

## Draft 2

### Share a Personal Story at Work Today

The CEO of a global corporation started our call with a confession.

Her leadership team was considering hiring me to speak at an upcoming event and they were about to interview me. When executives think about spending a bunch of money, they put the purchase under a microscope first.

I looked at the Zoom squares of corporate interrogators and prepared for the grilling.

But then the CEO blurted. . .

“I lost sleep over this call, because clowns terrified me as a kid and I’ve never interviewed a comedian before.”

Everyone broke into laughter.

Here’s what she accomplished in the first 9 seconds of a business call by sharing a short and disarming story about herself.

- One of the execs snort-laughed and her interrogation face could not be retrieved.
- The VP of sales comically tore up his prepared list of questions for me.
- We skipped over 30 minutes of posturing and got right to the point—how to create a great experience for their attendees.

A CEO like this literally reduces the incidence of cardiovascular disease, anxiety, depression and a host of other stress related illnesses in the workplace.

The lesson?

We need to be more human at work. Authentic personal storytelling can help.

*“Stories are a communal currency of humanity.”* — Tahir Shah, author and journalist.

Imagine what your own professional life would be like if you shared as authentically as this leader.

The truth is:

- The colleague who remembers the name of your pet fish after you told the story of its escape will give priority to your work needs over co-workers they know nothing about.
- The customer whose daughter goes to the same dance school as your kid will look for reasons to like your product or service.
- The boss who knows about the 20th wedding anniversary trip you've been saving for is more likely to create a pathway to your next bonus.

Yet many of us hide our true selves at work. Instead of sharing real stories about our lives, we manufacture a workplace persona that matches the plastic plants in the foyer.

*“Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”* — Oscar Wilde

There’s a huge cost to living like someone else and hiding yourself.

Sometime on Sunday, dread creeps into your bones and starts shutting down the organs of your emotion so you can make it through another week.

Why?

Because if there’s no room for your personal story at work, there’s no room for that work in your heart.

Jimmy Neil Smith is the director of the International Storytelling Center. The way he sees it . . .

*“We are all storytellers. We all live in a network of stories. There isn’t a stronger connection between people than storytelling.”* Jimmy Neil Smith, International Storytelling Center

Years ago, I presented at a corporate event for McGraw Hill Publishing.

The division leader had a brilliant executive assistant who ran this meeting like an orchestra conductor.

In her interview for the assistant job she shared her vision of earning a college degree, but starting a family had made immediate income a priority. The leader hired her. But on

the condition that she enroll and gradually work toward that dream degree over distance learning.

She did.

In fact, at the time of this event, 10 years later, she had graduated.

Because of work and family responsibilities, however, she couldn't travel to the college campus for a formal graduation.

I was sitting with the executive assistant, about to watch their awards ceremony, which she had also planned.

Except for one key detail that had been withheld from her by her boss.

Her expression turned sour as her employer went rogue, going off script with a "surprise announcement." I watched her slowly shake her head as he was about to throw a big wrench in the precision of her planning. This was nothing new. The surprise, however, was the entrance of a guest from the back of the room.

It was the president of the out-of-state college she had graduated from.

He had been flown in by her boss to conduct a formal ceremony, in front of her peers, to honor her commitment to earning that degree.

I will never forget that act of leadership, all made possible because she shared her

It's no accident that this leader's division was the highest-earning segment of McGraw's business. And I'm sure this story is still being told by others to this day,

What kind of story can you tell—or create—today that will make you joyous about your work?

Look around.

There's always an ounce of humanity to be found, even in a sea of red-tape, habitual politics, and recurring complaints.

What if your job was to find evidence of the human spirit at work, in yourself or in another person, and tell a story about it?

What if your Sundays were no longer filled with dread?

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## Draft 1

# Share a Personal Story at Work Today

It's killing us to enforce a separation between our business and personal lives

I couldn't believe what I just heard.

The CEO of a massive global company had started our meeting with a confession.

This multinational manufacturing company was considering me as a keynote speaker for their event. You need to be on your game when you're getting grilled by international leaders who can detect incompetence the way a drug-sniffing border dog can smell cannabis.

Meetings like this usually open with formal introductions and then a round of questioning about what I propose to bring to the event. The CEO will often hang back and listen while I get worked-over by the executive team.

This time, the CEO was the first person to speak.

"I've been so nervous about this call," she announced. "I've never interviewed a comedian before. I'm afraid I'm not very funny."

Of course, everyone laughed.

This CEO had just shared a very short, authentic, and disarming personal story about herself. Here's what she accomplished, over Zoom, in the first 9 seconds of a business call.

- We all relaxed because permission for being ourselves was granted.

- The context was established for an authentic conversation.
- A safe space was created for everyone to bring their best to the dialogue.

Research has shown that cardiovascular disease, anxiety, depression, diabetes and a host of other illnesses are on the increase due to workplace stress.

The lesson?

We need to be more human at work and storytelling can help us get there.

A prolific author, journalist, and documentary maker connects the dots eloquently.

*“Stories are a communal currency of humanity.”* — Tahir Shah

Imagine what your own professional life would be like if you became skilled at sharing your own past and current life experiences with others.

- As a generous and skilled storyteller, people listen when you talk, because they always want to hear about your life adventures.
- People like you because you share yourself authentically.
- People respect you because you are honest and thoughtful about your life.
- You enjoy a natural authority and influence that positions you as a leader.
- You enjoy continuous personal and professional development through your self-honesty and self-reflection.
- You remain in good health by embracing appropriate vulnerability at work.

Most of us have had the experience of hiding our true selves at work. Without the kind of leadership that sets a tone for deep authenticity, our questions, hesitations, many professionals choose to hide their experience.

*“Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”* —Oscar Wilde

But there’s a big cost to withholding our personal expression.

- We feel trapped inside of a personal experience that no one understands, respects, or has any interest in.
- We feel lonely and disconnected from our peers, colleagues, superiors and customers.

- The more guarded we are about ourselves, the more we obscure whatever we most believe in and most wish to serve.
- We go to bed at night bewildered by why our passion to make a difference in the world is not met with invitations to participate where it could matter.
- We stop growing at work.

Our professional lives are full of present problems and challenges. Many of those struggles, however, are just the result of human disconnection.

*“We are all storytellers. We all live in a network of stories. There isn’t a stronger connection between people than storytelling.”* —Jimmy Neil Smith, Director of the International Storytelling Center

I invite you to leave a short personal story in the comments about how you’ve been inspired by someone who had the courage to be honest, vulnerable, or authentic at work.

If you want more humanness in your professional life, consider sharing that story with someone at work and letting them know. If they resonate, you could arrange to connect regularly about your personal experience of work.

What stops you from sharing yourself more authentically?

If you’d like to [send me a personal note](#), perhaps I can support you to enjoy the benefits of telling your story skillfully and appropriately at work.