

# The values and qualities we promote with stories



**RICK  
BRIMEYER**  
Brimeyer  
LLC

He is president  
of the Ames, Iowa,  
consulting firm

I sat dejectedly in the seat of the road roller with Steve standing by its side.

Our latest of many attempts to resolve a slight but definitely perceptible lurch as the roller switched directions had failed. That slight lurch would result in a seam (i.e., bump) in the asphalt. We were scheduled to travel to Germany the following day to demonstrate our solution. Now, as the late afternoon slipped away, we had nothing.

“What are we going to do?” I asked rhetorically. I was beginning to think about how we could lessen the blow of our failure. Perhaps we could request more time.

Fortunately, Steve’s brilliant engineering mind was processing control spools, orifices and springs. A deep thinker who always chose his words wisely, he finally responded. “Well, I suppose we could try ...”

We raced to the model shop, convincing one of the machinists to work late on the test parts for Steve’s latest brainstorm. An hour or so later we were again running the roller. This time, it worked. Smooth as butter.

Off to Germany with our prized solution (trusted only to carry-on), holding our breath through customs and finally a day later at our customer’s proving grounds. Steve, a colleague from our German sister company, and I anxiously watched as their chief engineer drove a roller with our solution installed.

The stern chief engineer dismounted the roller, his demeanor not unlike the stereotypical German engineers frequently portrayed in U.S. car commercials. He looked at us (without smiling) and reported, “Not bad.”

As soon as safely possible, our German colleague pulled us aside and assured us, “That means he really likes it.”

That evening we celebrated with a little wine and a memorable dinner at an outdoor restaurant along the Rhine River. We had executed the engineering equip-

alent of the “Hail Mary” pass to pull victory from the jaws of defeat.

I’ve told that story many times to inspire others to never give up, and to promote the qualities that Steve exhibited when the chips are down.

Stories are so effective because they elicit both an intellectual and an emotional response, with the latter embedding within us deeper and longer.

We are wired for stories. From our earliest days, parents use stories to teach lessons, to establish norms and to entertain. Gifted teachers regularly use stories to drive lessons deeper into their students’ retention. Effective storytelling makes learning not feel like learning.

Storytelling is a powerful — and often overlooked — leadership skill, especially in today’s over-intellectualized workplace.

As your organization progresses through any meaningful improvement effort, it’s extremely beneficial to translate noteworthy improvements and benchmarks attained into your stories.

Make sure that they include not only what folks accomplished, but how it made people (employees and/or customers) feel.

These stories provide fuel for future challenges and play a key role in recruiting late adapters to join the improvement effort.

Document your improvement effort with stories, photos and pertinent metrics. It’s amazing how quickly one forgets the prior state.

A quick word of warning: Remember that the stories we tell are merely words, the same as that framed “Values” poster hanging in the lobby.

If leadership’s actions are consistent with the lessons we are teaching or the norms we are reinforcing, our stories will further our intent, and powerfully so. If our actions are inconsistent, our stories will cause cynicism and create a longing for past days and leaders whose actions were consistent with the moral of the story.

## RICK SAYS

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