

▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



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The Story

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I have been in the public speaking business for a long time. Over the years, I've read a lot of material on how to deliver that perfect speech. Some of the most cited advice I've come across includes such pearls as the following:

- Tell them what you are going to say, say it, and then tell them what you said.
 - Always start with a joke!
 - Know your audience and tailor your speech to their specific circumstances.
 - Practice, practice, practice, but don't sound like you've memorized your speech!
 - Act and look like you are the subject matter expert that your audience needs you to be.
- And the list goes on.

While these and other gems have some merit, I recently noticed some buzz about a very different approach to conveying ideas. I immediately bought the book that created the buzz. I think it may very well be the best book that I have ever read on this topic.

The book is entitled *Made to Stick*. Its title gives away the metaphor used both by its authors (the Heath brothers, Chip and Dan) and also Malcolm Gladwell, who first introduced the idea of “the stickiness factor” in his hugely successful book, *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell and the Heath brothers argue in their respective books that ideas either stick or quickly disappear after being introduced. *Made to Stick* is a great read on how to present ideas that stick.

While the Heath brothers go to great lengths to spell out a six-point formula that can enhance the stickiness of the point the presenter is trying to make, behind all of that lies an even more fundamental concept: the importance of the story.

The Heath brothers remind us that over humankind's history, the most effective

and enduring form of communication has been storytelling. Our intellectual development seems wired to select for learning presented in this fashion. We remember urban legends, Aesop's Fables, proverbs, Uncle Remus stories, and so on. We don't remember the complicated or near senseless bullet points that appear on too many PowerPoint presentations. If we can transform our presentations into something that resembles a story, the listener is more likely to actually remember (and even internalize) our points.

I highly recommend *Made to Stick* to anyone who does presentations, public speaking, or has an interest in conveying their ideas to others more effectively.

With the Heath brother's book in mind, I thought about some of the presentations that I've made over the years, especially presentations that I've made about NEHA. While I tend to think that I've done a decent job, I've always felt just a bit unfulfilled because, quite frankly, how can any presentation about an organization be exciting?! After reading this

book, however, I thought that if I could recast the presentation of NEHA into an inspiring story, then perhaps I could also touch people in a way that not only enhanced their understanding of NEHA but also their appreciation for their own role and standing as an environmental health professional.

So with you as my test audience, here goes my attempt to tell the story of NEHA and have an impact on you!

Most stories begin with some version of a “once upon a time” line. While we certainly have a fascinating beginning, our more compelling story actually begins with the Great Recession. I can safely say that NEHA has undergone more change in the last three years than it has through any period of time in my 30 years here, and I dare say, ever, over our rich 75-year history. The shock waves that have coursed through the profession couldn't help but impact NEHA since we are a manifestation of all that this profession is. As we have absorbed these waves, NEHA has changed in some dramatic ways.

Before I begin my story, allow me to once again remind you of our way of strategic thinking. Any regular reader of my column knows that I rail against the concept of strategic plans at least once every six months. I preach that in this fast-paced world, it is folly to think that we can predict our futures, let alone control them. As these are the unspoken premises that strategic plans are built upon, I expose them for what they are—illusions.

The vein of literature that I have tapped into (e.g., *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*) argues that strategy is emergent, not

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planned. As circumstances change (as they do every single day) new strategies become apparent; they are not preordained.

Coupled with this line of thought is a belief in open and self-organizing systems. Obi-Wan Kenobi advised Luke Skywalker to let the force be with him. In modern business parlance (e.g., *Leadership and the New Science*) this idea is expressed more in terms of following intentions.

The current version of the NEHA story begins with this idea of intention. It is this association's intention to be relevant. NEHA moves, adapts, pivots, dances, and responds—all in a quest to retain our relevance. If we are not relevant to the people and stakeholders we serve, then we have no value. After all, who would want to be a member of an organization that was irrelevant to their interests and needs?!

The world changes every single day. Notions of what is relevant can therefore change just as quickly. By maintaining an openness to our future and a willingness to adapt as changes in the world impact what is relevant to our members, we change. And over the past three years or so, have we ever changed! The current, fascinating story of NEHA can be found within those changes.

For most of NEHA's history, we have maintained an almost religious commitment to our 501c3 educational mission. NEHA has strived to be the credible and authoritative source of information, education, and knowledge about environmental health. While this promise remains a passionately held commitment for us, much has happened in the last several years to evolve NEHA into other even more important roles.

The modern NEHA story is woven together with three distinct threads.

Thread 1: The Move Into Training and ROI

As our members struggled to keep their jobs and do more with less, we observed an emerging need to move in two new directions:

- Add a training component to our traditional array of educational offerings.
- Build a return on investment (ROI) foundation into much of what we offer.

These two initiatives have changed how we think, and in the process, what NEHA now is.

Thread 2: Becoming More of an Advocate for the Profession

Contrary to what you may have heard, NEHA has long waged advocacy work on behalf of our profession and the people who practice it. What has changed is that this work has jumped a quantum level and has become a central facet to our identity today.

As environmental health has been whipsawed by economic pressures and as the need for an environmental health viewpoint in policy discussions of emerging environmental health issues has grown, NEHA has significantly upped the ante on our advocacy efforts. Under Larry Marcum's leadership, we now have a functioning and respected Governmental Affairs program. NEHA participates in more partnerships and alliances than ever before. We take policy positions more often. And we've even begun to enlist the help of our members in grassroots advocacy efforts as evidenced by our late February e-blast to you in conjunction with our campaign to save present-level funding for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Thread 3: Strong Leadership for the Future of Environmental Health

This is undoubtedly the most fascinating development of all.

NEHA has a proud history of "supporting" the profession. We also lead the profession in a variety of ways. We feature thought leaders on the pages of our *Journal* and at the lecterns at our Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition. We take positions that are in the interest of our future. We publish standards, educate on new issues, acquaint members with new technologies and products, and push new thinking with various editorials.

We have now, however, taken leadership to a whole new level.

Like it or not, environmental health is changing. Many traditional programs are being downsized and even eliminated. Funding formulas are changing. Privatization, consolidation, and even trivialization of some of our programs are taking place.

At the same time, new issues that beg for an environmental health role are emerging. Concerns in the realms of safe and healthy communities, health effects of climate change,

and sustainability are just a few examples from a much longer list.

A new program of ours helps governmental jurisdictions through their entire budgeting process, so we have finally "cracked the nut" in terms of finding a way to dialogue directly with local policy leaders. As we carefully take in the invaluable insights that we are gathering on how the very definition of government is changing and what those "new normals" look like, we have been astounded to see enormous opportunities for environmental health.

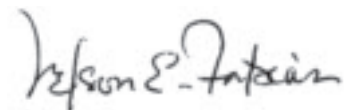
The problem is that many of these opportunities don't look like environmental health to policy makers (e.g., healthy and safe communities or economic/environmental sustainability). Worse, they don't look like environmental health to many of our own people, especially when such programs are institutionally located in settings outside the traditional public health system (e.g., in a land use planning department or a city manager's office).

And yet, this is where we are needed; this is where many environmental health professionals can contribute enormous value to the communities they serve.

NEHA is quickly moving to build bridges to these new opportunities where, it can be argued, a good part of the future of this profession lies. This kind of leadership will impact the future definition of environmental health and where many of you and your successors will practice this profession. These ambitious efforts exceed anything that we have ever attempted in the past.

All three of these threads materialized out of the story of the Great Recession and how it has changed our profession. That NEHA was able to see these emergent strategies within all the dust that the recession kicked up is a tribute to our openness to the future and our commitment to prepare you for it.

The three threads and our ability to see them represent a stirring story in my view. I hope you and the Heath brothers would agree and that the next time you think about NEHA, you will both recall some of this and see more promising possibilities in your own future. 🐼



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