Bernstein Artists, Inc.
Management/Production/Project Development/Representation

Bernstein Artists, Inc.
282 Flatbush Avenue, Suite 101; Brooklyn, NY 11217
ph 718.623.1214 - fx 718.638.6110 - www.bernsarts.com

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Human Capital

How to Succeed By Telling Stories

Clare O'Connor 11.22.10, 12:00 AM ET

In 2007 a hundred people from 48 countries sat in circles in a building in Cyprus and began telling stories in the voices of their grandparents. They were all employees of the Walt Disney Co.'s emerging markets team, and they were following instructions from Murray Nossel, a South African clinical psychologist. Nossel has started Narativ, a business that trains employees by getting them to tell stories. He says he got a decidedly mixed reaction from that crowd of Europeans, Africans and Asians.

"Some thought it was absolutely brilliant, some thought it was violent," says Nossel, 49. "For the Indians in the group, an oral tradition was very familiar. For the northern Europeans, it was like bringing the devil into the room."

For many of the Europeans the tales involved relating difficult, long-buried anecdotes about World War II to near strangers. "They found that we all have something in common," Nossel says. "We all have grandparents. It helps us relate. It's so easy to recognize only our differences."

The "grandparent story" is one of the principal tools Nossel and his team of psychologists, teachers and executive coaches use to help companies like Disney get their staffers listening to and communicating with one another. He believes that storytelling can be the key to bringing together a disparate workforce, especially one from around the globe. Narativ is a young company with a permanent staff of only four and annual revenue of about $250,000, but it's growing fast. It started working with corporations in 2007, but it already has big-name clients besides Disney, including HBO, Radisson, Unicef and George Soros' Open Society.

Nossel formed Narativ in 2000 with Paul Browde, a fellow South African transplanted to New York. The two had a long, troubled story of their own. They had met in school in Johannesburg, where Nossel remembers Browde "humiliating" him in front of their class when they were 15, calling him a "faggot." Twenty years later their paths crossed again, when they were both running with the same New York theater crowd. Nossel was a playwright, an Oscar-nominated documentary filmmaker and a clinical psychologist. Browde was a psychiatrist with drama school training. Both were then openly gay. "When we reconnected, we realized we'd led parallel lives," Nossel says.

The two started performing a play together, *Two Men Talking*, based on their unusual path to friendship. It's essentially live storytelling, and they improvise, making the show different each night. It has taken them to London's West End, Off Broadway and Johannesburg. At the same time they started that, Nossel was finishing up fieldwork for his psychology Ph.D. by counseling AIDS patients in Brooklyn. His job was to help them come to terms with their impending deaths.

"When people died their belongings were packed into black garbage bags, and nobody came to claim them," he says. "There was a sense of leaving nothing behind. For them to tell their stories was really important." He started getting them to narrate their life stories, though many--crack addicts, the homeless--insisted they had no stories to tell. Soon many began requesting VHS tapes so they could leave something for posterity.

Nossel and Browde cofounded Narativ in 2000 to teach anyone else how to tell their stories effectively. They first offered workshops for the general public and then programs for charities, schools and nonprofits. Nossel landed his first corporate client in 2007, thanks to a business school connection of a onetime intern, Jerome Deroy, who now oversees Narativ's corporate programs.

Browde has since taken a backseat, and Nossel has hired a senior adviser to help adapt his workshops for each corporate client. Bob Fitzpatrick, the adviser, has a long history as a senior executive, having been director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and dean of the School of Arts at Columbia University. Former Walt Disney CEO Michael Eisner hired him to launch Disneyland Paris in 1987. That involved overseeing a nascent management team that mixed Americans, French, Luxembourgers, Belgians, Indians, Brits and Spaniards. They had so little in common they could barely communicate. "The American expats assumed people shared their cultural frames of reference," Fitzpatrick says. "They didn't." He got them all cooperating by telling them stories to explain Walt Disney and the company's history.

Fitzpatrick learned about Narativ when he saw *Two Men Talking* last year, and he was entranced by the notion of teaching storytelling as a communication tool: "I thought, 'I'd have given my soul to have this when I was running Euro Disney.'" He attended one of Nossel's workshops for the general public, which cost $240 for seven hours of training, and he says he had to suspend his natural skeptic's disbelief to see the benefits. It wasn't the storytelling itself that won him over; it was how well the participants listened to one another.

"People were really listening--leaning in, not playing with their BlackBerrys or iPhones," he says. As a CEO he had noticed how in meetings his employees would pay attention to him and no one else. "From a CEO's point of view, getting people to really listen to one another is a gift from the gods. Then they'll work together much more effectively."

Fitzpatrick is helping Nossel tailor his workshops for two new corporate clients, one of the world's largest data analytics firms and a big life insurance company. In recent weeks they have met with human resources representatives and executives from both to conduct what Nossel calls an "ethnographic assessment" of how people at their companies work and communicate. "What we do with an insurance company that needs help selling a product is very different from what we do with a financial institution," Fitzpatrick says.

Narativ also trains charity workers to better communicate with those they try to help. "When you go into the Amazon and interview a kid about a human rights violation, you have to know how to collect that story without causing harm," Nossel says.

Alana Dave, the education officer of the International Transport Workers' Federation, turned to Nossel to teach truckdrivers and port workers in Mombasa, Kenya, to speak openly about AIDS, a huge problem in that part of Africa. That workshop led some transport workers to come out as HIV positive and others to overcome longstanding fears of being tested.

In the corporate world HR directors are finding other applications for Narativ's storytelling training, including crisis communications. Anna Tavis, who was the head of executive talent at American International Group during its bailout crisis, has met with Narativ and says, "The human collateral of that crisis--we don't even yet know what it is. We haven't done the healing. That's where I see the power of storytelling coming in. To a large extent, it determines how we see ourselves. In New York, in financial services, people have to reframe their stories."

Despite all his satisfied clients, Nossel knows there will continue to be skepticism in the corporate world about anything that seems so touchy-feely. Fitzpatrick is on hand to keep a wary eye on Narativ's programs for that reason. At the start of his workshops Nossel describes some of the science of how people communicate, and he makes the point that storytelling is nothing less than the basic way humans understand the world and convey that understanding. "Our brains are hardwired to recognize stories and want a resolution," he says. Companies that lose sight of that fact, he believes, do so at their own peril.