



HUMAN SYSTEMS
DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

Change the World Capture the Drama

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Not too long ago, I was disgruntled with the company that does some work around our house. From my perspective, they had not lived up to their promises, and as a customer I was not happy. Then when I tried to talk with them about the difference between what I expected and what I believed I was getting, they did not respond as I wanted them to. So I expressed my frustration and ended the conversation by letting them know I would no longer be needing their services. Later in the day I was telling Glenda, who also lives in this house and uses their services, about my conversation. I was passionate in my re-telling. I quoted what I said and then what they said. I expounded on how wrong they were, building to the crescendo, where I announced that they would no longer be performing their services in our home. Glenda just looked at me and after a moment, she said, "So righteous indignation is important and dramatic, and who is going to do their work around here now?"

We both laughed at my drama, and then I got busy looking for a replacement.

How often have you been involved in facilitating or engaging in a conversation that got so wrapped up in the drama of it all that the participants lost sight of the original goal or purpose of the conversation? I have thought about that often since my conversation with Glenda, and it occurs to me that there is a practice that we can use to get past all that drama. It's called "Six-word Stories."

Six-word Stories are not an HSD invention. The concept is attributed to Earnest Hemmingway, who responded to the challenge to tell a story in six-words. He wrote, "For sale: baby shoes. Never worn." In that one sentence, he tells a powerful story. The concept has caught fire and is widely known. Here are some examples I found at <http://www.sixwordstories.net/about/>:

- ▶ Fixed line of code; saved world.
- ▶ Empty Nesters: "Now we can swing!"
- ▶ Logged out. Pulled plug. Found life.

I watched Glenda facilitate a meeting a couple of weeks ago, and she used the idea of six-word stories to describe individual perspectives on a common question as a check-in/warm-up activity for a nonprofit board that was welcoming its new members. I

Nothing is intractable.

realized that it works as a facilitation tool because when individuals tell their stories in such a concise way, they are, essentially capturing the essence of the pattern they want to describe.

The story lets the speaker describe the container, point to important differences, and share the exchange that is most critical. It allows them to share the drama they feel over an event without providing a blow-by-blow justification for the righteous indignation they feel. It provides a way to get clear about what matters without the noise of so many words. It's simple; it's elegant; and it's powerful.

Today's model/method is a brief worksheet you can use to remind you—and others—to use a six-word story to get to the heart of an issue. Try it as the check-in activity to help people get to know each other. Use it to help people articulate their perspective of a conflict. Ask people to describe their hopes and visions for the future. I believe it's a process that can be a powerful and useful tool for your repertoire.

And, I realized what I might have said to capture the essence of my story with the service providers. My six-word story? "Talk. Listen. Talk. Listen. Satisfied customers." Find your own use for six-word stories, and let us know how you use them.

Royce



Your Six-Word Story

What is a six-word story?

It's a sentence that captures a whole story in just six words and may be referred to as "flash fiction" or "sudden fiction."

How do you write a six-word story?

- ▷ Who's the "actor"?
- ▷ What's happening?
- ▷ What's the outcome of the action?

Now what's your six-word story?

Examples include:

- ▷ Penniless weirdo. Struck lottery. Overnight genius. -*Evonne*
- ▷ Coffee before art. Goodbye straight lines. -*Vinsula*