

# POWERFUL STORYTELLING: RICH CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LEADERS AND GENERATION Y

BY DAVID RYMER



Leaders face a dilemma as Generation Y (sons and daughters of baby boomers) surges into the workforce. Staff turnover of more than 30 per cent and soaring recruitment costs are increasingly common, with frustrated expectations stemming from poor communication being blamed for the problem.<sup>1</sup>

Sociologist Peter Sheahan characterizes Generation Y as: “optimistic, creative, entrepreneurial, adaptable, sociable, and team oriented.”<sup>2</sup> He sees harnessing Generation Y’s passion effectively as fundamental to building competitive, sustainable organizations in coming years.

### Bring It On

Generation Y’s expectation of a more people-centric work environment nurtured through open dialogue carries profound implications for how leaders shape their organizations’ sense of identity.<sup>3</sup> In meeting this challenge, many leaders are rediscovering an old skill – storytelling, delivered through mediums spanning conversation café’s, blogs, and podcasting.

### Rediscovering Storytelling’s Power

Stories thrive in all organizations. Stories reveal the strength of an organization’s intellectual assets, its cultural vibrancy, the health of its values and belief systems, and its underlying pattern of behaviour.

Storytelling is uniquely suited to the challenge of engaging Generation Y employees. Popular culture – reality television, text messaging, and Internet chat are powered by rich stories reflecting peer experiences, communicated instantly across personal networks.

Contemporary experience indicates organizational storytelling is emerging as a flexible way of:

- Communicating complex ideas and making the case for change
- Getting people working together quickly and enthusiastically
- Sharing knowledge
- Stimulating innovation
- Taming grapevine rumours
- Transmitting values<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, stories provide a medium for leaders to shift from telling employees “What you can do for us” to unleashing Generation Y’s energy and enthusiasm by explaining “What this will do for you”.<sup>5</sup>

### Fostering Rich Conversations

Similarly, conversation is so invisible and so natural that we often overlook it. Yet it is a rich and powerful diagnostic engine for organizational problem solving. The World Café concept is a flexible, easy-to-use means of sharing experience and knowledge

to stimulate innovation. Each café typically has four to five people seated café style. Discussion revolves around progressive rounds of conversation focusing on nominated issues.<sup>6</sup>

‘Y’ is a generation that neither respects boundaries nor waits for formal authority before addressing an issue. Cafés are proving effective catalysts for tapping into Generation Y’s inquisitive desire to explore **what-if** and **why-not** possibilities.

### Embracing Blogging and Podcasts

Generation Y employees grew up with the Internet. Their expectations of technology are high, and personalizing information is the norm.<sup>7</sup> This is reflected in Generation Y’s enthusiasm for interactive television, text messaging, blogs, and podcasts.

Organizations including Amazon, Avon, Cisco, EDS, Ford, General Motors, HP, IBM, Microsoft, Motorola, Oracle, Sun, and Boeing are exploring blogging’s communication versatility, while podcasting is growing exponentially from a zero base in 2004.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, organizations do a sound job of communicating the “what” and a poor job of outlining the “why.” Blogs and podcasts are dynamic mediums for exploring, in story form, connections between work a Gen Y employee is doing today and the career they want to have tomorrow.

The best blogs appeal to Generation Y’s values through candour, urgency, pithiness and even controversy.<sup>9</sup> They enable leaders to cut through corporate clutter and outline their thoughts about what’s important, impending change, and emerging challenges. Executed well, they communicate clear opinions while remaining engaging reads for the “why” generation.

### In Conclusion

Generation Y have no tolerance for autocratic management styles. Storytelling is a natural and sustainable communication technique with the ‘high touch’ intimacy to complement ‘Y’s communication savvy and technological literacy. Whether ‘live’ in the workplace, ‘face-to-face’ in Global Cafés or ‘raw and uncut’ in blogs or podcasts, storytelling fits Generation Y’s desire for open and meaningful communication. Done well, it promises to substantially reduce turnover and its associated costs.

Intuosity’s inaugural Thinker-in-Residence, **David Rymer** has helped countless organizations adapt to uncertainty and volatility by building more agile, responsive leadership cultures. He is a sought-after coach, speaker, and facilitator, specializing in innovation, change management, networks, sense-making, and Generation Y. Learn more at [www.intuosity.com](http://www.intuosity.com).

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