one. I mean, people say what they think and feel. It will come out of their mouth. So, if your story sounds like just a dry recitation of events, well, this happened, and then this happened, and this happened and then this happened, you're doing it wrong. It ought to be, well, this happened. And then he said this. And then this happened. And she said that. By just having the dialogue will make it even more emotionally salient to people because again, people will people say what they think and feel, and it will kind of come out of their mouths.

PS: But there couple of other really easy techniques. I mean, one is just called the Tell Me technique. Just name it, like literally say he was sad, she was angry, they were confused. I mean, just name the emotion, the audience will get it. But a little bit more powerful one is the Show Me technique. And that doesn't mean you demonstrate it, you know, I'm not teaching an acting class or something. But just describing the physical manifestations of the emotions on the main characters will really go a long way to helping your audience kind of empathize with that. So instead of saying, you know, he was sad, say he started crying. When people cry when they're sad, right? The audience will figure it out, you know, instead of saying, she was angry, say she started yelling, well, people yell when they're angry, right, the audience will figure it out. So, describe what's happening in the red face the confused look that, you know, whatever, the audience will figure out the emotion from the clues you're giving them. And for some reason, that's a more powerful way for humans to emote with a story.

WS: Love that. That's incredible. I'm going to try to use that myself. For sure. Paul, it's been great. I think it's so helpful to think through how we are speaking. It's so yeah, it's worth our time to become better speakers, and ultimately, better storytellers. For all the reasons you have laid out here over the last few days. Few final questions for you, Paul, I ask often, almost everyone that I find interesting, as well. Paul, what are some of the most important metrics that you track for yourself? It could be personally or professionally, it can be the interviews you've done, it could be your bench press goal, either one.

PS: Oh, well, I mean, the health ones are the easiest ones, right? You know, what was my cholesterol level? How many miles did I run this week? You know, how many times did I actually get to the gym? Those kinds of things. As a business person, here's one that I don't track that I probably should, and that is, how many conversations that I have with prospects? And how many of those did I initiate versus, you know, somebody else? You know, I tend to just sit around and wait for the phone to ring and, you know, probably be more effective, you know, some other way. But I don't have a lot. So I mean, when I worked at Procter and Gamble for 20 years, you know, the year at this big company, you know, we had dozens and dozens of metrics that we measured in my department was in charge of tracking several of them. And it was an important part of running a business. I'm a solopreneur now, and I don't do that a lot. So I've lost that discipline. Probably could be more effective if I reestablish that but it's pretty easy in my position to not do that. So I probably fell victim to that.

WS: Are there other habits that you have that you felt have produced a return for you that you'd recommend?

PS: Yeah, for sure. So, first of all, exercising in the morning, like, first thing. It was one of the best habits that I ever developed. And it's hard now that I don't have to go into an office every day. It's harder to do that. Or not harder to do. It's, I don't have the constraint. But yeah, because like, I literally, I don't even drink coffee. Like, you know, the reason the way that I'm awake is because you get that workout first thing in the morning, and well now you're awake, and you don't need this caffeine habit that most people tend to have. So that was that's been a good one for me. Probably one other worth mentioning is, when I was in my mid-30s, I started talking to people who are retired, just to like, what's it like to be retired? And I'm 20 or 30 years away from that, but I'm kind of curious what that's all about. And one of the things that almost everybody said was their favorite part about being retired is not having to wake up to an alarm, like, you know, hitting the snooze button over and over. And just having that alarm waking them up in the morning was the worst part of their day. And they just started their day off on a bad foot, right, like this (makes alarm clock sounds). And I'm so tired and I need more sleep and just awful.

PS: So, I started thinking, Well, what can I do? Like I'm too young to retire. But what can I do to achieve to enjoy that benefit of retirement even though I'm not retired yet. And so I just started going to bed earlier 30 minutes earlier and I still needed an alarm then went to bed 30 minutes earlier than that and I still needed an alarm. And I found out that 10 o'clock at night. If I went to bed at 10 o'clock, I would wake up at 6am and which is when I wanted to wake up to go work out to get to the office by eight and so I did that for a while, and pretty soon I stopped needing an alarm clock and I literally haven't used an alarm in probably 30 years, you know. I mean, except for on occasion when I got a 6am flight or something, you know, but other than that I just haven't. I just have the discipline to go into bed and I'm always well-rested. So, that was a game changer.

WS: That's interesting. Yeah, I can relate to that to some degree. But what we associate that sound with right immediately puts us in a bad mood. What about the number one thing that's contributed to your success?

PS: Probably just having the guts to leave my cushy corporate job in the middle of my career and going and pursuing this passion of being an author and a speaker and a trainer, you know, I probably could have pursued some of this while keeping my corporate job. But, you know, having the guts to leave and go do this, you know, when I was too young for retirement, and all that kind of stuff that allowed me to have the flexibility to focus all my time and effort on researching and writing about storytelling, and which, you know, evolved into an entire career and of itself. And it's hard for me to imagine 10 years now, later, you know, what it would be like, if I was still, you know, in my old life, I liked my job. But this is just just head and shoulders above all the rest of it. And I'm glad that that was able to happen.

WS: Paul, how do you like to give back?

PS: I did it this week. And, you know, being a solopreneur gives you a little bit more flexibility and things like that. So, for example, twice a year, a high school class from Greene County, Ohio, comes to visit me. I mean, it's different kids each time different semester class come to visit me, sometimes at my house here and sometimes at the local library. And I basically teach

them some of the same things that I teach my executive clients about being better leaders and being better storytellers. And sometimes it's just about life. There are things like that, that I have the flexibility to do now that I didn't before. And that feels pretty good to invest in future leaders that way.

WS: Awesome, Paul, grateful for you giving back in that way. But I felt like you've also given back to us in a big way over the last three days, just spending this much time with us. I'm very grateful for your time and other listeners have learned a lot. I have learned a lot. It's great to hear I heard you speak about a number of these things. It's great to hear it again. And I just want to spend or commit some time on this. I didn't want to I love the idea to have different team members sharing different stories in the meetings. I think that's such a good idea. I think you're going to learn a lot about other people in your team to write and build even some culture and, and I love that idea. And so thank you so much again for your time and sharing your expertise. Tell the listeners again how they can get in touch with you and learn more about you.

PS: Yeah, thanks for having me on. This was a lot of fun. My website is the easiest way so that's LeadWithAStory.com and that's got links there to all my books and training courses, etc. So thanks for having me.

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[OUTRO]

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