

This is an edited transcript of the February 28, 2013 SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast interview titled ['David Lee: Storytelling That Sells'](#).

**Announcer:** Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving for small business success? There is help. Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

**Stephen Lahey:** Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host. Our guest today has been a self-employed consultant, speaker, and corporate trainer since 1995. He is an internationally recognized authority on optimizing employee performance. And in that capacity, he served a variety of interesting organizations, including large international companies like Accenture and Unum Life Insurance, government agencies such as the US Department of Health and Human Services, and educational institutions including Southern New Hampshire University and others.

Our guest has authored nearly 100 articles and book chapters on employee performance that have been published in trade journals and books in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Australia. And he's the author of the recent book *Powerful Storytelling Techniques* published by ASTD Press. This book is based on his 20 years of experience with storytelling in business and a variety of other settings. Today, I am pleased to welcome Mr. David Lee to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast. Thank you for joining us, David.

**David Lee:** Thanks. Good to be here.

**Stephen Lahey:** Well, I'm glad you're here. And I know you're just getting over a cold, but I gave you a recommendation for some cough syrup which hopefully will not put you to sleep – it will relax you. This will be a soothing interview, I guess. We'll have to see how that works. [Laughs]

**David Lee:** [Laughs]

**Stephen Lahey:** One of the things that occurred to me when I was going to interview you is we've both observed a lot of business speakers and sales presentations over the years and

wouldn't you agree with me that really only a handful of these speakers are able to engage their audience upfront and actually keep them throughout a presentation?

David Lee: Yeah, I would definitely say a majority don't do a great job at that.

Stephen Lahey: And I've seen you speak. And what always stood out for me – watching you, for example, in your YouTube channel and so on, is that you're a master at engaging your audience. And you're actually very good at provoking them so they can feel something. And you do it in a very non-confrontational way, which I find interesting. So can you share with us how you were able to do that?

David Lee: Sure. Well, that's why I love – or one of the reasons why I love – storytelling. You mentioned provoking. It's a way to present challenging ideas, a way to challenge people's limited belief without being in your face, so to speak, because you're just telling a story, you're not directly confronting them.

Stephen Lahey: And when you think about telling stories versus doing a more formal PowerPoint presentation and so on, how would you draw the distinction?

David Lee: Well, let me give you an example – and I bet every listener can relate to their version of this – actually, this experience stands out in my mind even though it happened 15 or 20 years ago. I'm at a conference – and this was in the mind-body medicine field – and it was an after-the-lunch presentation. So that alone makes it hard for a speaker. And this was an internationally known speaker and a real pioneer in the world of mind-body medicine.

And he's talking about whatever it was that he believed so passionately about; but unfortunately, he was doing the verbal equivalent of death by PowerPoint. He was just speaking in terms of bullet-point takeaway messages. And so I won't give the mind-body medicine content, but let's say in the world of business, let's say he was presenting how to be a good consultant or offer professional services. And let's say he was saying it's important to really listen to your potential client and don't offer solutions until you really

understand their unique issue and you need to understand what's important to them. Anybody in the audience would be like, well, duh, yeah, I know that. So that was sort of the equivalent of what he was saying.

So I just find myself slumping in my chair and getting ready to drift off the sleep. And I look around and there's about 1000 people there, and I could just see and feel the energy leaving the room. And it's funny because I don't know if he picked up on it and decided to switch gears or he planned this already, but he switched into telling a story about a challenging patient of his who looked was going to die within the next few months. And he told a story of how they worked together to create this really miraculous recovery.

And it was so neat because as he started into telling the story, I literally felt myself lift up my posture from slumped into sitting upright and just being riveted by this story. And I looked around, and the same thing was happening with the rest of the audience. And it was just a nice reminder because at that point I had been teaching storytelling for several years and it was just a nice reminder for me, you know, there it is. That's the power of storytelling versus doing sort of like bullet-point truisms and platitude.

Stephen Lahey: Is storytelling something you can use to really sell an idea in a focused way?

David Lee: Oh, absolutely. In fact, it's an incredibly powerful way. I think sometimes when people think of storytelling, they think of sort of like melodramatic storyteller performers who tell fantastical tales from other cultures and mythology and that sort of thing. And the type of storytelling that I'm talking about is the kind of stories that everybody tells. So something that happened at work that was sort of wild and wacky or consultants sharing consulting war stories or when somebody is sharing a case study or success story; those are all examples of stories.

Stephen Lahey: The times that I've seen people tell stories, and they include seeing really dynamic speakers like Tony Robbins and also very, very soft-spoken speakers, there was a hypnotherapist, for example, who by the way was in the right job, had a very soothing voice, who told a story as well. And each of them

were really trying to make a point in a very non-confrontational way.

In other words, it was almost as if they had said, you know, David, I realize this isn't you, but let me tell you about something that might make you think. *And in reality, David, that is you.* You can put yourself behind that story. And you sort of enter that world because you can relate to it. So I think that's the main point you're getting to is the power of stories is to engage people personally. And whatever your style, you still need to do that in order to persuade.

David Lee:

Yes And actually, I want to play off the hypnotherapy reference. I don't know if I had shared this with you off-line, but actually, my beginning in storytelling was as a hypnotherapist. So using that as a clinical, as a healing modality is what got me into it. And the person whose model I learned from, Dr. Milton Erickson, one of the terms that was used is that it's a therapy of politeness because exactly what you were saying that you're not directly saying this is something you need to hear, you're simply telling a story about something that you've shared with somebody else.

Actually, let me give you a specific story about doing that that I sometimes like to use when I'm presenting on this because it's such a perfect example of how you can deliver a powerful message in a gentle way using storytelling. So this actually comes from an experience that I had where I was watching a DVD of a man who is really big in the Internet marketing arena, a man named Frank Kern, who's kind of a wild surfer dude kind of guy.

And he was talking about how when he was just struggling and trying to create this business that would work and it wasn't working; and he went to some conference of Internet marketers. And after success story after success story was on the stage sharing their stories, he found himself sort of looking in the mirror. And oftentimes, when I tell this story, I ask the audience to think of their own version of some type of challenge that they're facing that seems so daunting. And that's what was going on with Frank trying to get this going. But it just seemed so scary, so big, et cetera.

And then, finally, he said to himself – and I'll give you the G-rated version – he said to himself stop being such a baby and get off your butt and do something. And as I watched and replayed the DVD as he's saying that to himself, like you know you can do this; stop being such a baby and letting your fears get the best of you and get off your butt and do it. So he's telling that to the audience about what he's saying to himself, but the audience is hearing that as if he's saying it to them at a subconscious level. But he's not directly confronting each person, like, Joe, stop being a baby. And get off your butt, Sally. And so they can hear it and start processing it without feeling the need to defend it. Does that make sense?

Stephen Lahey: It totally makes sense. You know, the funny thing is I love watching speakers and I love watching them, often not so much for the content, but for watching the process of how they do what they do.

David Lee: Yeah.

Stephen Lahey: So, for example, I've seen Tony Robbins use – and you understand what this is – anchoring techniques.

David Lee: Yes, I understand.

Stephen Lahey: You referred to Milton Erickson who certainly influenced people in developing NLP, Neuro Linguistic Programming, et cetera, which is a little bit esoteric but, basically, suffice to say that every time Tony would make a really intense emotional point, he would slap his chest – and by the way, he was mic'd under his shirt – and it would make a loud boom! And later, every time he would make that same gesture, people would just immediately go into a whole different emotional state.

Now that sounds very manipulative; and I suppose it is. But he was not a cult leader, he was using this to help people to change what they're doing and get better results in their business, etc. Yet how he was doing it was under the radar. And what you're really saying with storytelling and Frank Kern – who I've heard of as an Internet marketer – is that sometimes you need to do that. Because if you can bypass people's analytical mind, you can probably get your point

home in a different way and have them relating to it personally and draw them in.

I find this very interesting. Our listeners are almost all very accomplished at what they do in their work, but in terms of speaking, I don't think most of them would say, yeah, I'm a really grade A speaker. I'm not sure how much confidence they would have that they can be a master storyteller. So what advice can you give them as to where they can start? Because I think their biggest fear is: probably if I try this my clients are going to look at me like I have two heads. Where do you begin? What's the baby step and then the next baby step and so on?

David Lee: First, speaking from personal experience watching a lot of consultants and vendors speak at events, they have their big chance to share their expertise, there's just huge room for improvement.

Stephen Lahey: That's a nice way of saying that.

David Lee: And actually, with storytelling, it makes your job as a consultant or the solution provider so much easier. And that's actually one of the reasons why I recommend to people to start out their presentations with a story. And just an FYI, you probably picked this up, but for the listener is notice that even though we're having an interview and a conversation, I started it out with a story.

Stephen Lahey: I noticed. [Laughs]

David Lee: And so one of the reasons why I love starting out with stories even though a lot of what I do involves speaking, every now and then I'll feel nervous for whatever reason, and I find that rather than trying to come out with some sort of memorized speech opener or six bullet points or whatever, if I just share a story about something that happened that's relevant to the topic, especially something that I was involved in, it's like hanging out with an old friend because we know our story because we experienced it.

Stephen Lahey: I think there are actually quite a few people listening to this podcast who are a little bit analytical, like me. A lot of consultants are. And many of these folks are consultants.

But just thinking in terms of people in the B2B space, that tends to be a big part of how their brain works; they're analytical.

So break it down into some nuts and bolts; how is a story constructed? How do you know that you've got a solidly built, serviceable story that you can share? Can you give us a sense of the structure and sort of how do you figure out how to build the story?

David Lee:

Well, I think the simpler way to start is to think about the opening question, what's my key message? What's the takeaway message? So, for instance, and let me just back up for a second. A couple of phrases that can really help the person who feels like, well, I don't know how to tell stories, help them get started is for instance..., for example..., what I mean by that is..., and then just explain a situation.

So, for instance, when I do programs for supervisors and managers, at points in the program I share with them research on the difference it makes having a great manager versus a lousy manager. And so there's plenty of analytical data. But what I start off with is a scenario of a client experience that I had where one manager, Harry, was a superstar manager and he had the star team in the organization. And I talk about how because he's such a great manager, he wins, his team wins, his employer wins. And then I share what I heard from employees who worked for John and how they were the nightmare team and how much hassle John had to endure, how unhappy his employees were, and how unhappy the employer was.

So you notice what happens is I'm not doing some like fairytale story; it's just straight up. Everybody who hears that story can relate to it in some kind of way and it points out in a way that hits people home viscerally; especially, if they can relate to the frustration that John feels, man, it's really worth the effort learning how to be more like Harry and less like John. Get relevant, get personal, get a little bit visceral. Well, I mean, that really without going into the mechanics of the sequence of the story, that alone, you know, keeping things simple, that alone is perfect for the person to do.

Another simple way of thinking about, okay, well, how do I tell a story is to think about, well, how do you share a case study of what you do. So what was the client's problem that they struggled with? And then ask yourself, well, how do I describe that in a way so it grabs the listener. So back to that visceral thing. So what is the problem and then what was the solution that you came up with, that you came up with together, et cetera, et cetera? And then, what good thing happened because of that? So sort of like pain, solution, promise would be a way of thinking about that.

Stephen Lahey: That's good selling. If you've ever heard of the book by Neil Rackham call *SPIN Selling*, that's "situation, problem, implication, need, and then solution" and no matter how you want to slice it and dice it in terms of the sales process, the persuasion process – you're really talking about a very powerful way to get people to listen (like you said, at a more visceral level). And that's what moves people – emotion. If they don't feel something, they're probably not going to do something.

So that's interesting stuff. By the way, on your YouTube channel you have a whole bunch of different, I think, great examples of how to do that. And I know we don't have a lot of time because this is a half hour or so interview, but are there other resources that can help people to understand how to approach this so that people like me, again, who have to do their homework, they're chronically conscientious and maybe even a little bit overly analytical, shall we say, and they want to learn a little bit more, get the facts, understand the structure?

I know your YouTube channel which is linked to, I believe, on your website; if not we'll send it out with the links to our email subscribers as bonus material. That's one source. What are some other sources of good information, whether they're books or DVDs or CDs or whatever else that you'd recommend for those people who want to get the nitty-gritty?

David Lee: What I'll do is have a special folder at [StoriesThatChange.com](http://StoriesThatChange.com) with Small Business Talent.

Stephen Lahey: So we'll send people a link to that. The subscribers to this podcast who are listening to me right now, they will be able



to go to that folder – and that’s very interesting. That’s great. Are there a few thoughts you have about resources and where you would begin in terms of resources for those of us who need that?

David Lee: Absolutely. And I really hope people will be like you that really dive into it because it’s an incredibly powerful skill and it’s worth learning how to do it well. So here are a couple that I recommend, and I’ll have it in the list in the Small Business Talent folder. So here are a couple that I would recommend. One is *Made to Stick* by Chip and Dan Heath. And it’s not just about storytelling, but storytelling is included in it. But it’s all about how to be a more influential communicator. So that’s one, *Made to Stick*.

*Influencer*, it’s by a whole group of authors. *Influencer; [How to Change Anything]*. And they actually have an amazing story in that book that illustrates the difference between trying to use PowerPoint slides and pie charts, et cetera, versus telling a story. And then a brand new one, which is really good, called *Lead with a Story* by Paul Smith who works at – I think it’s Procter & Gamble.

I’d also recommend going onto YouTube and putting in storytelling; and specifically, I would recommend people check out Ira Glass from *This American Life*. He has a YouTube series on storytelling. It’s just – It’s fun. And he’s obviously a great storyteller.

Stephen Lahey: What is your YouTube channel, David?

David Lee: It’s Human Nature At Work. So YouTube.com/HumanNatureAtWork. But if they go to StoriesThatChange.com, they’ll see all the videos.

Stephen Lahey: That’s great. That’s interesting. Well, that would be the place to go. StoriesThatChange.com. And I know you have several websites, but that, to me, was a particularly interesting one; and that’s what triggered me to give you a call and do this interview because that’s the process that you use. I’ve subscribed to your *Human Nature At Work* newsletter for years and always enjoyed it – I guess, primarily, because I agree with you [laughs].

But other than that, I just found you very interesting and engaging and I saw some great testimonials. For example, I saw that Naomi Judd had a video testimonial relating to your speaking work. And I thought, well, that's different.

You really are the genuine article when it comes to having a natural ability that you've developed to engage people, but in a non-confrontational way; and that is a great skillset for anyone who's a consultant – or really for anyone who has to sell anything.

We all have the urge sometimes to say: "But don't you see? It's so obvious you need to do \_\_\_\_." Well, if we do that they are not going to listen.

David Lee: You've got it.

Stephen Lahey: You have to get at it slightly indirectly and with the knowledge that you're doing them a favor because they should listen. They should at least consider this and take it in.

Well, as we're wrapping up, I'm sure that there are some people who would like to explore working with you and improving their storytelling and speaking in general; do you take on individuals as a coach?

David Lee: Absolutely. Yes.

Stephen Lahey: Okay. And when you work with them, I'm assuming through the miracle of Skype, for example, that they don't have to be in the beautiful (and very cold) state of Maine where you are.

David Lee: You are correct, sir. [Laughs]

Stephen Lahey: Yes. Yes. And yet, I'm in Upstate New York so, you know, I get cold too. [Laughs]

David Lee: [Laughs]

Stephen Lahey: Anyway. I would think a lot of people who are trying to just change it up a little bit, moving away from stale PowerPoint presentations that everybody's doing – the PowerPoint crutch, I guess I would say – to doing something different to

distinguish themselves. I think that you're a resource they should consider.

So how can they best get in touch with you, David? Just go to your website?

David Lee: Yeah, just to go to [StoriesThatChange.com](http://StoriesThatChange.com) and they can email me from there.

Also, one other piece that I do want to mention. We've done sort of a presentation-centric talk about storytelling, but I also think it's helpful for consultants and service providers to appreciate that you can use storytelling in the one-on-one conversations that you have. It's a powerful way to challenge a client, again, in a very non-confrontational way. So you get to use storytelling in that situation really effectively too.

Stephen Lahey: I could not agree more. My core business since 2000 has been executive search, and when you're talking to someone – and by the way, you mentioned Procter & Gamble, a great company. I talk to candidates at Procter & Gamble since I do recruit in the consumer package goods space. They're very well-educated. They're very analytical and extremely bright business people. The thing is though, although you'd think that they would want a very fact-based presentation, they don't. They want to hear the story. They want to hear the back story. It draws them in.

If they can see themselves in the story of the job and the company I'm representing it helps them understand what the job opportunity really means to them personally. And either it fits with what they want for themselves or it doesn't. Storytelling is a great way to put people into the situation more personally – so they can feel it.

It's not a manipulation technique. It's really a way to –

David Lee: No.

Stephen Lahey: – to make it real for someone to have them understand what it actually means to them versus just looking at the facts. With a job change, particularly, it's not just about the facts, it's about a whole variety of different intangibles; and that

can only be fully grasped by interviewing and getting to know people. *But the storytelling element is a good first step.*

Well, David, I really appreciate the time you've taken. One last question; can I buy your book on Amazon?

David Lee: It is on Amazon, absolutely.

Stephen Lahey: Good, I'll be buying it after the interview.

Thank you so much, once again. I really appreciate you coming on. I'd like to have you back, by the way, if you don't mind. We've just scratched the surface.

David Lee: Sounds great.

Stephen Lahey: And to our listeners, thank you for spending some time with us today. If you like what you heard, I encourage you to visit [SmallBusinessTalent.com](http://SmallBusinessTalent.com) and subscribe to the podcast by email. And, if you do, you'll be alerted whenever we post podcast content but you'll also receive exclusive resources. David mentioned, for example, a link to a special folder on his site. Well, there's that and much more. So if you subscribe, you'll be getting the goodies.

Thanks again for listening today, and best wishes for your success.

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