Do Tell

Using the Power of Storytelling To Grow on the Job

Stephanie Stephens

Everyone has a story, but not everyone knows how to tell it effectively. In the highly technical world of healthcare technology management (HTM), a good story can shorten the distance between establishing a goal and achieving it.

“As healthcare technology managers, we aren’t robots. We’re people,” says Donald Armstrong, a customer quality manager for GE Healthcare’s U.S. and Canada Service in diagnostic and clinical services. “We don’t simply repair and maintain, but we interact with the equipment, the operators, the manufacturers, and especially the patients—both directly and indirectly.”

Sometimes you have explaining to do, he says, so you tell a story. “When we call an original equipment manager for tech support, we have to explain our issues to the tech. We tell a story when we speak to another technician about a problem we’re having with a piece of equipment, a program we’re trying to run, or even a difficult or problematic co-worker. Maybe we tell stories about past successes and some failures as well.”

Armstrong thinks the best technicians explain how they do their jobs by telling stories rich with detail about problems, actions, and tests they run—infused with personal feelings about their experiences. “Stories bring you to that place where you can see yourself,” he says. “They bring that essence of what it takes to be a great biomechanical expert.”

Express Yourself

When you are really engaged and involved in a story’s essence, both speaker and listener connect in the moment. Salim Kai, knows this as a clinical engineer for facilities services and biomedical engineering at the University of Michigan Health System, and he uses storytelling to foster cohesion.

“Storytelling principles are part of our daily culture, part of who we are, and how we express our daily involvements,” Kai says. “They also influence how we interact with others, personally or professionally. On the job, they help us relate in the present to others’ past experiences.”

Stories also help you win in a business world often characterized by PowerPoint slides, spreadsheets, and numbers. The ability to establish a rapport with the listener can accelerate a proposition or proposal “more than any amount of data you can throw at people,” says Glenn Scales.

He should know; he is the recipient of a Distinguished Toastmaster Award or DTM, the highest achievement in the international association that refines public speaking and leadership skills. Scales retired from his job in May after 15 years at Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina as a patient safety specialist, but he’s spent 13 years perfecting communication with Toastmasters International.

“There’s a difference between what is said and how it’s said,” Scales says. “If you can’t
communicate effectively, you’ve lost them.”

HTM professionals can act as translators between the technical and clinical worlds, he says. “It helps clinicians better understand their role—how technology impacts them and how to use it in a more meaningful way. Remember that if you don’t understand something, you’re at a loss about how to interact with it.”

Plus, hospitals are very complex environments—with many devices, and many people who have their own behaviors, conversations and priorities. Effective storytelling helps people put it all into context.

For example, in incident investigations and reconstruction “you’re gathering lots of data, testing devices, and examining materials,” he says. “All that must be brought together in a coherent story that tells risk managers, physicians, and nurses how it happened so we take steps to ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

The Human Connection

“Every time I write a submission, I tell a story,” says Annette Hillring of Hillring and Associates, Inc., a regulatory affairs consultant to the medical device industry. Her premarket submissions detail the rigors of development, and testing for safety and effectiveness—many times including clinical studies and proposed labeling.

Hillring also conducts training classes for AAMI on quality system regulation and weaves in examples of her years of experience. “It’s always a great compliment when someone tells me I made it sound so simple or interesting. I tell them, ‘Let me tell you about what happened to me—about managing recalls because of mistakes that were made.’ I want to prevent those problems from recurring.”

Cynthia Hubbard, RN, a consultant for quality assurance and sterile processing outcomes, wrote a sterilization manual for AAMI and also conducted a three-part webinar related to that manual.

“The more we can connect our repetitive tasks to the very human outcome for patients—our sterile processing team never comes in direct contact with them—the greater the impact of the message,” says Hubbard.

“A loved one, such as a technician’s mom, is the patient upon which the instrument set he is preparing will be used,” she says. “When technicians can make the emotional leap to the story and make it ‘theirs,’ they’re more apt to retell it. That, in turn, adds more reinforcement and better compliance to the requested compliance.”

No job is all business all the time, Hubbard says. “As a new manager coming from outside the community into this area and the hospital setting fairly recently, telling my story helps others get to know me. It builds relationships with my coworkers and those I manage.”

It’s also never too late to learn a new skill like storytelling, says Malcolm Ridgway, who retired in January from ARAMARK Healthcare Technologies as chief clinical engineer.

“Wow. Where’s this storytelling been all my life?” he wonders out loud. “In our profession, we do tend to be a bit formal, sometimes too geeky, with all those dull, standard corporate memos.”

Storytelling helps him get people interested in data collection and aggregation. Earlier this year, Ridgway wrote a blog post with HTM consultant Alan Lipschultz that challenged HTM professionals to better explain their preventive maintenance (PM) practices. Statistics and data tell one thing, Ridgway said, and they are vitally important in making informed decisions when it comes to PM procedures. But a compelling narrative can helps others better understand the point of all that data.

“It helps them get a handle on it,” he said.

Reach Out with Words

Think of a story as a handshake or invitation. “Storytelling is an excellent way to bridge the gap between groups that use different nomenclature or come from different backgrounds,” says Samantha Jacques, director of biomedical engineering at Texas...
Children’s Hospital in Houston. “The most difficult part of storytelling is finding a common example that works for all groups you’re communicating with. Sometimes they’re so diverse you have to really stretch to find a story that everyone can relate to.”

That stretch should marry an idea to an emotion. Jacques says that at a symposium earlier this year, a doctor told the story of how his team performed fetal surgery to repair a heart defect, saving the life of a baby still in its mother’s womb. The baby was born healthy.

The poignant story has broad applications, she says. “It highlights the fact that people are the ‘heart’ of every organization and without their dedication and caring, this little baby would not have been born. Stories like this can inspire and motivate our staff to rally around the mission and vision of our organization—or to highlight a change recently made and rally adoption of that change.”

Finally, you’re good at what you do, so don’t be afraid to brag (a little), suggests Robin N. Faut, a clinical engineer with Olathe Medical Center in Kansas. Too often, Faut says, HTM professionals “do not do a good job of bragging about what we do. Good storytellers can toot their own horns without ruffling others’ feathers and are more likely to advance in their careers as well as their departments.”

Faut says he’s worked hard to communicate complex technical issues so the listener doesn’t feel overwhelmed or less intelligent. He thinks that’s contributed to the reputation of the biomed department as a good neighbor—ready to help with almost any issue.

“I do have to point out that despite my efforts I have the nickname of ‘Sheldon’ from ‘The Big Bang Theory,’” he says. The geeky character is known for being hyper-intelligent, socially challenged, and rigidly logical. “That means I have a long way to go before I actually accomplish being a good storyteller.”
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