



## Getting Your Point Across Without Bullets and Builds

By Jarrod Goentzel

Dr. Jarrod Goentzel is Executive Director of MIT Supply Chain Management, a nine-month professional degree program. Send him your favorite stories at [goentzel@mit.edu](mailto:goentzel@mit.edu).

It is a fair assumption that most supply chain professionals reading SCMR can quickly recount a harrowing tale, probably set at the end of the quarter, involving a key shipment that is about to miss its delivery deadline. The customer is calling your mobile hourly for updates; a visit to the floor supervisor only reveals a new bottleneck; your inbox is stacked with a chain of emails that includes the V.P. and a long "cc" list; and the carrier has just sent you a text message that the pick-up driver cannot wait. Somehow, perhaps through an unexpected turn of events or an idea that you dredged out of your professional past, you save the day.

Being at the core of the action in today's globalized businesses, the supply chain is full of exciting stories about how someone moved mountains (of inventory) to save the day...or not. And these stories are getting more interesting as supply chains extend across cultural lines and take place in exotic settings. Given these dramatic settings, supply chain professionals have an opportunity to utilize the power of narrative beyond entertaining colleagues around the water cooler. Storytelling can become the most effective means to communicate messages that are critical to the success of your initiatives...and your career.

Stories can actually help us make supply chains more efficient and effective, too. After the earthquake in Japan earlier this year for example, new stories emerged about production lines being shut down due to a scarcity of simple components that lay forgotten in the networks of second- or third-tier suppliers.

A story like this may enable you to rekindle that initiative with engineering about simplifying the bill of materials for an upcoming product launch. Passing on first-hand experiences you heard at a conference about a company successfully rolling out electric vehicles might help you convince your fleet manager to pilot the new technology. Shared

tales from the trenches of turning inventory into cash during the recent financial crisis may enable you to continue building that critical relationship with the CFO, which will prove useful come capital budgeting time.

Stories convey culture and build a common bond among colleagues. Indeed, long before we had standard operating procedures to document the ins-and-outs of our daily vocation, humans told stories to retain knowledge and pass on skills. Such chronicles of frontier experiences have helped us, and our supply chains, to evolve.

Many professionals can effectively increase their use of narrative. However, it is important to avoid the other extreme of "managing by anecdote." Some organizations seem to define improvement initiatives solely from problems identified by specific experiences—especially the dramatic ones. It is critical not only to undertake further, more comprehensive, analysis to determine if an issue is exceptional or systemic, but also to regularly assess the scope of operations to identify problems that are not bubbling up at the water cooler. Anecdotes alone are not the whole story.

At this point, you may be wondering: How do I identify specific opportunities to use stories given my role in supply chain? And is this a skill that I can, and should, develop for my professional success? Let's consider these questions in order.

### Identifying Your Audience

You cannot tell a story without an audience. Fortunately, the supply chain is a nexus of communication across organizations and functions within an organization. Even for small companies, its setting is global and spans cultures. So supply chain professionals should not have trouble finding an audience; but it is important to know how to reach each audience appropriately. You can target audiences across three dimensions that utilize storytelling for different objectives.

*Horizontally* across the company. The supply chain spans corporate functions from product design to sales and customer service. To be successful in this landscape, supply chain professionals need to be able to relate to a wide variety of functional role players and geographical colleagues. Finance plays a similar integrative role across the company business units and functional divisions, but they have both the mandate and the means to facilitate communication through financial reporting, even if that is not the most enjoyable exchange each quarter. Lacking such a regular mandate, the supply chain organization must compel its audience with ongoing storylines—a serial drama, if you will—to facilitate regular communication.

*Vertically* from shop floor to the board room. Supply chain professionals also need to target audiences both up and down the corporate organizational chart. Successful implementation of an idea requires not only persuasive communication to get approval in the first place, but also motivational communication with colleagues on all levels who are involved in execution going forward. An effective narrative goes much further than PowerPoint slide decks in obtaining that broad-based buy-in to an idea. And stories can provide mental images that convey purpose much better than a wordy mission statement. A good example of articulating the customer service mission of the supply organization is P&G's Moment of Truth—the point at which a customer evaluates the shelves of product in the store.

*Externally* across suppliers and customers. A critical third dimension is the external audience. For many companies, the supply chain professional is as much the face of a company to its customers and suppliers as anyone else. We are definitely the people involved in the crisis stories when execution does not go as planned. We can also be part of the success stories when companies achieve common goals by working together. Openly sharing stories with partners can form a foundation of trust that is critical in scaling up the business relationship.

### Telling Your Story

Not everyone is a great storyteller. But that need not be a critical limitation in becoming an effective communicator. First, it is important to distinguish the entertaining story from the effective narrative. While you may not be able to spin a yarn that has the room hanging on your every word, know that entertainment is not the primary objective. It is more important to develop a clear and consistent storyline that facilitates continual communication with the audiences mentioned above.

Second, just as with leadership, MIT CTL believes that communications skills can be developed through active

learning exercises. On the writing front, we have expanded our logistics master's curriculum beyond the grammar and structure required in an effective master's thesis to include writing in the business context from emails to executive summaries. On the speaking front, we added a session where each student actually tells a story to the class so that they can focus on delivery rather than content.

Whether in written or verbal form, we emphasize three key aspects in building your narrative.

- **Setting:** Setting is a combination of purpose and context. Purpose considers the expected action based on the encounter (e.g., build support, make a decision, provide a status update) and the nature of the message (good news or bad news, neutral or judgmental position). The context considers time, location, room setup, nature of the audience, and expectations. The setting should direct you to the most appropriate mode of sharing the storyline. Too often, professionals default to one mode (say PowerPoints)

**Storytelling can become the most effective means to communicate messages that are critical to the success of your initiatives...and your career.**

and let it dictate the setting rather than finding the most effective mode for the setting.

- **Language:** Professions and industries often develop an insider language filled with specialized terms and abundant acronyms. While useful in communicating within the supply chain, such lingo easily forms obstacles for an external audience. Sometimes the language is dictated from the outside, such as financial reporting practices. In that situation, it is good for supply chain professionals to learn the language and to translate their stories into that language, especially when targeting audiences up the corporate ladder.

- **Culture:** It is more common than not these days for individuals in a supply chain team to hail from different countries. People from various cultural backgrounds can interpret stories very differently. And the message can change when stories cross cultural lines where assumptions are different. At the same time, the diversity of thought and experience in our multi-cultural supply chain settings can enhance the stories and make them more compelling.

Being an entertaining storyteller is not critical for professional success. However, consistent development of narratives that target your professional audiences is crucial in effective communication. While storytelling may not show up specifically in your next annual review, know that your colleagues will better understand your impact when they remember your role in their story.