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## Episode 27: Storytelling Skills with Murray Nossel

### Transcript

I'm Adam Pascarella and welcome to episode twenty-seven of *The Power Of Bold*.

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Hey everyone, thanks for tuning in to this latest episode of *The Power Of Bold*. We're on to episode twenty-seven and I have a real treat for you today. I discussed storytelling, which is a topic I find fascinating, with Dr. Murray Nossel. Murray is a storytelling expert. He has taught storytelling for 25 years in more than 50 countries and with more than 10,000 people. In the year 2000, he co-founded a firm called Narativ, where he teaches his listening and storytelling method to corporations and other organizations. Along with his work at Narativ, he is an Academy Award nominee for his documentary *Why Can't We Be A Family Again?* and has performed his listening and storytelling method on stages in London and New York. Most recently, Murray authored a book about storytelling called *Powered by Storytelling: Excavate, Craft and Present Stories to Transform Business Communication*.

I was excited to talk about storytelling with Murray and our conversation didn't disappoint. Among the topics discussed in the interview include why origin stories are so powerful, some of the common misconceptions of storytelling, why listening is so critical to storytelling, why using facts and sensory experiences—rather than interpretations—make better stories, and what we can do immediately after this episode to become better storytellers. Murray has some great insights on storytelling and I know that you'll find this conversation to be fascinating and enlightening. So without further ado, here's my discussion with Murray Nossel.

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**Adam Pascarella:** [02:08] My guest for this episode is Dr. Murray Nossel, a storytelling expert who is the co-founder of Narativ, a firm that offers storytelling training for all types of organizations. He is also the author of a new book titled *Powered by Storytelling: Excavate, Craft and Present Stories to Transform Business Communication*. So Murray, thank you so much for appearing on *The Power Of Bold*.

**Murray Nossel:** It's my pleasure to be here today, Adam. Thanks so much for having me.

**AP:** [02:37] Now, ever since I started this podcast about one year ago, I wanted to speak with an expert on storytelling because I think it's one of those skills out there that's vitally important yet maybe underrated because people think that they can intuitively do it. And granted, I'm sure that many listeners either think they are great storytellers or know someone that's a great

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storyteller. But that's ... I think it's a skill that we can all improve. So I'm really happy to have you on the show.

Just to start off here, I always like asking my guests how they wound up in the work that they are in. These type of origin stories are often really fascinating and I'm especially intrigued to hear your answer. So just to start off, how did you wind up in this line of work?

**MN:** Well, I will say to you that origin stories, how one started one's work and how one got to where one is at the moment, is, in fact, the very key to business storytelling. I always start off with asking people to tell their origin stories because it says so much about what your values are and also what your aspirations are. So I'm happy to tell you my origin story.

So, I come from South Africa as my accent will reveal. And I came to New York in 1990. I had told all my friends and family in South Africa that I was no longer interested in being a clinical psychologist, which I was, and that I wanted to come to New York to be a playwright. Now my parents, you know, their jaws just dropped. I had a successful consulting practice in Cape Town. My office was a block away from the beach. When I wasn't seeing patients, I could be swimming laps in the swimming pool that was right on the beachfront. Why on earth was I going to New York City, give up my job as a clinical psychologist for which I had worked so hard, and go to New York and do this really risky thing which is being a playwright? I mean, how many people make it as a playwright in New York City right?

Now, there was another thing that my parents said to me as they stood at the airport, waving me goodbye. And they said, "Listen, there's an epidemic in New York City, an AIDS epidemic. Please promise us you'll be safe." Of course they were saying this to me because I'm gay, and I had been until that point in the fairly protected environment of Cape Town, South Africa.

Anyway, I got a job as a caseworker on Staten Island to pay the bills and then at night, I performed in clubs in the East Village and wrote my plays. And after three years of this, I had basically not made a dime. Absolutely nothing. I'd had a few little newspaper articles. I'd won some awards at Columbia University. I had my plays put on at some fabulous theaters, but basically I hadn't made a dime.

So what you're going to do? I decided to go back to university again and I had been offered a Ph.D. in the School of Social Work at Columbia University. Social work. "Why are you doing social work?" people asked. "You'd been a clinic psychologist. Isn't that a bit of a sort of a step down?" Anyway, the fact of the matter is that I had to been offered this position in the social work school. And also I kind of liked the communal aspect of social work, the fact that I could get out of this kind of rut of being a one-on-one practitioner and you know, work with groups of people and communities.

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Anyhow, as part of the social work Ph.D, I needed to work with a population, and I was hoping that since my minor was in anthropology, I would be able to work with some kind of exotic population somewhere across the world.

**AP:** Right.

**MN:** You know, maybe in Indonesia or North Africa or someplace. No, no, Murray, you're quite exotic enough as it is. You're going to Brooklyn.

Now, the year is 1994 and the AIDS epidemic in New York City is at its peak. These medications that, the cocktail, the so-called cocktail, that has completely transformed the AIDS epidemic, was not yet available. And here I am standing in front of a white door in the basement of a building in Brooklyn was a laboratory specimen box on the door and it says "dangerous hazardous human waste material."

And I walk into this place and I sit down with my supervisor and he says to me, "Murray, you understand you are no longer a clinical psychologist. You are here to help these patients come to terms with the fact that they are dying." And that is true that people really came to this program only once they had an AIDS diagnosis. It was called the AIDS Day Program.

Now let me tell you that this is the one job in the world that I had told everybody I did not want. My best friend was HIV positive. My partner was HIV positive. I don't need this in my work life as well, I said. But here I was, meeting with my very first patient, asking her, "Well, you know, how is it for you? You know, what are you going through? What does it feel like?" Well, she rolled her eyes at me and she says to me, "What kind of bullshit question is that? I mean, how would you feel if you knew you were going to die? Haven't you seen what's going on in this program? Murray? I mean, every week someone's dying. How are you? How do you feel? How would you feel Murray?"

Anyway, I go back to my supervisor. I said, "Look, the patients in this program are very noncompliant and they've got no insight and there's nothing I can do with it." My supervisor Matt says to me, "Listen, Murray, you've got to find a way. These people are dying and they need you, but you'll going to have to find out what they need. They're not going to have to match up with what you feel you can offer. Why don't you just step back and observe?"

So that's what I did. And I observed that patients were, in fact, to die. Every week, one or two or three people died. And when these people died, we'd all be called into this sort of common room. Is there such a word as common room in America?

**AP:** [09:30] Yeah ... that would work. I think that would work.

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**MN:** Right, OK. The common room. And everybody told, “Oh, you know, so and so died.” And then everyone would say a few words about the person who died. And then everyone would just go on with their day, as if nothing had happened. And then the other thing that I noticed was that a few days after these people had died, their belongings would arrive in the secretary's office and they'd be sort of tied up in these black garbage bags. And nobody came to claim these bags.

Now, a lot of these people had been IV drug users. They'd been gay. They'd been, you know, excommunicated from their families. And I said to my supervisor, “I can't deal with the fact that these people are dying, leaving nothing of themselves behind. And what's even worse is that for those people who are still alive. They're realizing that what's going to become of them when they die.”

**AP:** Right.

**MN:** Well, what can you do about it? I said, “Well, there's one thing that all of us can leave behind. And that is our story.” And one thing that I can do, and of course I knew this as a playwright, is to help people to tell their stories, to teach people how to tell their stories. But more importantly, how to teach people to *listen* to stories. Because without your listening right now, Adam, I would have no story. You see, your listening is what is constituting my story right now. Your listening is like a bowl and my storytelling is like a liquid poured into that bowl. Believe it or not, your listening is currently shaping my storytelling. So...

**AP:** [11:28] Is it just the way that I'm responding to your prompts, like even just saying “mm hmm” or “sure,” or is it just my presence being there?

**MN:** It's a constellation of factors. It has to do with who you are. It has to do with the tone and quality of your voice. It has to do with when you choose to ask me a question and how and when you will give some feedback, such as “Uh-huh.” It has to do with the way that you've set up this interview, how you wrote me a letter to introduce yourself and the conversation we had before. There are so many factors that go into how your listening is. And so somehow the way that you were listening to me assured me that I could just go ahead and tell the story and that I was guaranteed of your listening. Now I don't know exactly how you communicated that. I can't pinpoint it down to just one thing. All I know is that the story's there, so you must be listening.

**AP:** [12:46] Right. That's really interesting and in your book you go, you spend the first two chapters discussing the importance of listening and removing obstacles and such things like that. And we'll get into that a little bit later, but I couldn't help but notice when you were telling your origin story, just how you were really articulating all of the lessons that you describe in your book. Like not including that much description of how you were feeling, you were sticking to facts, you were sticking to objectivity and I can clearly tell that you're a master storyteller. And,

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and I guess from your experience doing this for decades, what are some of the biggest or most noticeable flaws that you see in storytelling?

**MN:** Let me go back and finish my story if you don't mind, Adam.

**AP:** Ok, sorry about that.

**MN:** So, really where I was at was telling you how I had noticed that when people died, nobody came to claim their belongings, and people were dying, leaving nothing behind. And what they needed to be able to do was to tell their stories and have people listen to them.

And so what I did was that I created a storytelling group in which people could come once a week and simply tell stories about their lives. Well, one of the patients said to me, "Oh Murray, I don't have a story. I'm at crack addict for God's sake." Well, I said, "That's your story. Your only job is to say what happened to you." So she came and she said, what happened to her. And she went back into the common room again and she told all the patients, "Hey, listen, that guy Murray, he might be a white South African, but you can trust him."

And by Christmas of that year, 1994, my room was so full you couldn't move in it because everybody wanted to tell their story. Everybody wanted to leave some part of themselves behind. And when the Department of AIDS Services were threatening cutbacks to people with HIV, my patients from that program took the video tapes that they wanted made of their stories and they left those video tapes on desks of the legislators. and they said, "Listen to my story and then tell me I don't deserve services." And those stories that were told during those urgent times of the AIDS epidemic, not just by my patients but by people across New York, across the country and indeed across the world, are what changed the course of the epidemic. And that is where I learned firsthand, Adam, the power of storytelling to communicate a message and the power of storytelling to really create a movement.

Now what these AIDS patients had on their side—because you were asking about the pitfalls—is that they had *nothing to lose*. And to get to the point of what your podcast is all about: *they were willing to take a risk*. OK. They were willing to reveal who they were. And the philosophy was, "this is who I am, this is what's happened to me, take it or leave it."

So I think that the biggest pitfall is when people feel like they have to withhold too much of themselves in terms of telling their story. They are so worried about managing their impression that they end up just, you know, just sanitizing or, you know, taking all the substance out of their story.

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And then the second major pitfall in storytelling is to insert interpretations, commentaries, abstractions, and vague statements about feelings into stories. These are really killers. They kill a story.

**AP:** [16:48] Why is that? Why do they kill the story?

**MN:** Why they kill a story is this: if I just tell you what happened as I just did, Adam, right? As you said, I just lead you through the events of what happened in that program. What conclusion did you come to as a result of hearing my story? What are your conclusions? What are your interpretations?

**AP:** [17:14] Well, first, that you have an amazing story. One that's very, very unique. Along with that, this overarching passion for storytelling has been with you since you were a child, but it shifted in certain ways. It's kind of an overarching umbrella to what you do in life. And yeah, that you were really able to give ... you were able to empower people to feel hope in telling their story to the world and you inspired them to do so. I mean, I could probably go on and on,

**MN:** Excellent. Really great. So basically what you giving me, right, is your interpretation of my story, right? Which means to me that you were engaged and you were listening. Now if I would have told you all of that, if I would have said to you, "You know, Adam, I've always been really passionate about storytelling and I'm still passionate about storytelling and I so believe in storytelling and I've seen storytelling make such a difference in the lives of people and I've really empowered people through storytelling," well, there's no substance in any of that. If I were to say that and you were to say that and somebody else that we met in the street right now were to say that, we'd all be saying exactly the same thing, but referring to completely different contexts.

So for your story to really land and make a difference, it has to be specifically about your life experience driven by specific sensory details. In other words, a sensory detail is something you can smell, taste, touch, see, and hear. An opinion about something, even if it's a really passionate opinion, like "storytelling is very important for people." Okay, it's a passionate opinion, but it's ultimately meaningless.

So that's really at the core of my storytelling method. And I would say the biggest pitfall is when people fall into these kinds of jargon, shortcut or sort of vague abstractions which do not differentiate their stories from anybody else's.

**AP:** [19:35] Right. And I guess just to rephrase it in a different way, you're setting up the framework for your audience to ... you're empowering them to have their own interpretations to what you've experienced. And by doing that you, you create a more engaged audience. They feel a closer connection with you and it just leads to better storytelling.

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Looking through your bio, I noticed that you're also a filmmaker in addition to being a performer on the stage. You're actually ... you received an Academy Award nomination in 2003 for a documentary. I guess from those experiences, which are obviously unique, what are some of the most profound things that you learned about storytelling there, from both film and performing onstage?

**MN:** Well, Adam, I would say that documentary filmmaking is really, in the way that I approached documentary filmmaking, which is to really form very strong relationships with people. And you really identified what story it is that I want to follow. Of course, in the documentary, you're following people over time, which is what I did in the film called, *Why Can't We Be A Family Again?* That's the one that was nominated. But basically it's a procedure that I go through with all of my filmmaking. I start off because I'm interested in a particular situation or circumstance that people are in. And I'm also very interested in the characters. I find the characters very engaging and very genuine. I'm looking for engaging and genuine characters.

Now in parentheses, take note that this has everything to do with your audience as well. People are going to pay attention to them if they are genuine and engaging. We are all turned off by people who are too self-conscious or people who are trying to manipulate us with those things that they're trying to save.

So what I'm looking for in my characters are people who are not self-conscious and who are not manipulative. They're just willing to live their lives in front of the camera. And then my job is to be a listener behind a camera lens. I'm basically just listening. I'm not there to insert or impose myself. I'm simply there to see what's going on. So it's the ultimate expression in the sense of the work that I do as a storytelling teacher,

**AP:** [22:09] Right. You're also ... Paying attention to the audience and putting them at the forefront of mind is critical, not only there, but in the storytelling we do at work and in our personal lives. And so understanding the importance of the audience, how can we use that to craft our own stories, whether that's in the office or at work? Like how can we first understand what our audience wants if we don't really know much about them, and understanding that once we do, how can we craft our story in response?

**MN:** Okay, well, audience, let's talk about audience first of all. Okay. Now I say to you that there's a reciprocal relationship between listening and telling, right? That's the basic premise of my, of my method, right. Now let's look at the word *audio*, which is a Latin word. Audio, audire, which means listen, right? So same root in the word *audience*. An audience is a collection of listeners, right?

So when we talk about the audience, we're talking about, well, how do you connect with this collection of listeners when you don't know what is shaping their listening, right? Now when you

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asked the question, “what does your audience want?” That for me is kind of tricky. How do we ever know what anybody wants?

**AP:** Sure.

**MN:** My God. I mean, I can wake up in the morning and I don't even know what I want. Nevermind trying to understand what somebody else wants okay.” But what we can try and understand is what is shaping an audience's listening, right?

Now there are various things that can be shaping an audience's listening. So, for instance, if you are going to talk to some high up in a company, let's say, and you've got some proposal that you want to make up with that high up and that you know that you've only got 10 minutes to make that proposal. Then what's going to be shaping that person's listening and what's going to be shaping the entire interaction is the pressure of time. Right? And so that's one of the things that we can really know. It can also be very helpful and often is very helpful to research as much as you can about the person, about the organization, before you actually talk to them. So at least you know, again, that's how your audience is listening.

Now you have to use your discrimination powers, you know. If you go onto a website and you see a company, well, it's got some fancy vision statement and it's got some fancy mission statement, but it's not ringing quite true for you, you know, then, you know, that's already an alert signal. It's an alert signal. You want to really sort of try and burrow beneath the surface to see who it is that you're talking to, who is listening to you. And then what you got to be able to do is let go of any judgments you may have about them. Because it's those judgments that you have about them that are definitely going to interfere with your capacity to connect with them.

So connecting with an audience is a very tricky matter. And what is fundamental to the whole process, Adam, is preparation.

**AP:** Yes.

**MN:** If somebody comes to me to interview in my company Narativ for a job and they haven't bothered to look at my website, or they haven't looked at my, read my book, well, you know, that already gives me such a signal about them, right?

**AP:** Sure.

**MN:** So I am that [*unintelligible*] in the audience. I want to know that you are prepared. I want to know that you have made the effort to learn something about me as an audience. And then of course what I want to hear from anybody is a story, their origin story. I mean what are they doing in my office at that moment in time? And I want it to be succinct. I want it to be brief and I

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want it to be well planned. I don't want them to be constructing it in the moment. And so when I say well planned, it means a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. And every single person who's going out there to sell who they are, whether you're an entrepreneur and you're trying to sell your new enterprise or you are a person who has got an invention that you've just made or you're a person who works within a company and you want to convince your team to go in a particular direction, then you've got to have a story in your back pocket that's ready to go and will not ramble and will not get bogged down by opinions and judgments. It's got to be really tight and well prepared. That's how you connect to your audience, to answer your question,

**AP:** [27:19] I feel like a lot of people aren't prepared. They think storytelling is something that you do off the cuff. Maybe when you're in a relaxed setting. And I'm sure that's appropriate for some circumstances, but like you're saying, when you're in a professional environment, when you're selling something, you have to be more methodical and more prepared.

And when I think of some of the best storytellers in my mind, I think of comedians. Comedians out there that are just ... that have prepared their acts over many months or many years. And they understand what their audience wants and what their audience will laugh at. Do you agree with that idea that comedians are some of the best storytellers or who in your opinion are?

**MN:** It's a broad category, comedians. But let's have a think about somebody. I'm not an expert on this matter, okay? But if I think about Seinfeld, for instance, Jerry Seinfeld, who is a great favorite of mine. And he's a super good storyteller. And I can guarantee you that every single word has been carefully planned, carefully examined, okay? He looks at every laugh that he gets and he wants to know how he did that, right? These incredibly successful comedians, from what I've learned, right, are incredibly well prepared because they have gone through the kind of boot camp where they've stood in front of an audience who've heckled them and given them a hard time or who have been completely drunk.

And so that really is the bootcamp of storytelling and you've got to get past the heckling. You've got to get past the no laughs. You've got to get past the apparent boredom on the part of your audience, right? So, yes, I do think there are among the best.

Now I can give you a personal example of this.

**AP:** [29:25] Yeah, that'd be great.

**MN:** Because as a performer, I perform in a performance piece called *Two Men Talking*. It's a storytelling performance and it's a two man show. And my co-performer and I performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival back in 2006. Now the Edinburgh Fringe is mostly comedian, okay, it's mostly comedians. Ours was a little bit more of a serious show, which has to do with the nature of our friendship. We literally performed the stories of our friendship on stage now. Now

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we would go, we had five minutes to get on stage and you had five minutes to get off and we were, you know, we were called master storytellers in the press, you know, we were, we got some really rave reviews and then we would go on stage.

And in the one performance, now again, you know, we're spilling our blood. We're both personal storytellers, yeah, right? We're telling it all. A guy walks onto, into the audience with, I don't know, an enormous tankard of beer, lies down across the first eight seats of the theater, you know, and parses out.

**AP:** Really?

**MN:** Now try and tell your story to that. Or try and tell your story in Luton, in England, which is what Paul and I did as well, which is, you know, part of the industrial, sort of belt of England. We went into a 300 seat theater and six people showed up. Six people and 300 seats. And you are again revealing your true soul. And so we went back to our producer at the Barrow Street theater and we said, "Oh my God, how are we supposed to deal with this? You know, the audiences are drunk or they're not showing up."

And our producer, Scott Morfee said something to us, which I think you can really take away, Adam, in terms of thinking about audience. And that is: *never judge your audience, okay? Your audience owe you nothing.*

So when you get in front of an audience, you have to be willing to give the best of what you have, you know, without expecting anything back from the audience. If you go in and you start judging your audience or you start feeling ... your feelings start getting hurt, or you interpret something that's going on with your audience, which may incidentally be totally incorrect, you're dead meat, right? So you've got to go into the storytelling situation willing to just share your heart out. And I [*unintelligible*] teacher. So I don't know that all of them are the best storytellers, but I think that they, a lot of them, are extraordinary performers and they do know how to reach their audiences.

**AP:** [32:28] Just to quickly ask, so in those circumstances, when you're taking the audience for what it is, not expecting anything in return, it seems like almost an acquired skill because naturally people think, "Oh, you know, these people should listen to me. Why aren't they? Why aren't they paying attention?" And do you have any tips for people that are in that sort of situation to allow them to better accept the audience as they are?

**MN:** Yes. I think the first thing that we should always do is be very, very clear about, let's say, well, let's go to a business context right now. And you are maybe addressing your team. Yeah, let's say that. You're addressing your team and you're at a conference and you're addressing your team and you are looking out at those wide array of people and you're about to share a

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personal story, which is the first time you've ever done that in your work environment. I've actually got such an example in my book about an amazing human being from Conde Nast Publishing. His name is Craig Kostelic and he's now for the first time ever is going to share a personal story with the various, you know, hundred plus people in his team. Now we want to make absolutely certain that we optimize the listening in that room and that we minimize any potential interruptions, right?

So the first thing is just on a completely practical level: make sure that there are no interruptions during the actual performance of the story. This is the high point of that conference. That story is explaining Craig's value system, is explaining the meaning of the work of team for him, but he's showing rather than telling. You don't want anything to undermine that. So it's almost like you're setting up a sacred context for making that story, you know, received as well as possible.

So make sure that everyone's there on time, don't have stragglers coming in, you know, make sure that there aren't phone's ringing. And of course in this day and age, you got to let people know that they must turn off their mobile phones and they cannot be looking at their mobile phones. Now this is a very difficult sector to manage because people are often addicted to their mobile phones. They actually cannot put them down. So this is a major obstacle these days in terms of us trying to create an optimal listening environment. But ask, you know, make people put down their cell phones, in fact, make people put down everything. That's what I often say, "Please put everything down on the floor. You need nothing. You need nothing on your lap. All you need to do right now is be present for this story."

And then I basically, I'm coaching him to make a little bit of contact with these audience before he starts speaking. Stand there maybe just for 15 seconds and don't say anything. Just scan your audience with some eye contact, right? To really communicate to that audience that you are there with them present in the moment and then you start telling a story, but when you start telling a story, if that story is well planned and that story is engaging, then that story will do exactly what storytelling is meant to do—and that is it will engage our brains. It will engage the hard wiring of the listeners' brains. And that's where the spark of connection occurs. You've got to trust in the power of storytelling to actually captivate your listeners.

**AP:** [36:50] Right, and just to circle back a little bit, the part about removing obstacles. I think that's such an important point and you address the technology part, but even just if the temperature in the room is uncomfortable, just noting that or making a change. Just allowing yourself to be totally present in the meeting so you can hear the story. And I guess for the 20 or 30-year-old listening to this who maybe doesn't get to call all the shots that they're their office meetings, for instance. Like how can they convince their manager or company to adopt a similar storytelling strategy as you outline in the book?

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**MN:** Well, that's very interesting. I think that the first thing that I would suggest that that person does is that they should model. They should begin by modeling exemplary listening. So when they are sitting, let's say in a team meeting, you're sitting at a team meeting and somebody's talking, whether they're somebody on that ... that person's on your level or maybe a superior, don't ever be looking at your cell phone while they are talking. Don't ever do it. Because what it does is it communicates a lack of respect for what that person is saying.

And so I would say that this all begins with listening. Start by listening, you know. And then, I would say that it would be very beneficial to explain to the members of your team how listening and storytelling could benefit your particular department. And I think that the best way to go about doing that would be if you could find a situation, something that happened, right, particularly something that went awry, something that went wrong, and you really feel like enhanced communication would really have done wonders in terms of solving that problem, you know, or creating a breakthrough in that situation.

So I think the best thing to do is to find a story. And in the context of my method, we really talking about an almost legalistic perspective on storytelling. If you're making an argument about something, then give evidence for it. Story told in the sensory method where you just simply say what happened is like *evidence*. You cannot argue with it because it happened.

So I would say that if you find ... you start off by listening and you just notice what happens when you guys listen. Just like what happened to me when I worked in that AIDS program, right. When I was anxious, fear was basically dominating my sensibility, when I first started working in that AIDS program. It was fear. It was fear of failure. It was fear of the ... of that all the things that I've previously done as a psychologist were no longer working. I had to just sort of sit back and listen to see what was now available, what was now possible.

So I think for that person who's wanting to convince their team to change their ways in terms of communication, sit back and listen. Sit back and observe. Don't jump in. And of course, this principle applies to so many different things. We too often just jump into talk because we want to solve the situation or we want to be heard without probably properly analyzing it.

**AP:** [40:59] And once you listen, observe, you take the time to understand what what your team members are about, their perspectives, when you actually go down and sit down and craft your story, is there a certain way to do that? Like, for instance, is there a certain way to even start your story? Do you have any advice for people on that front?

**MN:** Adam, the first question you have to ask when you're going to tell a story in a business context is *Why Story?* and *Why Now?*. As you suggested earlier on, storytelling in a business context is different than standing in a bar, leaning on the counter, drinking a beer and sharing tales with your mates. This is a different ball of wax. This is really strategic. You're telling a story

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in a business context for a reason. Stories are the most powerful way that human beings have to communicate with one another. We've been doing it from the beginning of recorded human history and we know that our brains [*unintelligible*]. You have to know why you're telling a story, and in order to know why you're telling a story, you need to know what message you want to communicate. You've got to start with that. What's the message that I want to communicate through the story? And then you have to ask why now? Why is *now* the moment to tell that story? Right?

So let's say that you're an entrepreneur, right? And you've got a business partner and you are trying to convince that business partner ... the message is "Listen mate, we are currently undercapitalized and many, many startups fail because they're undercapitalized. We have to raise finances in order to stay on the ground, right?" And you know already that your business partner is very resistant to this idea. He's told you a number of times, "Oh I just, there's a guy that I know in Los Angeles and I'm telling you, I mean, he's just on the brink of signing this contract and we're going to be okay, right?" And you now want to tell him a story that is going to communicate to him the urgency of the situation.

So that takes care of the *Why Now?*. And the *Why Story?* is that you really need to get your message across, okay? Now you go straight then in terms of the story that you want to tell. So let's say you're going to tell a story now about how your father, right, ended up dying destitute, okay. He was a pauper because he was never willing to take a risk, right? So the first thing that you're going to do is you're going to go to the absolute crisis point of that story. You're going to go to the point where the father's life changed because he was unwilling to do something.

You start there and that's basically like starting in the middle. You're starting at your, what I call your emotional turning point. Then you work backwards and you craft a beginning that's going to get you to that emotional turning point and then you resolve that emotional turning point at the end of the story. So a story has to have this high emotional turning point in order for it to be engaging and you have to know how it ends. There is nothing more ineffective than a story which ends badly. You need to resolve your story properly.

**AP:** [45:06] Right. And again, you're focusing on the senses, the facts. You're not adding any interpretation. That's for the audience to add for themselves.

**MN:** Yes.

**AP:** [45:18] And when you're crafting the story, do you practice it out loud? Do you share it with a friend? How would you recommend people go about that?

**MN:** Well, I think it's a very good idea if you can do it in a group of people. And of course, what we're often doing is working with groups of people in companies, both corporations and

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nonprofit organizations. I'm putting them together in a storytelling group, exactly the same kind of group that I created in the AIDS Day Program in 1994. And I'm teaching people how to listen to one another without judgments. And then I am giving them the tools of how to tell a story and then they all spend some time on their own, mapping their story out, crafting it out on paper, and then they practice telling with one another. And then of course it's an iterative process, you know. You hear the feedback. You hear people say to you, "Hold on a second. That's not what happened. That's not a sensory detail. That was an opinion. That was an interpretation."

And then you go back to your story and you work it, you rework it. And you practice it with your wife or your husband or your partner and you see how it works. You want to see how it works. Just like those comedian examples that you gave. I mean, they are trying those stories over and over and over again.

**APb:** Exactly.

**MN:** So yes, this is a practice. And you'll eventually know it. I mean, do you know how many times I've told my story about working in the day program? I would say I've told it tens of thousands of times. And every time I tell it, it is brand new for me because it is being told in the context of a new person's listening.

**AP:** [47:10] Right. Do you change the details that much depending on the person?

**MN:** Yes, I may change the details a little in terms of emphasis. So let's say that I am talking to someone who's particularly interested in movement building and advocacy. I'll accentuate the time that my patients went to Albany and advocated for patient rights based on their stories. Right. If I am talking to a group of people who are much more interested in listening, I might accentuate the kinds of difficulties that my patients had listening to one another.

So yes, I mean, the context will always determine what gets accentuated and highlighted. But the basic bones of the story are always the same and they are ready in my pocket, they are in my back pocket, and you could wake me up in the middle of the night and drag me into a theater and I could tell you that story.

**AP:** [48:16] Yeah. And so is there anything that listeners can do today to become better storytellers? One thing that they can do immediately after listening to this episode? Like you said, you've spent a lot of time sharpening up your AIDS work story, but for those people that haven't put any work into really polishing one good story, what can they do today to start that process?

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**MN:** Well, if you're starting today, then you will start by asking yourself the question *Why Story?* and *Why Now?*. Why do I want to tell a story? What message would I like to communicate through a story? And why now? Why is this the moment?

And then I basically take you through this seven step process in my book, which teaches you exactly how to do that. So the first thing that you want to do is you want to rid yourself of any judgements, self-criticism or preconceptions. So what often happens to someone is they say, "Okay, why story? Why now? What message do you want to communicate?" And they sit down in front of their laptop or in front of their notebook and that cursor thing starts flashing and their mind goes completely and utterly blank. They can't think of a thing. Okay?

So this is where you have to ask yourself. You close your eyes for a moment and you say, "Okay, let me just check in with how I'm currently listening to myself." And I guarantee you that if you're truly honest with yourself, what you will discover in that moment is some kind of self-judgment or self-criticism. "This isn't going to be very good. This is not good enough. This is going to be boring. Who's going to possibly be interested in this?" Et cetera, et cetera. This is what happens to all of us creative people when we're facing that blank page.

So the first thing that you have to do is you have to be willing to look at your own resistance to doing this, and exercise the self awareness to actually say, "Okay, I'm judging myself, I'm criticizing myself. Nonetheless, let me just jot down a few ideas of things that have happened to me in my life that communicate this message." And that's where you begin, but you first have to let go of the self-criticism and the self-judgment.

**AP:** [51:02] Right, yeah. It's doing all that internal work and preparing yourself to tell your story. That's great. Well, this has been great Murray. I really appreciate it. The book is awesome. It's called *Powered by Storytelling*. And if, if people want to get in touch with you or learn more about the book, the lessons that you provide, not only there but with Narativ, where can they go?

**MN:** Okay. They can go to the website of my company which is [www.narativ.com](http://www.narativ.com), so that's [narativ.com](http://narativ.com). It's missing one R and an E. Or they can go to my website which is [murraynossel.com](http://murraynossel.com).

**AP:** [51:45] Excellent. Well thanks again Murray. This has been really educational and a lot of fun. So thank you so much.

**MN:** Thanks for the opportunity, Adam. I really enjoyed talking to you and I would really like to acknowledge your listening and the preparation that you did for this interview. It really made the difference.

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**AP:** Well thanks so much, Murray. Appreciate it.

**MN:** Okay. Bye bye.

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Once again, that was Murray Nossel, the co-founder of Narativ and the author of Powered by Storytelling. I hope this episode inspired you to get out there and improve your storytelling skills. It's something that we can always improve and the best way to do it is through practice. And let me know how it goes. Feel free to send me your feedback, comments, and questions to [adam@thepowerofbold.com](mailto:adam@thepowerofbold.com). I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

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