

## CHAPTER 1

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# *Have I Told You the One About . . . ?*

During long periods becalmed, sailing a long tack, or at anchor over beer and cheese, some often tedious, though pragmatic, conversation takes place aboard. “Snyder, while you’re below could you get . . .?” “Take the helm for a while, would you?” “What’s the chart say about the depth off of Webber Dry Ledge?”

Occasionally, this discourse is elevated to the realm of “story.” We are all, of course, packed to the gunwales with stories ready to be unloaded. One nineteenth-century rabbi observed, “God so loved stories that he invented man.” So nothing deflates a relationship at sea as quickly as beginning a promising story, only to have one’s companion mutter, “Oh Roland, you told that one on our 1974 cruise through Eggemoggin Reach.”

Yet it demeans the storyteller to have to preface every tale with the preamble, “Snyder, have I told you the one about . . .?” It is, after all, stressful to the aging, overtaxed human mind to remember to

## 2 Lessons Learned

whom you have told what and when. The solution to this recurring plight became **Cruising Rule 1:**



*Any story worth telling is worth telling often.*

It reassures and warms the soul to be able to tell your companion any story from your lifelong repertoire at any time and have it received with enraptured enthusiasm, as if heard for the first time.



I have become fascinated by the power of storytelling as a form of personal and professional development. And as a form of interpersonal development.

Why tell stories? Why listen to stories? What story is worth telling? Who determines how worthy a story is? People tell stories about events that have left an impression on their lives. Listening to the same stories again and again, we gain insight into what colleagues and friends value and who they are. Stories are important to the teller, and so listening to them—even several times over—strengthens relationships. By listening, one places value on the experience of another.

Craft knowledge is the collection of wisdom and insights one accumulates by showing up on the job. If ways can be found to unlock, celebrate, and exchange craft knowledge, how much better each of us can perform our work. Storytelling is one way.

Unfortunately, when someone in the workplace begins to tell a story, all too often eyes glaze over. For it is believed that when you scratch a worker, out will come not craft knowledge, but a war story!

War stories are *descriptions* of practice. “Let me tell you about the time I tried to fire an employee.” Craft knowledge is description of practice accompanied by *analysis* of practice. “Let me tell you about the time I tried to fire an employee. Here is what I learned. If I were to do it over again, here’s how I would do it.” Now we have transformed the war story into craft knowledge. Pure gold!

By honoring storytelling in the workplace, we can facilitate the revelation and exchange of craft knowledge. By telling their stories

to colleagues, workers analyze them, clarify them and elevate their experiences to the realm of helpful respectability. There is important learning in every story. We are truly one another's best teachers—novices and veterans alike. Indeed, I am convinced that if all of us were to regularly disclose our stories to our colleagues—even a small fraction of what we have learned during our careers—our organizations would be transformed overnight.

Hence, **Working Rule 1:**



*Every story—and every storyteller—has value.*

Those who study it tell us that storytelling is a dying art form. After supper we used to gather around the kitchen table and tell our stories. Now we don't even eat together!

Part of the problem is that not all of us have “the narrative gene.” Another part of the problem is that the culture of the workplace is not hospitable to our stories. And a large part is that we are not very good listeners. Jay O'Callahan, a New England storyteller, suggests that “A good listener is like a person with a thousand invisible hands, coaxing the story from the teller.” To create a culture of storytelling, we need to create a culture of listening.

When we succeed in unlocking the power of storytelling in our organizations, we also deepen and strengthen the relationship between the tellers and the listeners. In some ancient cultures, everyone came to gatherings wearing a mask. But those who told stories were allowed to take off their masks. Indeed, telling and listening to stories can remove our feelings of distance, alienation, and invisibility from one another. We can bond as colleagues and learners. By telling and listening to one another's stories, we can make sense of the world of non-sense around us.