

**The Power of Stories:**  
Using Narrative Structures  
to Teach Behavioral-Based  
Interviewing and  
Professional Behavior

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## Introduction

Over the last few years, a few apparently disparate threads in my career became intertwined. In the late 1980s and early 1990s—well before I became a member of the cooperative education faculty at Northeastern University in March 1995—I was a management consultant for a Boston firm that specialized in creating training and development models for Fortune 500 clients. Typically, the firm would conduct “critical incident interviews” with top performers, asking these organizational superstars to reflect quite specifically on the best and/or most challenging experiences. My role was to assist in analyzing the mounds of interview transcripts in an attempt to discern themes amidst the sea of stories. Ultimately we would work together to devise a model of behavioral competencies—the traits that differentiated the top performers from the pack in that organization.

Simultaneously, I was enrolled in fiction-writing workshops at the Harvard Extension School, learning the fundamentals of creating short stories by writing my own and critiquing those of my classmates. This led to becoming a member of a fiction-writing group, but it also changed me as a reader. Although I had always been a voracious reader, these experiences enabled me to take apart stories to see what made them tick.

Although it remains to be seen whether I’ll be able to resume anything more than nominal effort in consulting or creative writing some day, I serendipitously find myself drawing upon those experiences in my role on the co-op faculty. I have come to believe that stories and the underlying principles of narratives in general can be an extremely valuable tool in teaching aspiring professionals how to interview as well as in modeling appropriate professional behaviors in the workplace. This article describes the details of these discoveries in the hopes that other professionals may be able to use similar techniques with their own students.

## Basics of Contemporary Fiction-Writing Techniques

In order to understand how narrative structures, it may be useful to review some fundamentals of fiction writing as it taught to aspiring writers today. In fact, I routinely review these principles as a way of framing my instruction of behavioral-based interviewing, which has emerged as the hands-down most popular topic of my Professional Development for Co-op class.

### 1. *Today’s stories typically begin “in medias res.”*

“In medias res” is a Latin term meaning “in the middle of things.” This term actually goes back to roughly the year 30 BC, when the leading Roman poet Horace alludes to the fact that stories don’t necessarily have to begin *ab ovo* (from the beginning or, literally, “from the egg”). In writing about Homer’s *Iliad*, Horace praised the poem by writing the following:

Nor does he begin the Trojan War from the double egg,  
but always he hurries to the action, and snatches the listener into the middle of things ...

So writing stories *in medias res* is hardly a new concept. However, it's an approach that went out of fashion in 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction, which often starts with the birth and early life of the main character—and sometimes it begins even earlier than that! Consider that Anna Karenina doesn't appear in the novel that bears her name until chapter 18. In Moby-Dick, the whale itself doesn't surface until chapter xx of a xxx-page novel!

Today's readers and moviegoers—or interviewers, for that matter—are not as patient as the comparatively undistracted 19<sup>th</sup>-century reader. Therefore, storytellers need to begin the forward motion of their tales at or near a time in the characters' lives that will be of heightened interest to the person hearing the story.

2. *Stories need to present a conflict or problem facing the protagonist... and do so quickly.*

This strongly relates to the first principle. Whether you're reading *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* by Italo Calvino—a playful but cerebral literary novel, basically postmodern metafiction in that it's a work of fiction that constantly reminds the reader that it's fiction—or a big-budget Hollywood film such as *Spider-Man 3*, contemporary stories usually waste little time in putting a conflict on the table. In the Calvino novel, “you” are the main character, and you're reading the book, which includes reminders to tell your family to turn down the television. But then the “you” in the story quickly finds that the book has been misprinted and needs to be returned to the store. At the bookstore, your book is replaced with apologies... but when you get home and start to read again, you find that you're now reading a different book altogether!

Thus we see the usual pattern: The author introduces a conflict and then deepens it. It may be anything from a comical inconvenience to a life-threatening emergency. Either way, we are engaged and want to know what will happen next.

3. *The story's conflict generally intensifies and ultimately reaches some sort of resolution.*

The best stories move on from the initial conflict and then intensify, reaching a crescendo of sorts before reaching some sort of resolution. In a Jane Austen or Anthony Trollope novel, it often may be a matter of who marries who in the end after a series of obstacles is overcome. In a grade B horror or sci-fi film, there will be resolution as to whether the murderer is caught or killed or whether the aliens are prevented from taking over the planet.

Regardless, most readers, moviegoers, or behavioral-based interviewers will be disappointed if there is not some sort of resolution to the conflict. It may not be tied up so neatly that we know precisely what happens after “THE END”—stories often end *in medias res* just as they begin that way—but there needs to be some sense that the primary conflict that engaged us led to an outcome, whether positive or negative.

4. *Idiosyncratic details make stories come alive.*

Curiously, “God is in the details” and “the devil is in the details” are both common expressions. Whatever force may be in them, we must acknowledge how details are

critically important in making stories jump to life. Too often, storytellers stick to the realm of superficial details instead of drilling deeply into the quirky elements that make stories believable. In one otherwise mediocre short story I once wrote, I mentioned a character who had a saffron-colored toothbrush that reminded her of the robes worn by Hare Krishnas in airports. It was the shining moment of believability in an otherwise lacking story.

In John Gardner's classic book *On Becoming A Novelist*, he says the following:

There can be no great art, according to the poet Coleridge, without a certain strangeness. Most readers will recognise at once that he's right. There come moments in every great novel when we are startled by some development that is at once perfectly fitting and completely unexpected... Strangeness is the one quality in fiction which cannot be faked..

We tend to disbelieve stories when a detail fails to ring true, just as an idiosyncratic detail makes all the difference in having us trust the storyteller. Gardner says that strangeness cannot be faked in fiction, but it's extremely difficult to fake it in true stories—including in job interviews. Later we'll consider how to incorporate these quirky details for full effect.

### **Examples of these principles in contemporary books and films**

Reflecting on a few random books and films I've read and seen in recent months, we see how universal these principles are. A few months ago, I read *What Is The What* by David Eggers, a novel based heavily on the author's extensive interviews with Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng, one of the Lost Boys.

Rather than laboriously telling Valentino's story in linear fashion—starting with his early carefree years in a Sudanese village—the novel begins *in medias res*. Naively, Valentino is duped by a woman who insists she needs to use the phone in his Atlanta apartment. In short order, a man with a gun follows her in, and Valentino is held captive while they pillage his apartment. Lying on the floor, he reflects back on the life that led him to this tenuous moment as an American immigrant.

This frames the action that follows, which is basically a series of life-threatening dilemmas brought to life with countless idiosyncratic details of treks through the desert, life in the refugee camps, and generally many hardships interspersed with enough small joys to make it all believable.

These principles hold up just as well in non-fiction. In *The Places In Between*, Scotsman Rory Stewart recounts his remarkable attempt to walk across Afghanistan—just months after 9/11. It starts at the beginning of the trip, where the conflict is firmly established: Stewart is told quite emphatically that he will be killed if he makes this trip. We then follow his step-by-step journey through a rich variety of terrains and scenarios, wondering what will happen in many dangerous situations.

The fundamentals of great storytelling aren't limited to serious subject matter or to books. *Fever Pitch* is a very enjoyable movie comedy about a diehard baseball fan whose conflict revolves around whether the love of a good woman can coexist with his long-term mistress—a fanatical interest in the fortunes of the Boston Red Sox. The relationship gets off to a good start in the off-season, but the looming pennant race presents him with comical existential dilemmas. When his beautiful girlfriend is treating him to a romantic getaway to Paris, can he forego some important home games in the name of love?

Even a documentary film with no scripted plot twists and not much action tends to follow this kind of dramatic structure. Months ago I saw *The Story of The Weeping Camel*, a Mongolian film that probably has no more than a thousands words of dialogue in the whole movie. But however simple the story is, it has all it needs. The conflict occurs when a family's camel gives birth to an albino camel and then refuses to let it nurse. The family must try any number of possible solutions, and we are ultimately stunned with a surprisingly emotional resolution.

I find it helpful to review examples like these when helping students understand how to formulate their own stories—whether for interviewing or in reflecting on their experiences.

### **Consulting and the “Critical Incident Interview”**

I won't attempt to give a definitive history of behavioral-based interviewing (BBI) in this article. I will cover some brief highlights of how it has evolved over the last 85 years.

The earliest roots I've seen hearken back to 1922, when an US Army study showed extreme problems with interviewer reliability and validity in unstructured interviews. Over the subsequent decades, researchers gradually began devoting more attention to the subject. In the 1960s, a new level of sophistication was attained. Maas (1965) had interviewers list the traits of successful performers and then asked interviewers to write behavioral examples differentiating between high, medium, and low performance in those areas.

The situational interview was developed by Latham, Saari, Pursell, and Campion (1980), and we still come across examples of it today whenever we hear of interviewers posing scenarios to which the interviewees must detail how they would handle the situation. The focus here is on “how *would* you perform” in a specific circumstance.

As the 1980s progressed, a transition occurred in interviewing research. When it came to questioning job applicants, researchers found that they got good results from shifting the focus from “what would you do *if*” to “what *did* you do *when*” in interview studies. Janz et al. (1982) began showing the superiority of reliability and validity in what they called Patterned Behavioral Description Interviews. Then Orpen (1985) conducted more comprehensive studies that showed that if anything Janz underestimated the extent of this superiority.

In this same decade, Hay McBer and then Charles River Consulting (eventually renamed Cambria Consulting) began using critical incident interviews—not for making hiring decisions but for HR training and development purposes. When I was hired by Cambria to as a freelance consultant, I had little idea of this history of the movement. But I was soon fascinated by how compelling it was to mine these interviews for valuable information.

The typical pattern was to interview numerous individuals from a client company. About half had been identified as outstanding performers, while the other half was average. Neither the interviewers nor those analyzing the transcripts initially knew whether they were looking at information from a top performer or a more typical one. We simply tried to determine what themes were emerging. Eventually we would compare the two groups to figure out what differentiated the best from the rest, thematically. This would set the stage for future training, development, and hiring practices for that organization.

Sometimes the results were counterintuitive. Themes such as cross-functional awareness, out-of-the-box thinking, big-picture thinking, customer-service focus, and drive for results often emerged, but some of these qualities were not always as highly correlated with the top performers as you might expect, depending on the organization. This makes sense if you think about it. Someone who is a superstar at a more structured company like GE might have traits that would be less likely to lead to success at some place like Yahoo or Google. Inevitably, we learned a great deal about what it took to be successful in a specific organization.

In one project for a Fortune 500 client, I had the pleasure of using my fiction-writing skills to write up a few dozen of the best transcribed stories as dramatized narratives, complete with conflicts and idiosyncratic details. Much to my surprise as low man on the totem pole with the organization, one of the senior consultants pointed to my collection of stories as the most exciting piece of the whole set of deliverables for the client. Clearly the stories brought the model to life and made it concrete.

### **The Rise of Behavioral-Based Interviewing**

Meanwhile, industry experts were starting to figure out that a comparable focus on critical incidents could yield substantial payoffs in the hiring process. Think of how much money it costs to advertise positions and conduct interviews for them, let alone how much a typical professional employee earns. Then think about the financial and psychological costs of hiring the *wrong* employee—whether someone who is mediocre or particularly if the person is a mismatch and ultimately must be terminated. Clearly, anything that could reduce the risks of making the wrong hiring decisions would have major dividends for employers.

Behavioral-based interviewing has proven to be the best bet to date. A recent meta-analytic study by Behavior Description Technologies compared numerous hiring methods. Using correlation coefficients—with which a 1.0 would be a perfect correlation, -1.0 would be a perfect *negative correlation*, and 0.0 would indicate no

relationship whatsoever between the two variables, here's what they found when it came to the correlation between various methods and ultimate job success:

- Education level: .10 rating (1.0 highest)
  - Resume rating: .16 rating
  - One-on-one unstructured interview: .19
  - Reference checks: .24
  - Mental ability tests: .26 - .69
  - Work sample tests: .55
  - Behavior Description Interviewing: .70 - .80\*
- \* Depending on precision of interviewer analysis/training

With this data becoming more available to employers, we started seeing the first behavioral-based interviews around 1996 or 1997. The big accounting firms were among the first to adopt this style along with some Fortune 500 companies. Interviewers should be training manuals with names like "More Than A Gut Feeling." There was a definite movement afoot, but it was unclear whether it would be a passing fad.

### **Integrating BBI Into Student Preparation Activities**

Initially our students were frustrated by the BBI approach. A small percentage were naturals, but most were either puzzled or irritated by questions such as the following:

- Tell me what is your greatest specific accomplishment in life thus far.
- Tell me about a time that you had to overcome adversity in a job, school, or life situation.
- Describe a specific situation in which you needed to take an unpopular stand.
- Walk through a time when you had to deal with a problem when working in a group or team.

I often have a check-in period at the beginning of my Professional Development for Co-op class. One time, a young woman looking for her first co-op job checked in by saying "I just had the *stupidest* interview yesterday!" I told her that this was entirely possible, given that many interviewers are untrained and therefore don't know what to do. Some interviewers spend the whole time talking and don't really ask any questions at all! But when I asked her to describe the interview, my guess was proved wrong. "That wasn't a stupid interview," I told her. "That was a behavioral-based interview."

When I dug deeper into her irritation about the experience, I learned something important. "They asked me to tell them about a time that I had to overcome adversity while working a team," she said. "I'm 19 years old, and I've never had serious job. I've never really needed to deal with adversity at all!"

This showed me a major part of the problem in training students for behavioral-based interviews. Many students and young adults are at a loss when it comes to behavioral-based interviews, and for good reason:

1. *Students lack self-awareness about their own achievements, or they negate or minimize them.*

There is a common belief among students that their experiences or accomplishments somehow don't "count" unless they occur in a professional context. This is really a problem of staggering dimensions. I have had students who built their own computer network in their dorm or created a sophisticated website... and yet failed to think of putting it on their resume, as it was "just something they did." Then there is the student who has only worked in retail or in menial jobs. They believe that no one is going to want to hear about their waitressing or landscaping job, and they don't even begin to tap into those experiences without being directed to do so.

2. *Not many people—students or otherwise—are natural storytellers.*

In my experience, relatively few people can start telling an effective BBI story about themselves off the top of their heads. Most of us have quite a few options we could use, but it's difficult to decide which one will work best in the heat of the moment. Without some preparation and rehearsal, it's difficult to reel off several great stories with all of the elements that will strike the right chord with the interviewer.

3. *Figuring out the parameters of a good story takes practice.*

How much background will the interviewer need to understand the specific situation at hand? How short can the story be while still conveying the right level of detail? How long can the story be without becoming tedious? Which details are "need to know" versus "nice to know" or completely unnecessary? All of these elements are more art than science, and someone who is inexperienced in the professional world—let alone with interviewing—needs time to develop a comfort level with them.

All of that said, I became convinced that it was absolutely worthwhile to teach students the relatively advanced skill of becoming a great behavioral-based interviewee. One amazing experience that showed me the power of stories came when conducting a practice interview many years ago, when BBI was still new to me. The student's name was Ramona. I had almost finished her practice interview, and it was definitely a mediocre one. She struck me as the kind of person who thought the idea was to show up for the interview, answer off the top of your head as best as you can, and as long as you say *something* for every question you're doing okay.

I always want to have something really positive I can say during a practice interview critique, and I didn't have much to go on with Ramona up to that point. So I decided to throw one of the BBI questions at her that I had heard from one of the accounting firms: "What would you say is the greatest accomplishment of our life so far?"

I'll never forget the moment. She paused, mulled it over for several seconds, and came out with this: "When I was very young, I had to deal with a few sudden deaths in my

immediate family,” she said. “As you might imagine, it was traumatic for me. And as a result, I grew up very scared about death and emergencies in general...

“But when I got to high school, I just grew really tired of being this fearful person. So I decided to do something about it. First I got CPR training, and then I got more training in emergency medicine. Then I joined a volunteer rescue squad in my home town, and for the next year and a half I dealt with emergencies all the time... And now, if something were to happen to a loved one or friend, I wouldn’t be powerless. I could do something about it.”

No matter how many times I tell that story, it always churns up emotions. Hearing that story changed my whole relationship with Ramona. Obviously, I encouraged her to move that story to the front of the interview, as it said so much about her character. But it also made me feel like I really knew something about her as a human being—something I would never have known had I not thrown the question at her on a whim.

So between what BBI was doing for me in terms of building relationships with my students—not to mention how much more frequently we heard of employers using this interviewing style—I began thinking more seriously about integrating BBI into my practice interviews and in the teaching of my class.

### **Teaching BBI**

Now that I was sold on the value of behavioral-based interviewing, the question of how we could prepare students came to the forefront. In fact, the first question was really *if* we could prepare students for a BBI. The employers who used it always espoused the fact that it was an effective method precisely because it was so much harder to tell employers what they wanted to hear. Barring an unusually effective pathological liar, the candidate was limited to what he or she actually had done. Employers implied that there was no way a candidate could prepare to tell about that.

Doing some research about BBI preparation, I readily came across the handy acronym called STAR, standing for Situation, Tasks, Actions, Results. For a time, I advised students to use it. To some degree, this helped them focus on a specific situation, and it reminded them to get to the outcome, or results. But I always found it to be a bit too abstract. Students struggle to differentiate between Tasks and Actions, for example, and I also found that you could touch on the four elements without ending up with a story that was truly compelling.

Around the same time, I felt that I had bottomed out in my teaching of the Professional Development for Co-op course. It was feeling like a forced march. There was a sense that the class didn’t really challenge our millennial-era students, who had very high expectations. I didn’t like the class atmosphere, and I knew major changes needed to happen.

I revamped my approach to the class for the Fall 2004 semester, wedding a few of these different trends in the process. Giving a survey the first day that confirmed the millennial

values. Over 90 percent of the class “strongly agreed” with the statement “I expect to accomplish great things in my career and in my life.” This gave me a card to play all semester. I pushed them very hard with tougher assignments and in-class exercises. When they balked, I reminded them about their own high expectations and reiterated that great accomplishments are not magic. Great success requires hard work, and it starts with this class.

The two new exercises that proved to be pivotal both revolved around teaching the students how to write stories. The first was something plainly called “Bridging Exercise.” After learning the fundamentals of interviewing strategy through my *Find Your First Professional Job* textbook and classroom lecture, students had to target a specific job description in this exercise. The idea was to answer the open-ended interview opener “tell me about yourself” with a sharp, specific, strategic answer citing skills that they employer sought in a job candidate. Then they had to back up this answer with two BBI stories that would *prove* that they actually had two of the qualities that they claimed to have in the tell me about yourself response.

In grading the bridging exercises, I give the students specific feedback including scores on a five-point scale on the initial answer as well as on each of the two BBI stories. After they get that feedback to know whether they’re hitting the target, they then tackle a BBI assignment. This one works the opposite way around: Instead of trying to think of stories that will display a specific skill or trait, I tell them to just focus on writing three specific stories that will show them making great accomplishments or contending with major challenges. Then, after they write each story, they have to identify at least three different soft skills that the story could be used to illustrate in an interview.

The idea is that a vivid and compelling BBI story inevitably showcases multiple traits—customer-service skills, ability to work in a team, and initiative, for example. Given that no one can predict exactly what questions will be asked over the course of several interviews in a job search, this exercise gets them thinking about how they might be able to plug their great stories into answering a variety of questions.

The upshot is that they come out of the class with five BBI stories that they are ready to use in interviews. Obviously, this builds great confidence when dealing with a behavioral-based interview, but a nice bonus is that students often report that they are able to integrate one or two stories into most conventional interviews as well. After all, it’s one thing to claim that you have great interpersonal skills or an excellent work ethic: A great BBI story helps you *prove* it.

### **Keys To Teaching BBI**

By now I have taught BBI to over 200 students in six semesters worth of classes. As a result, my students have taught me a great deal each time that I correct a batch of assignments. As a result, I now have a series of principles that I use when lecturing about BBI or correcting assignments:

1. *Think story, not example.*

If you ask a student to give you an *example* of a time when they displayed the ability to work under pressure, you're increasing the chances of getting something very general as opposed to something that is really starting *in medias res* as a good story should.

2. *To come up with the best stories, think about CONFLICTS, PROBLEMS, and CHALLENGES.*

What was the toughest and/or best day you ever had at work? What customer challenged you the most? What was the biggest moment of truth you faced in a classroom or some other activity? What was the biggest hurdle you overcame? Prodding students with questions like these helps generate stories.

3. *A story starts at a specific moment in time.*

Sometimes you might need a few sentences to set the stage, but you want to make sure students strive to drill down into a specific moment in time. I always tell students that a great sign in a BBI story is a phrase such as "I remember one afternoon when..." or "One day a customer came in and said..." This emphasizes that we're avoiding the trap of limiting things to a general overview of a situation.

4. *Stories don't have to be work experience.*

As noted earlier, students often believe that professional work experience is the only that really counts. In addition to milking stories of retail jobs and menial duties, though, remind students to delve into many other life experiences. Classroom stories can be powerful, as can stories about playing sports, doing volunteer work, overcoming a personal weakness, or mastering a new skill. Some of the best BBI stories I've ever heard involve community service or sports, and students love writing them once they realize that these are not only okay but potentially great sources.

5. *Remember the ABC rule.*

In this case, ABC stands for affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Sometimes students tend to describe a sequence of events in a detached, matter-of-fact manner. The result is that we sometimes have stories that tell us very little about the storyteller. When critiquing a BBI story, ask yourself if it has those three elements. The affective component refers to the emotional piece. A good BBI interviewer will pull this out of the interviewee if necessary by asking probing questions during the story: "So what were you *feeling* when your team initially failed to hit the deadline for the first draft of the report?" But it's better if you provide the emotions without waiting for an engraved invitation—which may never come.

The behavioral element refers to actions. "Okay, so when you first learned that you were going to be the only waitress handling nine tables that night, what did you *do* first? Then what?" Make sure the interviewee is telling you their actions, as they will tell you a good deal about their style.

The cognitive component refers to thoughts. Sometimes the BBI interviewer will pull those thoughts out with another probing question: "So what was going through your mind

when you first realized that you had made that mistake?” Candidates can make themselves come alive by being sure to inject their thought process as well as their emotions. We see much more of their problem-solving style if they can give us a window to their internal worlds.

6. *Bring the story all the way to the conclusion.*

Sometimes I'll see a great customer service story, and it just ends when the interviewee resolves the problem. But if I'm a good interviewer and ask one more question—"So did you hear anything more about it afterwards?"—not infrequently I'll learn that the individual received a special commendation or award or letter of appreciation. Make sure that the interviewee doesn't end the story until we really see the impact of their actions. We want to see resolution to that conflict!

### **Common Problems with BBI Stories**

Just as good BBI stories share the aforementioned characteristics, there are also quite a few common pitfalls that you will need to correct when teaching BBI.

1. *Watch out for words like "always," "usually," and "sometimes."* Many interviewees have trouble getting beyond a general overview of a situation, and these words should tip you off about that problem. The BBI interviewer is not interested in what you usually or sometimes do; he or she wants to find out a specific moment in time. Sometimes a good BBI answer can start with an overview that is a little general, but make sure the interviewee puts the emphasis on one specific day, week, customer, challenge, etc.

2. *There may be no "I" in "team"... but the letter "I" appears four times in "behavioral-based interviewing."* As the cliché goes, there is no "I" in team. Therefore, team members—whether in sports, jobs, or classrooms—often have a tendency to downplay their individual contributions in a specific team situation. You may hear the word "we" quite a bit in answer to a BBI question about facing challenges in a team situation. This creates problems for the interviewer, as there is no way of knowing which responsibilities or actions were handled by the interviewee. So make sure that the word "I" comes up frequently in all BBI answers—including those involving roles in a team. The interviewee doesn't have to be the leader or star performer of the team, but we do need to see how they contributed to the team effort.

3. *Beware of the "who cares" story.* Even if the interviewee picks a specific situation and describes it thoroughly, there is no guarantee that the result will be a compelling story. For example, one student used the following as a story in answer to a BBI question about working as a team: "We had to do a group project in my marketing class, and we ended up procrastinating when it came to getting the project together. So we finally met three days before the project was due. The energy level in the room was really low. No one was that motivated to do the project, but I said to the team, 'Look guys, I'm not excited about it either, but we really need to get this done.' So we got going on it and ended up getting a B on the project."

This isn't exactly an inspiring story, although it does have some specifics. Hearing a story like this, I have to wonder if this is really the *best* team story that the candidate has got. If it really is, our impression is that this is not the greatest candidate. More likely, though, the interviewee just didn't rack his brain enough *before* the interview to determine what the *best* story could be. Unless you're really good at BBI, the first story to come off the top of your head might not be the one that will get you the job. Thinking through and writing out stories in advance helps considerably with this problem.

### **Student examples of BBI stories**

It might be useful to see a few examples of what a great BBI story looks like. As you read one of my favorites from my most recent Professional Development for Co-op class, remember that the ultimate goal is to be able to write a story **FIRST**, and then to list at least **THREE** soft skills that the story could be used to prove about yourself. So try to think of all the different soft skills or qualities that Rebecca could use this story to prove during an interview:

“At my high school they take their yearbook very seriously. The book is over 400 pages long, has an annual budget of over \$200,000, and has won numerous national awards. There is typically an editorial staff of 2 editors-in-chief and 8 section editors, along with a staff of 30. My senior year our advisor asked if I would be willing to take on the position of editor in chief by myself as she did not feel anyone else was qualified for the job. I agreed and spent the summer before preparing the layout of the book, setting up our office and buying new equipment.

“Our first deadline of around 80 pages was due in mid-October. I decided to tell the staff the deadline was at the end of September so we would have adequate editing time. The due date I set came and I went to collect layouts from my staff and found that only half had completed their layouts and even those were only mediocre. I went home that night feeling that I had already failed. I had nothing to work with and yet in a few weeks I was responsible for turning in 80 pages. No one had listened to the revisions I had made and I felt powerless.

“I decided that I couldn't give up; I was going to get this book done and done right because I had been given the responsibility to do so. I stayed up almost the whole night and wrote a two-page speech to deliver to my staff the next morning. I knew I had to be careful to balance coming off as angry to get my point across that I was serious, but at the same time I did not want everyone to think that I was on a power trip, especially because a lot of these students were my in my same grade and people I considered friends. On the way to class that day I stopped at the grocery store to buy some doughnuts for the staff as I knew this was a way to show that I really cared about them and that I wanted this to be an enjoyable experience.

“I then sat everyone down and explained to them how I was very disappointed with the results I had seen and that they were unacceptable. I outlined a plan of how I wanted the layouts to get done including showing them new forms that I had created so that each student could review his or her own work before turning it in to me. I stressed the fact

that I believed in the ability of each one of them and that I truly believed we could have a lot of fun and produce a book that we would all be really proud of. I could tell when I was done that everyone seemed much more motivated, they really wanted to work hard as a team and get this done.

“Every deadline after that I almost always received layouts on time and in near perfect form. In addition, our staff really bonded throughout the year and we had a really great time. When the book came out at the end of the year we heard from countless students that of all the years this was their favorite yearbook. I felt so proud of the book and my staff.”

~ Rebecca Harkess

Rebecca’s story is one of the best BBI stories that I’ve seen in a long time. Consider some of the elements: Even when she is giving background/overview to set up the critical moment of the story, we learn some things that are impressive about her. Due to the quantitative and qualitative details, we see that her editorial position was a high-stakes role.

The next great thing about this story is how well it conveys her thoughts, emotions, and actions as she encounters a major obstacle. We really know what it was like to be her in this role, and we have an appreciation for how seriously she took the failure that she faced. She proceeds to walk us through her thought process and actions in addressing the problem and carries it right through to the outcome. Just wonderful.

Better still, the story is one that Rebecca will have up her sleeve in case she needs to prove any number of qualities or soft skills: leadership, responsibility, conflict management, results orientation, interpersonal skills to name just a few!

The next story is from Cheyenne Olinde. Although this story is perhaps not as strong in capturing emotions through the conflict, it is almost a fiendishly clever story for a Supply Chain Management (SCM) major to use in an interview. Cheyenne has never worked in corporate SCM... but this story absolutely will resonate with SCM professionals: After all, it entails meeting a logistical challenge—one that required consideration of manpower, equipment capabilities, delivery time, and so forth. So while the story illustrates many soft skills—see if you can spy them as you read—it is particularly smart in showing that he has an appreciation for what a SCM interviewer may want to know.

“As a combat photographer, I have been fortunate enough to document every aspect the Marine Corps has to offer. I have documented everything from aerial reconnaissance to autopsies. I have been deployed to Cuba, Spain, Seychelles, Malta, Greece, Italy, Puerto Rico, Djibouti Africa, and Wisconsin. The one thing that all my missions had in common was that I was serving a customer. Whether it was a Captain for a routine passport photo, or aerial photographs of a military base’s security weakness for a General, I have always interacted with clients. Many times my customers would want certain photographs that were impractical and I would have to tactfully explain why their request would not work and offer a solution to solve their problem. Other times, I would get a call from an

important client who needs an exceptional amount of work done in a very short window of time.

“When our Marines were preparing to go to Afghanistan, we had to provide them with the tools to help teach their Marines basic Arabic. Their request was for over 1000 instructional Arabic CDs, needed in less than seven days on top of the other 30 jobs we currently had. My shop had neither the manpower nor the equipment to handle the request, and the customer did not have the funds to go elsewhere. I had to make it work.

“The original CDs were provided; we just needed to make the copies. We only had the capability to copy 20 CDs an hour, plus the work could not interfere with our other jobs requested by my other customers.

“I implemented a split schedule of three eight and half hour shifts, operating non-stop. This allowed for the constant copying of CDs, and the continuous work on other current productions. Not only did we meet the goal in less than three days, we made an extra 500 for future operations and completed all the current productions in house.

“I approached my commanding officer and requested time off for the team after the hard work and dedication my Marines showed. I then had them all come over to my house and treated them to a BBQ to thank them. After that, there was nothing my Marines would not do for me, and superiors knew that there was no challenge too large I couldn’t handle.”

~ Cheyenne Olinde

If I remember correctly, Cheyenne used this story to prove that he had good customer-service skills. While it does so, it also could be rolled out to illustrate problem-solving skills, leadership, and time management skills.

As you can see, a great BBI story really brings a job candidate to life. Although Rebecca and Cheyenne were both first-time job seekers, they repeatedly wowed interviewers with stories like these.

### **Impact of teaching BBI**

By now I’ve taught behavioral-based interviewing to four classes. Consistently, this element is rated as the best and most useful aspect of the class. In terms of impact, all of the following are true:

1. *Students are better prepared for job interviews.* After completing the bridging and BBI exercises, students have an arsenal of five stories that are ready to use as well as an understanding of how to produce more stories. Given that a focus group of 22 business co-op employers recently told us that *all* of them now use behavioral interviews, students are very prepared for this interviewing style. One year ago, I had 20 students interview with Microsoft, and 15 of them came away with co-op job offers. I think that the student’s comfort level with BBI was a big part of the reason behind that impressive success rate.

2. *Once students have BBI stories, they find ways to use them in conventional interviews.* After going through the exercises, students are sold on how powerful it can be to use BBI stories to answer more conventional questions about their strengths, qualifications, classroom experiences, and previous job experiences. It's all too easy to claim that one was a great performer: Using BBI stories helps to prove that point.

3. *Teaching BBI helps you understand who your students really are.* When you work with dozens of students at a time, it's hard to develop significant relationships with all of them. Reading through five personal stories about each student will teach you things you otherwise will never know about your students. Whether it's their ability to overcome adversity, their pride in doing a great job on some menial task, or the courage of their convictions, you will come away with some critical information about each student. This obviously will help you do a better job of working with your students and assisting them in finding the best career path.

### **Teaching Professional Behavior with Stories**

At Northeastern, another challenge gradually moved to the forefront of our consciousness around the 2005-06 academic year. Although we always have had some degree of problems with professional behavior in the workplace, it seemed that the problems were becoming more prevalent at that time. The issues ranged dramatically in type and seriousness, including problems with tardiness, abuse of technology, alcohol after work, and so forth.

What frustrated us more than anything was that we believed we had been proactive in dealing with these issues. They are covered in my *Find Your First Professional Job* textbook, and we went over them at great length in the course as well. So why were these issues continuing to arise?

The temptation was to bash the students as millennial generation individuals who believed that they were the center of the universe. However, that perception didn't seem to be helpful. Reflecting on it, it occurred to me that much of the advice we had given to students was *abstract* rather than *concrete*. In other words, we can tell students that they should network professionally in the office or thought that they should go the extra mile in their efforts... but how is a young adult of 19 or 20 with no corporate experience supposed to know how to translate such advice into an action plan?

With this in mind in May 2006, I set out to write a new book that would capitalize on the compelling nature of true stories. If specific stories could help an employer or co-op professional better understand something, why not use stories to *model* appropriate professional behaviors for our students?

Using the aforementioned critical incident interviewing techniques when interviewing students, alums, and colleagues, I compiled dozens of stories for the book—mostly success stories but with a good number of horror stories as well. As I wrote them, I logged them in an Excel spreadsheet that listed all the stories as well as various themes that each seemed to represent. I ended up with over 70 stories... and over 20 themes!

But when I started to analyze the themes systematically, I found that there were many overlapping or repetitive themes. “Assuming the best” was not appreciably different from “staying positive,” for example, nor was “going the extra mile” anything different from “exceeding expectations.”

Ultimately I was able to boil down the themes to seven “keys to professional success:”

1. Own Responsibility
2. Stay Positive
3. Exceed Expectations
4. Do The Right Thing
5. See The Big Picture
6. Control What You Can
7. Build Relationships

Here’s an example of a typical story. This one is from the “Own Responsibility” chapter it’s called “Mistakes Happen.”

### **Mistakes Happen**

Finance co-op student Amanda Roche had just made a disturbing discovery: She had made a pretty major mistake on a cost report that already had been submitted for processing. Even worse, she had seen how her overwhelmed boss had reacted when others had made similar errors.

However, she also had noted how those people had chosen to deal with the situation, and that had given her some insight into understanding her boss. “I had seen him get frustrated at other people,” she recalls. “But people would just wait at their desks, waiting for him to figure it out. And he would blow up: ‘What do you think you’re doing?!’ he’d say, things like that.”

Although she felt really nervous about it—“I thought he was going to yell at me,” she says—Amanda decided to be proactive about it. “I was sure he would blow up, but before he could, I marched into his office,” Amanda says. “I wanted to let you know that I made a mistake on this project,” she told him.

She explained what she had done, why the error had occurred, and what she proposed to do to remedy the situation. “I want to apologize; it won’t happen again,” she added.

Much to her surprise, his attitude immediately softened. “Mistakes happen,” he said. “There are so many reports that we have to send to different countries; it’s surprising this doesn’t happen more often,” he told her.

“He also liked the idea I had about how to fix it,” Amanda says. “We went over the corrected report on the phone with the customer, and I offered to stay late to help make it happen.”

It was great lesson for her. “The fact that I was the first one to bring it up and show how we were going to move forward made a big difference,” she thinks. “He wasn’t able to bite my head off.”

### **Teaching with Exceeding Expectations**

I have only taught two sections using this new book thus far, but I’m pleased with the results. Several students have told me that they read the book on the subway on the way to work. Recently a student had a significant problem with a full-time employee and told me that she hearkened back to a story called “The Difficult Co-Worker” as she figured out how to handle. In that story, a first-time co-op describes how she managed to put herself in the shoes of a full-time administrative assistant. She realized that it might be unpalatable for a woman of 45 to have to take orders from someone who is 20, so she learned how to show respect by soliciting input from the woman. The upshot was that the co-op’s manager noticed that the co-op now had the *best* relationship with that difficult individual of anyone on her team.

So the book seems to give people some concrete strategies that have proven effective in similar situations in the past. In reflecting on the book in essays, students cite specific stories that surprised them or reinforced some notion that they may have had about what differentiates the great performer from the average one.

I wrote various “case clusters” that can be used either in classroom discussion or in reflective writing assignments. The themes for these clusters include quite a few relevant topics: paying your dues, managing expectations, and sexy jobs, to name a few. Some majors need to work on some themes more than others, so this gives the various instructors some flexibility.

I also assign a final paper that asks each student to reflect on their strengths and weakness in terms of the seven keys to professional success and how they will work toward mastering the keys. Additionally, I have students discuss the four stories that had the greatest impact on them. I have been rewarded for that with many thoughtful papers.

### **Final Thoughts on the Power of Stories**

Through these experiences, I have come to believe that narratives are quite underrated as a teaching device. Given the vital role that storytelling plays in world cultures handing down their traditions—whether in Greek myth, native American legend, or most major religions to name just a few examples—it’s unbelievable how much higher education fails to employ stories as a way of engaging learners in subject matter. Consider the following quote from legendary psychologist Jerome Bruner:

“It has been the convention of most schools to treat the arts of narrative—song, drama, fiction, theater, whatever—as more ‘decoration’ than necessity, something with which to grace leisure... Despite that, we frame the accounts of our cultural origins and our most cherished beliefs in story form, and it is not just the ‘content’ of these stories that grip us, but their narrative artifice.

“Our immediate experience, what happened yesterday or the day before, is framed in the same storied way. Even more striking, we represent our lives (to ourselves as well as to others) in the form of narrative. It is not surprising that psychoanalysts now recognize that personhood implies narrative, “neurosis” being a reflection of either an insufficient, incomplete, or inappropriate story about oneself.

“Recall that when Peter Pan asks Wendy to return to Never Never Land with him, he gives as his reason that she could teach the Lost Boys there how to tell stories. If they knew how to tell them, the Lost Boys might be able to grow up.”

--Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (1996)

If we can capitalize on narrative techniques to educate our students about behavioral-based interviewing as well as what it means to be an exceptional performer, my hope is that we can utilize the power of stories to grow up as professionals in workplaces.

### **Recommended Reading**

I can't resist completing an article about the power of stories without leaving you with a few book tips. Readers interested in learning more about how stories can be used to convey serious subject matter more effectively may be interested in the following books:

#### *The Culture of Education* by Jerome Bruner

This is a rather cerebral read but a good one if you would like to understand some of the theoretical underpinnings of this paper. Nine essays comprise *The Culture of Education*, all reflecting on how cultural psychology informs education. In general, Bruner discusses the failings of education, the four dominant models of pedagogy, and how various approaches—including the use of narratives—could be used to make improvements in the delivery of education.

#### *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni

One of my contacts at Microsoft told me about this author, who has written several business books that eschew the usual how-to approach to convey concepts. Rather than dryly listing the five dysfunctions of a corporate team in this book, for example, Lencioni sets up a fictional narrative complete with characters, details, and plot twists. Is it great fiction? No, but it's an enticing spoon of sugar to make the medicine go down. He has similar books that include *Death By Meeting*; *Silos, Politics, and Turf Wars*; *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive*; and *The Five Temptations of a CEO*.

#### *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* by Irvin D. Yalom

Irvin Yalom is a renowned psychiatrist, best known as an expert in group therapy. His textbook on that topic is the definitive one. However, I recommend him heartily because of his use of narratives to teach a great deal about his field. *Love's Executioner* is a book of true stories of Yalom's patients, heavily disguised to preserve confidentiality. Quite often the stories show Yalom stumbling through difficult cases, sometimes reaching a good outcome in spite of himself. Any student of psychotherapy would be both humbled

and informed by these true stories. Likewise, Yalom's most recent novel, *The Schopenhauer Cure*, manages to teach the reader a great deal about group therapy as well as the eponymous philosopher. His books are both deeply moving and educational—a powerful combination.