

The Power of Story



My parents were born during the early 1930's, I would ask them about memorable moments from their childhood and they would share stories of how the depression and war impacted their childhood (sounds familiar). They related how they would gather as a family to listen to the radio every night for news, music and entertainment. They shared fond memories of radio shows like the Lone Ranger which brought adventures of the Wild West directly into their living room. Another favorite, The Shadow, was a dark figure that was able to solve any mystery but caused many a child to ask for the lights to be left on at bedtime.

Radio in the 30's was a theater of the mind. Dedicated followers of a show were able to create a reality of time and place with exceptional detail based on their unique imagination and past

experience. Today, radio serves many of the same purposes except the serials have vanished replaced by talk show hosts that provide us rare opportunities to think for ourselves much less imagine.

So, what does theater of the mind or stories like my parents listened to on the radio have to do with improving healthcare team performance? Everything! Simulation or the art of recreating reality takes many forms or fidelities (degree to which we suspend disbelief) in healthcare and has been proven to improve team performance. When we think of medical simulation, most of us think of the high fidelity mannequins that talk, breathe, and even blink. Role playing is another effective form of simulation and used extensively in standardized patient programs. Even simple case studies recreate real circumstances for learning. All of these effective methods of simulation begin with a script or more simply, a story. The story must feel real for participants to 'play their part' in the exercise and it must be connected to past or current experiences to elicit the most powerful responses.

These powerful responses become the catalysts for change within an individual, team and organization when carefully planned, scripted, facilitated, and discussed with others. Using powerful stories to simulate real experiences allows teams to model ideal behaviors, 'fail safely', learn key skills, and innovate new norms, beliefs and ultimately, culture.

We all know that the Lone Ranger and the Shadow were merely actors playing a role but don't try telling that to my parents in the 1930's.

[Check out how HTT is using stories to improve team performance and transform culture across healthcare](#)



By Stephen Powell, President/CEO, Healthcare Team Training



Motivating Change Through the Power of Story

Given the enormity of the problems facing healthcare and the intransigence of people to make changes to ameliorate practices and behaviors that contribute to healthcare's malaise, how is it that something that is seemingly simple as a story motivate people to take steps to change?

First, we now know that we are wired for storytelling—both our physiology and the narrative schema that inform the way we process information make storytelling an ideal method for bypassing the critical functions of the mind. Stories actually relax our defenses while inviting listeners to enter into an alternate reality, what is often referred to as the willing suspension of disbelief.

In the world of a story, changes that impact patient safety and satisfaction can be safely contemplated, and even seen as palatable and doable. When the story is finished, listeners are more receptive to reflecting on the meaning of the story, and when invited to imagine what it would take to create the conditions of that alternate reality in their real world, the possibilities of success seem much less daunting.

Finally, good stories become reference points for a shared experience that teams can come back to again and again when they have veered off the path of improvement. If the characters in the story could do it, then certainly we, too, can do it. And that is the first step to making changes that truly matter.