

Talk Quick!



**99-Word Stories for
Teachers, Trainers, and
Team Leaders**

By Brian Remer

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Published by The Firefly Group
339 Bullock Drive
Guilford, VT 05301
www.thefirefly.org
brian@thefirefly.org

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Stories for Learning

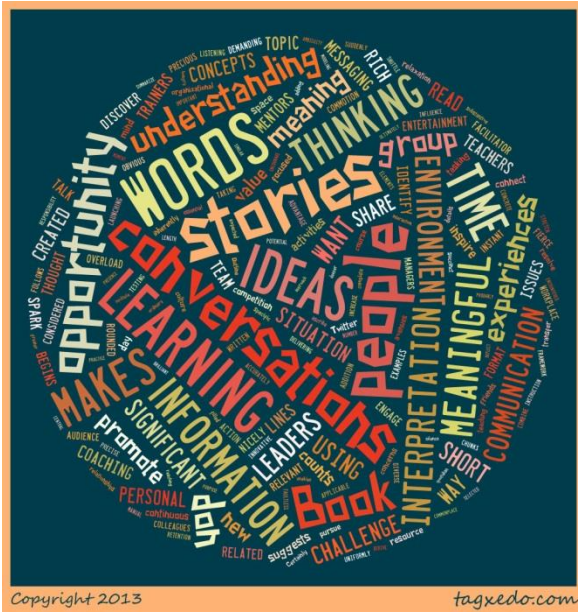
The Slow Learner	It can take a long time to learn from experience
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Change Recipe	Change efforts can pay off quickly
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Open for Business?	We can be the biggest contributor to our own failure
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Identify stories that relate to a list of key words.

[About the Author](#)

Who is Brian Remer and what does he do besides write 99-Word Stories?



What is this Book?

In a world of twenty-four-seven information overload, time counts, so it makes sense to count your words. If you can say something meaningful in just a few words, do it!

Because people are focused on instant communication, competition for brain band width is fierce. If you don't make your point quickly, don't bother making it at all because your audience is already multi-tasking with text messaging, Face Book, phone, and Twitter.

This book is a resource for team leaders, managers, coaches, mentors, teachers, and trainers who want to cut through the communication commotion and promote meaningful dialogue. Thought leaders who want to spark deep conversations about significant issues will find examples to fuel dialogue and inspire action – without demanding a lot of precious time.

Using these short stories, you can raise workplace issues and talk about how to resolve them. You can also identify concerns or challenges and discover new solutions and strategies.

Each entry begins with a story written in exactly 99 words. Several discussion questions related to the story are offered as a way to begin your conversation. Use them to understand the story in the way that makes the most sense for your situation. In addition, you will find an interpretation of the story that follows the ideas raised by one of the discussion questions. You can share this interpretation with your group or pursue other avenues of thought that the story suggests.

Of course, you can read these stories on your own for relaxation, entertainment, or to gain new personal insights. But beyond the obvious, they can become the basis for a reading group with friends or a self-coaching group with colleagues. As a trainer or teacher, *Talk Quick!* can spark learning with groups of two or two hundred. For mentors and team leaders, the stories can be used to inspire or reinforce organizational culture. Think of these activities as a launching pad for your own ideas about how to add value to your work, home, and community life by taking advantage of the 99-Word Story format.

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Why Have this Book?

Stories have been a significant method for teaching and learning since humans began to speak. Because stories are inherently entertaining, they are an ideal way to transfer information, establish a positive learning environment, engage active listening, increase retention, promote innovative thinking, and foster positive relationships. There is also value in delivering information in succinct chunks that

are concrete and memorable. Combine this with the opportunity for people to discuss the concepts found in the stories and suddenly the 99-Word Story format creates a rich learning environment that is flexible and applicable to diverse situations.

In a short story, you can focus on a main concept and let people fill in the details that make sense for them. With space to do their own thinking, people can experiment with ideas testing them for relevance against their experience. Outline an idea and you can create a framework in which others can engage in conversations. Through this dialogue, people come to new understandings that are personally relevant and timely. Sometimes you do need to convey precise information accurately and uniformly. Certainly you would want a specific level of understanding in the pilot's instruction manual for the Space Shuttle. But there are plenty of topics that are never considered deeply because we haven't given each other an opportunity to have a profound conversation about them.

But why exactly 99 words for each story? Well, 99 is a nice round number – almost. And these stories are also nicely rounded out and complete – almost. In each, there is room for interpretation and opportunity for adding your own meaning. Since you can't be expected to read between the lines if all the lines are filled, the “last word” in each story has been left to you!

Boil an idea down to its essential elements and people will discover meanings that they can connect to other experiences. Then, with just a few words, you will have created a rich learning environment that's flexible and offers an opportunity for substantive conversations. The potential of a message is not in its length but in the meaning we ascribe to it.

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Faultless Facilitation

To get the most value from these 99-Word Stories, consider how you might influence the tone of the learning environment. Think about your role. What is your responsibility to challenge people to stretch their understanding of the topic? Sometimes having the opportunity for a significant conversation is more important than reaching a consensus agreement about the topic. Here are some suggestions:

- Avoid either-or thinking by modeling an open interpretation of the 99-Word Stories and discussion questions.
- Encourage people to share their own stories that relate to those you've selected.
- Ask people to keep their personal stories short. Share the air time.
- Promote multiple ideas for a rich conversation.
- Give people a moment of silence to identify central concepts that summarize or connect stories in their own mind.
- Be comfortable with ambiguity. Trust that the time spent will be meaningful even if people don't bring up each and every one of your own brilliant insights.
- Leave 'em hungry. As facilitator, you don't have to tie up every loose end. People will continue the conversations that are meaningful to them off line, at the water cooler, and after the workshop.

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Beyond 99

Ultimately, this book is about learning from every-day experiences. Each 99-Word Story is based upon an ordinary situation, interaction, or observation that is rather commonplace. Most of us have probably encountered something similar. Yet each story also offers an opportunity to reflect upon the quotidian and derive the quintessential. They challenge us to approach each day with a presence of mind that looks for deeper meaning and, through the practice of continuous learning, enables us to find a greater purpose.

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The Slow Learner

One sweltering summer day, I sought relief on the screened porch. An enormous housefly was bouncing against the screen trying to get out. Feeling charitable, I waited until it got to the door then swung it open. But the fly kept bashing into the screen door anyway. I pushed the door open further. Still the fly ping-ponged against the screen never knowing a right angle turn would set it free. Finally I let the door swing shut.

When we don't see progress, what makes us think doing more of the same thing will set us free?

Discussion Questions

You can become a fast learner by using some of the following discussion questions related to this 99-Word story with your team or by yourself.

- What are examples of a lesson that took a long time to learn?
- Why might someone make the same mistakes over and over?
- What are some ways to maximize what we learn from experience?
- What is an opportunity that you will have in the near future to learn from your experience?

One Interpretation

There are many ways to understand this story as the discussion questions suggest. If you or your group would like to compare or contrast your interpretation with an outside viewpoint, consider this analysis.

“I’m always forgetting my glasses.”

“Every morning I have the hardest time getting out of bed.”

“I’ve told him a dozen times to clean his room.”

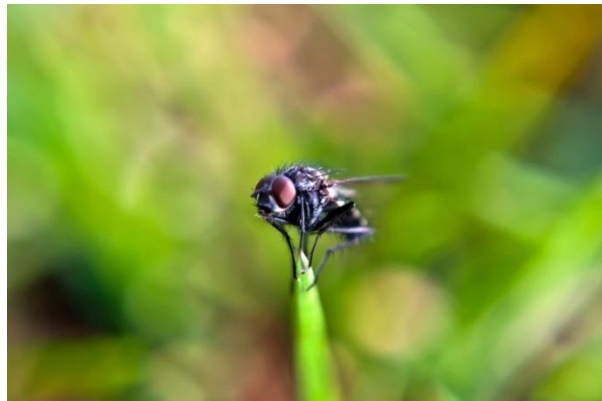
“I’ve clicked the ‘Refresh’ icon several times but it’s still the same.”

How often do you hear a comment like one of these? Perhaps you’ve even made similar statements yourself! We toss off these observations without giving them much thought but, whenever we say them, it is an indication that we are not learning from our experience. There is something going on that we are not paying attention to; something we could do differently that would enable us to turn the corner and begin anew.

What prevents us from making that shift? Perhaps we are paralyzed by procrastination. Other times, too many responsibilities, stress, or simply being tired can make it difficult to realize that we need to seek new options. Maybe we are a bit too comfortable where we are, humming along so smoothly that we don’t realize our groove has ground into a rut.

But whatever the explanation – or excuse – we have not been paying attention to the feedback. We take an action expecting to see our desired result and when that doesn’t materialize, we try again. Based on the feedback we receive, we *should* do something slightly different. This is often referred to as the School of Hard Knocks. The grading system in this school is based on our ability to increase our learning and reduce the knocks. And that requires being alert, noticing, focusing, attending. With a sharp observational eye, we can zero in on a possible fix. Or, when perplexed, we can call a friend, read a book, talk to an expert, see our therapist, and get help.

We shouldn’t have to suffer hard knocks to do better in work, at home, or in life. If we can pay attention to the feedback we receive, perhaps we can pay our dues less painfully.



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Whose Fault?

My friend Jean informed me that 25% of the pollution in California actually comes from China. The culprit? Coal-fired power plants. The Chinese plan to build more than 500 new coal power plants in the next 10 years!

It's something of a relief to discover that we aren't responsible for all the pollution in California, that it isn't our entire fault. In New England we often have to contend with the pollution from power plants in the Midwest. And I imagine that the pollution in Eastern Europe goes to... Asia?

Wow! What goes around keeps blowing around!

Discussion Questions

Keep the winds of dialogue blowing through your organization with these questions for your team.

- When something doesn't go as planned, we often try to find the person at fault. How do you explain this tendency?
- Describe a time when it was later discovered that a different person than originally suspected was responsible for a problem. How did that change the eventual outcome?
- Talk about a situation when your own well-meaning actions eventually caused a problem for someone else. How did you react or respond?
- How far "downstream" is it reasonable to be responsible for your own actions?

One Interpretation

There are many ways to understand this story as the discussion questions suggest. If you or your group would like to compare or contrast your interpretation with an outside viewpoint, consider this analysis.

We often say that one man's trash is another man's treasure. But in our global village, one man's trash can also be another man's trash, and another man's – and eventually, my own again! It doesn't take long to see that we are all connected in one way or another. When pressure is applied to one region of the web, the stress is felt throughout.

Of course, this situation is not unique to garbage. You can apply the same thinking to rumors in the office, poor quality control on the factory floor, trash talk on TV, or congressional gridlock. Whatever is left unfinished, poorly crafted, sloppily shared, or tinged with malice has negative consequences that spill over and influence the next iteration of the system. Since it's so difficult to see the whole all at once, we are unpleasantly surprised when last year's brilliant decisions have morphed into this year's dark monsters.

When the present begins to smell sour we look for a cause, either to assign blame or find a solution. Blaming someone else feels good but it doesn't resolve the issue. Instead, it merely assigns more responsibility to one party than all the others. I may decide you are at fault but we *all* still have a mess to clean up!

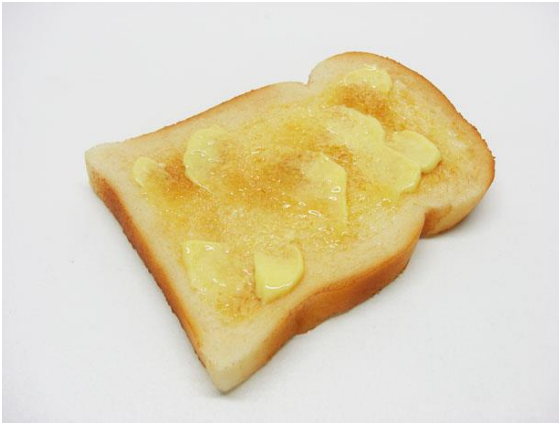
On the other hand, when we realize the circular nature of the systems in which we operate, it becomes clear: there is nothing for which each of us is not *both* part of the problem *and* part of the solution. You and I have the ability to determine how much responsibility we will accept for both the creation of a problem and for its resolution.

Now, my intention is not to dump more trash in your yard by spreading a load of guilt. But it is important to become sensitive to the many opportunities we have to reduce the circular garbage flow. What if the next time we heard of a negative consequence or a project that turned bad, we did *not* look for someone to blame. What would happen instead, if we looked for our own contribution to that problem – no matter how small – and disposed properly of at least that much of the trash?

Perhaps then we will all begin to breathe a bit easier.



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Change Recipe

At cousin Donna's Thanksgiving dinner the butter is homemade. Here's the recipe: fill a jelly jar three quarters with cream then shake, jiggle, vibrate, wobble, agitate. Keep the jar moving. Repeat. Repeat again. By now, your arms are tired, nothing has happened, and you are ready to give up. Many people do.

But with persistence, a moment comes when you feel a "thunk" and a lump of fresh butter magically replaces the liquid in your jar. Just like that!

To produce change, stick to it. What seems like ineffective agitation can suddenly produce the result you wanted.

Discussion Questions

Agitate for change in your team with these questions for reflection.

- Why do you think some people resist change?
- How do you feel about change in general? Do you fear it, embrace it, avoid it, manage it?
- Some say that the only constant is change. To what extent do you agree?
- What is an example of some things that should not change?
- Describe a time when a change was not handled well. What could have been done differently?

Bonus Question

What connections do you see between the 99-Word Story and the following quote?

"To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating yourself endlessly." – Henri Bergson, French philosopher and Nobel Prize winner 1859 – 1941.

One Interpretation

There are many ways to understand this story as the discussion questions suggest. If you or your group would like to compare or contrast your interpretation with an outside viewpoint, consider this analysis.

Ahh, the comfort of routine. Even if you are trying to lose weight, it still feels good to sit back with a cup of coffee and a donut. And that new IT system is so much more complicated to use, even if it might save money in the long run. Novelty can be great for a while but the familiar has a strong magnetism that pulls us back to the way things have always been. Yet something or someone is always shaking things up!

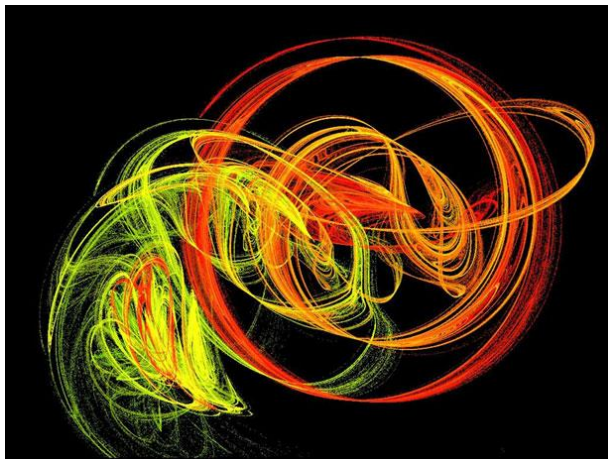
Change is all around us. In fact, what is *not* changing? First thing in the morning, you put a slice of bread in the toaster and it gets changed into a piece of toast. Your coffee starts out hot and gets colder. You need to change the feeling in your empty stomach so you transform raw eggs to make them edible. You eat and your body grows and renews.

And what about the workplace? Isn't *all* work about creating change? We work to produce something that didn't exist before, to create a new outcome, or to make something different happen. If a change wasn't needed, we wouldn't have to be at work!

Say, this continual shake up is starting to sound normal, even necessary! So, why do we get worked up about change? There are many reasons. Change is uncertain; our fear kicks in. It happens too fast. It doesn't happen fasten enough. We may not have a choice in whether to change, when to change, how to change, or how quickly to change. We are too invested in the future. We are too committed to the present. It takes work to prolong a change. The list seems endless.

If we can stop our fretting and worrying, the reality soon becomes clear. The issue is not how to cope with change but how to deal with our emotions, our attitudes, and our values about change. Expecting and looking for the good in a change can help. It enables us to stay open to unanticipated opportunities. Recognizing the positive advances we are making is also beneficial. It allows us to see progress and celebrate our efforts along the way. And not giving up is critical. Sustained change comes with persistence.

With a clear goal and steady effort, one day we will look up and realize that, "thunk," the new IT system is really quite user friendly and, wow, we have lost 15 pounds!



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The Best Holiday

'Twas, the day after Christmas. A vacation for me but not, unfortunately, for the rest of my family so I'm left to my own devices.

What to do? Let's see, there's that picture that needs to be hung but I'll have to paint over the black marks

left by the photo of Aunt Mable.

Wow, there are black marks in every room. Two hours later I'm still spot painting the house. Stranger still, I'm enjoying it. What's going on?

Oh, yes, painting was *my* choice. When we follow our *own* decisions, we are motivated and satisfied.

Discussion Questions

Learn more about how motivation is understood in your group or organization by initiating a discussion with some of these questions.

- Describe a situation where you were so engrossed that you lost track of time. How do you explain this phenomenon?
- Give an example of a project that expanded beyond its original scope. In what ways was that both beneficial and problematic?
- To what extent do you agree with the link being made between choice and motivation?
- How might you offer choices to increase the motivation of others or of yourself?

One Interpretation

There are many ways to understand this story as the discussion questions suggest. If you or your group, choose you might like to compare or contrast your interpretation with an outside viewpoint, such as this analysis.

In his book, *Why We Do What We Do* (Penguin Books, 1995), Edward Deci makes a distinction between extrinsic motivation (external rewards and punishments) and intrinsic motivation (internal goals and aspirations) to explain our behavior. He points out that, despite the popularity and prevalence of rewards and punishments, their effects tend to be short term. The fear induced by punishment creates psychological and emotional problems and rewards continually need to be inflated to stay effective. On the other hand, intrinsic motivators have their source within each individual. They stem from a person's interests, passion, and a desire to make a contribution or fulfill a sense of purpose. Tap into intrinsic motivators and you can increase commitment to the task.

Deci identifies three basic intrinsic motivators: Autonomy (opportunity for choice or making decisions), Belonging (connection to people or an important cause), and Competence (drawing upon one's talents and abilities). Any time one or more of these elements are present, we tend to be more committed to the job. Would someone *really* spend a day off doing a spontaneous home maintenance chore? If it was that person's decision (autonomy), if they saw a connection to the common good (belonging), if they derived satisfaction from their efforts (competence), then yes!

Often, with the demands of time, necessity, or the boss, it doesn't feel like we have a choice. Certain jobs just have to get done. But even in these instances we can

find opportunities for choice. Look at your To Do list. Everything there has to get done but can you choose the order in which you do them? Exercise your autonomy! Got a stressful meeting with your team? Be autonomous and schedule it for a time you can feel more relaxed. And what about all those small, time consuming tasks that are still important? Perhaps you and a colleague can be "mutually autonomous" and decide which of you can best accomplish each of them.

When someone else tells us what to do, even simple tasks can feel like work. But when we exercise our autonomy, every day can feel like a holiday.





100,000 Teachers

When we lived in Ecuador for two years, one of my personal goals was to learn Spanish. So I was upset when Giovanni, my tutor, announced that he would be leaving the country to take another job. Learning a second language was

traumatic for me and Giovanni was terrific at tailoring lessons to my particular interests and needs. How could I ever hope to find a replacement?

Then, while riding a crowded Quito bus, I found the solution. Everyone spoke Spanish. I was surrounded by thousands of teachers!

An expert is not always better than everyday expertise.

Discussion Questions

Tap into the ordinary expertise of the people you work with by engaging them in a conversation using these questions.

- What are some instances when you might learn from peers, coworkers, and others who are closest to you?
- What are some times when it might be helpful to step out of your own role as an expert and rely upon the know-how of others?
- What are some situations when we rely too much on the expertise of outside “authorities?”
- How much of good teaching is based on an expert’s level of knowledge and how much is based on that person’s ability to teach the subject well?

One Interpretation

The following interpretation highlights the dynamic responsibilities of both teachers and learners. Use it with your group to enhance these responsibilities in your organization.

Good teachers are essential to learning. They know the material but they also know how to share that knowledge with learners while creating opportunities for practice and feedback. But even terrific teachers can't do much with a student who is unmotivated, has no long-range goal, or is distracted by other needs and concerns. Teacher or student, the success of one is tied to the success of the other.

Too often there is an imbalance. We place most of the burden on teachers expecting them to create a successful learning environment for everyone – all the time. Seldom do we think about what we want to learn, why we want to learn it, what we'll do with it, and how we might learn it in the best way for us. We don't realize the personal energy investment necessary for real growth. However, once we know what we need, we can figure out how to get it. When that happens, we may see that the expertise we are seeking might come from unexpected places. We won't always find it spread before us in a book, as a slide presentation, or on a webinar. Valuable lessons might come to us from colleagues, family members, or strangers on the bus.

Ultimately, each of us is in the driver's seat when it comes to our own learning. By the effort we put into bettering ourselves, we decide our destination, the route, our speed, and who to pick up along the way.



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Looking and Finding

Paul was a bird watcher. He especially loved raptors and had sighted hundreds of hawks – all kinds – over the years. But he had never seen owls in the wild. Not surprising since they are silent, stealthy, and nocturnal! Then one day, driving across

the state, he spotted an owl and slowed to catch the details.

It was amazing that he noticed an owl in broad daylight. Even more amazing, though, was that he sighted four more that same day!

“When you are clear about what you are looking for,” he explained, “You begin finding it everywhere.”

Discussion Questions

Find unusual learning among your colleagues. Use these questions as a way to look at the different ways they understand this story.

- What examples do you have of noticing something more frequently after it has been brought to your attention?
- What are some things you keep “finding” or noticing around you at work, home, or in the community? What does that say about what you are “looking for” or expecting to find?
- Upon what basis do you determine what you ought to be looking for: vision, values, mission, cost, politics, public opinion?
- How can you use this phenomenon of looking and finding to your advantage to make a positive change or improvement in your work?

One Interpretation

What are you “looking for” and what do you hope to find by talking about this story with your team? To get you started, here is one way to look at it.

“Youth at risk.”

What does this term conjure in your mind? Do you imagine juvenile delinquents from broken homes, gang members hanging out on street corners, or teens being tracked down by truant officers? Today, counselors, recreation directors, and social service professionals who work with young people no longer talk about “youth at risk.” Instead they refer to “youth from difficult circumstances.” They want to highlight the role that environmental factors play in determining the choices available to young people. These youth workers also want to point out that every teen also has many positive assets, qualities, and talents. If they look for these gifts – and help young people see them too – they can leverage them for a more positive life.

In the business world, Appreciative Inquiry is a practice that focuses on what is working well and doing more of it rather than emphasizing all that is negative and needs to be fixed. In one study, workers were repeatedly told all the things customers didn’t like. The constant inundation of negativity led to low morale and a decline in customer satisfaction. When workers were encouraged to focus on what customers thought was going well, service improved and customer satisfaction jumped.

Youth-serving professionals as well as leaders know that if they look for trouble, that’s exactly what they will find. But if they look for an individual’s assets and gifts or if they seek out systems and processes that are working well, many more options are opened. Focus on what you want to find. Be clear about what you want to create or become and you’ll be soaring with the eagles.



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Open for Business?

Savoring early morning coffee and the ocean view from my booth in Breakers Restaurant at the Ashworth Hotel, I was startled by a loud tapping on the front door. Someone wanted to get in for breakfast. Looking around the

deserted restaurant, I called for the cook to open the door.

Here it was thirty minutes after “opening” and the front door was still locked. You’d think someone would have checked – especially since they’d had to unlock the side door from the hotel for me earlier!

Oh, the things we do that unintentionally thwart our own progress!

Discussion Questions

Help your team or group become intentional about their learning.

Talk about some of these questions to derive deeper meaning.

- How would you explain the fact that workers in the restaurant forgot to open the door for business? In what ways might the same dynamic be in effect where you work?
- What are some things you’ve seen people do that hinder their own progress?
- In what ways are the policies or procedures of your organization at odds with the way work actually gets done?
- What are some ways you’ve had to deal with unintended consequences?

One Interpretation

Open the doors of understanding for the meaning behind this story with this analysis.

Thirty minutes after the official start of the day, the restaurant still wasn't fully open for business. How can this be explained? Were the workers rushing around with last minute preparations, too busy to notice the locked door had been neglected? Was everyone on auto pilot, coasting through a morning so habitual they forgot that essential detail? Or was it casual indifference, a certainty that "someone else will take care of it?"

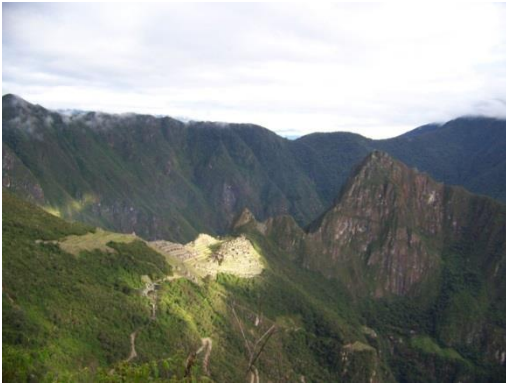
The answer is unknowable, but that makes the speculation all the more fun. How many more explanations can we generate? Unfortunately, trying to guess the reason is really just a nicer way of looking for someone to blame. And if we're going to start pointing the finger, eventually someone is liable to point one right back at us. As the last line of the story suggests, we all do things that limit our own success whether that's an action, an attitude, or an acquired way of thinking.

Perhaps it's more productive to talk about what it means to be "open for business." What conditions need to be in place for us to be fully present, engaged, motivated, and alert to our responsibilities? How might we challenge ourselves, our colleagues, and our loved ones to open the doors for new opportunities rather than staying behind locked doors wondering why the world is passing us by?



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<i>Opening Times</i>
<i>Mon</i>
<i>Tue</i>
<i>Wen</i>
<i>Thu</i>
<i>Fri</i>
<i>Sat</i>
<i>Sun</i>



Built to Last

The Incan ruins of Machu Picchu are famous for their massive stone walls fitted together without mortar. Even after hundreds of years, the blocks are so tight there's not the slightest gap between them. What's more, each block has a unique, irregular shape.

Some are larger than an SUV!

Why build with such irregular stones when clearly any shape could have been fashioned? Because these walls have withstood earth quakes when walls of standardized block have crumbled.

Helping people fit into the place that's best for them builds a stronger organization than forcing people to conform.

Discussion Questions

Your organization can become stronger by helping each person fit in. To begin, find out what people think about these questions.

- What are some instances when conformity and consistency are important?
- What are some ways in which conformity can actually weaken an organization?
- What opportunities do you have in your role to enable people to make their best contribution?
- Incan walls have an internal locking system that keeps the stone blocks from shifting. What internal structure is in place to keep your organization stable while allowing for individuality?

One Interpretation

Share this understanding of the story with your team but be prepared to listen to each person's individual analysis as well!

Managers have the job of making sure an organization runs as efficiently and predictably as possible. Leaders, however, have the responsibility to set a course and inspire people to contribute their best toward a shared goal. Both roles are necessary in an organization and both can be focused and highly directed. But neither managers nor leaders need work in ways that stifle creativity. When people are forced to squeeze themselves into a way of doing things that they didn't choose, some of their vitality trickles out too.

Coaches and mentors are in a position to recognize and encourage the unique talents and gifts that "shape" the contribution each member of an organization can make. Managers are in a position to remove the barriers that might prevent someone from making their best contribution. They help make the right "fit" between talent and task. Leaders provide the "internal reinforcement" necessary to withstand the violent turbulence in markets, the economy, or funding sources that is bound to occur. By championing the vision of the organization, leaders constantly remind everyone of why their collective work matters and how it will change the big picture over the long term.

The challenge for leaders, managers, mentors, and coaches is to create an environment where singular talents can be focused toward a common purpose. When that happens, people and the organizations they work in thrive. Face it, without the specialized input of each person, your whole enterprise might be sitting on a fault line waiting for disaster. Capitalize on those talents and you'll be ready to withstand the inevitable tectonic shifts and shakes.



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What's Your Contribution?

Ted hated meetings. You could witness it in his tone of voice, his body language, his demeanor, and his droll, sarcastic comments. He was famous for his opinion about meetings. Yet as head of his department, attending and leading meetings was a big

part of his responsibility.

Surprisingly, Ted taught me the secret to having a great meeting. He would often leave a meeting grumbling that he hadn't gotten anything out of it. But I noticed that he hadn't put anything into the meeting either!

If you want a great meeting, plan to make a contribution!

Discussion Questions

Give people on your team an opportunity to contribute through a dialogue about group participation starting with one of these questions.

- People say, "You're either part of the problem or you're part of the solution." Which would you say Ted is in this situation? In what other situations might this adage be true?
- What feedback would you give to Ted that might turn him around or help him see things differently?
- What are some examples of situations you have noticed where someone grumbles about performing their role?
- How much responsibility do individual group members have for the outcome of a meeting if they are not the leader or facilitator of the meeting?

One Interpretation

Solicit more contributions from your group with this understanding of the story.

“It takes two to tango.” “It takes a village to raise a child.”

One concept that these common phrases share is the idea of participation. You cannot perform an intimate dance without a willing partner who can contribute by both leading and following. And the contributions of many individuals and organizations in a community can enhance the growth and development of all of us. Without participation and contribution, there is no dance and there is no community.

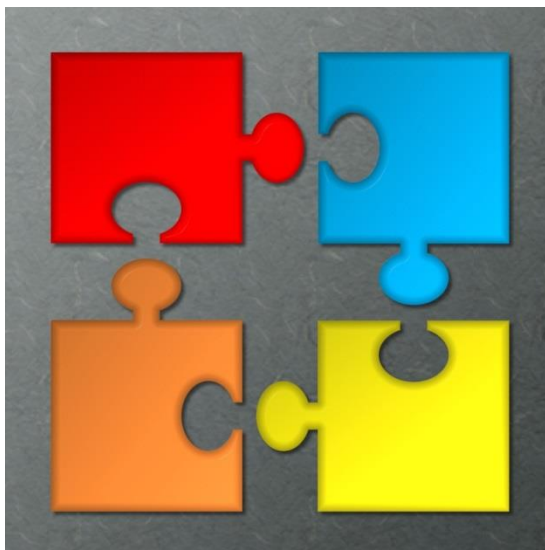
It’s easy to forget our own responsibility to contribute. Times are tough. We have our own problems. Everyone is making demands on us. We already have plenty of work to do, and so forth. Yet the only way important things get done is when people show up. They show up to play ball and a team is born. They show up to talk about spirituality and a church is founded. They show up to sell their handicrafts and an artist’s colony becomes a tourism focal point. They show up to offer shelter on a winter night and a group begins advocating for the homeless.

People often say they volunteer because they want to give something back to their community. This is an admirable reason for contributing. It works for many people who recognize the benefits they have received from their neighbors. But other people, like Ted in our story, don’t consider making a contribution. They think, “Why should I ‘give back’ when I haven’t gotten anything!” These thoughts blind them from seeing that community is co-created when people show up.

The next time you need to co-create community, even if that means only calling a meeting, try being up front with the people you invite. Let the “Teds” on your team know what contribution you need from them. Elicit their input and help them see their role in the big picture of what you are trying to accomplish.

On the other hand, perhaps you feel like Ted sometimes. If you have been invited to a meeting, don’t assume the organizers know exactly why they have asked you to attend! Look for connections between the topic of the meeting and things you know from your experience and your role. Consider ways you might make a thoughtful contribution. What you add may pertain to the meeting’s topic. But it might also relate to making decisions, getting unstuck from unproductive thinking, or even suggesting to meet at a later time in the future.

After all, it really does take a village to co-create a community!



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Empowerment Dance

Linda was a great boss. More like a coach than a supervisor, she helped me strive for my potential and offered me opportunities to learn and grow professionally and

personally. Acutely aware of power differences, she didn't discriminate between me and her office assistant, Isabel.

One day, Isabel confided, "Linda's always trying to get me to go to these fancy retreats but I just want to stay here and type."

Wow! You can offer to empower, but people have to be ready and want to make changes for themselves. It's a complex dance. Who leads; who follows?

Discussion Questions

Share the role of leadership in your team. Invite someone else to lead the group discussion with these questions.

- How would you define empowerment and what are some examples in your workplace?
- In your organization, who typically initiates an opportunity for empowerment?
- If you could speak to either Linda or Isabel, what advice would you give them?
- How might you explain Isabel's reaction; why might she be satisfied as a typist?

One Interpretation

This interpretation focuses on the symbiotic nature of the empowerment process.

If you watch a pair of ballroom dancers in a competition you will see effortless fluidity as the couple glides across the floor. It can be beautiful and daring. But this is a performance. The dancers have choreographed and practiced their moves to perfection. There is neither a leader nor a follower, just two people synchronizing their agreed upon and rehearsed movements.

I met my wife on the dance floor. She led me in a few swing dance moves and I was intrigued enough that we enrolled in a dance class. Traditionally, the male partner leads the couple from one move to the next. It's his responsibility to improvise and keep the dance interesting while avoiding potentially awkward contact with other dancers. But, as someone new to the dance floor, I felt clumsy and unsure of making the transitions between moves. Often my wife would take the lead initiating a move I had forgotten or helping us avoid a collision with another couple. Today, with confidence and practice, I am a competent dance leader. But my wife still leads at some points and our method of shared leadership has become a metaphor describing many other aspects of our relationship.

Often, people talk about empowering others; helping them to take on more responsibility, make decisions, or act confidently. What we forget is that, by definition, empowerment is something that comes from within. We cannot make another person more powerful, able, or confident. They must do that on their own. They must see the need for their own growth, desire that growth, and work to gain the knowledge, skills, and confidence to accept more responsibility.

However, even though the desire for empowerment must come from within, that person must have access to resources to gain the knowledge, skill, and confidence they need. Other people, who are themselves empowered, have control of those resources and can make them available to the unempowered. But those who are empowered must also be willing to share their power. For example, it does little good to train people but then never give them the chance to use their new learning.

And this is where our dance analogy is helpful. Someone needs to be the leader – but the dance must be improvised. If one person, say the one with power, choreographs the dance, those becoming empowered may feel controlled, manipulated, or coerced. If those without power direct the dance, those with power may think they are in the middle of a mutiny! Both dancers must coordinate the steps that will help them be successful together.

Dancing involves numerous complex interactions but in the end, it should be fun for both partners – and for the audience. If your empowerment dance has become clumsy, stop the music. Use the table below to find your place, look your partner in the eye, and determine your next step together. Soon you'll be dancing like a star!



Those Who are Empowered	Those Who are Becoming Empowered
People Such as... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers • Team Leaders • Parents 	People Such as... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees • Team Members • Teenagers
See the Need for... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Teamwork • Maturity 	Want to Grow by... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being responsible • Sharing expertise • Doing adult tasks
Share the Power by... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training • Supporting • Sharing the car keys 	Accept Power by... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using their learning • Supporting others • Buying gas for the car

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Taking a Stand

In some organizations, no one is allowed to sit during meetings. The idea is that if we have to stand, we'll finish the meeting and get back to business. The problem is that this assumes a limited use for meetings: giving orders or

reporting. Both could be accomplished as easily in an e-mail!

If the meeting is to analyze, create, learn, solve, celebrate, then make a place for dialogue. Spread the table with linens, flowers, coffee, and snacks and have a meaningful conversation.

Shape the environment to your needs. Don't force people into your well-oiled machine.

Discussion Questions

Give people a chance to shape their work environment by discussing some of the issues raised by these questions.

- What elements make a meeting especially productive?
- If you took a poll among your colleagues, how would they rate the quality of meetings in your organization?
- To what degree would you say physical comfort impacts a person's ability to analyze, be creative, or make decisions?
- List some of the reasons meetings are held in your organization. Which of these reasons make the most productive meetings?

One Interpretation

Everyone has an opinion about meetings! Get the ball rolling with this analysis of the 99-Word Story.

Wouldn't it be great to look forward to meetings?

Some companies are reporting more satisfaction with standing-up meetings that keep conversations short. An article in the *The Wall Street Journal* (Feb. 2, 2012) "[No More Angling for the Best Seat; More Meetings Are Stand-Up Jobs](#)" by Rachel Emma Silverman) lists several tactics to keep meetings brief: meet in a cold stairwell, meet right before the lunch hour, or have latecomers and long-winded members pay a fine or sing a silly song. Unfortunately, this article does not make a distinction about why some meetings might need to be longer.

Standing up may make a meeting shorter but is “short” really what we’re looking for? Perhaps we are focusing on short meetings when what we really want is productivity. If a facilitator said at the beginning, “By the end of this meeting you will have shared what you’ve done since yesterday, identified the roadblocks you’ve encountered, and listed the help you need.” Everyone could sit down, focus, and be more efficient than if they were standing.

Lost in all this talk is the reason to hold meetings – and there is only one reason: to do work that a single person cannot do alone. Perhaps you want to solve a problem, invent new ideas, share information, or complete a project. Maybe you want to do these things in an hour or maybe you expect them to take several months. In any case, you are gathering people in one place (either physically or virtually) because you need their assistance for success. And if you need each person’s effort for success in the long term, you also need their input during the short term of the meeting.

To get that input, consider how you might make your meeting productive without resorting to coercion, intimidation, embarrassment, physical discomfort, or manipulation. A critical strategy is the establishment of an outcome-based agenda for your meeting. Give your meeting guidance with a statement such as “By the end of this meeting we will have (identified..., analyzed..., listed..., decided..., etc.)” Learn more about outcome-based agendas from [Guila Muir](#). Your meeting will also be more productive when you determine procedures for gathering ideas and making decisions, choose someone as recorder, use facilitation skills, and ask for feedback when the meeting is over.

Of course, meetings are just a metaphor of what’s going on in the organization as a whole. If you want your organization to achieve its goals, set up the environment so people can do their best work. Help them be successful by taking away the barriers to productivity. Include the elements that will contribute to creativity, and a relaxed, social atmosphere. Provide the tools and resources essential for the task. Give people the freedom to ask probing questions, make mistakes, and experiment with alternative ways of doing things.

Facilitated poorly, meetings can run everybody down. But run them well and they can be the oil lubricating your whole organizational machine.



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Creating Change

Whoa. I just experienced a sudden pang of hunger! Searching the house for a quick fix I find a bag of corn chips and grab a fistful. Munching away, I immediately feel better. The food has yet to hit my stomach but already the hunger is diminishing.

Interesting!

So often I worry about making change happen and spend time anxiously waiting for the final result. Sometimes doing anything, just creating movement toward the goal, is enough to get relief, to see progress.

If we start moving, we don't need to have a full belly to create change.

Discussion Questions

Start a movement for change in a positive way with the questions below.

- Describe a time you felt stuck or overwhelmed by the uncertainty of a pending change.
- What are some of the reasons people might become anxious about making a change?
- What are some ways of dealing with change that have been effective for you?
- How do you explain the feeling of relief one might have in a situation of extreme change even before the change has been fully realized?
- To what extent do you agree with the statement, "The only constant is change?"

One Interpretation

Examine the relationship between movement and change with this analysis.

One of my classes as a graduate student was called “Social Change” and it examined the factors and forces involved in Chile during the era that the dictator Augusto Pinochet was in power. I had always assumed that change in society just “happened.” A revolution was something other people made and if one was in progress nearby, you’d best clear out of the way! The professor for this class had lived in Chile and brought first-hand examples to his lessons but the concepts still seemed purely intellectual to me. Fortunately, this was autumn of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall provided the contrast I needed to see that change happens when many people make many small steps in the same direction. Change comes about when we see ourselves as actors rather than spectators.

When we feel that sharp pang of hunger that signals a need for change, we can hunker down and watch or we can take action. Doing something, creating movement, puts us in control; we feel less vulnerable. Part of what makes a situation stressful is feeling that we are helpless; that things are happening to us. When we act, we are asserting our preference to be participants rather than victims.

Another thing that makes change difficult is the uncertainty about when the stress of it will end and what the result will be. We would like a quick fix. Rip the bandage off rapidly and only feel the pain for a brief instant. Action takes the edge of uncertainty off and gives us, at the very least, the illusion that we are making progress.

In some cases, people are reluctant to take action because they are uncertain about the best action to take. After all, it’s reasonable to hesitate when you don’t know what effect you will have. But there is a sense from this story that sometimes it doesn’t matter what you do. Any action can still make progress toward a goal. Especially when choices and their results are uncertain, any movement is a good thing because it adds a little bit of clarity, advancing one step further through the fog, to see the next step with more certainty.

With this sort of steady, incremental approach even wrong steps are OK. Should I have been eating greasy, salty corn chips or a fresh Vermont apple? It doesn’t matter because, if my change steps are small and gradual, I can switch to fruit before I gobble a whole bag of chips. Corrections can easily be made without long-term negative results.

Considering all the stress associated with major changes, you may think you don’t have the stomach to manage another change in your organization or personal life. But remember, even though we cannot always control a change, we can control our reaction to it by choosing to act.



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Topic Index

Because 99-Word Stories are open to interpretation, you can use the same story to lead a discussion on many different topics. It all depends upon the lens through which you view a particular story. Use the following list of key words to identify stories that relate to some common themes that might be important in your workplace or for your group.

Key Words	99-Word Stories
Change	Change Recipe The Slow Learner Creating Change Empowerment Dance
Coaching	Open for Business? Empowerment Dance Built to Last 100,000 Teachers
Collaboration	Built to Last Whose Fault? Taking a Stand on Meetings
Communication	What's Your Contribution? Taking a Stand on Meetings Open for Business?
Diversity	100,000 Teachers Built to Last Looking and Finding Empowerment Dance
Empowerment	Empowerment Dance 100,000 Teachers The Best Holiday
Focus	Looking and Finding Creating Change The Best Holiday
Goals	Looking and Finding 100,000 Teachers Creating Change The Best Holiday
Mistakes	Open for Business? The Slow Learner Whose Fault?
Motivation	Looking and Finding

[Built to Last](#)
[The Best Holiday](#)

Negativity [What's Your Contribution?](#)
[Whose Fault?](#)
[Taking a Stand on Meetings](#)

Problems [Change Recipe](#)
[Taking a Stand on Meetings](#)
[Whose Fault?](#)

Success [Open for Business?](#)
[What's Your Contribution?](#)
[Change Recipe](#)
[The Slow Learner](#)

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About the Author

Brian Remer, Creative Learning Director of The Firefly Group, is a designer of interactive strategies for training, facilitation, and performance improvement. With a B.A. in psychology and an M.A. in Intercultural Management from the SIT Graduate Institute, he has worked with businesses and organizations in Egypt, Ecuador, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and throughout the United States. He is the 2011 recipient of NASAGA's Ifill-Raynolds Award for lifetime achievement and the author of *Say It Quick! 99-Word Stories About Leadership, Learning, and Life*.

Every month he writes two on-line publications for leaders and trainers: *The Firefly News Flash* features a discovery, ideas, and an activity and *99's on the 9th*, which is a self-contained learning activity for teams.

Brian is noted for his ability to create a low pressure, high impact learning environment.

Contact information:

Brian Remer
brian@thefirefly.org
www.thefirefly.org
www.99-words.com
339 Bullock Drive
Guilford, VT 05301

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