

### What makes storytelling so effective? Pictures!

It's a truism that a picture is worth a thousand words. But how do you succeed in creating pictures in your communication? Many people try to do this by using language that is as figurative as possible and using lots of adjectives. It works more simply by telling personal stories, with details adding colour to the descriptions - storytelling in the best sense of the word.

#### Peter Näf

Reto (name changed) was a client of mine who was offered coaching by his company as part of a leadership development programme. One of the aims was to improve his leadership communication. We practised storytelling and he told me the following story:

Reto was head of department and led a team of five employees. A longer holiday trip was coming up, which he had promised his wife and children for a long time but had had to postpone more than once for business reasons. Another unforeseen scheduling conflict arose during his absence, an important project with high visibility at management level was due. Reto therefore planned the work meticulously and divided it up among his employees according to their strengths. In this way, he ensured that everything was completed on time despite his absence.

#### **The unexpected creates drama...**

During his holiday, a young employee had family problems that threw him off track. Reto was unable to release him for a longer period without endangering the project. He therefore spoke to his employee regularly on the phone and supported him closely. He worked out a plan with him so that he could take enough time for his private

affairs and still make his contribution to the success of the project. His team successfully completed the project and the feedback from the management was excellent. The sense of achievement in the team encouraged the employee in his difficult private situation and he thanked Reto for his support.

The story impressed me and showed some of Reto's leadership qualities: empathy, a good mix of people and factual orientation, resilience, and commitment.

#### **...and details add colour to the story**

We optimised the story until we were both satisfied. That was a lot of work and Reto was relieved. He sighed and unconsciously crowned the story with one single sentence: «You know Peter, it was crazy: many evenings, while my family was already asleep in the bungalow, I sat under palm trees in swimming trunks and a Hawaiian shirt with a beer and talked to my employee on the phone.» That really hit the spot! Reto having a beer under palm trees is the picture I still remember today.

The picture was not painted by him, but by me as the listener in my mind's eye, while he simply told me his story well. He could do without adjectives according to Georges Clemenceau, French publisher and later president, who had the following rule in his editorial office: «If you want to use an adjective, come to me on the third floor and ask if it's necessary.»

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