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ASCLS keynote reveals the power of storytelling

Every considered telling your story? Stories have far greater power to command attention than other verbal forms of communication. Lori Silverman, keynote speaker at this year's ASCLS Annual Meeting, asked lab professionals to consider using their own personal stories to make their voices heard. [Read more here.](#)

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ASCLS keynote asks, "What's in a story?"

In the language of the laboratory, information is presented as "data." Patient experiences are related in "case studies." Learning and teaching happen through "example."



But management consultant Lori Silverman, in her opening keynote address at the 2007 ASCLS Annual Meeting in San Diego this July, asked lab professionals to consider another powerful tool for communicating in the workplace that is often overlooked: storytelling. Research shows that stories have far greater stopping power than statistics and "bullet"-type presentation points. They're remembered longer and more accurately, even when they contain complex information.

Stories give the brain "a picture in your mind about what's going on," said Silverman. "What did it look like, sound like, smell like, what might it have felt like if I were there?"

Silverman believes that storytelling has particular relevance to the laboratory profession as it struggles for greater visibility and a more prominent role in healthcare decision-making. Stories give the storyteller a more influential voice, an opportunity to get noticed. Moreover, said Silverman, encouraging people to share their own workplace stories can dramatically enhance their sense of belonging and self-worth within their organization. She cited the example of a group of nurses at Rush Copley Medical Center in Aurora, Illinois, who began formally compiling their most memorable stories about patient care and nursing life. They now regularly publish these story collections in book form and make them available to patients, staff and families. The result, said Silverman, is an astonishing 85 percent reduction

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in turnover.

"That's what you all need to do," she said. "'Polish and make visible all these wonderful success stories that you already have and will continue to have."

Midway through the presentation, Silverman asked the attendees to pair off and share with their partners a personal success story drawn from their experiences in the lab. Within seconds the room filled with the animated chatter of several hundred newly-minted storytellers, along with an equal number of listeners instructed to pay attention, not interrupt, make eye contact and "listen delightedly." Tellers and listeners then switched roles. Afterwards, when Silverman asked the group how many had heard "a pretty cool story," every hand went up.

According to Silverman, storytelling is as much science as art. To be effective, she said, stories need characters, preferably with names, who speak in actual dialogue. Adding conflict—a dilemma, a problem, a challenge—heightens the tension and draws in the listener. Stories should end with a universal lesson that offers something to everyone, not just collectively but as individuals.

A story, she said, touches its recipient in myriad ways. During a typical workplace presentation, for example, the brain is able to process far more information than the speaker is imparting. Listeners fill that gap by letting their minds wander, either purposefully or dreamily. However, said Silverman, a story can engage that "extra brainpower" because it invites its listeners to add in meaning of their own. Stories even have a physiological impact on the listener, causes measurable changes in blood pressure, pulse and breathing rate.

Silverman closed by admonishing the audience to tell their own stories—whether professional or personal, formally or informally, orally or in writing.

"What are you going to do to be noticed and be heard? Are you going to shrug and say, 'Things are as they are?' Or are you going to take the initiative and start telling those stories? The time is now."

Do you have a story you would like to share with your fellow laboratory professionals? If so, please send an inquiry to "Contact Us" at www.LabsAreVital.com.

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