

# RISK COMMUNICATION THROUGH STORYTELLING



IRMS Insight

Albert Einstein is reported as saying *"Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere."* A lot of our risk communication is very logical but not very imaginative. Experience shows that people listen better if the message is presented attractively, and storytelling is one powerful way to achieve that goal. An expressively-told story grabs the attention of the listener and creates vivid images in their minds which aid understanding and retention of the underlying message, especially when we're dealing with concepts of uncertainty and risk.

What makes storytelling unique as a communication method?

- Stories translate difficult concepts into a concrete form that can be handed down verbally or in written form, helping to shape and preserve culture.
- Storytelling is interactive and flexible, causing the listeners to engage with the story and the storyteller.
- A strong connection is formed between the storyteller and the listener, allowing the message to penetrate to the listener's subconscious mind.
- Stories engage reluctant or unbelieving listeners who would not listen to the same message if it was communicated in a more traditional form.
- A well-told story stimulates creative thinking, and allows listeners to use their own imagination to put themselves in the story.
- Hearing a story together creates a positive group identity.

The use of stories to communicate key messages has been part of the African heritage for many years. In pre-colonial times, many villages faced huge challenges that could only be overcome by careful planning and strong leadership. For example, when facing enemy invasion, the community leader would develop a detailed plan to defend the village and defeat the invaders. But then he had to encourage and motivate the community to implement the plan.

One of the best ways to help them see the possibility of victory was to tell stories of previous successes achieved by their ancestors, or by narrating examples of other communities that had won in similar circumstances. The leader would also remind them that what they were about to do would not only be for the benefit of today's community, but that future generations would tell of their mighty deeds.

The same storytelling approach can be used to engage and motivate staff facing a significant risk challenge. The following guidelines will help you to tell a good corporate story:

- Do we have previous stories of service deliveries, what resulted in its success or failure?

- Who were the main characters in the story? Did they learn from it and how? What events shaped the story?
- How can we apply the lessons of the past to the current situation? Think about the objectives, the operation, the opportunities, the obstacles, and the outcomes.
- Good corporate stories put the audience in the place of the main characters in the story and lead them to say "I can see myself doing that."

Corporate stories can be communicated in many ways, and creative methods are more memorable. It is not necessary to rely only on written reports or spoken briefings. There are many new communication channels available, and we should explore them to ensure that the risk message is heard.

For example, the award-winning film *Moremi* is a good example of how to use storytelling to communicate creatively about risk. *Moremi* uses an adaptation of a traditional African folklore tale to explore the relationships between strategic planning, risk management, and rewards. How creative can you be in sharing your risk message?

## The Author

Joachim is a competent and forward thinking risk, strategy and performance management professional with the ability to provide leadership and direction in order to achieve set goals. He is a certified fellow, trainer and a former executive director of the Institute of Risk Management (IRM) UK. He has over 25 years of risk, governance, and strategic management experience spanning the financial services, non-financial, health sector, public sector, consulting and academia.

Having won recognition in the UK & Europe for his approach to Risk management, Joachim is now a keen promoter of the performance-based Enterprise Risk Management approach across the globe.



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