

Lessons from storytelling

Every now and then, we're reminded how powerful it can be to use storytelling to teach a lesson and engage the listener. Helen Rothberg did just this when she used her own story to highlight the elements of great leadership she learned while working as a bartender.

Here are a few of the lessons she delivered that have relevance for both individuals and organizations:

A cautionary tale: Rothberg delivered a cautionary tale about how demotivating a toxic work environment can be (as evidenced by the story of a worker who undermined her success) as opposed to a healthy one (as demonstrated by a bartender who taught her the value of getting to a place where you have greater control over your life). As Rothberg put it: "If the shoe doesn't fit, find a different pair of shoes."

The importance of culture: The work culture should allow employees to speak the truth without fear of consequence. When Rothberg started working as a bartender, she admitted to her customers she didn't know how to make the drinks they ordered and, instead of complaining, they made it their goal to help her learn — wouldn't it be great if this was the norm in all organizations?

Belief in self: Permeating all of Rothberg's stories is her indomitable belief in herself. Nowhere was this more evident than in how she obtained the job she held



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while going through grad school — by convincing the manager to hire his first female bartender after initially working for free to prove herself. The lesson is "Know who you are and show what you can do" and, for organizations, be willing to take a calculated risk when someone shows potential.

Show your stuff: There were other compelling lessons for job hunters and organizations seeking to make successful hires. Rothberg's account of her brother's rise in Hollywood from temp to head of his own studio reinforced the edict "Be willing to demonstrate who you are" but, again, this can only work if organizations are open to providing the opportunities for people to do so.

Unique training: Before being granted her doctorate, Rothberg's PhD committee sat at her bar to witness for themselves the strategic management lessons she was applying in her work — an acknowledgment we don't all learn the same way. This is something HR sometimes fails to take into account when designing one-size-fits-all training programs. As she put it: "HR is the heartbeat of helping people find the courage to stand and thrive in their own shoes."

While some of Rothberg's leadership lessons may have sounded familiar, never have they been delivered in such a refreshing and memorable way. Her narrative was a good reminder for the end of the year and the beginning of another that a powerful, well-delivered story is a captivating way to teach and to learn. It challenged each of us to think about if we are taking a walk or simply walking through life.

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