



Story First: Why Information Alone Can't Drive Change

Date: Tuesday, July 21, 2026

Host: Dr. Shari Simpson, Thought Leader, Paylocity

Guest: Mary Czarnecki, Brand Messaging Consultant, Mary Czarnecki LLC

[00:00:00] **ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to The HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:00:16] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Joining me today is Mary Czarnecki, keynote speaker and consultant at Mary Czarnecki LLC. Mary helps leaders communicate with clarity and confidence, especially during change and high-stakes moments. Mary, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:00:38] **MARY CZARNECKI:** Absolutely. Thanks so much for having me here.

[00:00:41] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So you really help leaders turn their ideas into influence. I'd love to start with a little bit about your background and passion around storytelling as a leader.

[00:00:53] **MARY CZARNECKI:** I've always been a storyteller. Just ask my kids, they probably got more stories growing up than the average bear. My passion around storytelling and leadership started formulating in my own career, when I started to look at the mentors and models that I had as I went through the different roles in strategy and marketing at Johnson & Johnson and WebMD. I noticed that certain leaders, certain mentors of mine, were just able to be more persuasive, able to get people on board with their ideas, able to help communicate complex strategies more effectively than others. And one of the things I started noticing was how they were using story to do that, whether it was personal stories or stories drawn from their work experiences, using it as a tool to enhance their communication and their leadership.

[00:01:49] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So often, our change initiatives fail because of communication, not strategy. So how do we take those lessons learned from that story side and bring them into how we think about our change initiatives?

[00:02:03] **MARY CZARNECKI:** We've all heard, "What's the moral of the story?" or "What's the lesson that this story is trying to teach us?" Most of us have a favorite kids' story that we probably begged someone to read us so many times that we didn't even need the words anymore. I think about stories now in leadership and in our professional lives in a similar way. Usually, especially with internal communication or getting people on board with initiatives, we have to have people go through some sort of transformation. They have to shift the way that they're thinking or operating in some way, and the story can help us help them understand it in a more comfortable, more approachable way. The way I think about it is first identifying what is the block. What is it that someone isn't quite getting or understanding or seeing as in their best interest or aligned with their goals? And then what story could we share that would actually help them understand, "Oh, it's kind of like this thing that you're already familiar with." As humans, we're looking for that familiarity. We're looking for that risk avoidance. We all want to survive and thrive, but we don't want to go outside that comfort zone. The story can help build that bridge from something that feels kind of scary and different to something that's more accessible, more understood already by someone.

[00:03:39] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Well, every keynote that I've ever gone to that I absolutely loved was anchored in a story. So we know that works. You use this phrase called the HR story advantage. What does that mean in practice?

[00:03:55] **MARY CZARNECKI:** In practice it really means looking for those opportunities where people are getting stuck, whether it's a new initiative that you're rolling out, getting team culture built in an organization that maybe has gone through a merger or new acquisitions, or even just adding new team members. The story advantage, especially for HR leaders, comes from not just relying on more information, or the facts, or "here's what people should know." It's not about more information. We've all had the experience of trying to do something different, doing our own habit transformations. Most of us know something might be in our best interest. We might even know the facts about why we should do



these things. But just having more information isn't enough. So the story advantage gives us a toolkit to actually make sure that we're not just relying on more information to get people on board with a new transformation or initiative, that we actually can use the story to do that much more easily and effectively.

[00:05:05] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I've found in my own career that when I'm working with heavy pieces of data, it lands better if you can create the imagination and tap into that, and use your data points to activate it. What do you think are the essential ingredients that a story actually needs to have to move the needle in our space?

[00:05:30] **MARY CZARNECKI:** Sometimes we do need to transmit certain facts or figures or data points, but when we wrap it in that story, that's where the memory actually gets built. People can absorb the information more effectively. When we're thinking about building these stories, we're looking for a scenario, a moment, that people can really embed themselves into. It's not about telling a 100-year origin story of your company. It's about picking a moment, a space, a time, a room that someone can walk into. That's the first thing: it's really based in a moment, a story based on a moment of transformation, of aha. Then thinking about that moment, how can we bring them into that space? What were you feeling before, or the character if it isn't you? What was that person feeling before? What was the status quo? What was the boom moment? What happened? How were they feeling then? What was the room like? And then what was the feeling afterwards? So thinking about the moment, number one, thinking about the sensory details to bring us into that moment, number two, and then thinking about what that arc really is, the before, the moment of transformation, and then the after. That's really where that aha happens. If we're trying to get people on board with this initiative, maybe the organization's going through a tough time, we're trying to keep people aligned behind potentially a new leader, whatever it is, we're telling this story so that they can see their own arc, their own before/after transformation in this story, this journey that this hero has gone on in the story we're using as our example.

[00:07:25] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** How do you help HR leaders get better at this when they often need to communicate things with clarity, and sometimes those things they really don't have control over? They end up being the messengers of the information, not the creators of it. So how do they find that story to be able to communicate it clearly?

[00:07:47] **MARY CZARNECKI:** I think a lot of times it starts with not finding the stories. That's one of the mistakes a lot of people make. They're like, "Oh, we need to tell more stories. Let's just come up with a whole bunch of stories." Especially for HR leaders, it's really identifying those story moments, those opportunity areas: where are our teams getting stuck? What aren't they able to clearly understand, or what aren't they feeling aligned to? What aren't they feeling connected to? Where do they feel that disconnect between what they're spending all their time doing and what the organization may be talking about? That's really where HR leaders can make a huge difference, first kind of slowing down even the executive team that's saying "we need more stories" to actually say, "Okay, but what are the stories gonna do? What transformation, what understanding, what are we trying to get this story to do for us?" And then making sure that's the guiding light. When you're being asked to transmit something that wasn't your idea, that's actually a superpower: being able to slow the room, say, "Okay, before we jump to just telling any story, we're not telling a story for entertainment. We're telling a story for transmission of information, for transformation." And so really being able to guide people to say, "Okay, if what we need is more alignment on the team, to feel less disconnection, to feel support and excitement about a new initiative that might feel intimidating based on their roles, if that's the job it needs to do, now with fresh eyes, with strategic eyes, we can actually take that lens and start to look for the right story to match that job."

[00:09:43] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** It's interesting coming at it from that angle, because I think right now we're sitting in a space where we're asked to communicate a lot more than we ever have before. The level of transparency that employees want is something I haven't seen in my career at this level. So I'm curious, as you've helped people create better stories and find these moments, how do we find that balance between transparency and oversharing or undersharing?

[00:10:18] **MARY CZARNECKI:** We've all probably heard those stories from leaders or mentors where you're like, "Ooh, that was a little overshare." I think that's always the gut check: is this going to make people feel more aligned, closer to the initiative, closer to the invitation we're making to them to get on



board with an idea, or is it gonna make them uncomfortable? I think taking that audience-centric approach and really playing it out, and maybe doing some test cases too. My background is in marketing, and I will always tell you, the market will tell you. We think we have the best story. We think we have the best marketing campaign. We are just an N of one, or N of five, it's a committee decision. But the market's gonna tell you. So especially if it's a big initiative or a big rollout, getting some feedback from a smaller group is also a great idea. And I think being audience-centric means: yes, we need it to do this job, but we're looking for something that is connected to their experience. It's not just a story because we feel like the story is special or it's gonna make someone look extra special. It's about what is this gonna make them feel? How is this gonna connect to worries that they already have, things that they want for their life, goals and aspirations that they have in the dark corners of their own mind?

[00:12:09] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** It puts the story in the eyes of the receiver, not in the eyes of the deliverer, which leads to my next question around two-way communication. When you're rolling out these initiatives, one of the biggest things you hear in HR over and over again is don't distribute a survey unless you're gonna do something with it, don't introduce a new initiative unless you've done a testing period. So how do we find the right way to have two-way communication where we can get feedback, and also help those receiving the message co-create the story with us?

[00:12:47] **MARY CZARNECKI:** I think it is incredibly important, and I love those reminders of why are we doing this. Hopefully this is gonna generate some follow-on action. Sharing a story can be just the beginning. So asking people, "What has been your experience? I shared this story. Where has that showed up for you? We'd love to hear that." Almost as an invitation, as a kickoff, then how does this show up in their life? When have you experienced something like this? One experience I've had in working with a client on developing one of these stories, she was in a marketing agency and rolling out a new initiative to reach certain new clients and trying to get her team on board with the messaging. The message was that these are clients who in the past have been burned by other marketing agencies, and we're trying to help them understand that we operate differently. The story she told, her own personal story for her team that was gonna be going out and doing the sales for her, was about getting a bad perm. Very clear. Even if you've never had a bad perm, you probably know someone who has. She told this story to her clients when she was doing the selling, but also to her team. She shared, "Look, I trusted my mom. I trusted the stylist. I begged them to do this. I trusted them, and then I got in the chair. They did the thing. I smelled the chemicals. I was so excited, and then I looked horrible. I know what it's like to trust the experts and be betrayed, which is exactly why we operate in our agency in a different way." And when she was rolling this out to the people that were gonna be selling for her, she invited them. She said, "Look, you can't tell that story. You can tell it about me, that's fine. Borrow my story. But I don't want you going out there and saying this is your story. I want you to bring your story. So tell me, after today, after this training, I'd love to hear from all of you: what's one story where you trusted someone? You trusted someone to have your best interest in mind and they didn't. What did that feel like for you? How was that experience, and what did you learn? So that when you're communicating this to our potential clients, to our prospects, how can you show up with your own story and help them understand what we stand for?"

[00:15:32] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** As you were relaying her story, if you have ever had a perm and you were talking about the scent, I literally could smell that, and I don't think I've had a perm since I was 10 years old. But it illustrates your point that there are these innate experiences that you can tap into that are very personal, but it drove a very important business initiative. I love that example. We have all these personal stories, and they don't have to be epic. We're not trying to do a TED Talk when we're doing these. We just want to make it personal and make that connection.

[00:16:15] **MARY CZARNECKI:** And even those that are doing TED Talks, it's usually the humblest story. Getting a bad haircut or forgetting your homework or something like that. These small moments, used in the right way, can be incredibly powerful.

[00:16:34] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** How do you see AI helping, hindering, or advancing this type of communication?

[00:16:42] **MARY CZARNECKI:** I use AI a ton, both with myself and my clients, so I do think it can be an incredible help. The biggest trap is relying on AI to come up with the story. We want it to be authentic. We want it to be real. We want it to be based on a real human's experience and that moment of



transformation. So I think using AI as a brainstorming partner, as a refinement partner, is fantastic, and even helping you to source your own brain, because a lot of us, when I'm talking to some of the executives and HR leaders who are trying to come up with their stories, all of a sudden we have to have a moment and we come back to our life and we're like, "Have I ever done anything?" Your mind goes completely blank. So sometimes it's nice to have AI prompt you and say, "Okay, give me some scenarios that I might be able to go back to my own memories and draw upon," and that's helped some of the executives I've worked with who've been trying to work from a blank page.

[00:17:50] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love that. What a great use of especially the talk features of some of these AI tools. Go for a walk, have it in your head, and just work through that. As you've coached leaders on making this transition, what are some of the poor communication tactics that leaders are doing right now that we can help them fix?

[00:18:10] **MARY CZARNECKI:** I think one is just forgetting to take that pause and think about what's in it for them. I want to say this, and I need to communicate these points, and these are my talking points, and this is what I have to get across. All of that is important for us to know, but having that moment of pause to actually say, "Okay, but let me put myself in their shoes. How is this relevant to their world? What is their reality like? What would they say they want to feel more of or do more of? Now, with that frame, let me think about how I can communicate what I need to communicate through that lens." I think that's one of the biggest transformations that leaders today can make, just taking that moment to be more audience-centric before they jump into whatever presentation they need to make.

[00:18:59] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So often, as leaders, we're just trying to get stuff out the door. That's the reality. We need to get things communicated, but we're missing the opportunity to make the connection where what we have to communicate will stick. That's really what we want. As we wrap up our conversation, Mary, my last question would be, what's one habit that leaders can start doing today to become better storytellers?

[00:19:29] **MARY CZARNECKI:** Finding whatever works for you in terms of starting to build your treasure trove. Yes, you can always go back and dig through your memories and brainstorm the stories. But even just moments where you may have an exchange or something happens, and you're like, "I don't know where I'm gonna use that lesson. I don't know where I'm gonna potentially pull up that moment." Whether it's a note app on your phone or a physical notebook, something that you can start to just keep track of some of those moments, those stories. That's something I'm seeing as incredibly useful, so that you have those stories that you can pull from in the moment where someone needs that, "Oh, well, this is kind of like this experience that I had. Let me tell you a story."

[00:20:13] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love it. Mary, such great advice around storytelling and better communication and really thinking about influence in a different way. Thanks for chatting with me.

[00:20:22] **MARY CZARNECKI:** Absolutely. Thank you for having me on the show.

[00:20:31] **ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for tuning in to The HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.