



Rational arguments and stories: two complementary tools of influence

The challenge

The world of business is basically rational. Educated to think logically and use sophisticated analytical techniques, business leaders and managers naturally tend to prefer to convince their counterparts with rational explanations. That's why seminars and board meetings can hardly get by without at least one PowerPoint presentation. Yet, clearly structured factual arguments are not the only way to sway an audience—far from it! Indeed, the ability to tell good stories would be a valuable asset in the management toolkit of many a leader.

Distinct advantages and disadvantages

Logical arguments and stories work according to very different principles.

LOGICAL ARGUMENTS	STORIES
Use reason to sway the listener ☺ The listener yields to logic and accepts the speaker's point of view. ☹ Eventually, however, the listener reverts to his or her initial point of view as soon as he or she finds a good supporting argument.	Use emotion to sway the listener ☺ The listener adheres to the message because he or she is deeply convinced. ☹ The message will not be conveyed effectively unless the speaker owns the story and tells it authentically.
Point to a single conclusion ☺ The speaker controls the message. ☹ If any of the cited arguments are shaky or too black-and-white, the listener may well challenge the entire conclusion.	Let the listener draw his or her own conclusions ☺ The listener accepts the conclusion, because he or she came up with it. ☹ The same story is subject to different interpretations.
Simplify the message to focus on the essential ☺ The listener easily understands the speaker's message. ☹ Reality is often more complex and subtle than argumentation tends to imply. The message is rarely couched in sufficiently moderate terms to be absolutely credible.	Describe different facets of a situation ☺ The listener observes that the speaker understands the complexity of the situation. ☹ The message is not explicit. The listener may draw conclusions that diverge from what the speaker hoped to communicate.
Are easy to remember in the short term ☺ The human brain stores logical arguments to be able to retrieve them logically. ☹ Logical arguments are remembered in the short term; but without an emotional link, they are not deeply engraved into the long-term memory.	Make a lasting impression ☺ Well-told stories create emotions that make them easier to remember over time. ☹ Remembering every detail of a story is a challenge, making subsequent re-telling difficult.