



40 stories at 40

40 real-life stories that demonstrate the craft of
Storytelling

RAVISHANKAR IYER

STORY
rules

“Numbers batao, kahaani mat sunao”

Translated - ‘Tell me the numbers, don’t spin stories’, is an oft-repeated refrain in business boardrooms.

The word story often gets a bad rep in the workplace. But that’s because it is sometimes used in place of the data.

Let’s face it - numbers are critical and we should not replace the data with anecdotal evidence.

Having said that, while numbers bring surety and credibility, they have one critical failing: they cannot move us emotionally.

Stories are powerful as an accompaniment (and not as a substitute) to numbers.

Stories are memorable, they hold our fickle attention, they are fun to read and what’s more – they connect with us at an emotional level.

Now I could have repeated that message to you a thousand times – but instead I relied on a simple storytelling principle: Show, don’t tell.

So this compilation of 40 stories is my attempt at ‘showing, not telling’ about the power of stories - to engage, inspire and get your point across.

I hope this collection inspires *you* to try using your own stories at work. And if told well, perhaps you could stop your boss from going:

“Numbers batao, kahaani mat sunao”!

A collection of 40 real-life stories

I turned 40 in May-2019, and made a public commitment (on LinkedIn).

I decided to reflect back on life and share 'Forty Stories' from my life (which have taught me important lessons) on the platform.

So far so rash.

It was a crazy, ambitious project and I had no idea how long I would be able to sustain it.

There were times when I almost felt like giving up.

One thing kept me going: the unbounded love from all the readers. They overwhelmed me with a ton of encouragement, support and inputs!

This is a small gift to them - and to anyone else who would be interested in ~~learning how a random middle-aged guy who calls himself a Storytelling Coach... became one~~ improving their storytelling skills by watching a storyteller in action.

Ravi is a storytelling coach and consultant. He is a Chartered Accountant...

But wait, that's not how a story begins. This is how it does:

Once upon a time, a boy was born
To a creative mom and a structured dad
Shy and socially-awkward was his norm
When lost in books, he was most glad

Comics, novels and thrillers he'd enjoy
Then it was non-fiction, especially history
Movies and music were a source of joy
Later he realised - all were forms of story

Writing also made him keen
To express his thoughts in clear prose
Perhaps in an alternate life he may have been
A history prof, a journalist, a writer - who knows?

But life's more practical and so he qualified
As a Chartered Accountant (with a rank to boot),
But while the numbers and financials he could ride,
He realised, as a career, it wasn't a hoot

An MBA from IIM-A gave him wider exposure
To business domains of Ops, HR, Marketing
His real learning happened however
During 7-years of management consulting

Contd...

He still (tries to) think, talk and write MECE
And never fails to ask the “So What”
It’s a skill that he felt ‘at home’ with, you see
And in his training career it’s helped him a lot

But after 7-years with for-profits, he yearned for impact
And joined a social enterprise that trained the young
His 3-year stint taught him a great deal in fact
But the over-dependence on the government stung

So he moved on, and life took a different direction
His love for history made him co-found a start-up
CaptivaTour: to tell monument stories, engaging and fun
It got great reviews (but no revenues), so that was a wrap-up

While working on CaptivaTour, he met someone
Who trained corporate leaders, which was interesting
A session on Effective Data Analysis was his first one
And he realised, hang on - this could be working!

Data Analysis soon evolved into Storytelling
And it was when writing a content guide
For CaptivaTour’s stories’ better writing
That he had an epiphany and realised

It doesn’t matter whether it’s science, history or finance
Compelling stories can be found everywhere
Stories which share common principles - perchance
Just the knowledge of these principles is rare

Contd...

And so that boy of a structured dad and a creative mom
Decided to become a life-long story-nerd
And help others get a better outcome
Using the power of that magical five letter word:

Story.

Oh, and they learnt happily ever after. 😊

And now, to begin with the real stories.

I. Life before CA

1	<u>Don't sing in the bedroom, seize the day</u>
2	<u>The Power of Reading</u>

II. Life as a CA

3	<u>Prepare (even if you think you don't need it)</u>
4	<u>Stand up for your colleagues</u>

III. Life at IIMA

5	<u>The IIMA GD – make your message count</u>
6	<u>Depth, not jargon - my first impression of IIMA</u>
7	<u>Choose memories over marks</u>
8	<u>Find the victory in defeat</u>
9	<u>Too much self-deprecation can backfire</u>
10	<u>Tough times will pass</u>

IV. Life at Feedback (Consulting)

11	<u>The power of vulnerability</u>
12	<u>Back your employees to deliver</u>
13	<u>Managing client relationships</u>
14	<u>Putting the Human in HR</u>
15	<u>Prepare - especially your opening!</u>
16	<u>Don't compare among employees</u>
17	<u>Build trust for the long term</u>
18	<u>Admonish, but with empathy</u>
19	<u>Focus on the story, not the data</u>

V. Life before Story Rules

20	<u>Use data to tell a compelling story</u>
21	<u>Don't be dogmatic about beliefs</u>
22	<u>Use entrepreneurial hustle</u>
23	<u>Let degrees not interfere with work</u>

VI. Work life - general

24	<u>Find your Ops orientation</u>
25	<u>Embrace, make the most of your past</u>
26	<u>The power of reflection</u>
27	<u>Don't wait till you 'find your passion' to work hard</u>

VIII. Life

28	<u>Don't be a 'phony'</u>	32	<u>Find the Bright Spots of life</u>
29	<u>Find your music</u>	33	<u>How emotions help us decide</u>
30	<u>Let go of distractions</u>	34	<u>Never give up before the game</u>
31	<u>Encourage experiments (and failure)</u>	35	<u>The power of story to persuade</u>

VII. Life with Story Rules

36	<u>Say "Of course I can"</u>
37	<u>Stay buoyant in the Ocean of Rejection</u>
38	<u>The Client is always the Client</u>
39	<u>Use empathy to connect with your audience</u>
40	<u>My quest for Ikigai</u>

Life before
CA

Story 1: Don't sing in the bedroom, seize the day

It was the late 80s - I was about 9 years old. At my dad's company, there was a get-together with family. Kids were encouraged to come, go on stage and perform (typically sing).

I was a movie songs kid. Knew most of the latest songs with all the lyrics (QSQT was trending then). Mom was a singer and she and dad encouraged me. But I was afraid. What if I screw up. In front of so many people?

They tried. I pushed back. Eventually I didn't go at all.

You know what I did the entire time at home?

Lay down in the bedroom, by myself. Singing one song after the other. With all the lyrics.

Cut to: 16 years later. At IIM-A. First week. Event organised by seniors for people to showcase their talents.

500 raucous people in a packed auditorium. I'm sitting in the audience - Should I? Shouldn't I?

I muster the courage. Slowly make my way down, thinking through my words.

I perform - a parody on the nursery rhyme 'Twinkle twinkle little star' (created by my mom and aunt). The performance is a hit. Thunderous applause. Unforgettable feeling.

Amma was thrilled when she heard about it.

For me, the ghosts of '88 had truly been slain.

Don't sing in the bedroom. Seize the day.

Story 2: The Power of Reading

I was about 7 when my dad took me to a small garage shop in Sion, Mumbai, where I first inhaled that unmistakable fragrance ... of bound library books.

I was hooked!

My first book was a comic about an old gentleman with a brain faster than a computer - Chacha Chaudhary!

From that I moved on to Tinkle, Amar Chitra Katha, Chandamama.. then came the inevitable Enid Blyton fest: Secret Seven, Famous Five et al.

Things became serious with Agatha Christie, and even more so with Arthur Hailey, Robert Ludlum, Sidney Sheldon (ahem), Frederick Forsyth... And throughout this period, PG Wodehouse kept me in splits.

In my 10th vacation, I overdosed on fiction (like 4 books a week) - and... something snapped. Almost overnight I moved to non-fiction - and have been there ever since.

History is a favourite topic. Others include economics, science, business, productivity and yes, storytelling...

The more I read, the more I learn.... how little I know!

Today if I'm able to perform as a storytelling coach, a majority of the credit should go to the many books that have taught me. It's been a fabulous journey.

And it all started when a 7-year old visited a musty ol' garage library with his father.

(Happy birthday Appa!)

PS: This post was published on 10-Sep-19, Appa's birthday

Life as a
CA

Story 3: Prepare (even if you don't need it)

Mid-2001. I'd just cleared the CA Final exam in my first attempt, ranked 11th nationwide. Life looked rosy, and nothing seemed impossible.

Time for the next battle - job interviews. One company was THE place to join: Hindustan Lever (now HUL).

HUL had a Commercial function where new CAs started off... And over the years they would get multiple rotations across different teams. It was probably the best learning ground for a new CA.

Ideally, I should have prepared thoroughly by talking to relevant folks, revising critical concepts etc.

I didn't.

I kind of assumed that I've got the grades for this... How could I screw up (or they refuse)?

Turns out the company's CFO didn't concur. The strict-looking gentleman threw a question about a critical finance concept... and I... floundered. And flunked the interview.

Had I joined HUL, I'd have had a different career trajectory. But my shoddy preparation definitely didn't deserve it.

The lesson? Just because you've had a major achievement don't assume you're done working hard and can take it easy. Life keeps upping the difficulty level - be prepared.

PS: Later, I facilitated data-storytelling sessions for senior HUL finance folks. I guess life worked out pretty ok. :)

Story 4: Stand up for your colleagues

In one of my earlier jobs, I was reporting to a very senior company official.

One of my colleagues was a chatty, no-filters guy called Sahil (name changed), who reported to another senior official.

One day Sahil and I attended the presentation made by my boss to investors.

In our gloriously limited understanding, we found the presentation ... underwhelming.

Which was not the troublesome part.

Sahil, God bless his soul, decided to give that feedback to my boss.

Which was still ok. What really put me in trouble was when he included me in his feedback: "Sir, Ravi and I thought your presentation could be better"

My boss later came to me and asked, "Was it really underwhelming?"

I was shitting bricks... But somehow managed to say "Yes sir, I thought so".

I remember two things from that day. My boss walking away shaking his head, probably thinking "These immature youngsters... what do they know"

But more than that, my relieved friend coming and shaking my hand... "Dude, thanks for standing up for me."

PS: If that incident happened today, I would change my answer. "Sir, the presentation was comprehensive and in-depth" (which it was) "But, I think it could have been better in one area..."

Life at
IIMA

Story 5: The IIMA GD – make your message count

Early 2003. I'm in a room with 8 sharp folks. It's the IIMA GD.

Our topic is announced - it's a super-generic one: corruption. A topic on which anyone could wax eloquent.

This was a group of 8 of the country's sharpest and most articulate young minds.

The first few minutes were a blur. Points and counter-points flew thick and fast. It was brutally tough to get in a word sideways.

I took a mental deep breath and thought about the issue. Actually thought.

Most points focused on the sectors where corruption exists, its impact and how to nab the corrupt...

I prepared my point. And finally, managed to speak.

"Instead of worrying about catching the corrupt, we should understand its root-cause - which is power without accountability. Anyone in a position of power who isn't clearly made accountable can misuse it. We need to increase accountability."

I'll never know this for sure. But I think it was that one small point - giving an insightful root cause for the problem and suggesting a relevant recommendation - that got me through.

(Of course, the CAT score, interview and previous work would also have mattered...).

Having said that: If you're in a GD, don't worry about your total count of points. Instead, make your points count.

Story 6: Depth, not jargon - my first impression of IIMA

Before IIMA, I thought an MBA was a person who was articulate, used management jargon and knew cool concepts like 4Ps of marketing.

(In fact among CAs then, there was this oft-repeated line: an MBA is a CA with better communication skills). (Cute but delusional).

On reaching IIMA (June '03), our first session was a demo class on Marketing. We had to read a case study for the class.

The Prof taking the class was a rotund, genial-looking guy called Abraham Koshy.

He started with a question about the case.

Some brave-hearts leapt into the ring with their opinions. They were articulate, used the right management jargon, and cool concepts.

Koshy massacred them.

He would strip down any concept to its bare bones, ask fundamental questions and leave the word-warriors scurrying for cover.

That day we learnt two lessons. One, be very, very careful before opening your mouth in front of a good Prof.

Two - a good MBA isn't a guy who spews jargon and fancy concepts. What's critical is a foundational understanding of business, expressed simply.

Did we achieve that in those 2 years? Probably not. But at least we understood its importance.

And for that, I'll always remember that brutal session by Prof Koshy.

Story 7: Choose memories over marks

First term at IIM-A. Our in-house cult-fest called T-Nite (or Talent Nite) is on. 250 first-year students across 4 sections (imaginatively named A, B, C, D) compete for the ultimate prize: T-Nite Champions.

Now, T-Nite wasn't an IIMA-approved event. So, morning classes went on and surprise quizzes continued to shock us. But come evening, we transform, wearing funny costumes and dancing with poor coordination (hey, we were engineers and CAs) in front of raucous, cheering (and jeering) crowds.

It was our most memorable week at IIM-A.

On day 2, as I headed back to class to contribute in whatever small way I could, a concerned dorm mate asked: "Dude. Don't you need to prep for the mid-terms?"

The mid-terms were a big deal and had a major bearing on the summer-placement (ahem, foreign job) interviews.

"Yaar, I've never had this – a proper college life, campus events, all this fun. During my graduation, my CA articleship and classes killed all college fun. Now with this second chance, I don't want to miss out"

Looking back, I am surprised I had the judgement to make that call.

And guess what, I don't even remember the mid-terms. That one-week of T-Nite though? Fondest memories.

Except: the best division (ours) lost by a narrow margin.

Story 8: Find the victory in defeat

2003. Talent Nite at IIMA. T-Nite was the internal performing arts competition for 300 first-year students. Four sections battled each other for supremacy and eternal bragging rights.

A week of events - dances, skits, music performances - culminated in a momentous final day, headlined by a flagship performance: The Class Act.

The Class Act was usually a scripted play or other performance, which had one condition: All 75 class-mates had to have some role in the act.

During the week, we brainstormed various possible themes for the Act, but no decision had been taken. People were busy and distracted - there were too many other events to be planned and rehearsed for.

I remember a frenzied day in class. I was sitting at a corner, watching everyone preparing, discussing and rehearsing their upcoming acts...

I'd never done theatre in my life. I'm not into dancing or Fash-P (I mean... look at me)... So I decided to do the only thing that someone without any performing talent can do - I wrote.

I wrote a story about the journey of a student at IIM-A, interspersed/supported by the most apt movie songs for each stage of the journey.

It was cheesy and didn't seem like much. But it caught the attention of the rest. And shockingly, they all contributed their own ideas and actually agreed to do it.

(Of course the real reason it was chosen - there was no competing option!).

Then something even more incredible happened.

Contd...

A bunch of the meekest people in class (I remember Munmun, Megha, Shiva and I) somehow took ownership of the play. And began to direct people. People who were more talented, more smarter... but people who still followed us.

During rehearsals, it seemed to be going well, but soon it started going south. People were not remembering lines, the music was not syncing, it was chaos.

One guy said: "Let's rewrite the play as a disaster-in-the-making, and how we're trying to make it work". A few others seemed to agree. Our heads sank.

Then another guy interjected: "We don't have time to do that. Let's just go with what we have". And we powered on.

With our cripplingly limited and flawed preparation, 75 of us trooped onto the stage.

The play itself was a blur for me. There was too much happening, too fast.

One thing I recollect - I knew most of the lines, so I would frequently come in when someone else missed their cue.

We finished the act... and ... were stunned to see the audience get up and give us a standing ovation....!!

Hahaha, sorry I'm kidding... We were quite bad. The script itself was hackneyed and our performance didn't do much to elevate it. The only hope was that the others were even worse...

But one thing I can never forget was what happened as we were streaming out of the stage, together.

Contd...

75 bright, sharp minds running high on adrenaline... Suddenly, one guy started shouting "Cosmo ka tempo high hai..." (a 'tempo-shout' is a way of cheering for someone or something. My dorm name at IIMA was Cosmo...)

And the others joined in and started cheering for all of us....

It was surreal. A magical moment that I'll treasure for the rest of my life.

Our section (narrowly) lost T-Nite that year... and the Class Act was one key reason.

But for me, that night, we were all winners. For trying, for having loads of fun and for creating the most unforgettable memories...

Often the journey is more fun than any destination.

Story 9: Too much self-deprecation can backfire

2003. Summer placement interviews at IIMA.

Every student has one dream: Foreign placements. Mostly in a big Investment Bank (IB) in NY, London, HK or Singapore. Getting an interview shortlist itself is a challenge.

I have a shortlist with Morgan Stanley - yay!

I enter the interview room. Serious looking middle-aged guy.

The interview starts off well. I'm building a good rapport.

Then a tricky question on "Any improvement areas?"

I decide to go all vulnerable and honest: "Actually heavy-duty Quant is not a strength area"

The temperature drops 5 degrees.

The guy mumbles something about everyone in IB needing to be a quant jock.

The interview was over. I'm not selected.

Should I have been vulnerable then? No - because I probably misrepresented myself.

While some parts of IB are really abstract-quant-heavy, the part I was interviewing for (M&A) was not one of them. I might have done just fine.

To quote from another story: Vulnerability can backfire if the skill is critical for the required task.

Contd...

... Too much self-deprecation can backfire

So, find out if the skill is key, and you really are demonstrably weak in that area.

If it is, and you are - then honesty is the better long-term strategy.

If not, then keep your self-deprecating opinion to yourself!

Story 10: Tough times will pass

I've been fortunate to do well in academics... With one exception: Quant at IIMA.

Now math is a vast area, and I'm ok with the basics. But not with the advanced stuff (calculus!).

I'm a CA, not an engineer - and so was spared the horrors of advanced math during graduation.

But they were lurking, waiting to strike at IIMA.

In year 1, I struggled through a 'Quantitative Methods' course.

In year 2, IIMA had a flagship finance course called 'Futures, Options and Risk Management' - a quant-heavy course that all 'finance types' took.

I was a 'finance type'. I took it.

More accurately, it took me. To the cleaners.

I still shudder to think of some moments. The prof cold-calling me in class. The batchmates who sniggered as I asked a 'stupid' question...

My biggest fear? Failing the course, and horrors - not getting the degree!

(Not getting into IIMA? That's ok. But getting there and not passing? Disastrous).

But somehow the storm passed and I scraped by.

Contd...

Eventually, things worked out ok. Btw, how often have I had to use those concepts in my work?

Never.

Don't let your weaknesses define you. Make them irrelevant.

If that's not possible, then weather the storm with your best effort... knowing that 'This too shall pass'.

Life at
Feedback
(Consulting)

Story 11: The power of vulnerability

Early-2006. The consult-firm I worked in (Feedback Ventures) was at IIMA for a 'Pre-Placement Talk'.

After our division CEO, Gopal Sarma made his warm, friendly pitch, it was QnA time.

The usual stuff about work content, culture, growth etc. Then, an uncomfortable question.

“Why are you guys not in telecom?”

So Feedback was an infra-consulting firm - and was present in all infra sectors - transport, power, urban infra, social infra - except telecom.

Gopal could have gone: “We were late to enter”, or “It’s a specialised field”. But he didn’t waffle.

His disarming response: “So one of our first telecom consulting projects was for Airtel in the mid-90s. And we goofed up.... We estimated the total demand for cellular connections in Delhi to be just around ... 50,000 or so”

Cue nervous laughter all around.

“Mind you, other big firms also got it completely wrong - none of us could estimate the telecom sector explosion. After that (study) we never got into telecom consulting”

Gopal had said a lot of good things about our company till then - but it was that honest, vulnerable, disarming response that won most hearts that day.

Contd...

Vulnerability - sharing your mistakes (see comment for caveats!) - can be a powerful trust-building mechanism.

There are some critical caveats to this though.

Vulnerability can be ineffective if:

- The skill in question is critical for the required task (A surgeon can't say "I suck at sewing up after the surgery")
- There are no redeeming critical skills/traits - anything that lends credibility
- The mistakes happen too often and/or there is no learning shown!

Story 12: Back your employees to deliver

Late 2005, Delhi. Around midnight. I'm in the office hunched over my laptop. Big presentation the next day.

The client was a leading MNC in materials. Our first project with them. Prestigious, critical for our firm.

And the relationship hung on the presentation to be given by me.

I was mighty-stressed. But also pumped up. That's because my leader for that project - Mukesh - had done something remarkable.

Despite my inexperience, he had shown a 100% faith in me. It was my deck and he trusted me to deliver.

Now that can be scary. But, by building complete ownership, it's also energising.

And it matters. There's a moment of truth every new entrant to the workplace faces. All the academic achievement until that point becomes irrelevant. You start on a clean slate. And you invariably struggle.

Many folks - including me - go through an Imposter Syndrome.

Do I really belong here? Have these guys made a terrible mistake?

That night as I worked on my slides, there was no time for those questions. Mukesh's trust meant I completely focused on doing my best.

And it was worth it. The presentation went off well, and we did a lot of work in that sector.

Back your employees to deliver. They will surprise you.

Story 13: Managing client relationships

This was during my early years in consulting (2006-07). My super-boss was one of the nicest guys – Gopal Sarma.

Our firm had gotten introduced to a large client in the materials space, through someone's reference (let's call him Rahul). We converted the intro and got our first consulting study with them.

It was a stressful study and took about 3-4 months. We delivered the final deck, which went off well, thankfully. The client was happy.

The next morning Gopal calls me into his office. I assume he wants a project debrief. Instead he places a call through the speaker-phone – to Rahul, the guy who had made the original connect.

Gopal thanks him and tells him that the project went off well. Rahul is, well, a bit surprised. Who remembers 3 months after an intro, and then specially calls to acknowledge your help?

Well, Gopal did. It was a small gesture but it meant so much. Not just to Rahul, but also to me! I appreciated that Gopal didn't just call on his own, but got me in and made it a teachable moment.

I guess it's appropriate that I start this series thanking him for his influence on me as a professional (now you know who to blame).

Sure my acknowledgement is about 11 years late, but better than never right?!

Story 14: Put the Human in Human Resource

Managing people is tough, innit?

Thankfully I learnt from the best in my first job post-MBA. I've spoken about Gopal Sarma and will talk about Mukesh Khandelwal later. But let me tell you about Monika Sood.

Super-sharp, intense, Sachin-devotee, healthcare maven – Monika wears many hats. But one that comes naturally is: 'people-person'. She really cares about people.

Say, you have a review with her. She's stressed about 5 other projects, taken a red-eye (after a late night) and spent a long day meeting clients. End of day, anyone else would be spent and ready to finish the review quickly.

Not Monika. She would first ask about home. The spouse. Health. That crazy match.

Oh, don't get me wrong. Work will happen. Boy, will that review happen. And God bless you if you haven't done your best*. Or what Monika believes is your best. You're going to get some tough, tough love if you take things easy.

For isn't that what a great 'people person' does? Deeply cares about you – the human, not the resource – but also cares so much about the client who's paying for it all, that she wouldn't hesitate to tell you off if you haven't put in your best?

Monika makes people better versions of themselves.

*PS: Also, never, ever criticise Sachin

Story 15: Prepare - especially your opening!

Around 2007. I'm in the consulting job at Feedback Infra. We were working for a company looking to diversify into a new area (let's call it X).

Now we used to work mainly in the hospitals space and hadn't worked on X before. For consultants, working on a new area is exciting, and I was kicked.

It's the day of the final presentation. Big board room. Client Chairman, CEO, and CFO present.

The slides are loading, and to make some small talk, I declare: "You know, we'd never worked on X before, and we've learnt a lot... So thank you for the opportunity."

The best part is I didn't even realise my goof-up and carried on presenting. Thankfully, the client didn't mind and the meeting went off well!

But Monika Sood's heart must have skipped a few beats. Later she made me realise what I'd gotten away with! Thankfully (surprisingly) I didn't get fired :)

My learning: Think not just about your main content but also how you'll start. It may take disproportionate time, but it's worth it. You're most nervous initially, and if you've thought that through, you'll sail through the rest easily.

Also: if you aren't sure what to say in front of someone senior, it's ok to remain silent, unless you're asked to speak!

Story 16: Don't compare among employees

2007. I had been promoted at my consulting firm, and had two associates - A and B - working with me on a project.

They had sent me a presentation each to review. I went through the same and called them for a discussion.

B's work was really good (especially his visual sense) and I had very few inputs. But A... well her work was just "not there".

Except I couldn't figure out why.

And that's when I did my major gaffe. When reviewing with her, I ended up saying "Why can't you make slides like B's..?!"

Awkward silence. B was clearly miffed... Later she told me in no uncertain terms: "Please don't compare me with someone like that"

I felt really small... and resolved to never do that again!

On later reflection, I realised:

- Just because someone becomes a manager, they don't acquire the skills – they need to be trained, especially on how to meaningfully review subordinates' work
- Over time I developed a simple hack for that: Before opening an output for review, I would always take some time to collect my thoughts on paper (on the output's content, structure etc.). That way I wouldn't get biased by what I saw, and the quality of my inputs went up significantly.

And I never compared people so blatantly again.

Story 17: Build trust for the long term

Sometime in 2006-07, I was at a client location, working with a few team-mates. One of them was A.

We were working on a time-constrained deliverable (as always). I had allocated the work and we were doing our individual pieces.

But A seemed tense, not fully "there". Normally I'd have ignored and continued with my work. But something made me ask - "Hey, is everything ok?"

Turned out, that she had to submit an application to a major B-School, and was really worried about doing it well and on time. I knew it wouldn't take much time and allowed her to work on it.

But after some time she was still not done. She was razor-sharp... But she was struggling a bit to craft the responses for the typical application questions.

I knew my way around these questions - and decided to spend time to help her. It didn't take much time, and they were done soon. Immediately, she was incredibly relieved - and fully back into the game.

Sure we lost some time, but we both gained each other's trust... which was far more valuable.

(Oh, and she got through to that B-School!)

Ultimately it's moments like these which offer you an opportunity to build trust with someone. How will you handle your next one?

Story 18: Admonish, but with empathy

During my consulting years, a sharp, dedicated young consultant (let's call her A) was reporting to me. A was a hard taskmaster (which is ok) but lacked empathy (which is not).

While reviewing the work of an associate, A found some shortcomings. She then admonished her rather bluntly... in her cubicle, with the rest of the teams within earshot.

Forget the impact this had on the poor associate (which would have been traumatic)... but such interactions also make other passive listeners uncomfortable and squirm in their seats.

And so, soon after the interaction, I messaged to A to join me in a cabin and explained to her why it's ok to admonish, but it's not ok to do it in front of everyone. A immediately apologised and promised she'd take care in the future.

My mantra: Praise in public; reprimand in private.

Story 19: Focus on the story, not the data

This is a 'epiphany-moment' story for me.

Many people question the value that external consultants bring to the table... But (in my initial consulting years) I had found a powerful answer: data.

You see, consultants are masters at planning, researching, analysing and presenting data to clients. I personally enjoyed the 'a-ha' moment that clients felt when we would present an interesting finding to them.

Unfortunately most such 'a-ha' insights would be hidden in mounds of information. Our philosophy was: "we have spent months finding and analysing this data, and we have to show it to you all."

I didn't realise it then, but gosh, clients would have winced at some of my data-dump slides.

Then one day, sometime in 2008/09, I asked a perceptive client (Abhishek Sharman) "Hey Abhishek, how can we become better?"

"Ravi you need to focus on the story, and not just showing all the data you have"

It seems blindingly obvious now, but it wasn't for me then.

From that day, it was as if a switch had turned on in my head - and I became a much better editor (and storyteller) of my presentations. Less became more.

The lesson: Don't drown your audience in data. Extract and showcase the story.

Easier said than done though!

Life before
Story Rules

Story 20: Use data to tell a compelling story

In 2011, I'd left consulting and joined a social enterprise in the skilling space. A couple of months in, I was anchoring the firm's Annual Strategy Meet with all leaders.

A contentious point was a small business unit which was losing a lot of money (even at a unit level; without loading any regional or central office costs).

But that unit was an emotional favourite - being the first one started by the firm - and people really wanted it to succeed. The general belief was: give it time and it'll work.

But there was one issue: that belief wasn't rooted in data.

And so I crunched the data, created some scenarios and crafted my pitch.

It had three messages:

- The unit-economics were so bad, that it wouldn't become profitable under any plausible scenario
- We shouldn't feel bad about closing one type of unit - with the freed-up bandwidth, we could enhance prospects of other units
- When we experiment with different models, some would fail; we should close them and redirect efforts on what's working

Convincing so many leaders was tough - but worth it. We did end up closing it and focusing attention elsewhere. Data matters.

(If this sounds self-congratulatory, wait for the next story where I screwed up big!)

Story 21: Don't be dogmatic about your beliefs

At the skill-development firm where I worked, things were tough business-wise. Though revenues were growing, our costs were higher and collections were a major struggle. During month-ends, we would be scrambling for funds for salaries and rent.

One key reason for this was our dependence on the government for business. Unlike other sectors, where you get paid by end-consumers, in skill development (due to various reasons), the government is the dominant customer. It sponsors various skill-development projects. As 'skilling partners', firms like ours had the option to apply for one or more of these projects. We'd apply for a program, get selected, conduct the training, meet the post-training deliverables and get paid by the government.

Program choice matters

Now, in terms of programs, there were a ton of options. Almost every government ministry was in on the game - Rural Development, Urban Development, Minorities, Education, Textiles, Agriculture, MSME, Tourism, Tribal Affairs... and this would be repeated across Central and individual state governments!

So a major challenge for us was choosing the right programs to apply for - especially since not all programs were worth applying to. Some had terrible margins, some had onerous conditions and some would interminably delay payments.

My thrust: Focus, focus, focus

In this context, I would push our firm towards program rationalisation. Usually, my thrust would be: "Let's do fewer sectors, geographies, or ministries - but let's do them better".

Around late-2012/early 2013, in a recent strategy meet, we had agreed on a fair bit of rationalisation and decided on the focus programs.

Contd...

A new program is launched

Then (sometime in 2013) came an announcement. A new program was being launched by the government (let's call it TARA). Big buzz surrounding it. Not like other ones, we heard.

A group of 3 leaders went to a government briefing about TARA. Their consensus: this is like no other program. Massive scale, very doable, quick payment terms, and fabulous margins.

("Hm, but all on paper", I mused).

And so, everyone else was fully in favour of doing TARA. Nay, they wanted to go all in; at the cost of other programs. In fact, I distinctly remember how a senior colleague summed up his assessment of TARA: "I feel like a mosquito in a nudist colony".

To do or not to do

I was not sure however - for one, it meant digressing from our recently agreed focus projects. And two - sure TARA sounded good on paper, but could we trust the government to fulfil its promise?

My firm over-ruled my objections and went all in. Like many other firms.

The outcome

TARA turned out to be the most profitable project in our history. It wiped out years of accumulated losses and gave us a new lease of life.

Thank God my firm over-ruled me.

I learnt a key lesson though: Don't be dogmatic about your beliefs and wedded to your plans. Be prepared when the world craps all over it - and make the most of the opportunity such occurrences create!

Story 22: Use entrepreneurial hustle when required

This story happened, of all places, in Itanagar (Arunachal Pradesh). On a bright, humid day in August 2013, I was representing my company, B-ABLE (which was into skill development) in a massive “Skills Mela” organised by the state government.

The program’s objective was to get the state’s youth to enrol for any skill training program; and later hopefully get a job after completing the same.

The Mela’s organisers seemed to have done a great job - there were around two thousand students who had come from various parts of the state. On the other side, we were about 40 skill development firms - each offering many courses (such as computers, retail, hospitality etc.) of varied duration – from 1-month to a year long.

This Mela was held in a huge open ground. In the centre of the ground was a massive stage – on which each skill company was to make a formal presentation to the seated student audience. And located around this stage, in a U-shape, were ‘stalls’ – each firm had a stall where its employees could explain the various courses on offer to the interested students.

Based on the presentations (on the stage) and explanation (in the stalls), students could choose to enrol in any one (or more!) of the courses. And therein was the challenge for companies: Make a good impression on students, so that you can enrol as many as you can.

So the program starts. I have one junior employee in our stall, while I’m seated in the audience, listening to the presentations. Our presentation was one of the last, among the 40 companies. The official schedule was: 3 hours for all company presentations, and then students could visit the stalls.

But I realise something is amiss.

Contd...

Each company was merrily exceeding its time-slot for the talk. Getting bored by the endless droning, some students were filtering out and visiting the stalls.

Realising that 'this doesn't feel right', I called the best guy for the situation: Abhishek Gupta.

Me: Hey Abhishek, our presentation is scheduled for much later – but these students are already starting to visit the stalls...

Abhishek: Arre, then drop everything and go to our stall!

Me: But, but ... our presentation?

Abhishek: Just ditch that – this is a free-for-all – just enrol as many students as you can!

And that's just what I did. Stood near our stall and rounded up students like you'd round up customers at a busy marketplace. Short of shouting out our 'wares', we did all we could to enrol as many students as we could.

I don't remember how many we signed up that day – but I do know this: It was a decent number and had I not made that call to Abhishek, it would've been a fraction of what we ended up with.

And no, I didn't make that presentation at all.

Instead I learnt an important lesson in entrepreneurial hustle. One that doesn't come naturally to a 'structured', process-driven person like me: In a Mela, ditch the presentation; start shouting out your wares.

Story 23: Let degrees not interfere with work

May, 2015. 2 batchmates and I had recently started a company (CaptivaTour) to create mobile audio-guides for historical monuments.

I've written and recorded the first tour - Red Fort in Delhi - and we have created a basic app. Now we need to get actual customers to "try it out" (for free, of course).

So I think - all I need to do is get someone to try a free audio-guide for a monument they are anyway visiting - how hard can it be?!

Turns out, very.

It's a searing day with the mercury probably touching 45 degrees. I'm standing outside Red Fort, trying to pitch our free product to incoming foreign tourists.

But they aren't biting. In fact, as soon as I approach someone, they walk away. In India, they've learnt to not trust anyone, especially at tourist spots.

I shake my head. I'm a guy with a CA and MBA and 12 years of experience... almost begging people to try out something... free!

Not only is it not working, but I'm also worried they may complain to the authorities!

But I don't give up... and finally, manage to convince two guys (both German) to try it. They like it and thank me later.

CaptivaTour didn't take off... But I learnt a key lesson on perseverance (and ignoring the degrees – my own and the heat!) that day.

Work Life

Story 24: Find your Ops orientation

If you categorise people into two buckets - Thinkers and Doers - I'm clearly not the latter.

But while I love the 'Thinking' domain, none of us can escape the 'Operations' elements in our lives.

Our work (and life) is filled with random maintenance tasks that seem unending. The car needs to be repaired after an accident. The chair needs to be fixed. The house-painters botched up their job - we need to remedy it.

Even if you get someone else to do it, you need to supervise!

I've recently worked (admittedly, only a bit) on two such tasks... and realised one thing. I don't like the fire-fighting nature of these tasks. I hate their uncertain, gnawing, unending nature. And the fact that people will screw up, miscommunicate, over-promise and under-deliver. (Shit happens).

Having said that, I do enjoy one aspect about such tasks: when things go wrong, I like to decipher the exact root cause and recommend a long-term fix that will prevent the problem from recurring.

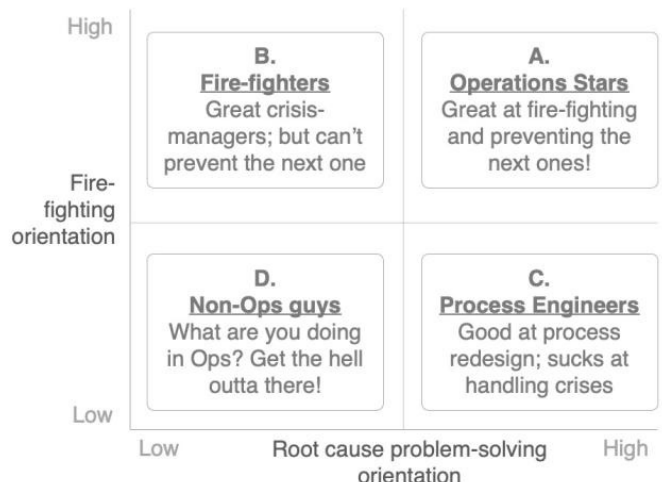
(Good luck trying to get others to implement it though!).

Which is when I realised – there are 4 types of 'Doers' or Ops folks.

I'm clearly a 'C' (I hate the fire-fighting part!).

Which category are you in?

Understand your Operations orientation



ravishankar@storyrules.in

Story 25: Embrace and make the most of your past

Growing up, many of us wanted to do something more exciting than the usual 'safe' options of Engineering, CA, MBA... that we ended up doing.

Later, when mid-life crisis hits, there are two thoughts:

- Those unable to change: "I've already spent so many years doing X, how can I leave it all?"
- Those who take the plunge: "Why did I spend so many years doing something I didn't enjoy?"

This story is about addressing these two thoughts.

In my early CA years, I loved to write ... one day I went to my dad with a desire to leave my accounting degree and get into business writing - by studying journalism.

As you would expect, my dad (and other well-wishers) convinced me against it and I continued with my CA.

I did well in CA (and later in professional life), but for a long time felt regret... What if...?

Later when I moved away from CA, there was also resentment - why did I waste so many years doing something I didn't enjoy...?

But now - I am at peace.

Those years of CA were also instrumental in making me who I am now. I joke about it now in my training sessions, but that degree gives me significant skills and credibility.

And guess what - I am getting to write too! On my own terms :)

Nothing goes unused. Make the most of your past.

Story 26: The power of reflection

A few years back, I was heavily into Twitter, apart from other sources of reading. Once, chatting about it with a close relative (and friend!), Suresh (Ramakrishnan Hariharan), I was in show-off mode.

Me: You should get on Twitter – it's fascinating. Also the Kindle is great - you can carry and read a variety of books. Plus, have you tried podcasts? They are so insightful ... and you can listen to them even when doing something else, like commuting or walking.

Suresh: Tu itna padhta hai toh sochta kab hai? (If you read so much, then when do you think?)

Me: (Stunned silence)

I realised that day - just copious reading isn't going to improve my work. To create better output, I needed to spend more time on a crucial midway step: reflection.

Since then, I deliberately try and carve out more reflection time. I try and do it when I'm cycling or walking. It helps me to de-clog my mind and think clearly.

I'm also a big fan of 'shower moments' - those epiphanic insights that suddenly strike you in the shower!

(Future goal: Try meditation!)

So the next time you get stuck on an issue, don't read more. Take a walk, cycle around or if you're really desperate, hit that shower.

Your mind will surprise you.

Mid-2018. After running a session in Gurgaon, I met one of the participants - a sharp, entrepreneurial recent IIMA grad (let's call him Arun) - who was working on an SME consulting project, directly with the CEO.

He said "The work is great, but I'm not really pushing myself... I'm planning to startup later - that's when I'll go full tilt".

I've come across this in other youngsters too, who don't 'give it their all' in their early jobs - either because it's not their 'passion' or they want to startup later.

My advice to him: Don't wait till you start your company/find your passion. At the early stage of career, just give it all.

Only ask yourself, 'Am I learning enough? Am I being pushed mentally?'

You may think you'll do that later in life. But at age 35:

- You may not have the constraint-free life (kids, spouse)
- You may not have the energy
- You may regret not having picked up the skills/networks

In that project, Arun could learn: how to manage people, how to build strategic plans for a small business, how to market a product - all at NO risk of his own capital. Isn't that a great opportunity?

He seemed convinced by my words... and perhaps changed his mindset.

Would you?

Life

Story 28: Don't be a 'phony'

I was a shy kid growing up - especially among girls.

School was still ok, but in college, we were a boys-only group. Unparalleled fun, unrestricted language, great memories... but terrible conversational skills with females. In 5 years at college, I must have spoken to girls, a sum total of 30 mins or so.

That changed in my first CA article-ship job. We were a great mixed gang of guys and girls.

Trouble is, evolutionary genes kicked in. I would frequently find myself trying to impress the fairer gender... sometimes becoming someone I wasn't.

I remember a conversation with a good friend:

She: Why do guys always try so hard to impress?

Me: I know. We all do it.

She: ... at least you're being honest.

Honesty didn't change my behaviour though. What changed it was a book gifted by my cousin sis: The Catcher in the Rye.

About an angst-ridden American teenager with caustic opinions, one theme stood out for me: he hated 'phonies' (people who act superficially, in order to change others' perceptions).

I was a phony.

Did I change overnight? No. But the awareness it gave me, transformed my behaviour. And beliefs.

Years later, I saw someone exhibiting similar behaviour at my workplace.

I gifted him a book. The Catcher in the Rye.

Story 29: Find your music

One of my biggest regrets is not learning music as a kid. That's doubly surprising given my mom was a Carnatic vocal teacher. Day after day, young students would troop into our house and we would hear the familiar strains of "Sa-sa Re-re Ga-ga"...

For some reason though, mom never forced my brother or me to learn. If only she had...

Now the cool part about life is - you can't change the past, but you sure can do something about the present.

And so, sometime in September-2017, I finally started on my musical journey - with the guitar. Not been easy, but it is such a great sounding instrument (right?)... and I love being able to play old Hindi songs on it.

One aspect which has really been fascinating for me is music theory - it is a beautiful blend of math (you read that right) and art.

The next step was inevitable. About a month back I started Hindustani classical lessons from a vocal teacher nearby. I'm thoroughly enjoying that journey too.

If you enjoy listening to music, then there's a musician inside you - vocal or instrumental. It's never too late. Start somewhere. You'll be surprised by how much you enjoy it, and how much it de-stresses you...

Today, Amma would've been a sprightly 64. I bet she's smiling from up there.

PS: This post was published on 8-Aug-19, Amma's birthday

PPS: I couldn't sustain the practice required for the Hindustani classes... so I had to quit ... ☹ for now. I continue to extensively listen to it though!

Story 30: Let go of distractions

On a lazy Sunday afternoon, Advait (my 7-year old son) and I were in the cozy, welcoming environs of the Pagdandi Bookstore Cafe in Pune.

We ordered a hot-chocolate with marshmallows for him and a bun-maska + adrak chai for me. We then took a chair (Addu on my lap, since the cafe was packed) and picked up a book each as we waited.

The order took its time - but we didn't feel the wait. Coz, books.

Sitting there, with Addu on my lap, both of us immersed, and time passing by gently, I wondered: Why don't I do this more often?

I spend too much time doing unnecessary stuff. Like what would I normally be doing, if at home this time? Probably reading from my phone. Reading what? Twitter.

There's no way to hide this: I had become a Twitter addict. Using the excuse that I "needed to know" important stuff and opinions, I would open the app umpteen times a day. But I knew this – I was reading it primarily for entertainment, not for education. I do follow storytelling experts through my StoryRules handle... but I could easily read their posts once a week on the web.

Why have the app on my phone?

And at that moment, reading with my son on my lap, surrounded by books, I did it: I deleted the Twitter app from my phone.

Thank you Pagdandi!



Story 31: Encourage experiments (and failure)

On May 1st, I was out with extended family for dinner. 5 noisy kids who were super-hungry after playing in a trampoline park.

We first ordered for the kids - the usual pizza and pasta - and then placed our order. One of our orders was a paneer-chilly variant.

As expected, the kids' dishes came first and they dug in. After a bit, the paneer-chilly arrived. My sister asked the kids (mostly for courtesy sake) if they'd like to try.

The younger ones - aged 9, 8 and 7 years old - all passed (saying it would be too spicy). The eldest one (14) said she'll try a small piece. It was the youngest (a plucky girl of 5), with a plate full of white-sauce pasta, who said, "I want to have".

An elder relative discouraged her. But she was insistent. My sister served her a piece.

She immediately found it super-spicy and had to drink a lot of water.

The elder relative (a sweet, kind person) immediately reprimanded her with a "See, I told you".

Experiments by nature may fail. We should admire the courage of the little girl, who wanted to try before making up her mind. An 'I told you so' is the last thing she should hear.

How often do we do this to our kids, employees, friends, when they try something new?

Story 32: Find the Bright Spots of life

March 2017. Our son Advait (who was then 5) had been preparing for his school's Annual Day concert for about a month now. On coming back home, he would show his dance steps and sing the song. We all were super-excited about seeing him perform on stage!

It's the day before the concert. We see some small reddish spots on his body. We think they were because of the heat but decide to check with the doctor anyway.

Our worst fears are confirmed: he's got chickenpox. The doc says: A week to heal, during which time, no contact with other children :(

Praveena and I were devastated - because this meant he would miss the concert ... and more crushingly because it might have been prevented, had we given him a timely vaccination (which was due just about a few weeks back). Talk about timing.

Our bigger worry, of course, was managing Addu. We thought he would be throwing a tantrum, insisting on attending the concert, complaining about his situation etc.

But this guy was nonchalant.

The next day morning (the day of the concert), he gets up. Our faces are morose.

He looks at me and says "Appa, the doctor said it will just take a week... and one day is already over."

Story 33: How emotions help us decide...

How do you make important decisions? Led by reason or by emotion? Here's the story of one of mine.

A rain-soaked Saturday morning in Pune, August 2017. My wife and I are seated in a large auditorium attending a children's music concert.

A little boy, barely 3.5 feet in height, dressed smartly in a formal white shirt and black trousers walks out, and confidently bows to the audience.

Amid applause, he sits at the keyboard and flawlessly plays a small piece.

And as I'm recording my 5-year-old son's first concert, I find tears streaming down my cheeks.

It wasn't just paternal pride. Listening to the (mostly young, some older) performers that day, there was another factor which left an emotional imprint on me. The music.

There are few life-encounters that rival the emotions and joy of experiencing music live. It's a special, uplifting feeling.

I wanted to create that feeling. For myself and for others.

The next week, I walked into my son's music school and signed up for guitar classes. It was one of the best decisions of my life.

My teacher is a thoughtful, insanely-talented musician called Robin and I've thoroughly enjoyed the process of learning from him

Of course, getting time to practise has been tough for me; listening to me practise has been tougher for my family!

Contd...

But overall the journey has been great fun!

Recently, on 26th October 2019, another rainy Saturday morning in Pune, my musical journey had an important milestone. This time I was performing on stage for the first time.

It wasn't ... flawless, but I had a blast! ... And it was fun having my family (including my now 7-year-old son) cheering me from the audience!

Looking back at the start of this journey, the decision wasn't an easy one - my logical brain was thinking of several reasons why this may not work out. I could hear it saying: 'You're too old to learn, you don't have the hand-eye coordination, you won't get time to practise, people will be embarrassed to hear you play...' and so on.

I'm glad I took the decision to find my music despite these arguments - a decision fueled by the emotions of those joyful tears, watching a 5-year-old boy play music on stage.

Which major life decisions have been triggered by emotions for you?

Story 34: Never give up before the game

My 8-year old son plays football at school (at least he attempts to).

These kids love playing matches but aren't too fond of practise drills.

So, to give them some 'match time', about 3 months back, their coach organised a few matches with another school.

There was an issue though - the other team's kids were 2 years older.

At that age-bracket, 2 years makes a huge difference. The outcome was a foregone conclusion.

But not for the Coach. He instilled belief in them. Did the huddle. Discussed match strategy. Positions. Marking.

Not for a moment did he make them feel that it was not possible.

My wife attended the first match. The inevitable happened: they lost 3-0.

Then she had to leave and couldn't attend the second match.

As she's leaving, my son tells her: "Aw, Mumma, you won't be there when we win the second match!"

When. Not if.

The power of self-belief.

They did end up losing the second match too. But kudos to the coach who never allowed their self-belief to waver.

Story 35: The power of story to persuade

It's tough for parents to engage kids during the lockdown.

Thankfully, our 8-year-old loves reading ... and recently he's been besotted by the magic and bewitchery of the Harry Potter series. (Thank you JK Rowling and Kindle Unlimited)!

But the flip side of so much reading? Bugger doesn't play.

After mostly unsuccessful attempts to get him to play family cricket, Praveena (the better half) asked a friend for ideas.

The friend suggested creating a Snakes and Ladders game with physical activities to be done at each point you land.

But here's the problem: Snakes and Ladders is boring. It has no story.

Guess what has a story though: A certain book series about a young wizard.

And so Praveena and Advait created "Broomsticks and Basilisks" - the Harry Potter version of the game.

When he plays this, Advait isn't just moving from one square to another on a piece of paper.

He is living a story. Those 10 jumping jacks on square 11 are actually helping rescue Ron! He's excited and looks forward to this every evening (at least so far!).

Stories are powerful.

Life with
Story Rules

Story 36: Say "Of course I can"

Early 2017. Taking baby steps in data-storytelling, I was pitching to the head of an advisory firm in Mumbai.

On seeing my data-storytelling content he said, "We have a meeting every third Saturday where we invite guest speakers. Would you be interested?"

Me: "Sure, I can run this ppt then"

Him: "Hm, not tips on charts and slides. I want some real storytelling."

Me (Showing a slide with a clear message and chart): "Oh... but isn't this storytelling - with data?"

Him: "No, I want to include other elements- humour, emotion"

Me: "Aaahhh"

Internally it hit me like a ton of bricks. Of course, I needed to expand my horizons in storytelling. Make it not just about numbers. But about emotions. Human Stories. Analogies. Surprise. Curiosity.

I'd read about all this stuff. But did I have any prepared content on it then?

None at all.

Him: "So can you put this together?"

(Me thinking: Create new content and present it to 50 folks - in just 3 days??!)

Me: "Of course I can"

Contd...

Story 37: Stay buoyant in the Ocean of Rejection

Late 2016. My training career had taken off to a flying start because of a senior partner (Sriram) who'd given me a lot of work.

I felt like I've arrived and would soon be inundated with training work. My big worry was how to manage the incoming workload.

Then ... it all crashed. Two of Sriram's biggest clients went on a training slowdown in early 2017. And then I had to reach out to companies for business on my own.

It didn't seem too tough initially. I used my network and got many references. The interactions were promising and many proposals were sent.

Then, nothing.

No one was biting. It was incredibly frustrating.

I remember telling my wife then (around Mar-2017), "If this continues, I'll go into depression"

At that time, I got an inquiry on 'Storytelling for Sales' from a friend for his company. It was just a preliminary lead... but, in order to prepare for the ensuing conversation, I bought the book 'To Sell is Human' by Daniel Pink.

That conversation (or training) never materialised. But that book changed my life.

In the book, Pink makes a simple point. Selling has changed. The old 'ABC' of selling was 'Always Be Closing' - but that's pushy. No one likes it now.

In the new ABC, A stands for Attunement (with your customer) and C is for Clarity (clearly knowing their need). But it was B that shook me.

Contd...

B stands for buoyancy. Why buoyancy?

You see, if you are selling anything - *howsoever good your product might be* - you will face an **Ocean of Rejection**. That concept hit me like ton of bricks.

It essentially means – a LOT of potential clients would reject you because

- Not everyone may need your product,
- Not everyone may need it now, or
- Not everyone may be able to afford it now.

Your job is to avoid taking that ‘ocean of rejection’ *personally*, and be buoyant instead... And work will come.

And work did come. Slowly but surely.

Later, I transitioned to less selling and more marketing (through LinkedIn).

But at that time, when I was super-low, it was a simple concept in a simple book that gave me a ton of perspective, gave me hope and inspired me to continue the fight!

(Minor Caveat: Being ok with rejection doesn't mean being closed to suggestions. If your prospects offer genuine inputs on improving your product, do take them on board!)

But here's the overall takeaway for those in any selling role (even if you are pitching yourself in an interview/pitching your company): Don't get disheartened by rejection. Even when your product/service is great and is needed by the customer, he or she might not take it up. Rejection is common and happens to everyone. Don't take it personally. Keep up the fight and you'll get through!

Story 38: The Client is always the Client

Around Sep-2018, I was doing a 2-day workshop for senior managers of a multinational services firm. The participants were enthusiastic and Day 1 went swimmingly well.

On Day 2, I started off with a module I normally run - and which I realised these folks really need (having looked at some of their outputs).

Unfortunately, one senior-ish guy didn't think so.

He conveyed "This module isn't relevant for me" to the HR folks present there.

They passed on the message to me during a short break.

That's when I screwed up. I should have tactfully figured out what they would like to learn instead...

Rather, I took the stance that "I know that this module is important... I've got just one part to complete, and it'll be awkward to leave it midway".

The HR immediately got a more senior person to intervene and ... of course, I backed down and moved to a different topic.

But I learnt an important lesson. One that my mentor, Sriram Subramanian coined: The client may not always be right, but the client is always the client.

If the client is specifically asking for something (unless it's harmful for them), it is better to listen.

Story 39: Use empathy to connect with your audience

Early 2019, Bangalore. A big auditorium packed with 400 people. I'm here to deliver a 45-min talk on Storytelling at an Analytics conference of a tech major.

My talk was the last one of the day, but I came in earlier to get a sense of the other topics and the theme. Through the day, I sat through one thought-provoking talk after another. So far so scary.

Then came the guy before me - let's call him "S". S, the Analytics Head at an insurance company, was to speak on Data Science. In his mid-40s, he looked serious, unassuming, almost professorial.

Should be an easy act to follow, I thought.

Wrong. That guy was an absolute blockbuster.

Jokes, inside jokes, funny memes, movie references... and all about Data Science! He just kept 'em coming, thick and fast ... and the folks went WILD.

The crowd was roaring as he made his way off the podium.

Uh oh. It was my turn next.

I had to discard the prepared opening and improvise instead. Here's what I said:

"You know, I'd have preferred the post lunch session today... But following after S?! That's crazy! He's a rockstar...!" Then turning to S (who was in the audience), I said, "S, you should do standup!"

S laughed. The crowd laughed. I had opened up on my worries to them - and they showed their empathy through laughter. I took a deep breath, and continued.

Contd...

... Use empathy to connect with your audience

“Initially I was worried - how do I follow after him?! Then I thought - it wasn't just S. We saw a raft of amazing storytellers today.”

I paused. And then raised two key questions that would connect my talk with the previous ones.

“So, how many of you would like to speak like them?” All hands went up.

“Now, how many of you think you can already speak like them?” Almost all went down.

Now I had their full attention. Time for the connecting insight.

“Think of them as Sachin, Virat, Viv... Masters at their craft. But you can't learn by seeing them play right?”

“As for me? I'm not another Sachin... I'm like a Ramakant Acharekar or Gary Kirsten...I want to teach you guys how to speak like them...”

And then we began the talk. The crowd loved it and it all ended well.

In a tough situation, it's ok to acknowledge your fears or worries. But then - especially, if you are in a position of authority - you need to assure the audience of your competence.

You too can use some of these techniques to engage the audience - be honest with them, ask them questions, surprise them.

Essentially you need to empathise with them - at every step of your communication - and you will be able to make a strong connection.

My Quest for
Ikigai

Story 40: My quest for Ikigai

I call myself a 'Story Coach'. But

(a) What is that really? and

(b) How did I reach here?

This (ultra-long, slightly indulgent) story is about my journey.

I'm sure many of you have heard of the Japanese concept of Ikigai. Loosely translated as “a reason for being”, it's a powerful framework to figure out your true purpose in life - that which will bring most happiness to you.



Ikigai¹

This story is about the quest to find my Ikigai.

Before we begin, a few disclaimers!

- This piece was to be a quick recap of my career choices using the Ikigai framework. As I was writing it, however, it took a life of its own and morphed into some semi-autobiographical monster... which was not the intention. But writing-plans rarely survive contact with the keyboard...

- The previous stories in the #40StoriesAt40 series were mostly bite-sized and appealed to a larger demographic. This one is a long-read and may not appeal

Contd...

1. From [Wikimedia Commons](#), by [en:User:Nimbosa](#) derived from works by Dennis Bodor (SVG) and Emmy van Deurzen (JPG)

to everyone. Why am I still posting it? Because I think the message - to find your Ikigai - is something that I strongly and truly believe in.
- While I refer to it extensively in this article, I did not know of Ikigai till a few years back. So it's not as if I have carefully planned my life using this tool! This post is just about me using the framework to look back at my life and 'connect the dots', so to speak.

On that note, let's begin.

Our careers are hypothesis-driven.

You may not realise it, but every time you choose a career or a job, you (or the person influencing your decision) are testing a hypothesis: "This will work because of X, Y or Z". Most often these hypotheses are not written down, or even formally thought through. But they are present.

The problem is, once we start working, we forget them and immerse ourselves in the day-to-day minutiae. Until the next hypothesis comes along. In my case too, I've built and tested hypotheses (or stories that I told myself). It was only later that I realised that I had been subconsciously following one framework through my experiments.

Ikigai.

Here's the story of my hypotheses

Imagine coming from a different (say Amazonian tribal) civilisation and put on a cricket ground. You're asked to throw a red object towards a set of 3 sticks. You're asked to run behind a red ball. People suddenly start clapping and cheering for no discernible reason. You're playing the game, and playing it well. But you don't really 'get' it.

You may be naturally talented - you can hit the ball well or run faster than others. But till you know and understand the game's rules, you can't really achieve your true potential, heck even enjoy the game. And most importantly you can't decide on the most critical question - is this game really for you?

When I was growing up, youngsters were not as worldly-wise as those of today... Even by those low standards, I was much, much worse than the average. Embarrassingly worse. My dad took the decision for me to join commerce and pursue Chartered Accountancy.

But on one (you might say rather important) criteria, I turned out to be surprisingly good - the exams.

People give many names to the dreaded CA exam. 'Come Again' is probably the one that sticks the most. It's difficult to pass this exam in the first attempt. A small minority of those who appear, pass the exam. A smaller minority of those who pass are awarded ranks.

I got a rank in all three levels of my CA exams with a rather high 11th rank in the crucial CA Final Exam, among 9,707 who gave the exam that year. I also got two prizes for being the highest in the country in the subject of ‘Cost Accounting’.

Clearly this was what I was destined for - my dad had chosen right for me.

Except, no.

In my first job itself, I wasn't as engaged as I should be... Most critically I didn't feel connected with my work, there wasn't a sense of purpose or ownership.



Some days were great... But on many days, I remember just waiting for evening to clock out.

At this stage, I would have scored very low on my 'Ikigai index'.

I was plodding on like this, until a chance conversation happened with a close friend (Manish) at the iconic National Hindu Restaurant, at Ballard Estate, Mumbai.

He basically convinced me to do something that I had postponed for later in life: give the CAT.

My second hypothesis was mine (but not really thought-through)

At least this time the hypothesis was (to some extent) mine. I thought - since I don't know what to do in life, maybe an MBA, with all the options that it opens up for me, will help me decide.

Given my proclivity for exams, I did well in the CAT, got calls from all the major IIMs and was fortunate to get through to IIMA.

(I remember my grandma asking then - "Why do you have to go all the way to Ahmedabad to study? Doesn't Bombay have good colleges?")

IIMA was great fun. My first experience of hostel life (which I think everyone should go through once at least) was very memorable. Strong friendships, great camaraderie... and yes, some good learning too (see Story #27 for instance).

While the two years at IIMA gave me some indication of what I'd not be interested in, I still wasn't sure what I would really like to do - finance, consulting or general management?

Somehow I had the fear of being disengaged in each of those jobs. And so, sometime during the second half of the second year, I was drifting aimlessly, with the Beatles' song 'Nowhere Man' ringing in my ears.

I didn't understand it then, but I was looking for something with purpose. The only subject I loved was Economic History - and there weren't many corporate careers in that subject. Still, I yearned to work on something meaningful...

Inspiration arrived in the form of a moving talk by the head of Pratham (the education NGO) in Gujarat - Aditya Natraj.

I thought, this is it! I could join an organisation like Pratham, it would be a wonderful cause, and I could use my skills to contribute to it.

Hypothesis 3 (V1) was the first time I thought on my own...but I didn't act on it...

After spending 2 years on an MBA, there's high pressure to get a corporate job. Leaving 'everything' to get into the social sector seems noble, but it was an extremely tough call to take.

I spoke to some people, introspected... and decided against it. I simply didn't have the guts.

I told myself (as we always do) that I could always join it later, after getting some work experience in the 'real' business world.

Meanwhile, I was back to my ruminations about which sector to work in.

That's when a truly different company came to campus for recruitment. They were a less-known advisory firm called 'Feedback Ventures' based out of Delhi. Three folks - Gopal, Mukesh and Monika took the interview. Refreshingly different - no corporate airs, friendly, and best of all they were helping build India!

That's right - Feedback Ventures focused on the 'Infrastructure' sector in India. And I was sold! This was it - great people, meaningful work and they paid very well too!

That became Hypotheses 3 (V2): Infrastructure consulting

This hypothesis worked out for me - but not for the reasons I thought it would. Joining Feedback, I had visions of being in charge of major road, rail or port projects. Well, Feedback did undertake such projects, but they were in different divisions. And while I did work on the feasibility/advisory side for projects in the transport sector (mainly ports and logistics), most of my work happened in a different field: healthcare delivery.

You may not consider healthcare as 'infrastructure', but we at Feedback did. For one, it was "social infrastructure". And two, Feedback was really good at it. That was because of basically one person: Monika Sood. Monika (batch of 1998, IIMA) is a wonder. Unlimited energy, incredibly sharp and probably India's foremost expert on the private healthcare delivery space. I started working with her and started to love the space.

Medicine is an utterly fascinating topic and I loved to geek out on treatment modalities, medical equipment and specialised procedures. At one point of time, I briefly contemplated leaving it all and enrolling in medical school! But thankfully for India's patients, I did not, and continued to work with clients in the business of healthcare.

Apart from healthcare, the other thing we geeked out on, was consulting techniques, especially communication. In Story #4, I shared how I became a convert to the power of 'storytelling' after an epiphany moment.

One of the side activities I loved to do at Feedback was run training sessions for the new joiners. I didn't realise it then, but that focus on the story - and the training experience - would come in handy later.

The content for these training sessions would come from two sources - our own experiences at work and from books on the topic, which I loved to read. (The McKinsey Way and Presenting to Win were influential).

But if there was one book that influenced me the most, it was the strange-sounding, 'Made to Stick' by Chip and Dan Heath (US-based prof-researchers).

Recommended by the brilliant Rohan Desai, it has in turn been my most-recommended book to others. I still use the concepts outlined in that book in my training sessions.

Of course, sectors, concepts and frameworks were all good; but the best part about Feedback was its people. The team was an absolute delight to work with. Some of my fondest memories are the offsite retreats we went to - and the multiple trips to the Himalayas organised by the inimitable Ranveer Singh. Unforgettable stuff.

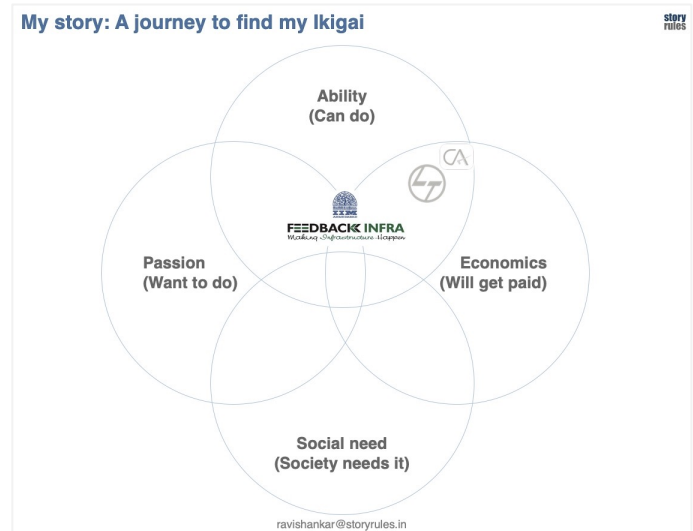
Coming back to work (we did that too, by the way) during the 7 years spent in Feedback, over multiple night-outs, we created some special work for a variety of clients. I was intellectually extremely challenged and content.

But something was missing.

I was itching to make an impact on the most vulnerable and wanted to join the social sector. But the social sector is vast - and I wasn't sure which cause to choose.

That's when I read an article in Mint (the newspaper) - about the paradox that India faces of unemployed youth along with businesses facing an acute shortage of skilled manpower.

Surely, there's got to be a social business model here, I thought. Train youth and place them with the companies - and charge them for the service as a sustainable non-profit.



That became Hypothesis 4: Skill Development as a sustainable social enterprise

I was committed to this space - but didn't want to start-up on my own. I researched the social enterprises working in the sector and zeroed in on B-ABLE, one of the sector's first start-ups.

B-ABLE is a Delhi-based skill-development firm founded by Sushil Ramola and Vijay Mahajan (both IIMA alumni). But I joined them because of the strong rapport I built with one of the senior employees: the incredibly talented and driven Abhishek Gupta.

I spent 3 years with B-ABLE in a variety of roles - Strategy, Planning, Placement and other corporate partnerships... I also spent time visiting training centres located in some of the remotest corners of India.

I built strong friendships with some fabulous folks - Abhishek, Kaushik, Vishal, Radhika and many more. I realised that the people in the social space are as driven and talented (if not more) than the business sector. I learnt some new skills, as I shared in this story about my adventures in Itanagar, of all places!

We were working on exciting projects ... and progress, though slow, was happening.

Unfortunately, over time, I started getting disillusioned with the space. Primarily because of two reasons:

- Dependence on Government: My hypotheses of building a sustainable for-profit social enterprise turned out to be wrong. Skill development is a 'market-failure' sector - and it requires massive government intervention. The government basically funds most entities in the space. And I realised that I didn't have the ability to successfully work with the government (which was critical to succeed in the sector).

- Operations-heavy nature:
Training tens of thousands of youth across 100+ training centres across the country requires strong operations and execution skills. As I've written before, that is definitely not my strong suit! If the world was divided into 'Thinkers' and 'Doers', I'm definitely the former!

Over time these (and other challenges) became too big to bear.

I realised I did not have the ability to succeed in the sector - and I left B-ABLE in mid-2014.

During my exit process, I was uncertain - and had no idea what to do next. And that's when we undertook a family trip to South India. A typical pilgrimage style trip with plenty of temple-hopping interspersed with fabulous meals at traditional Tamilian eateries.

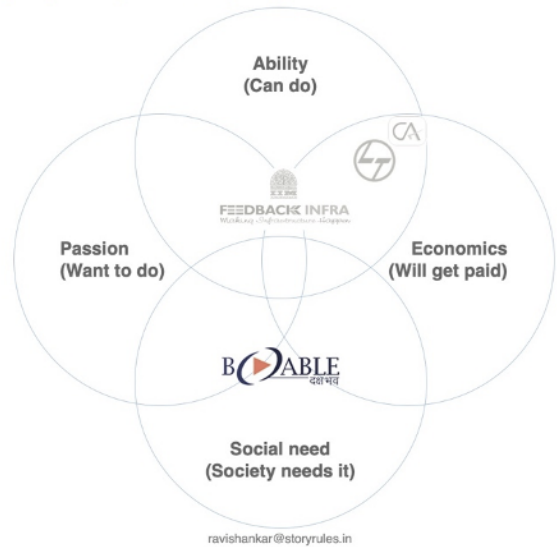
During one of those temple visits (the [Nelliappar temple](#) in my native district, Tirunelveli), I was wandering the massive pillared corridors of this 8th-century architectural wonder.

And I thought: "Who built this? Who financed it? How did they approach the design? What was their story?"

There were no answers.

And, I realised, this was true of India's most famous monuments. You either had the government-published guidebooks (excellent for your insomnia) or the local guides (who didn't let inconvenient elements such as facts come in the way of a good story).

My story: A journey to find my Ikigai



story
rules

I thought - this is it! I could combine my skill of communication and business, along with my passion for history and create a product to meet this need.

That's how the idea of CaptivaTour was born - a mobile app for audio-guided tours for historical monuments.

This was hypothesis 5: History made interesting

As mentioned before, history was a huge interest area for me. I thought - why not use my love for history and my experience in storytelling to tell entertaining (but accurate) stories of India's monuments? They had some fabulous stories which deserved to be told!

I happened to mention this to a couple of batchmates - Deepthi and Sid. Inveterate travellers and history buffs themselves, they loved the idea and said that they had been thinking in similar lines!

We did the market research, thought the idea had potential and registered our start-up. (I ticked off start-up co-founder from my bucket list!)

We named the app CaptivaTour and split responsibilities. Deepthi headed Marketing, Sid was Tech plus overall leadership and I focused on the Content (plus some Sales elements).

We decided to start with monuments in Delhi. I took up membership at a library in Pune, picked up as many books on Delhi's history as I could, and started reading.

The first tour was tough to create- but it was completed in mid-2015. Other tours followed and over time we built 18 tours covering major monuments in Delhi, Agra and Jaipur.

Then came the marketing and selling part. We designed collateral and other marketing material. Initially, when we wanted feedback on the product, I would try and get unsuspecting tourists to try it out (for free). Story #21 tells a memorable incident from those days.

During this time, I camped out at Paharganj in Delhi (cheapest rooms, central location, cheap beer at 'My Bar') for several weeks to pitch our product to hotel, hostel and B&B owners.

(If you ever want to completely eviscerate your pride, try to sell something to a hardcore West-Delhi hotelier from Paharganj or Karol Baug. It's a free ego-detox program).

Having said that, the hotels were just the channel. The customers were the tourists - mainly foreigners. Our hypothesis was: Folks have paid thousands of dollars on a trip to see the Taj Mahal. Surely, they would be willing to pay an additional \$2 for a great guided tour that enhances their experience!

We were wrong.

Expecting people to pay for content is extremely tough.

Having said that, if there was any team that could have accomplished it, it was this team. Our product was great, we tried everything possible with our limited budgets on the marketing and sales side, we printed great collateral that we gave out free...

Unfortunately, it was not to be. Despite giving it our best, we ultimately had to see the writing on the wall - there was not a market big enough (at least in India) for a product like this.

The 'Economics' of the Ikigai circle, were just not working out!



During the two year period we were working on CaptivaTour, Sid continued working with another firm, while I had left my job... and was getting antsy.

In order to raise some funds for CaptivaTour, I had approached a Pune based history-lover and corporate trainer called Sriram Subramanian.

Sriram couldn't offer funding. But having looked at his profile, I asked him another question?

Can I become a corporate trainer with him?

He was incredibly generous and took me as one of his trainers (he had about 5-6 other affiliated trainers).

And it was on 2nd March 2016 that I did my first training session for a leading Indian bank. The topic was Effective Data Analysis. It went off decently enough to encourage me to do more.

Sriram then introduced me to another client - a leading international financial-services major in Bangalore. Sriram was incredibly hands-off and allowed me to structure and create my content.

I ran the first batch of Effective Data Analysis for the Bangalore client. They liked it (though I cringe with horror when I look at some of the content now) and came back - can you run a program on Data Storytelling (referring a book on visual storytelling that had recently been released)?

I immediately got the book, incorporated the concepts in the workshop, and ran my first Data Storytelling workshop in May-2016. They found it useful and scheduled more.

Slowly my training career was picking up.

This was a time when I was juggling two roles - creating data-storytelling content for training corporates; and writing history stories for CaptivaTour. I still hadn't committed to either then.

Then, the epiphany happened.

So, in CaptivaTour I'd written most of the content till then, but we wanted other writers to create stories too. To enable consistency in the approach for the stories, I crafted an internal 1-pager 'Principles for History-storytelling' for CaptivaTour.

And that's when the massive penny dropped.

I realised that - whether I was dealing with business data, or events from history (or for that matter any set of facts) - the underlying storytelling principles ... Were. Exactly. The. Same.

Mind. Blown.

I now knew what I had to do. Become a life-long student of these storytelling techniques. And help people from all walks of life - business, social sector, education - in telling their work stories better, and driving better outcomes by doing the same.

This was something that I was good at. This was something I was truly passionate about. The economics would hopefully work out. And by enabling people from all sectors tell their stories better, I would be fulfilling the social purpose that I was best-placed to do.

I had to become a Story Coach. Story Rules was born.

This, I realised - is finally it.

This is my calling.

This is my purpose.

This... is my Ikigai.



A top-down view of a cup of coffee, a pair of glasses, and a spiral notebook. The cup is filled with a light brown liquid. The glasses are black and folded. The notebook is white with a spiral binding.

40 stories at 40

40 real-life stories that demonstrate the craft of
Storytelling

RAVISHANKAR IYER

**story
rules**