



**Freedman Consulting, Inc.**

— CHANGE . . . RESULTS . . . SUCCESS —

## IMPROVE FIRM CULTURE WITH STORYTELLING

Ellen Freedman, CLM  
@2025 Freedman Consulting, Inc.

---

People have been telling stories since they discovered how to communicate. Stories enable us to share experiences and values, to educate one another, to entertain and to inspire. Stories help us understand the world around us, and our place in it. Stories have the power to impact our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Much research has been done on the power of storytelling. For example, we know that hearing or reading stories about people overcoming adversity can boost people's resilience and ability to self-care. Stories about unusual friendships forged between unlikely pairs, enable listeners/readers to better understand and empathize with others who are different from them. An interesting study of children who were read stories about environmental issues found they were more likely to care about the environment and take action to protect it.

No doubt about it, stories have a profound impact on our lives. Most people have their first experience with storytelling from hearing bedtime stories as a child. With proper selection, a meaningful lesson could be instilled from each story, resulting in the child becoming a better person.

For all but the few people reading this article who are older than me — predating TV— storytelling through television has been a part of our lives. Pictures combined with the story made a greater impression than words alone. Our moral compass was formed watching TV shows like *Lassie*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Adventures of Superman*, *Wagon Train*, *the Lone Ranger* and more.

I first wrote about storytelling in “Make It Personal: How to Build Your Network” (*The Pennsylvania Lawyer*, March/April 2009). In this article about marketing techniques, I relayed my story about teaching a young lawyer how to develop and use vignettes — short stories told in such a way as to sound unrehearsed and conversational — to communicate his expertise with prospects in a social setting.

## IMPROVE FIRM CULTURE WITH STORYTELLING

Page 2 of 3

I next wrote about storytelling in “Get the Job Offer” (*Pennsylvania Bar News*, Feb. 19 2018). I mentioned preparing for job interviews by carefully creating several vignettes in order to be prepared to answer some of the most common interview questions, like “your biggest mistake and what you learned”; “how you handled a time you had to implement something you disagreed with”; or “provide an example of a time you went beyond your job duties and what you accomplished.”

I most recently wrote about storytelling in “How to Tell a Good Story” (*Pennsylvania Bar News*, Jan.16 2023). It discussed how the use of vignettes could be used by attorneys to illustrate expertise in a relatable and memorable manner to prospects. I noted vignettes were also effective to communicate different skill sets to current clients. I described the vignette as a valuable marketing tool; enabling the teller to blow one’s own horn without seeming to do so. I then provided some guidance on how to create your own vignettes.

Regrettably, I did not mention storytelling at all in “Creating a Culture of Respect,” (*Pennsylvania Bar News*, May 1 2017). Nor did I mention storytelling in “Culture Drives the Firm,” (*Pennsylvania Bar News*, Dec. 18 2023). The first “Culture” article got little reaction, but the second got quite a strong reaction from members. Mostly from those who have survived toxic cultures. But also from members wanting to discuss how to improve their own firm culture.

Personally, it is a very important topic. Back in the day when I managed law firms, my colleagues used to joke that I wouldn’t have enough work to challenge me at a “nice” firm. Not that all were toxic. There were a couple relatively nice ones. But most of my years of law firm experience, plus almost all of the years in corporate environments before I joined my first law firm, left me with a strong desire to have a positive impact on culture whenever the ability arose.

Now in my defense, I will point out that many of my articles are grossly over the word limit, and I usually have to cut them many times before submission. So going outside the obvious connection between storytelling and positive culture only formed true clarity in my mind during a recent hotline call.

It’s said of film-making that some of the greatest moments wind up on the cutting room floor, never to be seen or heard. That happens with my articles as well. When I have too much to say about a topic, often much winds up cut and forgotten, rather than getting included in a subsequent article on the same topic. So when I had the epiphany during that recent hotline call, I decided I had to write another article.

Storytelling is a powerful tool for businesses to use to achieve a variety of business goals. I’ve written extensively about most of the outward-facing goals.

Freedman Consulting, Inc.  
(215) 628-9422

## IMPROVE FIRM CULTURE WITH STORYTELLING

Page 3 of 3

However, I've failed to write about — until now — the most important internal goal: creating / impacting firm culture.

Yes, the use of storytelling should be repeatedly used to educate employees about:

- Firm history
- Firm values
- Firm leadership
- Firm goals and visions
- Teamwork
- Expectations

In short, all the essential components that combine to create a firm culture can be related through storytelling. Now, I'm not suggesting that this be the only method of communicating firm culture. But I am a strong believer in having as many tools as possible in one's toolbox, and using as many as possible as opportunity provides, or as one can create opportunity.

The good news? This is a learned skill. If you have long-tenured people at your firm, they are ideal candidates for storytelling. You just want to make sure they are telling stories that send the right messages. If not, it's up to firm leadership to create and tell the right stories. Is there training for that? You betcha!

There are books, workshops, and videos on storytelling training for leaders. Use your Bing or Google to find them. Look for the ones which include positively impacting culture as a program goal. Adding the ability to create and communicate a good story to your toolbox will serve you well in your professional and personal life.

As a reminder, PBA members are encouraged to reach out to me to discuss this or any other business-related topic further. For a copy of any article mentioned, send an email request to [lawpractice@pabar.org](mailto:lawpractice@pabar.org); be sure to include your PBA member ID and county.

*A version of this article originally appeared in the January 20, 2025 issue of Pennsylvania Bar News.*

© 2025 Freedman Consulting, Inc. The contents of this article are protected by U.S. copyright. Visitors may print and download one copy of this article solely for personal and noncommercial use, provided that all hard copies contain all copyright and other applicable notices contained in the article. You may not modify, distribute, copy, broadcast, transmit, publish, transfer, or otherwise use any article or material obtained from this site in any other manner except with written permission of the author. The article is for informational use only and does not constitute legal advice or endorsement of any particular product or vendor.

Freedman Consulting, Inc.  
(215) 628-9422