

The Leadership Superpower

Inspiring change through storytelling



Edward F. Garcia, MBA, MS, FAARC, RRT

System Director, RT, Rehab, PFT, Wound Care and HBO- UCI Health



A respiratory therapist who leads with stories



Edward F. Garcia

MBA, MS, FAARC, RRT



System Director, RT, Rehab, PFT, Wound Care and HBO



University of California Irvine Health, Orange



Speaks nationally on leadership, change, and storytelling

What you will leave with today



Conflict of interest

No conflicts of interest to disclose.

1

Explain how storytelling builds emotional connection and trust and helps a leader communicate vision and values.

2

Practice actionable strategies for crafting and delivering stories that inspire teams and drive change.

3

Apply storytelling to real leadership moments: change, culture, alignment, and engagement.

BUT FIRST, A STORY

Permacrisis

(noun) an extended period of instability and insecurity

Collins Dictionary Word of the Year, 2022



...the thunderstorm and the rainbow.



Why stories work

Leadership is influence — and stories are how influence travels.



Leadership is influence



*Leadership is influence —
nothing more, nothing less.*

— John C. Maxwell



The Law of Buy-In

People buy into the leader first, then the vision. Stories reveal the leader behind the plan.



Connect before you direct

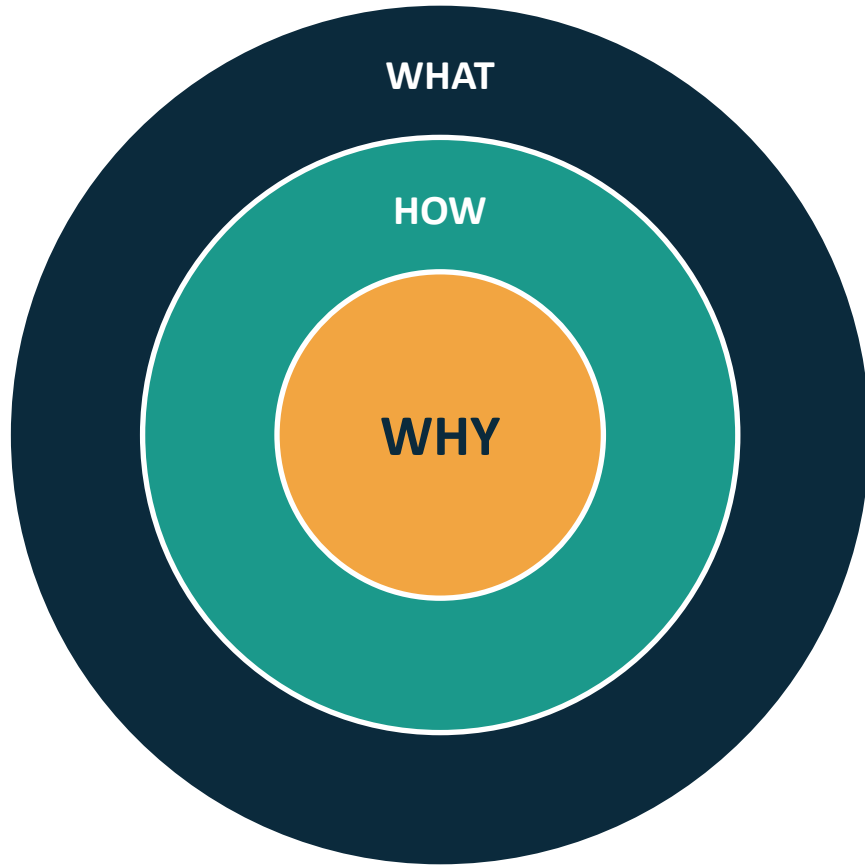
Connecting — identifying and relating to people — is what increases a leader's influence.



Stories carry influence

A title gives you authority. A story gives people a reason to follow.

Start with why



“People don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it.”

— Simon Sinek

WHAT

We are moving to a new high-flow oxygen protocol on Monday.

HOW

RTs will assess and titrate earlier, with new documentation.

WHY

Last month a patient on 4 East declined for hours before anyone escalated. We never want that again.

What a story does in the listener



Transportation

Listeners get “carried into” a narrative. Attention, imagery, and feeling converge, and counter-arguing drops.

Green & Brock, 2000



Empathy

In lab studies, character-driven stories with tension shifted attention and empathy — and generosity toward strangers.

Zak, 2015



Memory

A person, a moment, and a turning point give the brain hooks that a list of facts does not.

Heath & Heath, 2007

Honest caveat: promising evidence — not a magic switch. Not every workplace story builds trust.

Stories stick. Statistics slip.

63%

of students recalled a speaker's stories

5%

recalled any individual statistic

Stanford classroom exercise: students gave one-minute persuasive speeches, then classmates were asked what they remembered minutes later.

Stories and measures belong together



“Maybe stories are just data with a soul.” — Brené Brown



The story shows...

who the change affects, what it felt like, and why it matters to the person on the next shift.



The measure shows...

how big the problem is, whether the change worked, and whether it is lasting.

A 2023 meta-analysis of 50 studies found no overall persuasion winner between narrative and statistical evidence. Use both.

The leader as meaning-maker

When you explain what, people hear words.

When you explain why, they feel purpose.



The storytelling gap

The gap between what leaders want people to feel and what they actually feel is often a missing story.



When we communicate a policy...

people comply.

- They do the minimum
- They wait it out
- They fill in the “why” themselves



When we communicate a story...

people commit.

- They understand the purpose
- They see their role in it
- They carry it to the next shift

What your team is really asking during change



What is changing?

Leaders usually answer this one well — the steps, the timeline, the go-live.



Why now?

The question most often skipped.
The honest answer is usually a story.



How will it affect my next shift?

The question behind every hallway conversation. Answer it concretely.

Negative metaphors about planned change can persist even in teams that ultimately succeed. Acknowledge the strain — don't dismiss it.

Stories build the Circle of Safety



“Leaders eat last.”

Sinek: when people feel safe inside the circle, they stop protecting themselves from each other and turn outward to face the danger together.

Psychological safety: a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. — Amy Edmondson

When a leader tells a true story — including a mistake — it signals that the circle is safe.

So why do leaders hesitate?



“I’m not a storyteller.”

You don’t need to be. You need one true moment and a point.



“How vulnerable should I be?”

Share the struggle you’ve worked through, not the wound that’s still open.



“What’s the point?”

Start from the decision in front of your team, then find the story.

“

You can choose courage or you can choose comfort, but you cannot have both.

— Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead*

If you don't tell the story, someone else will



In the break room:

*"They're cutting our FTEs to save money.
Nobody up there cares about nights."*



From the leader, first:

*"Here's what happened, what I know, what I
don't know yet — and what I'm fighting for."*

*In the absence of data, we will always
make up stories.*

— Brené Brown

- Tell it early, before the rumor does
- Use "The story I'm making up is..." to check assumptions
- **Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.**

Crafting your story

Four story types, one simple arc, and a three-minute lab.



Four stories every leader needs



Value story

What we protect in a difficult moment.

RT example: Our pillars — outcomes, education, safety, experience — in action.



Founder / origin story

Why this team or service exists.

RT example: Humble beginnings; venting open-heart patients on a Bird Mark 7.



Purpose / teaching story

What experience changed our practice.

RT example: The lesson we learned and never want to relearn.



Hero / recognition story

Whose actions show the standard.

RT example: The RT who “protected this house.”

The story arc: Normal → Explosion → New Normal



Normal

The world as it was. A specific, ordinary day your team will recognize.



Explosion

Something changed or demanded a response. The turning point.



New Normal

The choice, the result, and the lesson. It need not be a triumph.

Leadership tip: when you ask your team to change, tell it in this shape. They'll understand the purpose, not just the policy.

Four moves that make a story land

1

Identify the real moment of transformation.

2

Isolate the one emotional point you want them to remember.

3

Share with clarity and focus — leave out what doesn't serve the point.

4

Connect the story to the message and a clear call to action.



The broken-arm test

Don't tell the story of tripping down the stairs and breaking your arm to deliver a message of hope — unless you explain why tripping turned out to be amazing.

From update to story

THE UPDATE

“We expanded respiratory support on the towers.”

Heard, filed, forgotten.

THE STORY

“A nurse called her tower RT forty minutes before the decline would have become a code...”

A person, a moment, a choice.



Then show the outcome — and the limits of the data.

A respiratory care example: the Tower Pilot

12 → 6

code blues on pilot units, FY24
comparison

~400

nursing hours returned per month

T3 • T4 • T5

pilot units, launched June 5, 2023

Normal

RT coverage on the pilot units was reactive.

Explosion

Bedside teams needed earlier respiratory support.

New Normal

A tower model — and measurable improvement.

Your turn: a three-minute story lab

- 1 Write the Normal in one sentence.
- 2 Name the Explosion — the turning point.
- 3 Describe the choice and the New Normal.
- 4 Connect it to one action you need now.



2 min write

1 min share with a neighbor

No patient identifiers

Prompt: What one real moment would help your team understand why this change matters?

Delivering & embedding

A story told once is information. A story told often is identity.



Deliver with authenticity and impact



Be specific

Name the moment, the constraint, the choice. “Our team is resilient” is a claim; a real scene is proof.



Be human

Perfection doesn’t connect. Real does. Share the struggle, not just the solution.



Make your team the hero

Leaders build trust when the story spotlights others, not themselves.



Repeat your stories

Repetition builds culture. The stories you retell become who you are.

Protect the people in your story

- ✓ Ask permission before naming a coworker.
- ✓ Remove any detail that could identify a patient.
- ✓ Label composite or illustrative examples as such.
- ✓ Never use a moving story to paper over a staffing or safety concern.
- ✓ Follow your organization's privacy and communications policies.

“

Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.

— Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead*

Match the story to the moment

Leadership moment	The story to use	What it builds
Onboarding new RTs	Origin / founder story	Connection and pride
Quality improvement	Teaching / purpose story	Understanding and buy-in
Culture building	Value story	A clear picture of what “great” looks like
System change	A story of past success	Confidence; less fear
Morale dips	Gratitude / hero story	Resilience and recognition



A 60-second story fits a huddle, a staff meeting, a one-on-one, or an evaluation.

A good story still needs a good test



What did we observe?



**What else could explain
the result?**



**What will we measure
next?**

A story can earn attention. It should never replace evaluation. Distinguish what you observed from what you can prove caused it.

Legacy: the stories told when you're not in the room



A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.

— John C. Maxwell



Stories outlast leaders

They shape how future RTs understand the profession.



Stories preserve courage

Moments of compassion and innovation stay alive.

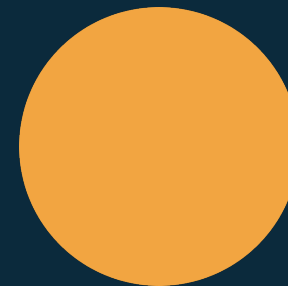


Stories create continuity

They carry identity through turnover and change.

YOUR NEXT LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION

Find your story. Tell it often.



One true story

A brief scene from real work.



One relevant measure

With its context and caveat.



One clear request

What you need your team to do.

Leadership is not the title you hold. It's the story you tell — and the story you inspire others to live.

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THANK YOU

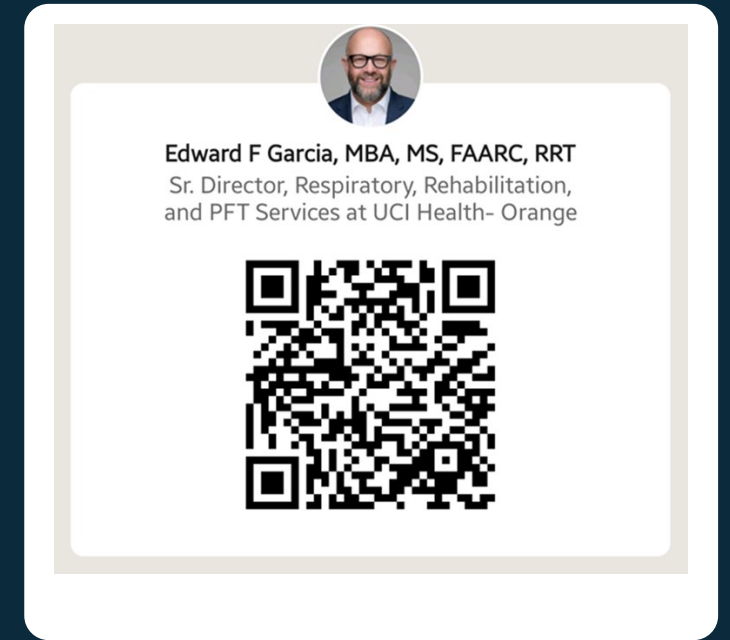
Questions & conversation

Edward F. Garcia, MBA, MS, FAARC, RRT

edwardfg@hs.uci.edu

LinkedIn: [edward-f-garcia-rrt](#)

What story will you tell at your next huddle?



Scan to connect