



## Tell Me a Story: How People's Experiences Help Teach Safety

Before writing was invented, before the first cave painting appeared on a rock wall, human beings learned from stories. For thousands of years, storytelling has remained a vital part of cultural discovery and understanding, despite fast-developing technologies and global channels of instantaneous information.

When it comes to safety in the workplace, the story always has been an important communication device for illustrating the severity of hazards. Stories frequently are used in training and as precautionary lessons for new and young workers who are learning the ropes. "One of the things that stories do very effectively is share experiences," said Elaine Cullen, communications chief for NIOSH's Spokane Research Lab in Washington state. "When you are working in an environment that is very dangerous, you really don't want people experiencing [bad] things firsthand. So, what you can do is have them learn about dangers without exposing people to them," she said.

Cullen, an experienced miner and story documentarian, said when workers start a new job they often are bombarded with information and don't always process it well. They find rules and procedures difficult to remember and retain, especially written guidelines, charts or statistics.

### Connecting with Listeners

Getting through to workers during training requires instructors to convey meaningful information in a way that makes an impression on their audience. That means knowing what subject you are training and whom you are training, then creating a picture best suited for your listeners. "Most people are visual learners," said Jim Solomon, defensive driving course program development and training manager at the National Safety Council. "When you tell a story, the brain makes pictures as you go along."

Solomon said a story doesn't have to give people every single detail of an event; it simply has to give the right details.

He continued, "What you try to do in storytelling is paint word pictures – 'We had a guy by the name of Tony. Tony worked over in Unit Seven for years. He was one of the best guys they had. He had a wife and three kids, and he coached a Little League baseball team. He was a family man. One day, Tony was sent to fix a leak. He put the ladder up, just as he's done three other times, knowing he needed to bring someone else in [to help]. But he had to go do it. He didn't put the cones around the base of the ladder. And knowing he'd only be there a couple minutes he didn't tie it off. As a result, the forklift operator didn't see the ladder, backed into it, tipped it over and dumped Tony. Tony was impaled on one of the tines on the forklift.' Now we have a picture. That's what stories can do for us."

Both Solomon and Cullen agreed that stories can be told in a variety of ways as long as they are relevant. Some tales may be humorous, others may be sad, but they must break down the barrier between the instructor and the listener to be successful.

### In-Culturing Through Story

Trainers aren't the only people who frequently use stories to make a point about safety. In many dangerous occupations such as mining, construction and manufacturing, an oral tradition exists among workers. Cullen has experienced some of these tales firsthand while filming videos in hard rock mines. She once witnessed a new hire make a mistake and a gruff, older miner pull him aside to tell him a story about someone who had made the same error. "By doing that he moved the nipper (an assistant in the mining industry) out of having to defend his action because the story wasn't about him.



It was about somebody else who got hurt. This kid got the message clearly without having to develop a defensive mechanism and protect his ego," she said.

### **Collect and Respect**

Every workplace has potential stories that can help teach safety. Solomon and Cullen both said the key is for management to listen to workers and respect their experiences. If supervisors sit down and talk to employees, employees will almost always share their stories.

Stories raise awareness about dangers by painting powerful mental images. These images stay with workers and alter the way they perform their jobs. "If you can reach their heart and get them to make a voluntary change in the way they do things, you can change their behavior," Cullen said.

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