



Great Leaders Know How to Reframe a Story

The story you tell yourself and others can make all the difference.

By Minda Zetlin

What sets great leaders apart from everyone else? Their ability to reframe their point of view and tell different stories. That's according to Lee Bolman, co-author of *How Great Leaders Think: The Art of Reframing*.

"How does that work?" I ask, so he uses me as an example. He's read my blog about my husband's and my upcoming move to the Seattle area to support my husband's music career. There are two ways of looking at this story, he says. "One story is that it's good for him and a small price for you, part of two people's long-term commitment to each other. That's one version, but there's another story about how you feel rooted and in love with Woodstock and so leaving comes with a tremendous sense of loss for you."

He's right--both stories are true. But how I feel about our impending move depends in a big way on which one I tell, both to myself and the people around me. I'm certainly sad to leave Woodstock for many reasons, but I choose the optimistic story, the one about how this move will be an adventure for me and a new opportunity for him. And so my happiness about those things outweighs my sadness about leaving.

The ability to reframe a story and look at it from a new point of view won't just make you happier with your own decisions, Bolman says. It will also make you a better leader. And it's an especially important skill for entrepreneurs, he adds. Many successful entrepreneurs got that way by reframing existing stories. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos realized that you could sell books without a bookstore. Former Starbucks

CEO Howard Schultz realized that Americans everywhere would pay premium prices for a really good cup of coffee and a pleasant café in which to enjoy it.

One reframing may not be enough. "Often, down the road, the entrepreneur has to reframe again," Bolman says. "Otherwise, either the business will get into trouble, or the entrepreneur will get pushed because he or she is no longer giving the business what it needs."

Wondering whether you're telling the right story about your business and about your life? Try asking yourself these questions:

Is this story serving me well?

Keep in mind that your attitudes, outlook, and even your decisions will be formed in part by the narrative you use to describe your work and your life. Is that narrative taking you where you want to go? If not, it may be time for a reframe.

Sometimes, Bolman notes, we cling to counterproductive stories because we enjoy a good gripe, epitomized in an old joke in which a worker, offered a solution to a problem, responded, "No, thanks. I'd rather have my grievance." If that sounds the least bit like you, chances are you're clinging to a story that's doing you more harm than good.

Is there a different viewpoint that changes the story?

Sometimes, reframing can be difficult to do. When that happens, "keep learning," Bolman advises. Read widely, take classes, talk to smart people both within and outside your industry. Check out your competitors' operations to see what they do differently from you, and determine whether any of their ideas are worth imitating.

If all that doesn't get you thinking outside your original frame, you're probably resisting, Bolman says. "We're attached to our way of understanding the business, and as the

Buddhists say, our attachments are our greatest source of misery," he says. "We'll be stuck until we're ready to let it go."

Does this story inspire others?

As a leader, the way you frame your stories affects more than just you. "You have to understand the importance of narrative," Bolman says. "A great leader tells a great story. The story serves as an intellectual framework, but it's also emotional and even spiritual. Typically, it's a story of great challenge, adventure, and achievement. A great story orients the leader, but also everyone around the leader. That helps them understand what the business is about and where you are trying to go."

Source: <https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/great-leaders-know-how-to-reframe-a-story.html>