

# nsu. the papers.

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*a series of briefings from the frontline*

Issue 03 / 2017

**Everyone loves a story.**



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**Every high performing  
individual in a company  
has a story; their story.**

Why organisations need  
to tell them effectively.



‘Storytelling is the most powerful way  
to put ideas into the world.’<sup>1</sup>

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ROBERT MCKEE, CREATIVE WRITING INSTRUCTOR




‘Scratch the surface in a typical boardroom and we’re all just cavemen with briefcases, hungry for a wise person to tell us stories.’<sup>2</sup>

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ALAN KAY, COMPUTER SCIENTIST







‘Stories? We all spend our lives telling them,  
about this, about that, about people...  
But some? Some stories are so good we wish  
they’d never end.

They’re so gripping that we’ll go without  
sleep just to see a little bit more.

Some stories bring us laughter and  
sometimes they bring us tears ...  
but isn’t that what a great story does?  
Makes you feel? Stories that are so powerful...  
they really are with us forever.’<sup>3</sup>

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DUSTIN HOFFMAN, ACTOR



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**Everyone has  
a story to tell.**



**The E-Type.**

An Operations Supervisor at a regional Gas Compression Station is identified for the performance of their site team and the generation of ideas that save the organisation money... but the real story is a man who's passionate about restoring cars and how the attention to detail, thousands of man-hours of effort and uncompromising commitment to excellence they've given their stunning Jaguar E-Type shows up in the way they do their job every day.





**The athlete.**

A young team leader who's delivered strong sales results through their team is recognised at a regional level... but the real story is of a committed athlete driven to achieve elite status, who trains twice a day on days off, sets targets for every aspect of his race-day performances and who simply carries on doing the same things when he gets to work every day.



### **Determination and hard work.**

A respected business leader is appointed  
as company chairman of a major brand...  
but the real story is someone who left  
school at 16, studied in their own time  
to become an accountant and then a  
barrister... and who rang to tell their mother  
on the confirmation of their appointment.





## What's your story?

Behind every high performing individual in a company is a story; their story... and it has a big impact on how they show up in the work they do, the mind-set they operate with and their behaviours while they deliver their job role. And wherever we find them, real stories of real individuals are far more interesting and compelling than their job description or the position they hold in an organisational structure.


**‘Their story (...) has a big impact on how they show up in the work they do, the mind-set they operate with and their behaviours while they deliver their job role.’**

Stories are memorable.  
And every organisation needs to learn to tell them effectively.

# 63%

of people will remember a story,  
whilst only 5% remember statistics.<sup>4</sup>



A photograph of two children dressed as astronauts, standing on a dark, rocky terrain. They are wearing white spacesuits with helmets and backpacks. The child on the left is holding a white flag on a stick. To their left is a tall, grey cardboard rocket with a pointed top and circular windows. The background is a hazy, orange-tinted sky with a large, bright sun or moon on the right side. A semi-transparent orange box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing text.

‘Data can persuade people,  
but it doesn’t inspire them to act;  
to do that, you need to wrap your vision  
in a story that fires the imagination  
and stirs the soul.’<sup>5</sup>

HARRISON MONARTH, EXECUTIVE COACH AND AUTHOR



## Cutting through the noise.

### Information overload.

Mark Ivey is a published author and social media consultant who's served as a Bureau Chief at BusinessWeek magazine, as National Media Spokesman for Intel and as Editor in Chief for Hewlett Packard. He says:

‘In a world where we’re drowning in information, good stories can cut through the noise... personal stories feel real versus abstract concepts and statistics... and capture people on an emotional level to create a deeper, intimate bond.’



# 92%

of consumers would prefer media messages to sound like a story.<sup>6</sup>

# 60k

times faster... is the rate at which the brain processes visuals in comparison to words.<sup>7</sup>

# 77%

more responses to press releases with multimedia included.<sup>8</sup>

# how storytelling affects the brain.



## neural coupling.

When the brain sees or hears a story, its neurons fire in the same patterns as the speaker's brain. This is known as neural coupling. 'Mirror neurons' create coherence between a speaker's brain and the brains of his/her audience members.<sup>9</sup>



## connect emotionally.

Through a process psychologists call "narrative transport," good stories engage listeners emotionally. Engaged emotions create empathy with the speaker.<sup>9</sup>



## light up, light up.

When the brain is presented with factual information, only two of its regions activate. Studies show that storytelling causes many additional areas to light up. The brain responds to the story events as if they were actually happening to the listener.<sup>9</sup>



## stories that stick.

It's easier to remember facts when they're told in a story — think Isaac Newton and the apple. Perhaps that's because the part of the brain involved in memory is the same part involved in imagination and story work.<sup>9</sup>



## stay focused.

The human brain has a strong tendency to lose focus. It is estimated to engage in up to 2,000 daydreams a day and to spend up to half its waking time wandering. In the presence of an interesting story, though, this mental meandering goes to zero.<sup>9</sup>



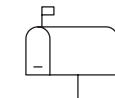
## the love hormone.

When captivated by an emotionally engaging story, the brain produces oxytocin, a substance shown to increase generosity, compassion, trustworthiness, and sensitivity to social cues.<sup>9</sup>



## generosity on tap.

Pioneer 'neuroeconomist' Dr. Paul Zak has shown that people are far more likely to donate to a cause after viewing an emotionally impactful story. In a recent social experiment, testers were able to sell \$129 worth of trinkets on eBay for over \$8000 by crafting personal stories for each object.<sup>9</sup>



## the chemical messenger.

The brain releases dopamine into the system when it experiences an emotionally-charged event, making it easier to remember and with greater accuracy.<sup>10</sup>




## Unforgettable.

The importance of effective storytelling is increasingly recognised in the life of organisations. Leaders who take time to contextualise and personalise the developing story of their enterprise generate far more energy for it than over-crafted corporate messages and cascade materials. And while most of us forget statistics, slide decks and company directives presented from a platform, we remember personal stories from real people that sit behind the work they do.

During a development day for emerging leaders we hosted for a global financial services brand, the thing people remembered most was a board member describing the mental discipline and emotional resilience they'd developed through competing (and failing) in ultra-marathons; skills they now applied at work to navigate the commercial pressures on executives in a turbulent market.

No-one forgot that business update. It wasn't the slide deck and it wasn't the sharp suit. It was the honesty and humanity of a daily struggle and its underlying personal challenge to the audience that people connected with. The starkness and honesty of the work-based examples they gave are unlikely to be found in their bio on the company website.

A black and white photograph of a person hiking on a rocky, uneven trail. The person is seen from behind, wearing a backpack and a light-colored jacket. The trail is rugged with many rocks and patches of low-lying vegetation. In the background, the trail continues up a hillside. A large teal rectangular overlay is positioned in the upper right portion of the image, containing white text.

‘It was the honesty and humanity of a daily struggle and its underlying personal challenge to the audience that people connected with.’

‘Stories constitute the  
single most powerful weapon  
in a leader’s arsenal.’<sup>11</sup>

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DR HOWARD GARDNER, PROFESSOR, HARVARD UNIVERSITY





# Pull, not push.

## **Circular conversations.**

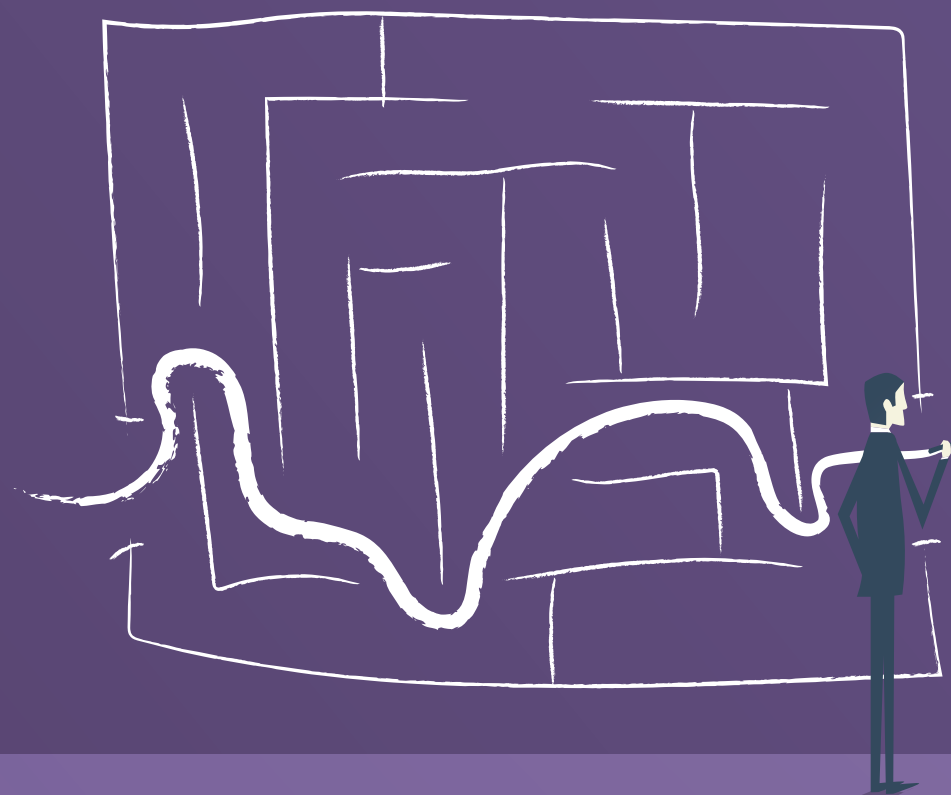
At NSU, we believe the frontline of an organisation is where the action is. Therefore telling the stories of the people working in it is a key to engaging a business-critical and yet often overlooked audience. And when it comes to storytelling, we reckon everyone has something to say.

In tribal cultures, community conversations are circular, with the focus on ensuring each person is able to make a contribution. The spirit of a circular conversation has its base in the ancient protocols of an elder's council, a leadership round-table or a campfire circle. In these environments, there's minimal competition and individual comments stand on their own merit; the outcome is to hear and understand. Listening is more important than speaking, with a belief that the answer to any question or challenge will be found within the 'group-brain' of the community.

Effective storytelling from the frontlines of a company creates circular conversations at an organisational level. Examples of exceptional delivery, anecdotes of self-led and motivated employees and the commercial impact of resilient team members reveal stories that are inspiring, challenging and always compelling when told peer-to-peer. In our experience, using storytelling as a means to support group-think creates both a sense of identity across a frontline population and serves as a platform for greater collaboration and best-practice delivery. We've also seen that once people know they're not alone in the work they do, engagement levels increase and a confidence to both ask for and offer support to others, all lead to further examples of collaboration that can benefit the entire community.

Frontline storytelling pulls the stories from within a community rather than pushing a central message and provides a sustainable model for performance improvement. And it starts with listening, not telling.

**'...using storytelling as a means to support group-think creates both a sense of identity across a frontline population and serves as a platform for greater collaboration and best-practice delivery.'**



### Archiving wisdom.

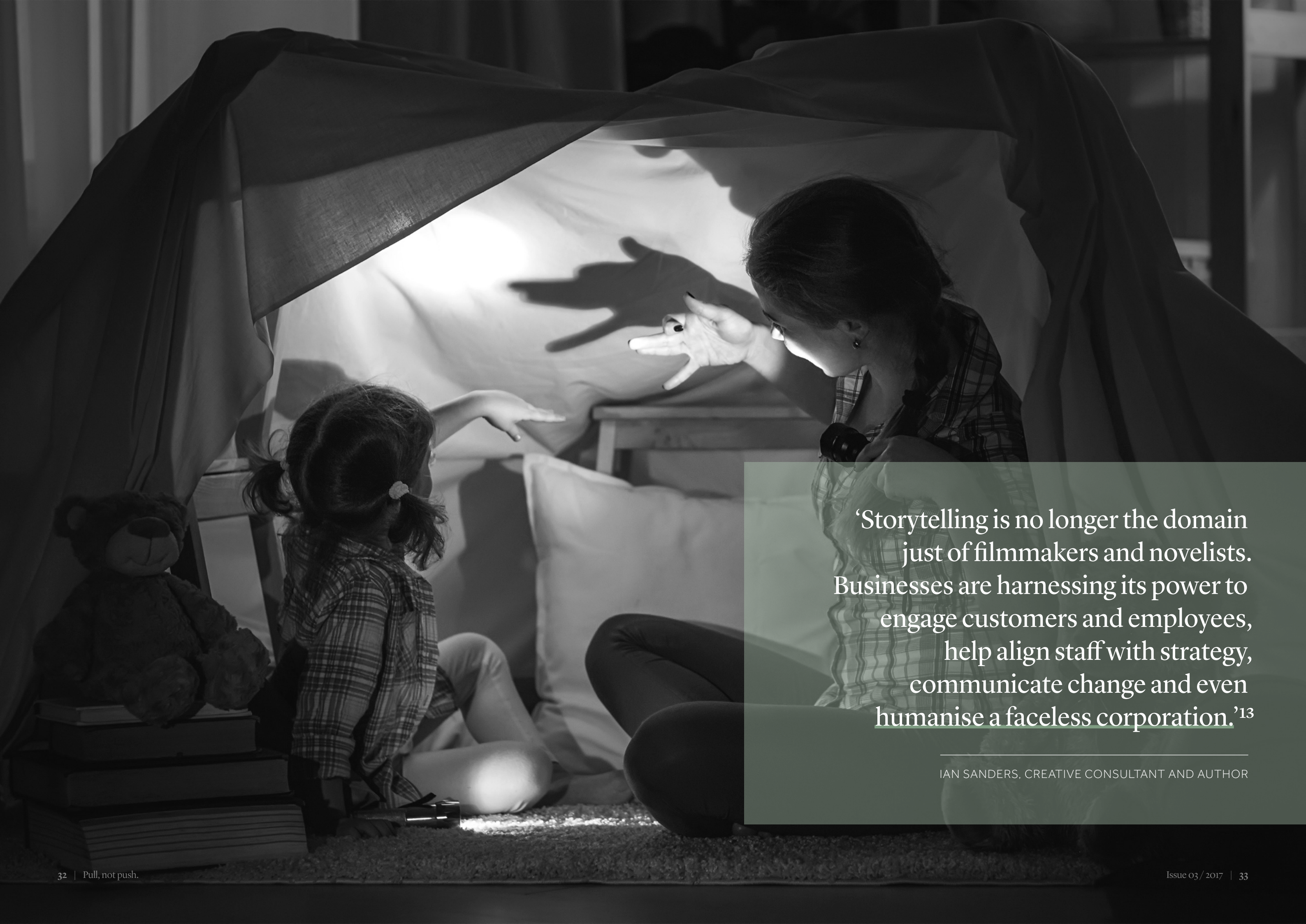
StoryCorps is an American non-profit whose mission is to record, preserve, and share stories of people from all backgrounds and beliefs. In 40 minute recording sessions, two people (who already know each other) discuss questions they've always wanted to ask each other and the recordings are then made available publicly. StoryCorps topics range from the seemingly mundane to the profound; grandchildren interviewing grandparents, life-partners reviewing 20 years of experiences or veterans answering questions about their service experiences for the first time. A project founded on National Public Radio in 2003, to date StoryCorps has recorded over 60,000 interviews with more than 100,000 participants across all 50 states and several American territories.<sup>12</sup>

Why would an idea like this work? Who would listen to it? Founder David Isay says the power of StoryCorps lies in:

**‘...the art of listening and the impact of everyone’s stories and the belief that eliciting and capturing them is a way of insisting that every life matters.’**

When every person in an organisation has value, people’s experiences and perspectives matter, and they might just have something to teach all of us.





‘Storytelling is no longer the domain just of filmmakers and novelists. Businesses are harnessing its power to engage customers and employees, help align staff with strategy, communicate change and even humanise a faceless corporation.’<sup>13</sup>

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IAN SANDERS, CREATIVE CONSULTANT AND AUTHOR



## **Modelling for excellence.**

### **Strike.**

In 1982, University of Wisconsin researchers, who were conducting a study of the adult-learning process, videotaped two bowling teams during several games. The members of each team then studied their efforts on video to improve their skills.

The two videos had been edited differently. One team received a video showing only its mistakes; the other team's video, by contrast, showed only the good performances. After studying the videos, both teams improved their game, but the team that studied its successes improved its score twice as much as the one that studied its mistakes. The evidence suggests that focusing on errors can generate feelings of fatigue, blame and resistance, whereas emphasising what works well and reviewing how to get more out of those strengths taps into creativity, passion and a desire to succeed.<sup>14</sup>

**‘...emphasising what works well  
(...) taps into creativity, passion,  
and a desire to succeed.’**

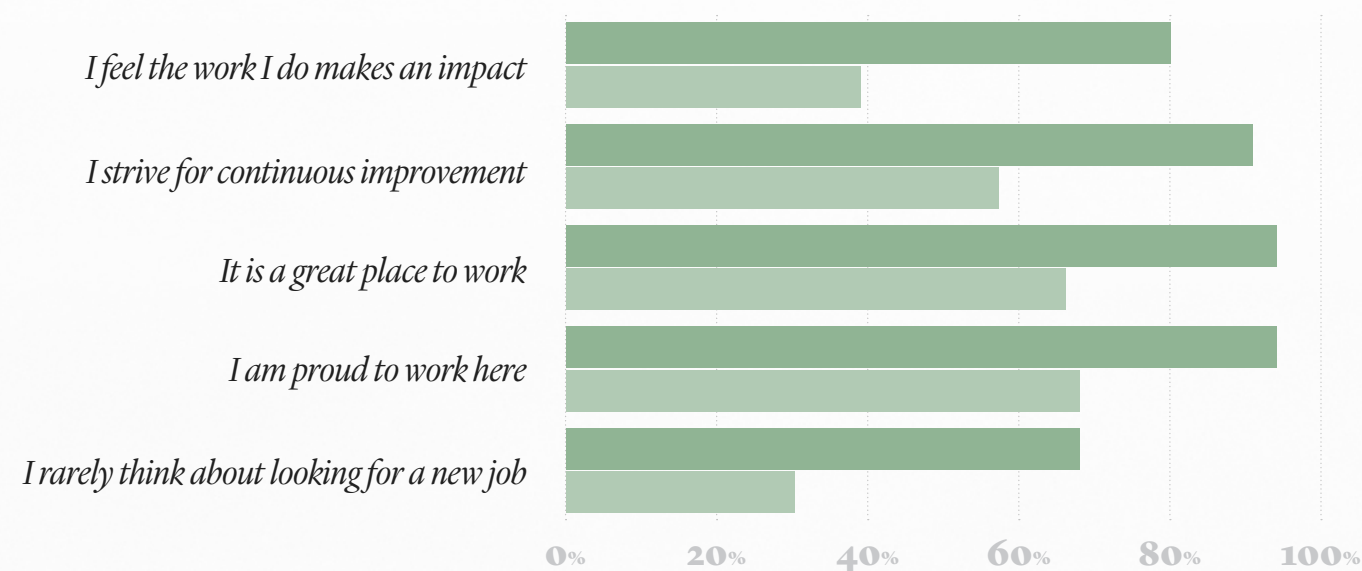


**Figure A**

Employee reported results from an initiative at KPMG whose managers communicate with purpose and focus on storytelling vs those who don't.<sup>15</sup>

**Communicate purpose** ●

**Do not communicate purpose** ●



### Now it's your turn.

Well-told stories from within an organisation gives the audience an opportunity to model similar ways of thinking and apply them in their own local job role and business area. Consider the examples described at the beginning of this document. How does a commitment to excellence, regular setting of targets and a personal drive for self-development apply in the work you and your teams do? What would it look like if you and others adopted similar ways of working?







### **Everything you need is already there.**

We're yet to meet a company that doesn't have people working in it who are doing remarkable things outside normal working hours and which they carry into their workplace performance. Their experiences, values and underlying mindset are significant factors in the results they see with colleagues and customers, sparking stories that deserved to be told. Frontline stories connect people with people and co-workers with co-workers and, if told well and creatively, help us all bring more of ourselves and our talents to the work we do every day.

So the good news is that the stories we need are everywhere. The most powerful examples a company has are already within it; they exist in the lives and experiences of the people working there through their experiences, challenges and developing personal stories that are unfolding constantly.

**‘...the good news is the stories we need are everywhere.’**

If we invest enough time in looking for them and telling them effectively, we'll quickly find stories all of us should be listening to.



‘After nourishment,  
shelter and companionship,  
stories are the thing we need  
most in the world.’<sup>16</sup>

PHILIP PULLMAN, AUTHOR





## **Telling stories from the frontline.**

NSU Media is an employee engagement agency focused on telling stories from the frontline of organisations that inspire, support and develop their people.

Our programmes help frontline managers form a strong internal identity and lay a foundation for ongoing learning and sustained improvements in performance and customer satisfaction.

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