

AUTOBOTS, TRANSFORM!

THE UNIQUE POWER OF STORYTELLING IN SERVANT LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATION

By Tara Mibus, Partner, AMCA
October 1, 2015

"Attention, barnacle monster! Come out with your hands over your...well, you don't have a head. But you get the idea."

—Bumblebee¹



Saturday morning cartoons are a nearly perfect picture of childhood to me: a quiet house (the *only* day I was up before my parents); the morning sun streaming through the windows, still cool and cheery; one bowl of Marshmallow Rice Krispies (more marshmallows than Krispies, of course); and the latest episode of *Transformers*[®] on TV. Quite without intent, I learned some important life lessons from the show—the value of friendship; how to work as a team; the rewards of never giving up (Earth saved again); and, yes, how to conduct a felony traffic stop on a barnacle monster—some of the basic life skills all youngsters should have. And while I didn't *recall* actually learning anything after the episode ended and I dumped my soggy Krispies in the sink, I did nonetheless. Through their storytelling, the episodes began to form patterns in my mind—how relationships work, old-fashioned American values, that good defeats evil, how true leaders lead...they were a subtle yet expansive teacher.

"[...] our stories help us know each other. Stories can build bonds, develop trust, and lead us to the greatest meaning in our lives and our work."²

All stories hold lessons for us, whether by intention or not. Perhaps that is why we heard so many stories at our most recent Servant Leadership Learning Community session, where leaders from 16 Dallas metroplex organizations gathered to sustain and grow their servant-leader cultures. Our presenters were Cliff Watson, Fossil Generation Vice President - Southern Region, and Mac Tristan, Chief of Police at Coppell Police Department. Both Cliff and Mac used the strengths of storytelling to more effectively teach their messages.

A FUN TEACHER

"Perhaps we can make our own luck [...] but it will require using Bumblebee's greatest strength."

**"What, my stingers?
My turbo-speed?"**

"Your obnoxious personality."

— Prowl and Bumblebee³

A fun teacher is a more effective teacher. If you ever built a baking soda-vinegar "volcano" in a grade school science class, you will remember how suddenly chemistry was interesting. "Acids" and "bases" morphed from meaningless words into something understandable. And the knowledge stuck with you. In the same way, stories that are fun—ones that are humorous, dynamic, or particularly visual—increase comprehension and retention. Cliff in particular used a story with clear visuals as a teaching tool that made his lesson more memorable. His topic was life-work balance, and he encouraged us to become aware of our physical, mental, spiritual, and social-emotional balance. He initially

employed a logical approach that broke each area down into specific steps that would help us achieve balance. But he also used storytelling to teach, talking about how he brought these practices to his home life. A balanced life includes exercise, and here he shared a story about marathon training with his daughter, Maddie. He painted mental pictures of their obstacles—the rainy days, the shin splints, the tears—but he also showed us their vision of crossing the finish line together, "hands held high." And the addition of this story to the theoretical side of Cliff's teaching was a powerful magnifier. It made his message more dynamic and entertaining and thus far more memorable than an equally true but plain statement of facts.

Cliff's anecdote showcased another feature of a fun story that makes it a "more effective teacher"—it is not just more memorable but also often more practical. A fun story like Cliff's is frequently built around a specific example of applying concepts in real life. His marathon training with Maddie was an example of the benefits of pursuing life-work balance. They grew closer together, and Maddie gained a valuable lesson in the power of visioning. His fun story was not "just" fun but also practical—just as creating an active volcano is, no doubt, a very practical lesson, whether for good or ill (depending on the child's destructive inclinations).

A UNITING TEACHER

"If we go down, we go down fighting. Together. And I can't think of a better band of Autobots I'd be prouder to fight alongside."

— Optimus Prime⁴

When it was Mac's turn to teach, he made storytelling front and center, inviting his officers to take the lead in telling the story of Coppell

Police Department's ongoing culture change and making their stories the climax of the presentation. As each officer shared, we saw the larger story from a different perspective. We heard from twenty-year veterans and new members of six months. They talked about their initial resistance to culture change—how they didn't want to be ridiculed as one of the “Kool-Aid drinkers”; how they were conditioned to expect and perpetuate blind hierarchy; how no one wanted to hear anything from the rookies. More than one officer revealed a point in time when they didn't want to come in to work. Change needed to happen. And, through courage and commitment, one-by-one they got on board with servant leadership. One officer had poignant words describing their new culture: “Wherever we serve, we will win the people over.”

The officers' stories had a slightly different tone than Cliff's stories, and they benefitted from a few different strengths of the storytelling tool. One strong effect was that they added credibility to Mac's overall message. Servant leadership is a subject that often brings out a natural level of skepticism, but it was obvious that they weren't all talk—they had lived it. Furthermore, they each had a piece of a complex narrative—from the veterans seeing the change happening to the new recruits knowing nothing different—yet it all came together to tell the same larger story.

**"Couldn't I just ask your
Autobot friends to help?"**

**"NO! I...do not wish
them to see me in this
weakened state."**

—Sumdac and Megatron⁵

Hearing about the officers' struggles also made it safe for listeners to be open to their own opportunities for improvement. The officers were not completely receptive to servant leadership initially. And they risked sharing some of these less-than-flattering stories. Mac mentioned

multiple times that their adoption of a servant-leader culture has been a long, multi-year journey, and they are still a long way from perfect. But the first step toward achieving change must be honest self-assessment, and so the value of stories in making us receptive to self-examination can hardly be overstated.

Ann McGee-Cooper says in her forthcoming book *The Art of Coaching for Servant Leadership*, “The empathy conveyed through a story can go deeper than any idea or tool we might have available as coaches.”⁶ And perhaps the biggest storytelling strength we experienced from the officers was this—that their stories made the material deeply impactful through their personal nature and emotional weight. They spoke with openness about some of the hard lessons they have learned on their servant leadership journey, whether struggling with colleagues who were or were not on board or with their own past experiences coloring their expectations or even Mac's recounting of the day one of their officer's almost died. All of these made the message more personal and created an empathetic connection with the listeners. The speakers became more relatable, which facilitated vicarious learning. Stories allow us to put ourselves in another person's shoes and see beyond our conscious and subconscious biases—revealing in this case, perhaps, that a strong servant-leader culture can be fostered in the most unexpected of places.

A TRANSFORMING TEACHER

**"Give up the AllSpark or give up the
Earth... How am I supposed to
decide?"**

**"Heroes are the ones who
make the hard choices."**

—Optimus Prime and Ratchet⁷

Listening to Cliff and Mac's team was a valuable experience of the unique benefits of storytelling as a teaching tool and how a personal narrative

can turn an abstract message into a practical, credible, and deeply impactful lesson. But beyond just the extensive use of stories by all of the speakers and its benefit to their teaching efforts, their stories actually had a common theme—one of transformation. Perhaps this is not too surprising. In American culture, we gravitate towards stories of individual transformation. Whether it's The American Dream (poor to rich), sports stories (losers to winners), the abundance of superhero movies (nobody to hero, or semi-truck to giant robot, as the case may be), or even spiritual conversions (sinner to saved), our culture has an unending appetite for transformation narratives.

But the stories we heard that day had an atypical twist. They were not inspirational examples of a “nobody” turning into a rich, victorious, righteous hero. The stories were actually the opposite—how those already given center stage, the leaders in their organizations, can and should transform into servants. This is the paradox of servant leadership—that serving is the most effective path to successful leadership—and it is one reason why, when first introduced, the theory often conjures up an instinctive skepticism. In their presentations, Cliff and Mac could have presented in bulleted form the concepts of servant leadership. And most people would have walked away with some level of education. But stories are uniquely suited to helping us understand and accept the truth in paradox. Immersion in a story both requires and creates suspension of disbelief, and this can also momentarily suspend our bias against new or seemingly contradictory ideas. Therefore, storytelling is a special resource in the journey of servant leadership transformation because the counterintuitive nature of servant leadership benefits from the general strengths of stories as teaching tools (such as credibility and emotional impact) and, critically, from the open mindedness that storytelling generates.

A CONTINUAL TEACHER

“Sometimes even the wisest of men
and machines can be in error.”

—Dinobot⁸

It is no easy task to unlearn old assumptions and be open to a new way of seeing others, ourselves, and our leadership role. But stories make it safe to explore this new perspective vicariously. If we suspect that servant leadership is too soft, real-life stories give it credibility and practicality. If we object to being vulnerable, stories tell us how others found safety and strength through sharing their weaknesses. If we are feeling disconnected from the higher-level concepts, stories make them personal and powerful.

While I unwittingly learned many small lessons from *Transformers*, I am lucky that the show was not my only teacher. Aside from possibly acquiring some less desirable traits, including a proclivity for juvenile smack talk and blind heroics, I would have had a one-dimensional education. Fortunately, it was supplemented by stories from my parents, myriad books, close friends, teachers, pastors, and others who, through personal narratives, taught me the complexities, grey areas, and sometimes-harsh realities of life. And it didn't stop when I left childhood behind. When I joined AMCA, for example, I was arrested by the freeness with which Ann shares personal stories. If the need is right, she has no hesitation offering up her experience in the hope that the story will be a gentle yet powerful teacher. And in my professional role, I have exposure to many of our clients' most deeply impactful stories as well. When I was first being introduced to servant leadership and trying to grasp its dimensions, it was the examples in all of these stories that began to clear the fog. When learning any subject possessing a level of breadth and complexity like servant leadership, it is highly beneficial to have access to many stories from a variety of sources. Eventually,

one or several of them will speak to you on a deeper level, communicating what a bare definition cannot.

A PERSISTENT TEACHER

"Dad, it's like you taught me. You never quit on the ones you love."

—Spike⁹

So, if we recognize that storytelling has a penetrating power to teach complex messages and that it has a special utility in "paradoxical" servant leadership transformations specifically, what is the next step? It becomes obvious that it is immensely important to immerse our company's culture in stories at every opportunity. Be on the alert for stories from your own experience that you can share with others. Actively invite others to share their stories so that everyone can reap the benefits. Look for safe and creative ways to systematize storytelling at your organization. Above all, have courage and "don't quit." The benefit will be unmistakable: the more you integrate servant leadership storytelling into your culture, the faster your culture's transformation will accelerate.

"I have witnessed their capacity for courage. And though we are worlds apart, like us, there is more to them than meets the eye."

—Optimus Prime¹⁰

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Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214.357.8550 or visit us at AMCA.com

Sources

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¹⁰Powers, Robert. "Rob's Pile of Transformers: Cartoon Quotes." *Rob's Pile of Transformers*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Sept. 2015. <<http://www.builtstlouis.net/tf/>>.