

UBC Student Leadership Conference
January 12, 2013
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Good morning.

A warm welcome to all of you. And what a wonderful sight it is to see so much energy in one place.

And on a Saturday morning no less. Clearly born leaders all of you.

“Unwritten: Creating your own story.” Once again the organizers have selected a great theme to stimulate engagement. And since storytelling is the medium of the day, I have a short story I would like to share.

It’s the story of a high school student – we’ll call him Charlie – whose extended family gets together annually to celebrate the holiday season. On this particular year, it was Charlie’s family’s turn to be hosts of the holiday feast and to welcome a handful of relatives as overnight guests.

Among them was Charlie’s grandmother, who presented him with a jigsaw puzzle of a map of Paris. There were a thousand pieces, all similarly shaped with few distinguishing features. Hundreds of the pieces were all the same pale blue color with only the word “Rue,” the French word for street, appearing either in whole or in part. This will be a very challenging puzzle he thought, and secretly wondered if he would have the patience to assemble it.

But early in the afternoon, he opened the box and positioned the box top with the map of Paris on the living room coffee table. He then did what most puzzlers do; he began looking for the edge pieces.

Soon his younger cousin sat beside him on the sofa and began to run her fingers through the pieces, eventually finding an edge piece that clicked into place, and then another. Next, an uncle who never spoke much began to hover nearby. Eventually he too spotted an edge piece, and then another.

Through the course of the afternoon, several people took turns searching through the pieces, studying the box top carefully and every so often finding a fit. The puzzlers worked into the night, but it took another two full days to finish it. Once completed, it was a rather intriguing thing to look at, with Paris' most famous museums, monuments and boulevards all highlighted. Best of all, it had been a fun and satisfying exercise, and one that had nicely integrated several people who otherwise may not have interacted as much.

Several weeks later, Charlie's family received a late-night telephone call from a hospital admitting clerk who said that his grandmother had been brought by ambulance and was in intensive care. Although the elderly lady survived, her ordeal resulted in the family spending many long hours in a room reserved for the families of intensive care patients. At one point Charlie noticed a shelf upon which were boxes of puzzles. With little to do between limited visits to the ICU, he chose another one-thousand piece puzzle. The box top depicted a striking and colourful scene of an outdoor Asian market.

Shortly after he put the first edge pieces into place, the phenomenon of people joining in repeated itself. Charlie's grandmother was one of several intensive care patients, and the family room was frequented by many diverse people who came and went at all hours. Charlie was quietly amazed to see how even severely troubled people from all manner of ethnicity and backgrounds – complete strangers to one another - were irresistibly drawn together to re-create the colourful images on the box top.

In later years, Charlie studied computer engineering and went to work for a large telecommunications company. One of the things that appealed to him about his job was that the company's chief executive officer was a masterful story teller who used his skills and passion to share the company's business strategy in a highly motivational manner.

Knowing exactly what the company was attempting to achieve, Charlie and his colleagues could easily identify how they could contribute, and they did so with

great gusto. He was soon promoted to manager, and then a director. A few years later, he started his own successful company.

One day a student intern asked Charlie what advice he would give on being a good leader. Charlie thought for a moment about how the CEO of his previous company was so effective in telling his people about their company's strategy, and in a way that made them excited to be a part of it.

But then he remembered the puzzles and the groups of people who couldn't resist helping to put them together. It suddenly occurred to him that what piqued their interest so profoundly was the box top!

The box top included a vivid picture of the desired outcome of collective efforts, detailed instructions on how to achieve objectives, and a constant feedback mechanism to show progress and challenges. And suddenly it occurred to him that by sharing the company's strategy so openly and passionately with his employees, the CEO had, in effect, merely shared the box top of an intriguing jigsaw puzzle. Charlie quickly decided to change his story.

"Leadership," he told the intern, "is like a jigsaw puzzle. As long as the puzzle you've chosen is of a captivating scene and you keep the box top on display for all to see you'll be amazed by how many people will want to help put it together. They'll be able to see exactly how they can contribute and how much progress they have made. If on the other hand, you give them the pieces, but not the box top, they'll soon lose interest or be discouraged."

The puzzle analogy sounds simple, doesn't it? Devise an outcome and a strategy for whatever it is you want to achieve tell it to your group members in an understandable way and watch them go to work.

Well, yes, but not exactly.

First, you've got to create a story about something you are truly passionate about, something that you can't stop thinking about. At the same time though, it is

essential to recognize that although the idea is alive in your head, it is still “unwritten.” Therefore, you need to write it, draw it, express it as articulately as possible.

Then put it on a box top so that others can see the end result you have in mind, and the strategy you have devised to achieve it.

Next, ensure that you have a means of reporting on progress and challenges so that everybody knows exactly where they are relative to the end results they are trying to achieve. In order to do that you must keep the box top in full view at all times.

Leaders who don’t share strategic objectives, progress and challenges are akin to puzzlers who leave the room with the box top. The others involved in the exercise have a much more difficult time contributing, and they will be challenged to remember what it is they are working towards.

The moral of the story is simply this: Never assume that just because you have an idea for something you want to create or change in this world that other people will see it as clearly and with the same passion and ambition that you do.

Whatever story you create, make it your own. And then turn it into the most striking, colourful and captivating image you possibly can and put it on a box top. And leave it in a place where all can see.

I want to conclude by commending you all on your decision to participate in this conference. I assure you that you are all in for a fabulous day.

On behalf of UBC, my sincere thanks to all of the organizers and presenters.

Best wishes to all.

Thank you.