



PROJECT MANAGEMENT
CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE

A.J. CLARK SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING
Civil & Environmental Engineering Department

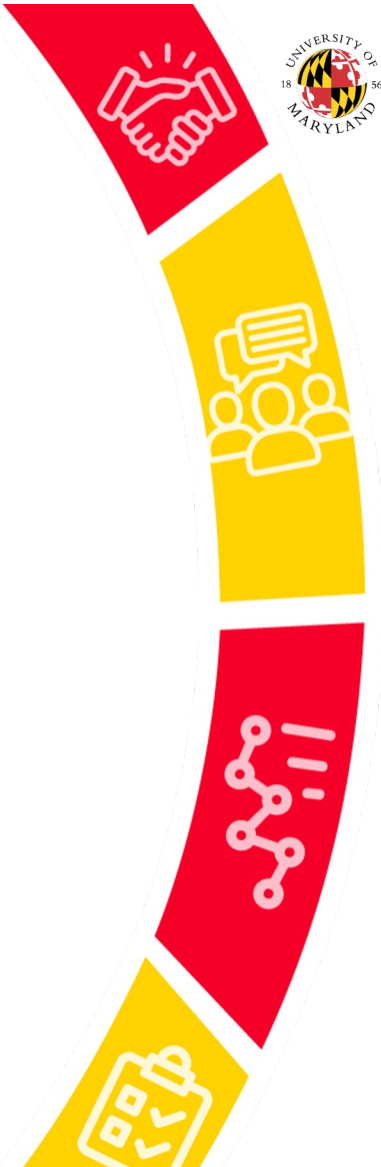
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
2026 PROJECT MANAGEMENT SYMPOSIUM

Mastering The Project Narrative: *Storytelling as a Strategic Leadership Skill*

Dan Ward & Lynne Cuppernull

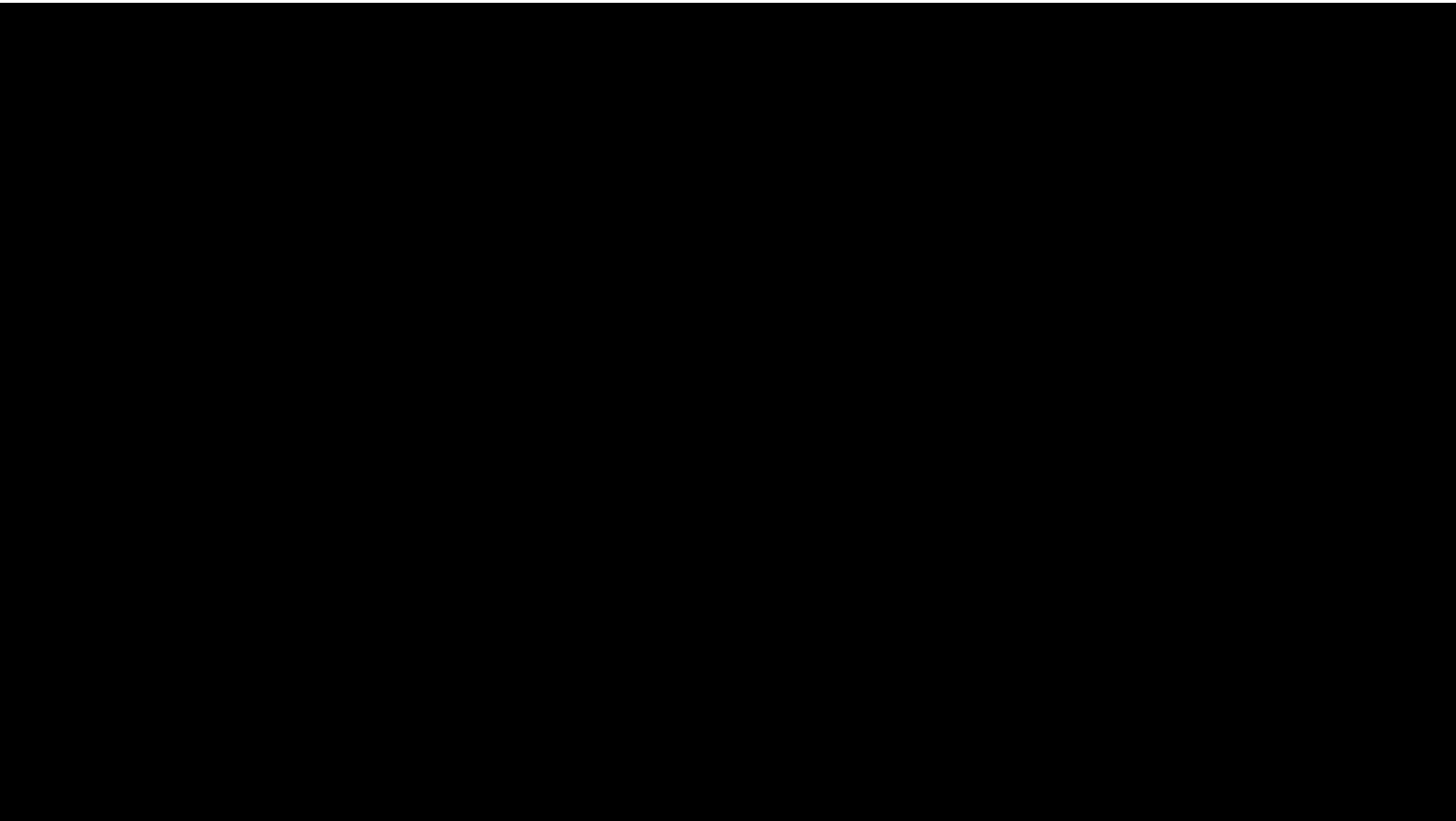
Co-Founders, The SparkLit Group

PMSYMPIOSIUM.UMD.EDU



A bright yellow speech bubble with a pointed tail at the bottom left. The text inside is in a bold, black, sans-serif font, rotated slightly counter-clockwise. The background is plain white.

**Who wants to
hear a story?**



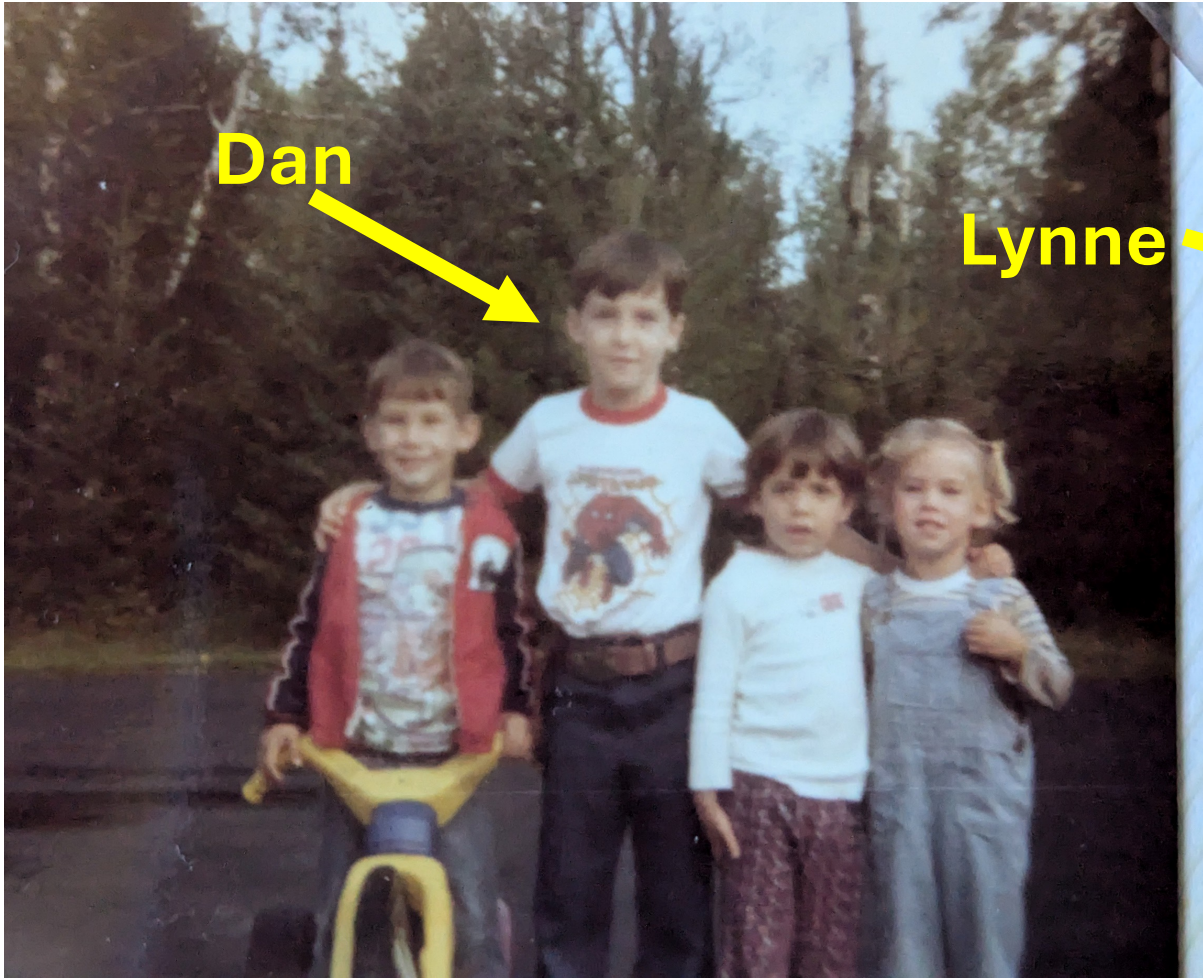
empathy

emotions

curiosity



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Dan



Lynne



what's
your
story ?

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Your Storytelling Workbook



Mastering the Narrative

Storytelling With Impact Workbook



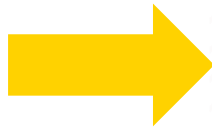
Story Spotting



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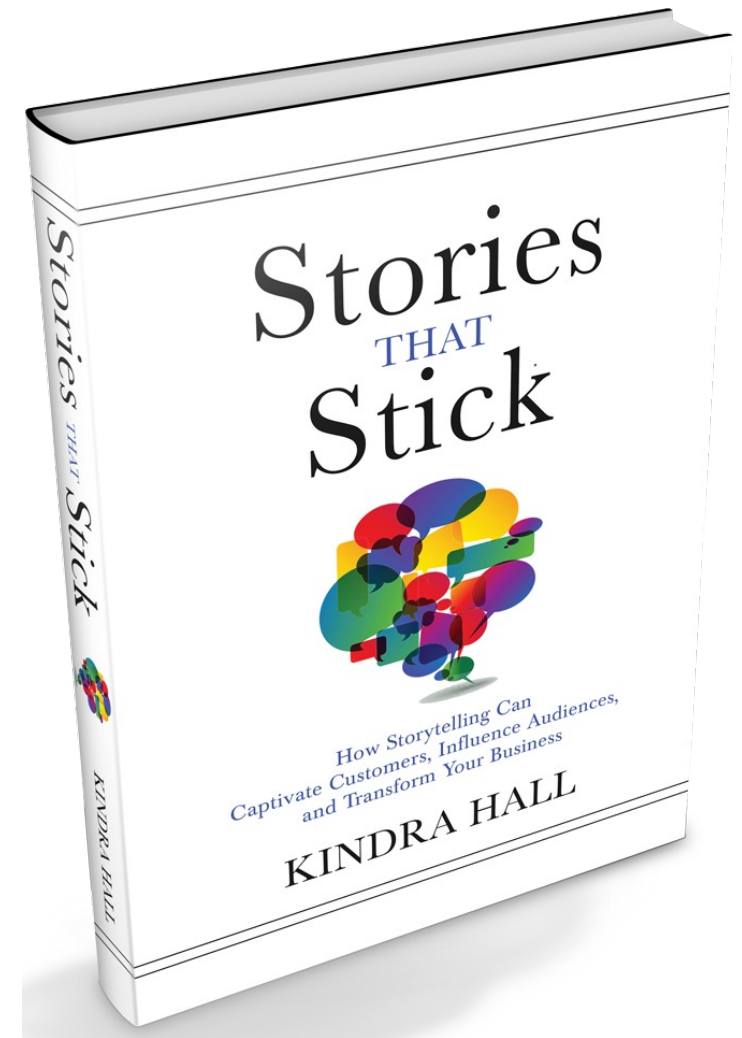
normal



**NEW
NORMAL**

Four Pillars of a Story

- Identifiable **characters**
- Authentic **emotion**
- A significant **moment**
- Specific **details**





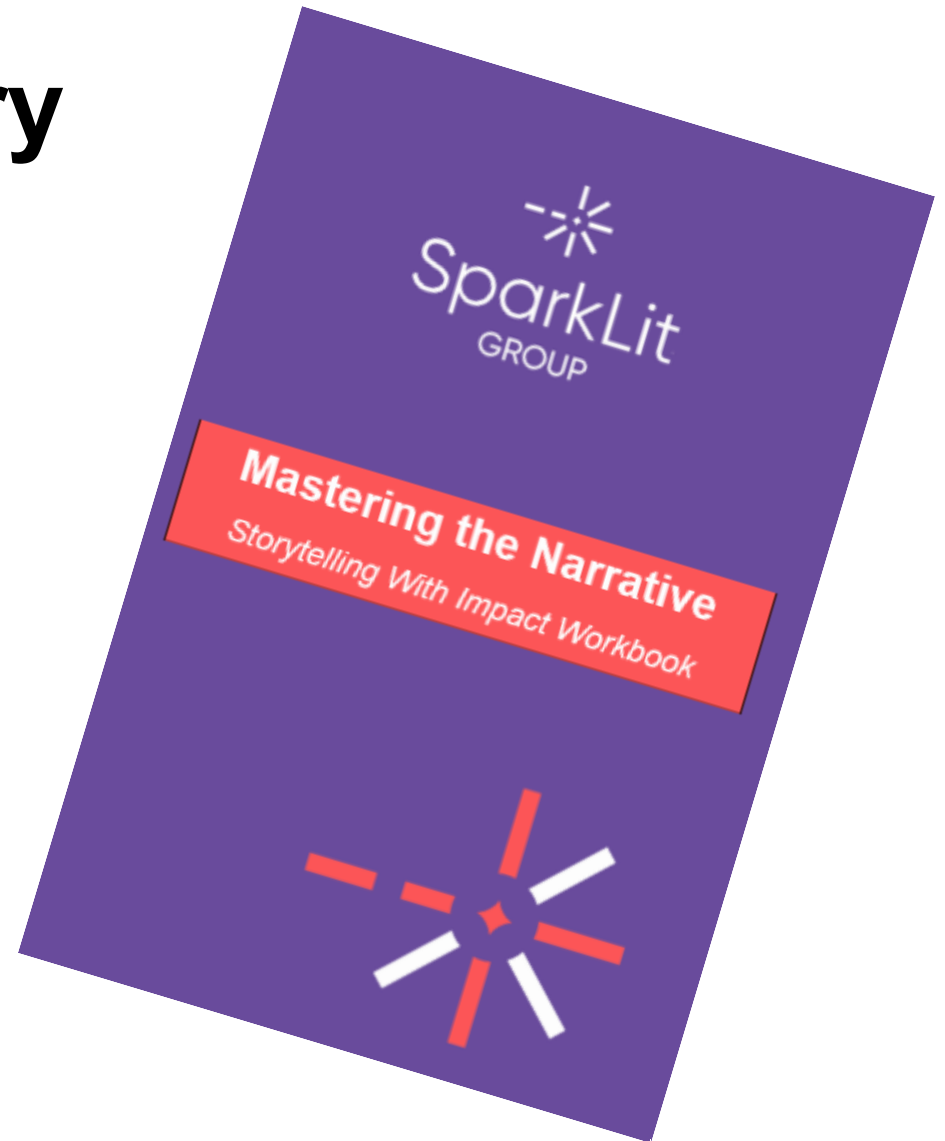
Say hello to iPod.
1,000 songs in your pocket.

Say hello to iPod:

- 5 GB hard drive
 - 10 GB option available after March 21, 2002
- Holds 1000 songs in 160-Kbps MP3 format
 - 2000 on the 10 GB drive
- High output amplifier (60-mW)
- FireWire port
- Standard 3.5-mm headphone jack
- 2-inch white backlit LCD display.
- Physical dimensions: 4.02 x 2.43 x 0.78 inches
- Battery life is an estimated 10 hours.

Four Pillars of a Story

- Identifiable **characters**
- Authentic **emotion**
- A significant **moment**
- Specific **details**



Pixar Story Spine

- **Once upon a time...** [character/context]
- **Every day...** [status quo/normal/details]
- **Until one day...**[explosion]
- **Because of that...** [moment & consequences]
- **Because of that...** [more moment & consequences]
- **Until finally...** [resolution]
- **And ever since then...** [new normal]



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Your Audience

- Who?
- What do they already know?
- What will surprise them?
- What do they want/need?
- How do you want them to feel?



The Elephant in the Room

Why Storytelling Is A Leadership Superpower, According To Neuroscientists

By **Carmine Gallo**, Senior Contributor. © Harvard instru

Published Mar 22, 2026, 09:00am EDT

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CMO TODAY

Companies Are Desperately Seeking 'Storytellers'

Brands trying to wrest greater control of their narratives are asking for 'storytelling' skill sets—without a campfire in sight

By **Katie Deighton** [Follow](#)
Dec. 12, 2025 6:00 am ET

Entrepreneur

🏠 / BUILDING A BUSINESS

[AI Not Delivering? Here's How to Fix It →](#)

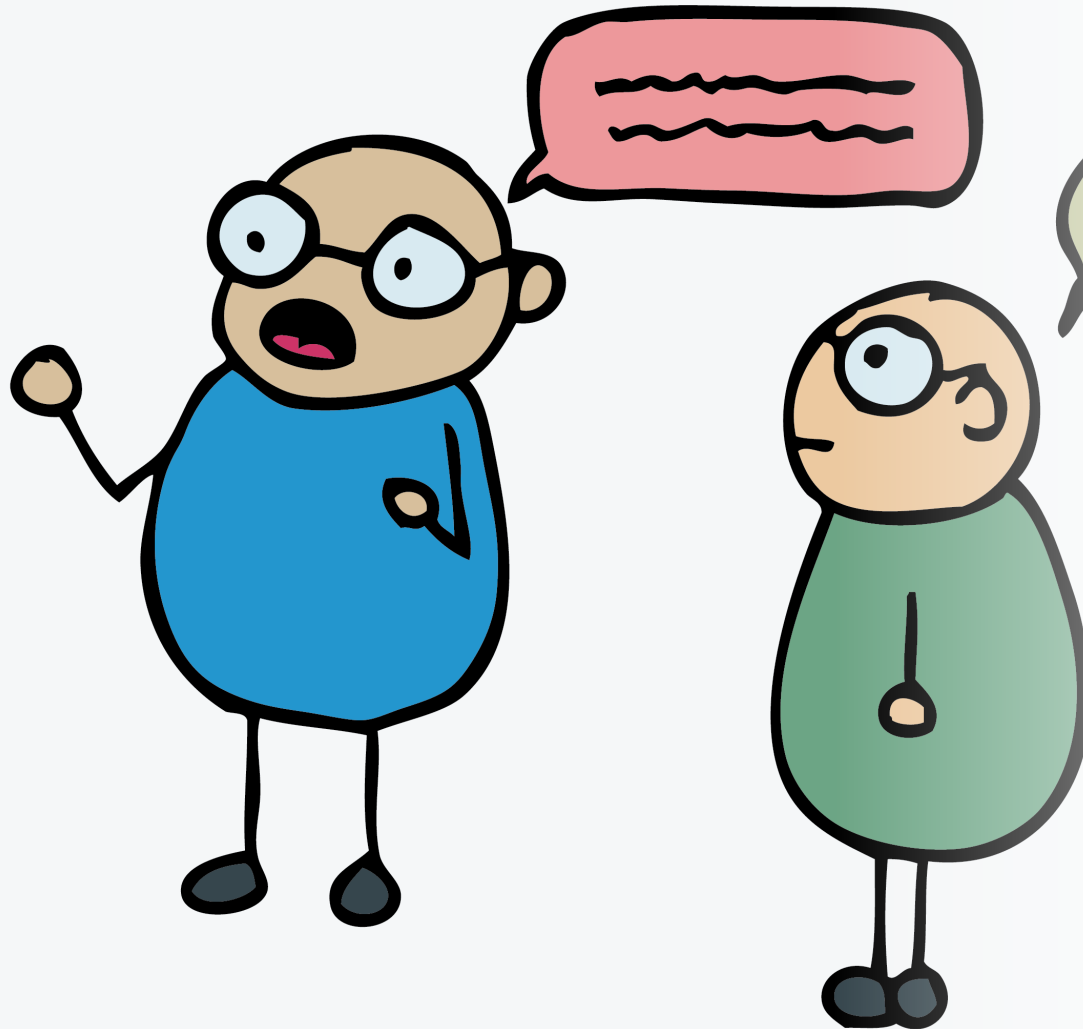
Why Storytelling May Be the Most Important — and Most Underrated — Leadership Skill of 2026

Story Seeds

- Unexpected win or loss
- Near-miss / lesson learned
- User reaction or quote
- Team adaptation or pivot
- Risk averted



The End.
(not really)



3 Closing Questions

1. What story are you currently telling about your project?
2. Who on your team has a story that isn't being told yet?
3. What role will you play in making the human story matter?



Questions & Evaluation

Evaluate Session:



Contact Information:

Dan Ward

dan@sparklitgroup.com

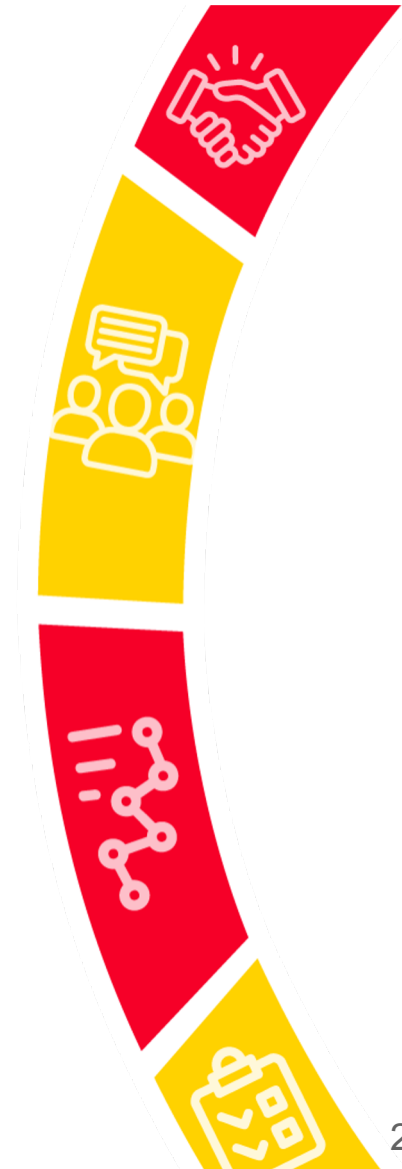
<https://linkedin.com/danward>

Lynne Cuppernull

lynne@sparklitgroup.com

<https://linkedin.com/lynnecuppernull>

<https://sparklitgroup.com>



Stay in Touch!



More info & free resources at:

SparkLitGroup.com

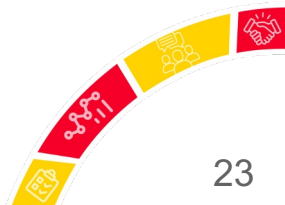
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References

- [Stories That Stick](#), Kindra Hall
- [The Storytelling Animal](#) by Jonathan Gottschall
- [Why Storytelling Is A Leadership Superpower](#), Forbes
- [Storytelling: Most Important & Underrated Leadership Skill](#), Entrepreneur
- [Desperately Seeking Storytellers](#), WSJ

