

Interview with Dr. Veit Etzold on the Subject of Storytelling



Everything is subject to trends, including the consulting-, keynote-speaking and executive education business. It seems we're hearing more and more about storytelling. Is this the latest trend in business?

Dr. Veit Etzold: *I rather think it's the oldest trend. Storytelling is as old as the ability to speak. People have always used stories to transport content. Stories are exciting and want to be heard, they have a message and they are "sticky". The most successful CEOs in history were always good storytellers. What's more, people want to hear stories. However, you have to be careful: If you can't tell a good story yourself, others will tell it for you. But not necessarily to your advantage. So it's better to tell your own story than to let others do it. Then the story can become a \$tory!*

Why does the world need more lectures and advice on storytelling if, as you say, storytelling is in our blood?

Dr. Veit Etzold: *Because we have forgotten how to tell good stories. Why? Because we are too fact- and data driven. Because those who can talk fact, don't really "tell" something, because we cling to Excel spreadsheets and slides and rely on numbers, data and facts. Nobody likes slides, but everyone uses them.*

We think too much about ourselves and too little about others and have forgotten that when you go fishing, the worm should be tasty for the fish, not for the fisher.

What about Germany? Are we good storytellers?

Dr. Veit Etzold: That's what one would think, in the "land of poets and thinkers", but this doesn't apply to the world of business. We believe, especially here in Germany, that our arguments should be strictly factual, because that demonstrates objectivity and a certain soberness in thinking. That is indeed a worthy goal. However, there is a region in the brain, the amygdala, which decides what is important and what is not. Our ancestors used stories to explain best practices for survival. That's why, at the door of the brain, a tough old bouncer known as the thalamus lets stories in – but keeps fact-heavy business speech out.

You have a PhD in Media Studies, you worked in strategy consulting, you have an MBA from a top business school and now you're writing thrillers that go straight into the bestseller lists, one after the other. Did you ever think, back when you were sitting in management meetings at Boston Consulting, that your career would lead you to write novels?

Dr. Veit Etzold: I think this is no coincidence. All the industries I have worked in have to do with the sale of high-margin abstract products or services: banking products, media, strategy projects and management seminars. In these fields, you always have to tell a story, if you want to be successful. Equity storytelling for example is the field where the two worlds overlap: understanding business and telling stories. There are creative people who advise businesses without having any knowledge of business. And there are consultants who want to teach creative techniques to managers, without being successfully creative themselves. I offer both sides. And that means my approach is ready for immediate implementation! At least, that's what my clients tell me.

Last question: Do you have something like a guiding principle?

Dr. Veit Etzold: If you do not tell a good story about yourself, others will tell a bad story about you. Because: "If you're not at the table, you're on the menu!"