
InTransition 129: Gabrielle Dolan

Announcer: Welcome to In Transition, a program dedicated to the practice of content communication in the public sector. Here's your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practice of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and thank you for joining us once again this week.

Today, we will speak to an expert in storytelling, that very topical piece of communication that everyone is now talking about the importance of it, but we're going to speak today to Gabrielle Dolan who is really leading the world in the practice of storytelling, not just in the private sector, but in the public sector as well, but Gabrielle has a fantastic career in communication both internal and external communication where she's worked with Accenture, Spark New Zealand, Australia Post, Telstra, Ericsson, Shell, Bupa, the ANZ. That role at the NAB was as a senior manager in communications dating back to 1988 through to about 2005, but on her journey, she has discovered the power of storytelling and that's what she does day in, day out. She teaches people how to communicate effectively through the power of story and she joins me now. Gabrielle Dolan, thanks very much for joining me In Transition.

Gabrielle Dolan: Thanks, David. It's good to be here.

David Pembroke: So storytelling, it really is as Paul Keating used to say, "Every galah in the pet shop's now talking about" storytelling, but it's something that you've been focused on now for a number of years.

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, it is. Look, as you said in your bio, I left the NAB in 2005 so we've been doing this, teaching leaders how to tell storytelling for over 12 years now, but it is certainly the buzzword. The last couple of years, it's certainly gained momentum and there's a lot of people talking about the importance of using story in business to get your message across and to influence people.

David Pembroke: How do people do it well?

Gabrielle Dolan: How do they do it well? Yeah, we could spend a lot of time on how they don't do it well. How they do it well is there's a couple of really important things you need to do and the first thing is you have to be really clear on what your message is. I find a lot of people when I'm trying to teach them

how to use a story and they're struggling to come up with a story, it's because they don't have real clarity around the message they're trying to get through. They either kind of articulate the message or they've got three or four messages they're trying to get through in one story. The first rule is you need to have one message per story. Then the second thing is your stories have to be authentic and relatable, and it's just trying to find the right story that matches your message. There are a lot of things that can go wrong with storytelling and that's why I spend a lot of time actually giving leaders the skill to do it well.

David Pembroke: Just in terms of that, do you go to that issue of what's the message or even perhaps before then, is there the step where you're helping people or working with people to understand their purpose perhaps or the vision of what they're trying to create?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, I do spend a lot of time on what the message is. For example, when I go into organisations and either do a half day training or a full day training program, and it's normally to roll out the company values or the new strategy and then, it really is spending a bit of time saying, "What does this mean to you personally?" You could have a value of integrity, but what does it actually mean to you and until people are clear on what it means to them personally, it's quite difficult to come up with a story. In the end, the story is the relatively easy bit to find. Getting clarity on the message is sometimes the hardest.

David Pembroke: In terms of looking for those messages that you're trying to communicate, what are the most topical or typical sort of stories that people are trying to tell in that corporate context or even in a government context?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, look, sometimes when I get a call from the client, it's saying, "Can you come in and help us with our strategy story or our brand story or we're going through change and we want to come up with a change story?" And I actually say there's no one story that does that, but it's how you can skill the leaders so that they're sharing their own personal stories to get the message across. You might be rolling out a significant change across government or across a company and the messages you have to give to each team will vary. Some of the same change messages might be the same, but how the team's going to respond will be different. Each leader needs to think about what are the key issues for their team and what are the messages I need to get across, and how a story can help with that.

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- David Pembroke: Yeah, so that context obviously is really important, isn't it, is to really think about the audience and how they're feeling and thinking about whatever it is that you're about to talk about because that's obviously going to have a massive impact on the effectiveness of whatever it is that you're going to tell them after you've understood what that context is.
- Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, absolutely, and when you see storytelling done badly again in government or organisations is when they believe that the marketing department or the corporate affairs department can come up with one or two stories and everyone just shares them that storytelling by scripting and getting everyone to learn the story and just share it doesn't work because, of course, it's not going to be relatable to the most of their audience.
- David Pembroke: How difficult is it to teach the skill of storytelling because it sounds quite a nuanced skill that you've got to develop over time?
- Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, you do have to develop it over time. Like I said, I've been doing this for over 12 years. I've got a pretty proven process that I know without fail I can take a group of people the start of the day coming in thinking, "I don't have any stories or even I'm not really sure if storytelling is something for me to use," to the end of the day them sharing some really powerful stories because it is ... I actually take them through quite a logical process that gives them the confidence to do it and in the training, they've all shared a story and they've received feedback from me and they've actually experienced the power of story from hearing their peers share stories.
- David Pembroke: We don't have half a day, but we do have a bit of time to go through it, but how about we start the process? What's step one? How do we get going on this storytelling journey?
- Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, step one is to be really clear on your message. Again, in business, you've got to be saying, "What is my message?" A lot of values around doing the right thing so the first thing I say to people, I go, "What does that mean to you?" Not what it means to the company, what does it mean to you? They might list a few things like doing the right thing means respecting people. Doing the right thing means taking people's different views into accounts. They will list three or four things what it means to them and then I say, "Just choose one of them," so choose one of those messages because if you're trying to put four messages into one story, it loses its effectiveness. Helping them get really clear on the message and then, the next step is where do you find a story and one of the simplest ways is to say, "What does this feel like outside of work?" If you want to go to a personal story, what

does respecting people feel like outside of work? Then people come up with stories about their kids or when they were a kid or a story about their friends or whatever.

David Pembroke: I'm interested in that sense of going outside of work, what's the significance of finding a story outside of work as opposed to a story inside of work?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah. Where stories are still effective about what they normally ... They don't normally have any personal connection with them so no emotional connection or engagement. One of the examples I often cite is working with a woman who was the head of risk and her biggest problem was that every time risk was raised as an issue, the business unit she supported would all say, "That's your problem because you're the risk manager." Yeah, and nothing was changing. She'd sort of say to me, "It doesn't matter how many times I tell them that I can't manage their risk for them, that they have to manage their risk," and she also said, "It doesn't matter how many business examples," so she would provide them with lots of business examples of business units that didn't manage their risk and the consequences, and the ones that did and the good things that happened, but all these business examples weren't having any impact.

She shared a personal story. Would you like me to share the story so your listeners can-

David Pembroke: Yeah, yeah, yeah, for sure, yeah.

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah. This is the story. She went through the process about risk management, what does this feel like outside of work and this is the story she shared. She said, "When I was a kid, I grew up on a farm and growing up on a farm, there's all these dangers we needed to be aware of, but Mum would teach us what to do. So we knew what to do when we came across a spider in the timber heap, and we knew about all the potential traps in the dam after heavy rain, and we knew what to do if we came across a snake in summer. I remember this really hot day Mum was yelling at me to get my bike from the front gate so I ran down the path and then I just froze because in front of my bike was this massive copper head snake, but I remembered everything Mum taught us to do. I played statues and I slowly walked backwards until there was enough space between me and the snake and I ran back to the house to tell Mum.

I'm sharing this with you because it reminds me of the role we play in risk. All I can do is give you the skills, knowledge and advice so when you come

across your own copper head snake, regardless of what that looks like, you will know what to do."

David Pembroke: Very good. You've got me.

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, yeah. The personal story as opposed to all the logical business examples where it stays in logic, the personal story taps into a personal emotional connection, which helps the listener, as your listeners heard that, they might be thinking, "Does that help me understand the role of a risk manager better?" Normally, the answer is yes and not only helps me understand the message, but I will absolutely remember it and I'll be able to retell it without losing its meaning.

David Pembroke: That's the thing, isn't it, that copper head snake moment becomes then part of the story of the organisation so people can then relate to each other to say-

"That was my moment," so that then can become more meaningful to a wider group of people.

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, and it's more those day-to-day stories that become more meaningful to a wider group of people. Also, look, the reason you're sharing, you're trying to tap into emotion and get people connection is to drive behaviour so Rosemary would say that after she shared that story, that they were fully accountable why they needed to take control of the risk and when they started talking about risk, they would say things like, "Have we identified all our potential copper head snakes?" The story drove behaviour and drove decisions, which is actually what you're trying to achieve when you're influencing people.

David Pembroke: How hard was that to find the copper head snake story?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, look, it was pretty hard so a lot of people hear that story and go, "Well, that's really simple and easy," but like anything that looks easy, it's normally quite complicated and we started with what's the real message you want to get across in risk management and what does this look like, and I knew she'd grown up on a farm so I sort of said, "There must be lots of examples of that." She talked generally about her mum, but then I said, "Give me a specific example." That's the other thing, you got to provide a real specific example, which brings in that emotional information and then, we worked through the process of how you start it, what you put in the

middle, what you leave out of the middle and most importantly, how you end it so it's on message so people actually get it.

David Pembroke: There's quite a few steps just there, but we might just dial back a bit to the specific example and then, perhaps the way that you tell a story, what's your advice to people once they've found their copper head snake story then to understand then how best to deliver that in a way that's going to have impact?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, look, my advice is especially when you're starting out is to write your stories out. You write them out and then, you practice them. Writing them out will then help you think, "Actually, there's too much detail. I need to get rid of that," and it's there, you've got a record for it, but it's really important to practice it so you especially nail the ending so you get your message across. A lot of people think, "If I practice it too much, it will come across as scripted or rehearsed," and that's not the case because when you're sharing a personal story, you don't just retell it. You actually relive it and again, that's the power of sharing a personal story in business that the emotion is often visible. When I say emotion, I'm not talking about people crying. It's just you can see it. You can see pride or you can see fear or you can see anger, but you see it.

David Pembroke: What about supporting materials to be able to deepen the impact? How important is it to have slides or videos or audio or other media-rich resources to help you?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah. Look, it's not critical. I think a story, a well told story can stand alone because what the story can do is paint a picture in your audience's head so you don't need any visuals, but sometimes if you've got a prop, it can add to it so it can be powerful. If you were sharing a story about when you were a kid and you won your first race and received your blue ribbon, if you've still got your blue ribbon, you could bring that in to really add impact. If you're giving a presentation and you've got your slide deck, when you get to the point where you're sharing your story, you could be sharing a story about when you were a kid, you could have a photo of yourself up there. They do work together, but it's not critical to have the additional visual.

David Pembroke: It's an option though, isn't it?

Gabrielle Dolan: It is an option, yeah.

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- David Pembroke: Obviously, the key thing is that you don't want any visual device that you may be using to be working against your story in any way.
- Gabrielle Dolan: Absolutely. That's regardless of when you're using a story or not, you don't want any visual device to be a distraction. That's why I'm really up against the poor use of PowerPoint because often, we use PowerPoint to help us as opposed to helping the audience so yeah. That's the good thing about storytelling. You can take it anywhere with you. You can use it on a teleconference. you don't need the props or the PowerPoint to do it because it's your story and once you've got it and once you've rehearsed it, you will never forget it.
- David Pembroke: Now the story that you told there before was a very simple easy to access story and there seems to be in lots of the literature and discussion around storytelling that Joseph Campbell's The Hero's Journey that every story follows that arc of you set out, you identify whatever the challenge is and then, you have to cross the valley of darkness before you get to the other side where there's somebody to help you and then, you know what I mean, there's all those various steps and it becomes quite complex really when you try it. Trying to tell something quite simple, but if I'm following The Hero's Journey, sometimes maybe not every story is a hero's journey.
- Gabrielle Dolan: No, no. Look, I'm not a big fan of The Hero's Journey concept with storytelling. I get it, why it's important if you're making a Hollywood movie, but if you're just sharing stories in business because what happens when people think I need to have a hero's journey, it needs to be a struggle and it needs to come out and it needs to be a great climax at the end, we dismiss 99% of our stories. That's when people come to me and go, "I don't have any stories because I'm just normal," because they're thinking it's got to be these really big stories, but the day-to-day ones are the most powerful ones. Part of the training with people is helping them realise that the day-to-day ones are the really most powerful ones. They're the ones that people relate to the most. Once people realise that, they realise their life is rich in stories and they've got a whole heap of stories they can draw from.
- David Pembroke: Why do you think that whole movement to The Hero's Journey has got such momentum behind it because it's everywhere when you're in this corporate storytelling space?
- Gabrielle Dolan: I think because The Hero's Journey around storytelling, it's been around for probably thousands of years, but it's also the process people follow when they're writing books or creating movies. I think when people think

storytelling, that's what they think and because storytelling in business is so new, relatively new, it's trying to educate people to say, "It's not about that. It's just about the day-to-day stories," but yeah, as storytelling's becoming more popular, I find 10 years ago, I had to convince people on the power of story. I no longer have to convince people on the power of the story. It's now it's convincing them that it's not The Hero's Journey. It's just the everyday stories that are the most powerful.

David Pembroke: If your story doesn't need a hero's journey, what does it need? What are the essential components that must be there to have resonance?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, look, it needs to have emotion in it, but even again your day-to-day stories can tap into emotion. The fact that you're actually sharing a personal story in a business format makes it more relatable. You still want it to be intriguing. You don't want it to be a boring story, but it doesn't have to be climbing Mount Everest type story, but there's still got to be enough intrigue where people are with you and thinking, "I'm not sure where this is going, but it's interesting enough for me to stay with you."

David Pembroke: Right. There has to be some element of conflict or challenge because otherwise, it's a story, "and then I did this and then I did this and then I did this," which as you say is that's not much good to anyone.

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, yeah, you don't want that. No, you just don't want a process of, "I did this, I did this, I did this." Also, when you're sharing stories in business, they're really succinct. My rule is about 1 to 2 minutes. Again, the shorter they are, the less likely people are going to be bored and start losing engagement as well.

David Pembroke: That word emotion is a challenging word in the business context, isn't it, because that suggests a degree of vulnerability that perhaps people in the work place are not prepared to share. How do people understand what's appropriate emotion and inappropriate emotion?

Gabrielle Dolan: There's a real push to authentic leadership and authentic leadership is about showing vulnerability and bringing your whole self to work so sharing stories about your kids or sharing stories about the struggle you have as a kid really taps into that authentic leadership and showing vulnerability. Vulnerability isn't about letting it all hang out and talking about your deepest, darkest fears and secrets and fantasies, and it's also not about sharing something that is so raw and so emotional that when you share it, you break down and

can't carry on. We don't want to get to that either, but that is we are a long way from that.

David Pembroke: Why is that so important in building teams and building high performing teams?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, yeah. Look, I think the days of the leader because they're the most senior person has to be bulletproof and have all the answers is long gone. I talk about I think Gen Y is forcing us to lead differently and it's not just Gen Y, but we know people respond to vulnerability really well. It humanises leaders and the more senior leaders get, the more they need to do this.

I was actually running a workshop last week and someone said, "What's this real push to showing vulnerability?" and she's noticed a difference and I said, "Have you started to do it?" She goes, "Yeah, I've started to show vulnerability and even use a little bit of self-deprecating humour because every time I show vulnerability, afterwards people come up and say, 'I really related to that,' and it was like ... " She goes, "I keep doing it." I go, "And that's the power of it." People are realising, leaders are realising that people respond and connect and relate to leaders showing a more vulnerable side and not sitting up there expecting them to have all the answers.

David Pembroke: From your experience, where would you say that we sit on the maturity scale in terms of a general comment about leadership and embracing this notion of authenticity, vulnerability, storytelling to create connection? Where are we on that scale?

Gabrielle Dolan: Look, it really depends by culture and what I mean by culture is in the company as well as in the country. I think Australian, New Zealand audiences are leaders that are well advanced on the authentic leadership space and I think again, because the people they're leading are responding well to it. I find in some organisations, I've had inquiry just the other week from a department, an organisation department, the military and they want to bring it in, but again, it's such a hierarchy that I'm not sure if it will work or not, but they're convinced it will, but it's a hierarchy of people just being told what to do and perhaps vulnerability there is seen more of a weakness than it is in other companies, and even I'm finding I'm doing a lot more work in Asia and it's the perhaps the more hierarchical cultures that find it a little bit more difficult. I think because Australia and New Zealand are not that hierarchical that people step into it better.

David Pembroke: Do you have to be vulnerable in your storytelling?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, I believe the really good storytellers are prepared to show vulnerability. Again, there's all levels of vulnerability. Just admitting that you were scared is showing vulnerability. Admitting that you made a mistake is showing vulnerability. Again, the whole concept of vulnerability, we think of being the worst part of that, but it's actually, I'm a massive fan of Brene Brown and she talks about vulnerability as our greatest sign of courage and strength to be able to show it.

David Pembroke: Yeah, that's that fantastic YouTube video, isn't it?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, absolutely. It's in I think one of the top 10 most YouTubed or TED Talks, top 10 TED Talks.

David Pembroke: Yeah, TED Talk, yeah.

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah, and it is getting people away from the fact that not seeing vulnerability as a weakness, but seeing it as a strength.

David Pembroke: Now in a couple of your earlier answers, you made the point about the importance of a strong ending. Why is that so important?

Gabrielle Dolan: You also don't want to be telling people the moral of the story. Storytelling's quite a respectful way to communicate and you should allow the audience to get the message. If you've done the ending right, 9 times out of 10, they will get the message. The biggest mistake leaders make is because they're used to telling people what the message is and they're used to reiterating the message several times and so, they end their story by telling people what they should take from the story and reiterating the point over and over again and then you've just lost them.

David Pembroke: How do you ensure that your ending has impact? What has to be there to make sure that it lands?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah. Look, there's a couple of things. It's got to be quite inviting. Instead of saying, "The moral of the story is," it's inviting them into the ending so things like, "Imagine what we could achieve if" or "Just think, wouldn't it be good if" or even "I invite you to consider." Not telling them what to do, but inviting them to think this way or accept this way or feel this way. It should always be inclusive so always using the word, "we" instead of you so "Imagine what we could achieve." Again, like I said before, just respectful, not telling them over and over again what you want the message to be, but allowing them to get the message.

David Pembroke: Gabrielle Dolan, just in summary then, what are your top tips then that would help them to improve their storytelling and to make that their leadership within their groups more impactful by becoming a better storyteller?

Gabrielle Dolan: Yeah. Cool. Look, I think to recap some of the things we talked about, be really clear on your message. One message, one story. Be absolutely authentic. We didn't talk about this, but do not make up stories or use other people's stories and use them as their own. Your stories have to absolutely be authentically true. Tap into your day-to-day stories as opposed to some of your bigger life events, again, still can be powerful, but the day-to-day ones can be really powerful and you've got so much more of them. Be succinct so 1 or 2 minutes. Again, in business, it doesn't matter how interesting you think your story is, if you're going 3, 4, 5, 6 minutes, people will be thinking and sometimes saying, "Get to the point." I guess finally, just have a variety of stories. Just keep thinking, "Could I use a story for this?" and keep thinking of new stories and coming up with a variety of them that you can start to use.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. Gabrielle, thank you so much for spending a bit of time with us today and on behalf of the audience, can I thank you for that masterclass in storytelling because I think the more people understand the power of story in the way that they communicate, the more effective that they'll be in their jobs and certainly in government communication, we need to become better in our communication to underpin a strengthening of our communities and to improve the wellbeing of citizens. I think it's a skill that needs to be learned and I think that's another point I'd take away from the discussion is that it's really a skill. You're not born as a great storyteller.

Gabrielle Dolan: No, no.

David Pembroke: It's something that you can learn.

Gabrielle Dolan: Absolutely. A lot of people go, "Some people are natural storytellers." They're not. It's a skill they've invested in. Some are naturally better than others, but it's an absolute skill that we can all learn and get better at.

David Pembroke: Excellent. Thank you very much for joining me once again. To you, the audience, thank you very much for dropping by for a short part of your week this week. Fantastic conversation there I think with Gabrielle and really so many valuable insights that you'll be able to take away and build in. Why don't you take just a bit of time this week to practice? Next time you're

going into a meeting, find a story, make the point that you want to make and see how you do with that and then, try it again and again and again, because as Gabrielle has just pointed out, it is a practiced skill. Thank you. It's bye for now.

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