

LEADERS AS STORYTELLERS

“Leadership...surely includes the ability to mobilize others in positive ways.”

How do leaders do that? One way is through their stories—both those they tell themselves and those they relate to others. “Images implanted in the soul...can disturb, delight, move, haunt, and compel,” say the authors of *Common Fire*.

Faced with funding cuts, the board of an adult literacy program needs to re-invent its approach to programs, funding, and its own structure. After a year of work with this group, I see good ideas unmatched by enough energy to meet the challenges. Now, suddenly, in an annual board/staff retreat, staff members erupt with stories about clients. Mary now reads well enough to have passed her driver’s test. Jane has gotten a library card and now brings her children to the library. Ellen and Jeanie registered to vote. These stories are small flames that kindle staff passion and now embolden the board.

Stories inspire us to action, light our way to future successes, and, as many leaders witness in the book *Common Fire*, stories draw us into the circle of humanity working around a common fire.

I often work with leaders who are bringing teams or organizations through major changes. Sometimes our work involves identifying the spark that sustains these leaders through hard times. Jim is a hard working division director whose unit has been relocated in the organizational structure. As he describes his challenges, I see bright ideas peeping from behind the clouds. We create a concept map, placing each new idea on a sheet of paper and then arranging the ideas by priority and sequence. The map will be a story to tell his staff and a guide for them all.

Vera comes seeking an action plan for her troubled company. Like most of my clients, Vera has a story already burning inside—and her staff have theirs. But until the words get strung together like the prayer flags Sherpas hang at base camp before a climb, they cannot guide. Vera’s first achievement is her discovery that she carries the passion to guide her organization to health. She also has the commitment (see right column definitions) to gather staff around the common fire to envision the company anew. Next, cross-functional teams will work to build it.

Stories help staff see their way through dark, uncertain transitions. Toni, group leader on a manufacturing line, is both discouraged by low morale and sure of her work group’s potential. “What do you see ahead?” I ask. Her eyes light up as she answers with word pictures. Of course telling the story to her group is just one spark. The flame will be fed by skill support and group forums that include chances for others to tell their stories—both dreams and nightmares of the in-between time, and stories of successes.

We can get stuck in stories that dwell on the selfish self and on what is wrong. We all catch ourselves imagining the impossibility of positive outcomes. Like tornadoes—such stories throw us off center, tear us away from each other, and leave behind heaps of debris. Which stories shall we choose? What images are “implanted in your soul?” How will we string them together to guide us? How shall we gather, and by what light?

Please copy this article with complete copyright notice.

Copyright © 2006 Merryn Rutledge

Guiding stories

“...find the guiding stories that get [you] through the rough parts.”

From *Common Fire, Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*

by Daloz, Keen, Keen and Daloz Parks

Five qualities

In their interviews with leaders, the authors found five qualities that feed the common fire—both the inner fire that forms and sustains us, and the community fires that leaders kindle in our common lives.

- **Compassion:** living a life that embraces others who are like and unlike us
- **Conviction:** developing these habits of mind: dialogue; seeing others’ perspectives; embracing ambiguity, paradox and contradiction; seeing life as an interconnected whole
- **Courage:** sustaining our search for the center of our being and the imagination to live a moral life
- **Confession:** remembering one’s own fallibility
- **Commitment:** living and striving as if there are solutions, resolutions and reconciliations