

# Why top B-schools are betting big on storytelling for future leaders

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Recruiters have been increasingly prioritising storytelling capabilities, alongside analytical skills in fresh MBA graduates. | Photo: iStock/ Getty Images

In today's fast-paced and data-driven corporate world, with shrinking attention spans, storytelling is fast emerging as a critical skill for business leaders. Communicating complex business messages, including numbers and trends, in a gripping storytelling format is very effective, as it enables leaders to emotionally connect with their teams.

Recognising its value, leading business schools have been integrating storytelling into their curricula to prepare the graduating students for leadership roles. This article explores

the usefulness of storytelling skills for business leaders, expectations from recruiters and how top Indian B Schools are gearing up to address the same.

## **The art and science behind the power of storytelling**

As per cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner, the human brain is 22 times more likely to remember a fact or message when it is wrapped and narrated as a story than otherwise. An interesting story triggers emotions and helps absorb the gist of the message quickly. The combination of data and story activates both parts of the brain and makes the message stick longer. No wonder most of us still remember the bedtime stories narrated by our parents, from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Panchatantra, and more.

Research from Harvard Business School (HBS) emphasises storytelling as a crucial skill for leadership. Strategy consulting company McKinsey views storytelling as a foundational leadership skill and utilises the SCQA (Situation, Complication, Question, Answer) framework to structure compelling narratives, using a PowerPoint presentation. It was found business leaders, using narratives, can build trust and empathy faster, articulate complex strategies more easily, unify teams around a shared vision, and motivate people effectively than those who communicate with data alone.

## **Storytelling skills as a differentiator**

Recruiters have been increasingly prioritising storytelling capabilities, alongside analytical skills in fresh MBA graduates for dynamic roles in consulting, marketing, branding, product management, corporate communications and general management. Consulting firms McKinsey, Bain, BCG and Deloitte expect storyline-driven presentation skills, along with persuasive client narratives, for consultant roles.

For product management roles, technology companies like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft search for candidates who can articulate vision, user stories, and data-driven product narratives. Branding and marketing roles in Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) companies like Hindustan Unilever, Procter & Gamble, Nestlé, ITC, and Marico require skills in customer storytelling and design of campaign narratives. Leadership and general management tracks in business conglomerates like Tata, Aditya Birla Group, Mahindra, Reliance, etc, seek candidates who can orchestrate personal leadership stories.

## Key storytelling competencies

Key storytelling competencies include narrative frameworks, delivery skills and emotional intelligence to create an authentic, impactful narrative that resonates with the situation and the audience. Developing these abilities involves active listening skills and practice, understanding the psychology of connection and incorporating elements of humour and emotional appeal to make the story interesting. Data storytelling involves transforming complex data and analytics, using data presentation tools like Tableau and Power BI, into an interesting visual and verbal narrative that is easily understandable and persuasive to a non-technical audience.

## How leading Business Schools incorporate storytelling in their curricula

In view of its importance, most premier business schools have stopped treating communication as a one-off soft skills course in the first semester and have been building full-fledged storytelling journeys across the programme. Harvard Business School uses Marshall Ganz's Public Narrative framework (Story of Self, Us, Now) for leadership, focusing on shared values and challenges.

Stanford Graduate School of Business offers "The power of story" and "Master storytelling for authentic leadership", where leaders learn to build signature stories that capture their values and vision and to understand the neuroscience behind why stories move people. The European Summer School imparts the skills using the 5 C's of storytelling (Character, Context, Conflict, Climax, and Conclusion), persuasive writing, and crafting stories from data. These curricula combine storytelling theory with practice to equip students with the techniques to craft and deliver narratives effectively across various business contexts.

Most IIMs offer courses on storytelling, where participants explore why stories matter, how leaders across domains use them and how to harness the hidden, invisible stories within organisations for change. ISB's "Business Storytelling and Executive Presence" course, delivered by expert storytelling practitioners, explicitly combines storytelling from the perspectives of business, data and brand building. XLRI Jamshedpur, in its course on "Storytelling with Data", covers storytelling frameworks, principles of effective data stories and how to design the dashboards that cut through the noise and drive decisions.

Symbiosis Institute of Management (SIBM)'s course on corporate readiness includes modules that train students in the art of storytelling to enhance ability to communicate ideas, engage audiences, and drive business initiatives. Management Development Institute (MDI) offers a program on leadership communication through storytelling and theatre techniques.

## **Storytelling in religious epics: enduring lessons for leadership**

Indian epics richly illustrate storytelling as a means to teach ethics, leadership, and resilience. Ramayana's story of Rama's perseverance, duty (dharma), and leadership during adversity serves as a model for principled decision-making and emotional strength. Mahabharata's complex tales, including the Bhagavad Gita's discourse, teach strategic thinking, moral dilemmas, and the importance of duty, highlighting how stories convey profound leadership lessons. Panchatantra uses animal fables, with simple yet effective narratives, to impart lessons on strategy, communication, and human behaviour. Religious texts - Bible, Quran, Guru Granth Sahib, and the Buddha's teachings, also offer stories for ethical and effective leadership, emphasising core principles of integrity, compassion, selflessness, and vision.

Incorporating ancient wisdom into modern management education enriches leadership training by reminding future managers of storytelling's power to communicate effectively and transform individuals and organisations.

## **Conclusion**

For business schools, the inclusion of storytelling is now a strategic necessity to ensure graduates are equipped to be persuasive leaders. As business schools worldwide emphasise their mastery and recruiters seek these skills in strategic management roles, the ability to weave meaningful stories remains a timeless cornerstone of impactful leadership. Learning from epics enhances this skill by rooting it in cultural depth, emotional resonance, and ethical guidance that every business leader should harness.

The integration of storytelling into leadership development bridges ancient narrative wisdom and modern business demands, fostering leaders who can communicate, inspire, and innovate through the power of stories. The future of successful corporate leadership in the current Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) world will be written by

its storytellers. Indian Business Schools have their role cut out to prepare their graduates to face it successfully.

*(Prof. O.R.S. Rao is the Chancellor of the ICFAI university, Sikkim. Views are personal.)*

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