



RETRIEVING YOUR COMPANY'S LEGACY

How storytelling can help you reclaim your heritage and shape your company culture

By Tania Dussey-Cavassini

November 2012

IMD
Chemin de Bellerive 23
PO Box 915,
CH-1001 Lausanne
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07
info@imd.org
www.imd.org

Mankind loves to tell stories. In fact we all grow up with stories. In our own ways and in our own cultures, we experience the magic of the story told around the campfire. Stories shape cultures. Stories have the power to create a sense of belonging. They bond people together through shared experience and through common values the stories carry.

The impact of storytelling in business has been subject to much research and writing. Although to some it may look like just another new trend in leadership development, at IMD, we have experienced the value of crafting stories.

Over two years ago, the HR Development Director of Veolia Environmental Services, a multinational waste company, asked IMD to design and develop a unique program for its top 200 executives. The purpose of the program was to retrieve the legacy of what the company used to be: an entrepreneurial and agile partner contributing to the well being of the planet and the people. The spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation had to be revived.

In close collaboration with Veolia's HR Development Team, IMD Professor of Strategy Cyril Bouquet put together a sophisticated program design. The program blended intensive group work, deep dive sessions on alternative business models, team-building workshops through jazz, cooking challenges with IMD Chefs, and public speaking sessions with coaches experienced in the performing arts¹. This latter session was aiming at helping executives sell new business ideas more effectively. Participants were invited to tell a story which they had experienced in their work environment. The story had to be related to how they had dealt with a challenging situation. Thanks to their personal intervention, and often thanks to the work of their team, the executives had managed to turn around a situation to a successful outcome.

Eighteen months later, after completion of the program, I reviewed the evaluations, and contacted some of the executives. Many qualified the coaching session on public speaking and storytelling as "one of the most useful and revealing parts of the program." Here is how these sessions impacted them, and indirectly the company:

Retrieving a sense of *community*:

"This program helped me realize that I share common human values with colleagues from other regions, colleagues which I did not know before coming to IMD," wrote Xavier to the HR Development Director upon his return to the office after the program. Stories have the power to bring people together through shared values. For Veolia Environmental Services, most of the stories told during the program were about entrepreneurial achievements: Moments, when these executives had succeeded thanks to their dedication, their creativity, and most importantly their leadership skills.

Retrieving a sense of *pride*:

"This is the toughest program I have ever attended. However, I truly believe that it will make a huge difference in how I operate and manage challenges in the future" said Jack at the end of the week. Most executives described the program as being intense, demanding, yet fun and friendly. Through the stories each executive told, they acknowledge how proud they were to work for Veolia Environmental Services and for their teams. The sense of pride grew with the sense of duty, and the demands put on them during the program.

Honoring their work and the work of their teams:

"Through these stories, we learnt so much about ourselves and others. I shall always remember Gary's story," wrote Derek. During the individual coaching with participants, I found out that over 90% of these stories were told to an audience for the very first time. Rarely had the story been told to a Veolia Environmental Services colleague before. What we actually did by telling these stories was to honor the work and dedication of teams who sometimes, like Gary, found themselves in

¹ IMD partnered with The TAI Group for the delivery of this session (<http://www.thetaigroup.com>)

difficult and life threatening situations. To honor is to respect the value of the efforts, it is to acknowledge publicly the value of a colleague.

Retrieving their *legacy of entrepreneurship*:

“What a joy to give us the willpower to dare,” said Bertrand. “We learnt tools which gave us trust in our own capabilities,” added John. Isn’t it what the spirit of entrepreneurship is about: To have the skills to explore, to dare to challenge the status quo, and to create new products and markets.

Two years later, as a result of this program, the culture of entrepreneurship is back in many ways. Many tools provided by IMD are spread and shared within the company at all levels. Executives who completed the program continue to work on refining and prototyping their business ideas for the Executive Committee’s validation, and a dozen of pilot projects are currently running successfully.

And finally, *daring to be*:

“This coaching session in the program was a moment of truth, when I became convinced that I could be myself, without fear,” said Martin. Some executives still struggle with the fact that they do not dare to *bring all of themselves* to work. Like Martin, other executives declared that telling that simple story had shown them that they could be, and learn to rely on their strengths.

Since he attended the program, Emmanuel is not only daring to be, he dares to let people be. He states that it has transformed the way he engages in conversations with his clients, partners or co-workers. “Not only has it changed the way I communicate, but the way I listen. I am more interested in trying to find out what is on people’s mind than sharing my own concerns. And what at first may look like a weird idea often leads to good discussions in the team, and eventually to great improvements” he concludes.

In his latest book “Care to dare: Unleashing astonishing potential through secure base leadership” IMD Professor of leadership and organizational behavior Georges Kohlrieser exposes the importance of creating a safe environment in order to foster high performance. Listening to the stories of Veolia Environmental Services executives, I know that from the way they engage and bond with their teams and partners, they are creating environments that unleash astonishing potential and a spirit of entrepreneurship.

Pondering on the achievements of this two-year journey, the HR Development Director of Veolia Environmental Services recalls: “When we designed the program, I was intuitively convinced that this storytelling session was going to be useful. With the experience and looking back, it is clear that this session was the final touch of the program, the icing on the cake that contributed to its success. I was personally amazed by the emotional intensity and the courage of the participants who gave so much of themselves when sharing their stories.”

Today, I feel privileged to have witnessed and listened to all these stories. Each story is unique in its time, place and people. Whenever I see the brand name of Veolia Environmental Services, I am reminded of the faces that told these amazing stories of people working together. And I am humbled by the courage, the dedication, and the passion of these people.

Tania Dussey-Cavassini coaches executives in the area of communication and public speaking. She is currently a Fellow at Harvard University conducting research in the area of cross-cultural communication and negotiations; you can follow her on Twitter @TaniaDussey