

Effective Explanations



Effective explanations are essential to make ideas, products, and services easier to understand. Explanation is a key communication skill¹ for team management, motivation², change management³ and stakeholder management⁴. If people don't understand what you are doing, or what you want them to do they are not going to be able to help you.

The key elements of a good explanation are:

- **Make Your Audience Feel Smart, Instead of Making Yourself Look Smart.** When making an idea easy to understand, simple trumps clever. Fancy vocabulary and extensive background information might impress your listeners but is more likely to confuse them. Stop trying to look smart and start to make your audience feel smart by building their knowledge and confidence. Dazzle them with clarity!
- **Explain the Forest, Not Just the Trees.** Zoom out and focus on context at the beginning of an explanation to build a world around your product or idea so that it makes overall sense. Then focus on features or specific instructions. Once your listener has bought into the 'why', they are likely to embrace the 'what' or 'how' of your explanation or instruction.
- **Add Detail Sparingly.** More information won't help someone who's already confused. The antidote to confusion is often less information. Don't add detail; come back to one or two big ideas you know they'll understand. Once their heads are nodding again you can proceed, but with caution.
- **Remember Your Audience is Human.** Stories provide a way to see how a product works in the real world, with real people. And you don't have to be a storyteller to make stories work. In fact, the most effective stories simply illustrate a person in pain who found a solution and now feels relieved. Simple stories offer a way for the audience to empathize and imagine themselves solving similar problems.
- **Focus on Why.** The best explanations answer one question: why? Why does this idea, product or service make sense? Why should I care about it? Why does this matter to me? By answering the 'why' early in an explanation, you create a foundation for understanding on which to build more complex ideas.
- **Your Job is to Explain to Smart People.** No one likes to be talked down to, and if you approach explanation with the wrong attitude, it can be destructive. Treat your audience as if they are as smart as you, just not as informed. Use this important point to set the tone of your explanation. Your job is to inform smart people, not help the slowest people catch up.

¹ For more on **communication** see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1066_Communication_Theory.pdf

² For more on **motivation** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1048_Motivation.pdf

³ For more on **change management** see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1078_Change_Management.pdf

⁴ For more on **stakeholder management** see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1083_Valuing_Stakeholder_Management.pdf

Using stories to build understanding

One of the most effective ways to explain a new idea to your audience is through effective storytelling. A well-structured story will impart understanding, inspire action and be remembered long after other boring presentations are forgotten! The power of storytelling is summed up in the storyteller's creed:

"The Storyteller's Creed"

by Robert Fulghum,

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge.

That myth is more potent than history.

That dreams are more powerful than facts.

That hope always triumphs over experience.

That laughter is the only cure for grief.

And I believe that love is stronger than death.

We know stories are effective; they have been used to communicate sophisticated ideas for millennia ranging from the parables in the Bible through to the morals embedded in fairy tales. The storyteller's realm extends from fantasies and fiction through to business presentations and team meetings. In short, there is nothing like a good story to connect with your audience!

In business, storytelling is a captivating way to explain why a decision was made, what it means to the audience and the benefits that will flow as a consequence. Rather than simply using techno-speak, data and facts, building this information into a well-crafted story will engage your audience as you explain the reasons why you have selected a particular set of options and what the listeners need to do to help achieve the 'happy ending'. The facts give your stories *substance*; your stories give facts *meaning*.

Creating a good story requires skill, and whilst you may never aspire to becoming the next J. K. Rowling, (author of the Harry Potter series - <http://www.jkrowling.com/>), applying some effective development techniques can help you develop your own style of storytelling.

The ***Story Spine***, originally created by playwright Kenn Adams, is one tool that can be used to craft well-structured stories. It is a series of sentence fragments that prompt the narrative elements of your story, and it can be used by itself or in conjunction with any exercise in which individuals or groups are asked to craft a story to explain a new idea or technical concept.

The structure of the Story Spine (*the option in italics suggests one possible use to explain and get buy-in to solve an emerging risk issue*).

The Platform – introduces the issue/topic

- Once Upon a Time...
- Everyday...
- *The project risk register identified...*



The Catalyst – explains why this is important today

- But one day...
- Then something change...
- *The recent xxx has escalated this risk significantly...*

The Consequences – explains the journey and the ‘problem’

- Because of that... (repeated as many times as you wish)
- And then Occurred
- And then.....
- *Because of this we have had to change*
- *Which has caused.....*

The Climax – the core problem / challenge / solution

- Until finally...
- Then suddenly
- *Which means the project must.....*

The Resolution – the solution to the climax

- Ever since then...
- And the moral of the story is...
- And the funny thing was....
- *And we need your approval to implement these recommendations!*

This template serves as a dynamic and fluid structure, allowing storytellers to pick and choose what works best for them.

Storytelling is one effective way to avoid *the curse of knowledge* when we have to explain something. If we know a subject well it is very difficult to imagine what it is like to *not* know it. But, if your explanation is pitched towards a knowledgeable listener (just like you), and the person lacks the level of knowledge you have assumed, your explanation will fail.

Researching the audience’s starting point before starting on the development of the story, and seeking feedback as the story unfolds, helps you pitch at the right level. Aim too high and you create fear and confusion, too low and you will be seen as boring or worse. People grappling with a totally new concept generally need to appreciate ‘why’ it is important before moving forward. Experts know ‘why’ – they are interested in ‘how’ the new idea will help them.

Some of the other elements that can be built into your story to help ‘sell’ the idea you are explaining include:

- Seeking **agreement** early by introducing big-picture statements almost everyone can appreciate and understand such as “We can all agree petrol prices are rising”.
- Developing specific **context** that is relevant and personally important to the audience such as “Which means more of your hard-earned income is going to pay the running costs of your car”.
- Introduce a ‘real’ person into the storyline: “Meet Billy, he’s tired of paying so much for fuel and needs alternatives, this is what he found”.



- Make **connections** using analogies and metaphors to connect the new idea to something the audience already understands. An analogy compares two ideas for the purpose of outlining a connection between them, such as: “Billy could see using public transport was like multi-tasking because he could work and travel at the same time”.
- Use **descriptions** that are focused on solutions; ‘how’ rather than ‘why’. “Billy found he could save \$20 per week by taking the tram three times per week”.
- Finish with a **conclusion** that wraps up the story and defines the next steps for the audience to take. “The next time petrol prices get you down, remember.....”

Well-crafted stories are designed. Some of the factors to consider in designing your story include:

- Find out what your audience already know (don’t assume).
- Use the most basic language possible.
- Understand the constraints:
 - When do you need to have the story ready by?
 - How long do you have to present? Keep it short!
 - Where will the presentation take place?
 - How will the information be presented?
 - KISS – how many ideas can you really explain in the available time?
 - Slow down! Many explanations are too fast and too complex.
- Focus on the big ideas – forget the detail and exceptions.
- Solve a real problem – if the story is going to last, it needs to be timeless (ie, avoid datable examples where possible).
- State your intentions early – ideally in the title. This sets expectations
- Trade accuracy for understanding – if they don’t understand you have wasted everyone’s time. Embrace imperfections.
- Accessible to the audience, ensure the story:
 - Is clean and clear – reduce noise and distractions to zero.
 - Makes effective use of visuals to enhance the message
 - Fun to engage with – the careful use of informality and humour helps build rapport.
- Grounded: build onto knowledge or ideas the audience already hold.

Next time you need to sell an idea to management, why not try a good ‘story’ - you may be surprised at the results!

Be a S.T.A.R.

The STAR method is a structured way to respond to behavioural questions that one might encounter during an interview process where you need to explain your approach to a situation. It’s an acronym that stands for **S**ituation, **T**ask, **A**ction and **R**esult, which are the four aspects that need to be addressed in a behavioural interview question. It helps to break down your response into a four-step answer that will satisfy the person interviewing you. It not only answers the question, but it allows you to put it in context and show your ability to respond. However, as with every explanation and story, preparation helps enormously!



S Situation	Detail the background. Provide a context. Where? When?
T Task	Describe the challenge and expectations. What needed to be done? Why?
A Action	Elaborate your specific action. What did you do? How? What tools did you use?
R Results	Explain the results: accomplishments, recognition, savings, etc. Quantify.

Situation: To begin, describe a related situation or task from a previous job, volunteer experience or anything that's relevant. Describe a specific situation and establish context. Don't generalize or offer a litany of your accomplishments, but speak directly to the question as posed. Be detailed enough that the person asking the question is informed.

Task: Once the context is clear, then go to the specific task that you had to do. Be clear what that task was. It should relate to the question asked and whatever ability the interviewer is looking to evaluate. It's crucial that the task is set up with clarity and relevancy, so that you can take the next step in the STAR method—action.

Action: Describe the action you took to deal with the situation or task. Be detailed, but only so much as to answer the question. Stay on topic. Don't use this as an opportunity to go off on tangents about your other skills. Focus on what you did in the situation to resolve the task and keep that focus on you. So, be specific about your actions and your contribution. Use first person singular, and don't talk about we or the team. Don't take credit for other's work, but only talk about what you did, regardless of whether it was within a larger group or team context.

Result: Now comes the time where you explain the outcome of the task due to your actions. Take credit for what you did. This is not the time for modesty. Explain what happened, how did the situation or task resolve itself, what did you accomplish, did you learn anything, etc.? Your answer should be positive, of course, and can speak to several positive results.

The STAR method works if you follow the steps and are specific and not overly detailed in your answers.





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