

Storytelling for Leaders:

How to Humanize Leadership to Build Organizational Trust



PRESENTED BY **STORIES**



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Introduction

Leadership communications have always been a bridge from the boardroom to the shop floor. Whether it's an in-person town hall, onboarding welcome video, or email newsletter, these communications serve as opportunities for leaders to share their perspective and build trust at important employee inflection points.

If you were to take a step back and look at your leadership communications from the perspective of a frontline employee who has never met a senior leader, what would you see? What perception would you have of leadership? How confident would you feel in the direction of the company? Would you believe the company lives its values? And most importantly, how does this perception affect how and why you would show up to work every day?

In this guide, we'll introduce you to leadership storytelling and how you can use it to raise the bar on your executive communications strategy. Let's get started!

Storytelling for Leadership Communications

What is Leadership Storytelling?

Leadership storytelling humanizes leadership at scale; it creates a communications strategy that brings moments of vulnerability, personal stories, and connection to all employees. If the goal is an aligned and engaged workforce, leadership storytelling is a consistent drum beat of stories from leadership that amplify your organization's most important decisions and initiatives.

Leadership storytelling isn't one campaign, video, or story. It's a commitment to using real stories from leaders to build trust, communicate effectively, and provide support to employees and other stakeholders every step of the way. Even (and especially) when it's not easy.





Why Personal and Professional Stories Humanize Leadership


The fastest and most effective way to humanize a leader is to help them share their real experiences and stories at scale. Here's why:

Stories give real insight: They communicate what's great about working at your company to both your internal and external audiences. Stories from leadership add a valuable perspective by giving relatable context behind business decisions that impact people.

Stories are memorable: Science says our brains are hardwired to retain information delivered in a story better than other methods. It's easier for us to process information in a cause-and-effect scenario, and stories tend to have that structure. Sharing a story around important business decisions improves the chances of your audience remembering the information.

Stories inspire emotional connections: People put themselves in the shoes of the storyteller. Rather than keeping leaders at a distance, using storytelling in executive communications makes leaders more relatable and helps build trust.

Stories prove you are who you say you are: Just because you have your EVP posted on your career site or have made a public commitment to gender parity doesn't mean that the employee experience actually supports it. True stories from leadership, on the other hand, provide proof of top-down commitment to these culture initiatives and that you are who you say you are.



Stories impact the talent metrics you care about most. Employees either believe in the mission and the culture you are building, or they don't. Candidates can either see themselves at your company, or they can't. Stories from leadership build trust in order to improve employee engagement, employer brand awareness, time-to-fill, and retention.

Why is Leadership Storytelling Important?

By incorporating storytelling into your leadership communications, you build trust faster throughout your organization. And this has ripple effects throughout your organization:

- **Employee engagement:** Leadership trust is the highest-ranked motivator of employee engagement at 77%. And, employees of high-trust organizations report 74% less stress, 76% more engagement, and 50% higher productivity than low-trust organizations.¹
- **Attracting top talent:** 74% of talent prefer to work for a company with a trustworthy reputation.²
- **Employee retention:** 62% of employees who plan to stay with their current employers reported high levels of trust in their corporate leadership. Only 27% of employees planning to leave express that same trust.³

Now that you understand what leadership storytelling is and why it is such a critical communications medium, we'll share different ways you can use it to raise the bar on your executive communications.

How to Use Leader Stories

Effective leadership communications strategies highlight key organizational decisions and initiatives that impact people: lofty CSR commitments, launch of a new talent program or benefit, or an organizational restructuring, to name a few. With an leadership storytelling approach, you'll incorporate stories from leadership that bring these initiatives to life in a more human way.

In the following sections, we provide four common opportunities to share leadership stories, supported by real examples from progressive companies:

- Provide strategic vision
- Lead by example to model healthy work habits and company culture elements
- Lead through adversity
- Team storytelling

Provide Strategic Vision

Unsurprisingly, leadership storytelling is a great way to provide strategic vision and perspective into company decisions. Whether it's a new talent program or announcing a merger, senior leaders have the 'why' that people crave from executive communications. By inviting employees into the conversation, leaders can energize them around the strategic vision and create a more aligned workforce. Bonus points for connecting these decisions with the company's mission and vision statements and core values.

Pro tip: use these leader stories to introduce other supporting employee stories. The leader can give insight into the 'why' behind the strategic vision, and another team member shares what this vision means to them personally or how they have been able to contribute to its success.



Overview video for 'HEI Loves' program, featuring CEO Anthony Rutledge and team members.

Above, we share an example from HEI Hotels. The video highlights 'HEI Loves,' the company's umbrella talent program created to invest in the health and success of HEI's team members. Throughout the video you hear from CEO Anthony Rutledge about the strategy and values behind the program and why taking care of the associates is so critical to the company's success.

This leader perspective is then supported by multiple employee stories throughout the video showing, not telling, what the program looks like in real life.

'Go First' In Modeling Healthy Work Habits

Most leaders would agree that they want their workforce to prioritize mental and physical well-being, have healthy work/life balance, and live their lives to the fullest. But how many leaders practice what they preach? When you don't model the behavior you say you want from others, you send confusing messages. And often, employees default to the example set by leadership.

If you want your workforce to have healthy work habits (which smart leaders should – it's linked with higher levels of productivity and engagement, retention, and lower health care costs), leaders need to 'go first' in modeling these health work habits. Take all of your PTO. Sign up for the mental health benefits. Close the laptop at the end of business hours.

And most importantly: talk about it loudly. By sharing stories about how they used PTO or openly prioritizing mental health, even if it means taking a step back from work, leaders show employees that it's OK for them to do so, too.

We love the leader story below by Trane Technologies as a part of their mental health anti-stigma campaign. In this story, Ann, a Human Resources leader, shares her own personal experience seeking mental health support during a challenging time in her life.

The story also highlights the positive and supporting response of Ann's boss and colleagues, who were more than willing to step in and help while she was prioritizing her mental health. By bravely sharing her own story, Ann is using her voice as a leader to drive awareness for mental health.

Featured Case Study: Trane Technologies

Mental Health Anti-Stigma Campaign Powered by Leader Stories

- Nine leaders interviewed about their experiences with mental health
- Nine employee spotlight videos created; to make accessible globally, each video captioned in nine languages spoken by employees
- Videos averaged 13,500 unique employee views per video (120,000+ total video views)
- Campaign drove 5,000+ visits to Mental Wellbeing Hub
- Highest performing internal campaign of 2022

[Read the full case study](#)



Mental Health spotlight of Ann De Man, VP of Human Resources

Leading Through Adversity

There will undoubtedly be times of adversity that force leaders to make tough decisions that have a significant impact on the people in your organization. Sometimes these circumstances are within a leader's control (poor product decision, market miscalculation). And sometimes, they are nobody's fault (an economic downturn, a global health crisis).

A leader's response to adversity speaks volumes to members of your organization. Do they offer compassion towards team member challenges, or indifference? Take ownership of company decisions, or fade into the shadows? Prioritize employee well-being, or prioritize profits?

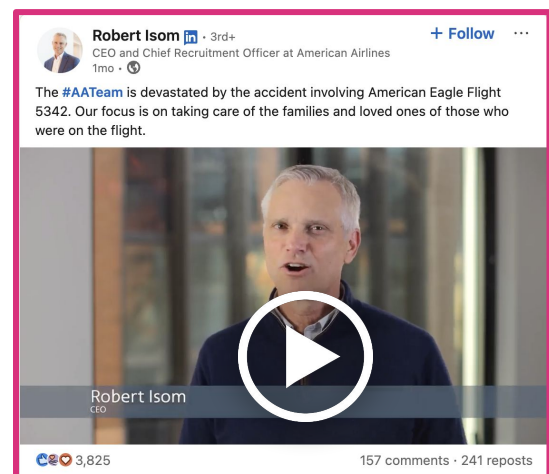
By showing empathy, vulnerability, and accountability through executive communications, leadership can take these times of adversity and foster trust and community in their organization.

"We're devastated and I know everyone is hurting. I arrived in D.C. earlier today and have been in constant contact with our team, government officials, and first responders. I want to thank everyone who's given their time and compassion to these efforts."

– Robert Isom, CEO of American Airlines, immediately following a tragic airline incident in January 2025 in Washington, D.C.

To the right, we share a video message to American Airlines (AA) team members and the community delivered by CEO and Chief Recruitment Officer, Robert Isom. Immediately following the tragic airline crash in early 2025, Isom delivers clear facts on what they know about the incident and how the AA team is caring for their customers and each other. He closes with words of empathy and gratitude for the entire AA team.

Isom's response was quick and clear. The video is an excellent example of human leadership through adversity.





Team Storytelling

In addition to sharing stories from CEOs and members of the C-suite, don't forget about other leaders throughout your organization. Business unit directors and site leads, for example, have a similar challenge in front of them: building trust and connection with members of their team who look to them for strategic direction.

For this sub-segment of leaders, leadership storytelling rules still apply. There is huge value to be gained by the SVP of Engineering sharing their perspective on why a new product launch is going into effect. Or, a story that shows why a group operates in a certain way to meet customer needs.

In the example below, Alexion features the Global Head of Patient Experience, Wendy Erler. In the video, this senior leader shares where her passion comes from along with the experience of building a patient advocacy team from the ground up. Wendy's level of compassion and investment in her team create a level of openness that could help attract others to working in patient advocacy at Alexion.



Video highlighting the value of the patient advocacy team at Alexion. The video features Vice President Wendy Erler sharing her purpose and how her team has grown to deliver far-reaching impact.

Conclusion

Leadership storytelling uncovers stories that amplify your company's most important decisions and initiatives. By taking a more human approach to your communications strategy, your campaigns will be more effective in building trust and alignment throughout your organization.

Once you look for it, you'll find many opportunities to infuse company information with leadership stories. Providing strategic vision, leading through adversity, leading by example, and team storytelling are just a few ways we discussed in this guide.

If you'd like to learn more about how to uncover leader stories in your organization, please [get in touch with our team](#).

About Stories Inc.

Stories Inc. is the only global content partner that helps companies activate their brand by creating high-quality content libraries—fast. Unlike traditional marketing agencies or internal teams, we specialize in uncovering and amplifying the authentic stories that define your company's culture. Through expertly crafted videos, photography, and digital content, we transform real employee and customer experiences into compelling narratives that power brand awareness, talent attraction, employee engagement, and internal communications.

To learn more, visit [storiesincorporated.com](https://www.storiesincorporated.com)



Sources

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- ² Trust in the Modern Workplace, [Workforce Institute @ UKG](#)
- ³ Talent 2020: Surveying the Talent Paradox from the Employee Perspective, [Deloitte](#)

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