

JUMPSTART STORYTELLING

ACCELERATING HIGH PERFORMANCE IN MEETINGS

BY SETH KAHAN

JUMPSTART STORYTELLING is a powerful technique for quickly engaging participants in the business at hand and accelerating productive work together. Designed for groups of 10 to 100, it can be customized for as few as three and as many as 400. It takes about 60 minutes and sets the stage for the collaboration which drives high performance.

JUMPSTART STORYTELLING has been developed to

1. Efficiently engage every participant in the business objectives
2. Accelerate collaboration without compromising diverse perspectives
3. Effectively introduce each person to 10-15 other participants
4. Improve learning through high quality idea exchange

I developed this technique from my experience

- Designing multi-cultural, collaboration sessions for professionals at the World Bank¹
- Studying story at the Center for Narrative Studies²
- Conducting research with the Center for Association Leadership³ aimed at increasing the effectiveness of conventions in the association industry
- Presenting speeches at numerous business conferences

The power of this technique comes through the participants' experience as they tell and listen to each other's stories, engaging with the hearts and minds of their colleagues. It is a great way to begin a business gathering, involving everyone in the room. Ideas cross-pollinate, rapport increases, and the entire meeting comes to life in a way that naturally and predictably focuses the audience's collective enthusiasm on the business at hand *through each other's stories*.

I hope you will use JUMPSTART STORYTELLING at your events. If you do, please provide me with attribution. You may copy or excerpt this document and distribute it, including my name and copyright. Please let me know what you learn. Together we can further improve this technique and effectively serve professionals who meet to work collaboratively.

¹ www.WorldBank.org The World Bank Group is one of the world's largest sources of development assistance and knowledge. 1989 – 2002 I served in the organization as a Senior Information Officer, specializing in information technology, knowledge management, internal communications and internal community development.

² www.StoryWise.com The Center for Narrative Studies is a research and training institution recognized for its innovative peace and reconciliation effort, "The Washington-Ireland Program." I operate under a fellowship at the center, studying, researching and documenting narrative discipline as it applies to professional life and practice.

³ www.CenterOnline.org The Center for Association Leadership in Washington, DC, focuses on the future of associations. I have served since 2001 as Center Visionary, researching the contribution of community to meetings.

WHY JUMPSTART STORYTELLING WORKS

Storytelling has been part of the human experience since the dawn of time. **When people share their stories, listeners naturally focus their attention, engaging with the teller's experience.** The deliberate and effective use of storytelling establishes links between participants, and sets the stage for high performance.

To jumpstart collaboration it is necessary to shift away from a “broadcast” mode in which one person dominates the presentation while everyone else listens. By activating a “beehive” in which everyone is sharing, the conversation moves off of the podium and out onto the floor. **This form of storytelling has the effect of literally bringing the gathering to life, filling the room with activity and enthusiasm.**

Social networking is one of the primary reasons people attend professional gatherings. Many transactions take place in the hallways of these meetings: valuable news is exchanged, services and jobs are brokered, and new members are integrated within existing communities or not. These transactions impact membership flow, knowledge development and effective governance within the community. The capacity for each person to build and develop relationships during the meeting increases when they are introduced to others, and invited to share stories in the context of their work together. **This type of sharing is personal, face-to-face and provides a richer interaction which significantly increases the capacity of the group for social networking.**

High quality collaboration relies on multiple, conflicting points of view coming together in a collective intelligence that honors the contribution of each perspective. Building community is often mistakenly thought of as creating an environment where everybody likes each other. People perform effectively without mutual admiration. Yet, it is critical to establish an atmosphere of collective aspiration built upon respect and the capacity for each person to contribute to the group's objectives. **Storytelling, called the “smallest portable context” by John Seely Brown⁴, provides a perfect vehicle for bringing together differing points of view productively in the spirit of collaboration.**

⁴ Interview with John Seely Brown, February 10, 2003. Interviewed by Seth Kahan. Edited by Steve Denning. Available upon request by email from the author: Seth@SethKahan.com

A TEMPLATE FOR JUMPSTART STORYTELLING

Introduction to the process 5 minutes

1st Story Table 10-15 minutes

1. Each person notes their aspirations for the event
I provide example.
2. Each person recalls experience that anchors their aspiration
I provide example.
3. Small groups - Each person shares story in 90 seconds.

2nd Story Table 5 - 15 minutes

1. New small groups are formed – all new faces.
2. Storytelling repeated. Same story, different listeners

Clusters & Chains 5 minutes

1. Each person recalls the story that most captured their attention.
2. Everyone stands up, finds the teller, and puts their hand on his or her shoulder.
3. Those with most hands on their shoulders (i.e., the most people have selected them) are asked to share their stories with the plenary.

Plenary Storytelling 10 minutes

1. Each story is told and followed by 20 seconds of silence, rather than applause. Audience encouraged to notice how the story engages them.
2. Each story is given a name that conveys some aspect of its essence.

Concluding Remarks 5 minutes

Total time: 40 - 55 minutes

EXAMPLE

To help understand the nuances of presenting JUMPSTART STORYTELLING I have created a fictitious event to guide you through. *Imagine, if you will...* I am presenting at an annual conference of multi-national senior project managers. The event is called, ***Challenges of the Global Village: Projects 2004***. Fifty of the best and brightest have gathered to share what they know, network, listen to experts in the field and discuss the impact of globalization on their work.

8:30 am on the first day participants are sipping their coffee, getting situated at tables of six and sorting through conference materials. This year's president welcomes everyone and then introduces me. I come to the podium to jumpstart the conference. I look out at the people, together for the first session, and smile because I know that the room is about to be activated. Here are my preparation notes and including some *verbal instructions (in italics)*:

Introduce myself and JUMPSTART STORYTELLING **5 minutes**

- Time-tested technique for professionals, generating optimum performance together
- Fun, informative way to highlight our aspirations for the event
- Why storytelling? – We have shared this way for a long, long time; it is natural

1st Story Table **15 minutes**

1. *Take a moment and reflect on why you are here. What are your aspirations for this conference? As an example, let me share one of my aspirations:*

- *I want to better understand global learning events through the experience and knowledge of other participants.*

*Note one or two of your aspirations on a piece of paper... **pause 30 seconds***

2. *What personal experience do you have that would give us some background on one of your aspirations? I am looking for something that actually happened to you that you can tell a very brief story about. Let me share, as an example, something that happened to me which tells you why my aspiration is to better understand global learning events::*

Three months ago I discovered that all the countries I am working with have identified “technology training” as a need. Seeing this as an opportunity, I called a video-conference to discuss it. Everyone participated: Chile, Brazil, the Ukraine, Uganda, Sri Lanka, China, India, the Philippines & Viet Nam.

It was the first time we were all online together. It blew me away to see the different faces, different styles of clothing, and hear the variety of accents, all in a single conversation. It gave me a sense of our “global village.” We agreed together to do a global learning event and train each other, sharing what we knew about technology.

Afterwards through email we made a plan for how our learning event will flow, literally around the world. We developed the syllabus, set up a website and started publicizing the event in our organizations.

Then, just a couple of days ago I was sitting in my office and I began to worry that something would go wrong. The whole process seemed so complex, everything from the satellites and servers to the multi-cultural interactions. I was sitting there fretting when my secretary came in with news that one of the satellites was dead. ‘Oh, boy,’ I thought, ‘here we go.’ I got up out of my chair to begin making phone calls. I was talking to one of our people in Viet Nam, when their tech woman got on the phone, and told me she had the satellite up and running

again. Later that day she sent me an email telling me how much she was looking forward to our global learning event, and how happy she was to help with the satellite. Our even is scheduled for this fall. I want to make it the best possible event I can.

*That story took me about 90 seconds to share, which is how long I will give you to share your story. Please take a moment now, think of a story you can share that tells a little about your personal aspirations for this conference. ...**pause 30 seconds***

3. Storytelling in small groups.

Each person has 90 seconds to tell their story. It may be tempting to talk about what you hope for the conference rather than actually telling a story. Please avoid that temptation and tell a story from your life experience. I am going to ask the others at your table to keep you on task. If you hear someone taking more than 15 seconds to begin a story, just interrupt them and say in a friendly way, "Please tell us a story."⁵

I'll keep track with this bell. When you have 30 seconds left, I'll call, "30 seconds." Then at the end of 90 seconds I'll ring the bell.

*Look around your table and choose the person to begin. ...**pause 10 seconds**... When this person is done, let's go around the table clockwise. Go ahead and begin⁶.*

2nd Story Table 10 minutes

1. *Take 2 minutes to find another table with all new faces...*
2. *Same process as before. Same story. Tell your story again. Retelling a story is a wonderful way to learn about storytelling. Notice how your story changes for your new listeners.*

Clusters & Chains 5 minutes

1. *Think back over the stories that you have heard, and notice one that particularly spoke to you, that expressed something you found to be important.*
2. *Now stand up and go find the person who told that story. Place your hand on their shoulder. This will be interesting. You may find that you have three people stringing along behind you and you have to go across the room to find your person. As you travel you will take that chain of people along with you.*
3. *I stand on stage and look for the top three or four "clusters" – the people with the most hands on their shoulders. I walk up to each and ask them to share their stories with the group. Then, I ask everyone to drop their arms and find a place to sit.*

⁵ I find that this short reminder makes a difference, and results in a big increase in the number of participants who tell stories, often 100%

⁶ While ringing the bell between stories, I wander around listening to the sharing. I listen for people having not telling a story. If I find someone not telling a story, I gently interrupt and coach them.

Plenary Storytelling **10 minutes**

1. *These stories that we are about to hear have been selected by you. They contain messages that are important to this group.*

I ask each teller to share their story, one at a time. I invite the audience to respond with silence rather than applause.

During the silence, allow the story to move into you and notice how it engages you.

2. After listening, I ask everyone to help me name the stories. Each name should capture the essence of the story told. I write the names up for all to see.

Concluding Remarks **5 minutes**

Something to think about: If these stories were the chapter titles in a book, what would be the name of the book? How will this inform our work together?

GUIDELINES

DETERMINING THE SIZE OF THE SMALL GROUPS

Small group size is important. Each person needs to meet about a quarter of the room through the two Story Table sessions.

| For total attendance of: | Number at each Story Table: |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 11 – 30 | 4 |
| 31 – 55 | 6 |
| 56 – 75 | 8 |
| 76 – 100 | 10 |

SMALLER & LARGER GATHERINGS

For fewer than ten people, just one session of storytelling works fine. Everyone tells their story to the group. Omit the **Clusters & Chains**. The total time becomes 15 – 30 minutes.

For groups of over 100, divide the room into two or more groups of the same size. Have each section of the room work independently. It is helpful to have an assistant available to support each section of the room. For example, for 150 participants, divide the room into two groups of 75. For 270 participants, divide the room into three groups of 90.

The power of JUMPSTART STORYTELLING comes through the participants' experience. It culminates in the group mind that develops in the concluding session, setting the stage for high performance work together. The stories that are told become touchstones for the participants and can be effectively used in the remainder of the meeting. Because storytelling involves the whole person, increased participation and engagement can be expected. This is a remarkable way to bring people together. I hope you will enjoy its transformative power, allowing JUMPSTART STORYTELLING to work its magic at your event.