THE GRAYSON COMPANY

Your Best Idea Is Dying in a Spreadsheet

How leaders turn ideas into innovation with stories that inspire action

An executive briefing | November 2026



Stories turn sound ideas into funded, adopted innovation

Analysis earns an idea a hearing. A story earns it commitment, budget and behavior change.



Story is part of the innovation

If you can't tell the customer's story after the change, the idea isn't ready.



Match the story to the job

Rallying teams, selling upward, shifting strategy and explaining change need different stories.



Use a repeatable structure

Protagonist, tension, turning point and a clear ask beat charisma.



Make narrative governance

Require narratives, storyboards or future press releases at funding gates.

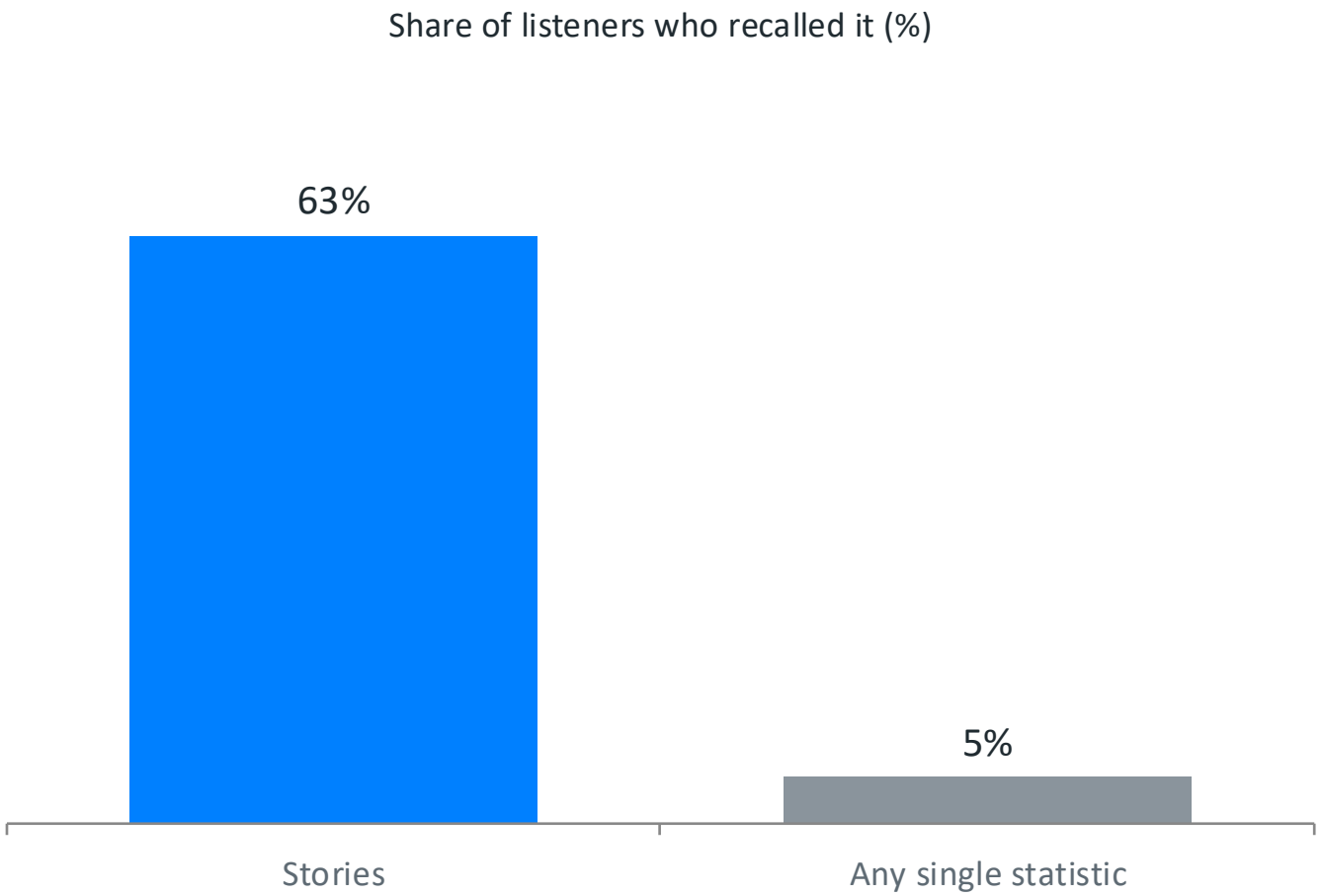
01

Why data alone fails



Data proves an idea is sound. Stories make people remember it and want to act.

Listeners remember stories, not statistics



1 in 10

speakers told a story; the typical one-minute speech used about 2.5 statistics

Polish didn't matter

Captivating speakers did no better at making ideas stick. Stories, emotion and a single point did.

Source: Chip & Dan Heath, Made to Stick, Stanford classroom exercise

Stories build trust and force clearer thinking



Stories move people to cooperate

Paul Zak's lab found character-driven stories with real tension trigger oxytocin, tied to trust and empathy. The amount released predicted willingness to help, such as donating to a related charity.

Zak, Harvard Business Review, 2014



Narrative exposes weak logic

When Amazon replaced slides with narrative memos in 2004, Bezos's reasoning was that narrative forces authors to decide what matters most and how ideas connect. Bullets let weak logic hide.

Bryar & Carr, Working Backwards

A new idea asks people to trade the familiar for the uncertain. Spreadsheets describe the uncertainty; stories let people experience the future well enough to choose it.

02

Crafting stories that inspire action



Four roles, four story jobs, and one structure that works for all of them.

Each role needs a different story



Team leader

Objection: "Why take this risk?"

Purpose story: Who we serve and what changes for them



Idea champion

Objection: "Why this, why now?"

Springboard story: A real case where the idea already worked, told briefly



Strategic influencer

Objection: "How does this fit?"

Future story: The customer or market after the change, told as if it happened



Communicator

Objection: "What does it mean for me?"

Transformation story: Where we were, what we learned, where we're going

The same executive often plays all four roles. Build the core story once; retell it with a new protagonist and ask for each audience.

Six working parts of a story that moves people

1

Start with the ask

Write the decision you want before the story

2

One protagonist

A named customer or employee, not "the market"

3

Break the ordinary

Show today, then the moment it becomes unacceptable

4

Cause and effect

Each beat follows from the last; the idea is the turning point

5

Make the future concrete

Specific, sensory, from the customer's side

6

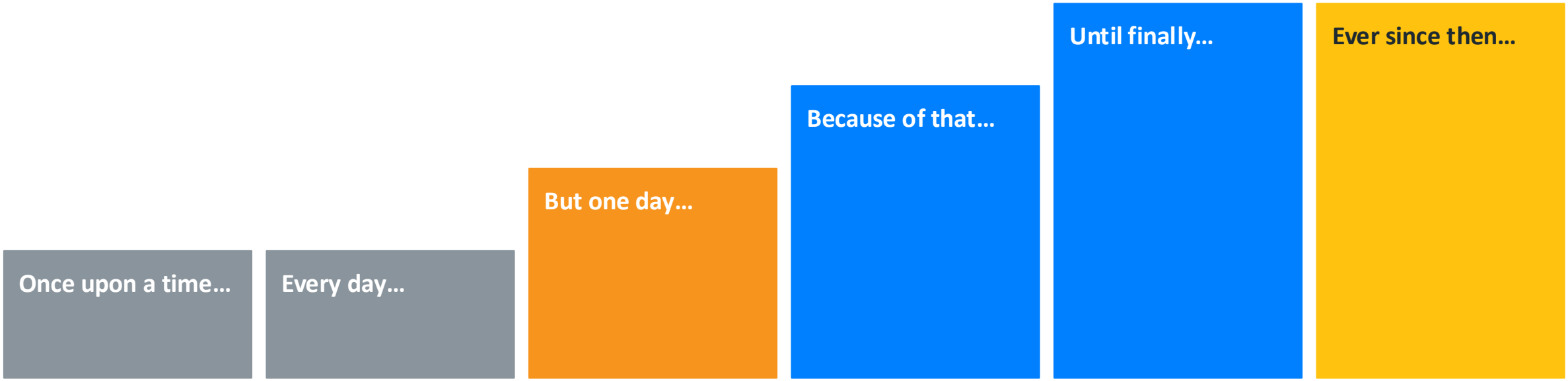
Close with proof + ask

Two or three numbers, then the decision, owner and date

Three tests: Can you tell it in 90 seconds? Can a listener retell it tomorrow? Does it end with a decision someone can make this week?

A drafting tool: the Story Spine

The ordinary world | **The turn** | **The transformed world**

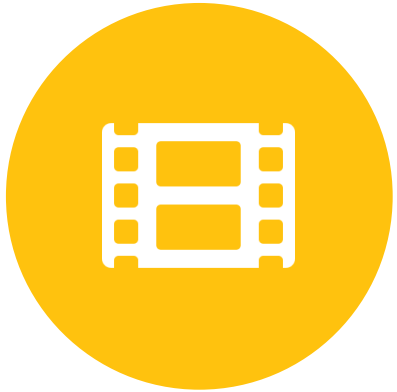


Once upon a time…	Every day…	But one day…	Because of that…	Until finally…	Ever since then…
Who our customer or team is today	The routine, workaround or pain	The insight or shift that changes things	What our idea makes possible, step by step	The customer, business or market transformed	The new normal, and what we need from you

Created by improv teacher Kenn Adams and long used in story development at Pixar (NPR, 2026). "Because of that" repeats to enforce causality.

03

Case examples across industries



From development finance to consumer technology, the idea won when someone found the story that let decision-makers see it working.

World Bank: a two-sentence story sells a new strategy



IDEA CHAMPION · SPRINGBOARD STORY

Stephen Denning's logical case for knowledge management was going nowhere. So he told a short true story: in June 1995, a health worker in a remote Zambian town found malaria guidance on the US CDC website.

The punchline: the World Bank, for all its expertise, wasn't in the picture. The story galvanized leaders, and by 2000 the Bank was benchmarked as a knowledge-management leader.



Sparse on purpose. Denning found embellishment hurt: a thin story let listeners picture their own unit and think, "we could do that here."

LESSON

For an upward pitch, short and true beats dramatic. Leave room for the audience's version.

Sources: Denning, The Springboard; RiseWithDrew, "Beware the Well-Told Story"

Amazon: narrative as the innovation operating system



STRATEGIC INFLUENCER · FUTURE STORY

Senior meetings open with a six-page narrative memo, read in silence. New products start with a PR/FAQ: the launch press release and FAQ written before anything is built.

The press release forces teams to tell the customer's story of the finished product first. The practice spread into acquired businesses such as Ring and Eero.

1 Press release

2 FAQ

3 Six-page memo

4 Decision

LESSON

Make narrative the entry ticket to funding. No customer story, no money. (Evidence is mostly insider testimony.)

Sources: Bryar & Carr, Working Backwards; Amazon Chronicles (Dave Limp); Decision Brief / PR-FAQ evidence review

Airbnb: storyboarding the customer journey

TEAM LEADER · STORYBOARD

After reading a Walt Disney biography over the 2011 holidays, CEO Brian Chesky borrowed Disney's Snow White storyboarding method. Airbnb hired Pixar animator Nick Sung to draw the guest, host and hiring journeys. The frames exposed moments where Airbnb did nothing for customers, and teams began organizing around frames.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Hears about it	**Searches**	**Books**	**Arrives**	**Stays**	**Reviews**

Illustrative guest-journey frames; Airbnb's actual board used 15 frames each for guests and hosts. Highlighted: the "moment of truth" on arrival.

LESSON **Drawing the customer's story shows where to innovate and gives every team a shared map.**

Sources: Fast Company, "How Snow White Helped Airbnb's Mobile Mission"; Nathan Blecharczyk, Sequoia

Microsoft: one culture story for the whole enterprise



COMMUNICATOR · TRANSFORMATION STORY

Becoming CEO in February 2014, Satya Nadella framed renewal as a culture story: from "know-it-alls" to "learn-it-alls," built on Carol Dweck's growth mindset, and told through his own life in Hit Refresh.

He policed its meaning: when an executive used growth mindset to criticize colleagues, Nadella said plainly that was not the point.

FROM

Know-it-all

TO

Learn-it-all

LESSON

An enterprise story needs a personal source, a simple contrast and leaders who model it.

Sources: Right Attitudes summary of Hit Refresh; Business Insider

Apple: the reveal as a story

COMMUNICATOR TO MARKET · REVEAL

At Macworld on January 9, 2007, Steve Jobs set the moment against Apple's history with the Macintosh and iPod, then announced "three revolutionary products."

He repeated the three until the audience caught on: they were one device, the iPhone. Specifications came after the story.



= one device

LESSON

Frame the new against what people know, build anticipation, then deliver one memorable turn.

Source: Business Insider, "Apple reinvents the Phone"

Kodak: an invention without a story



CAUTIONARY TALE

Engineer Steve Sasson built the first self-contained digital camera at Kodak in 1975. By his account, management called it cute but said to keep it quiet, and marketing would not sell it for fear of cannibalizing film. Talk of a future 18 to 20 years out did not excite executives who would be gone by then.

1975

Digital camera prototype built

1978

Patent filed; no public showing

Early 1990s

Kodak's first digital camera ships, ~18 years later

2012

Kodak files for Chapter 11

LESSON **Kodak had the invention first. What it lacked was a story that made the future urgent for the people deciding.**

Sources: PetaPixel; Camera World. Timing of first launch per Sasson; 2012 filing is public record.

What the cases have in common

Case	Role	Story device	What it unlocked
World Bank	Idea champion	Two-sentence springboard story	Leadership buy-in; KM leader by 2000
Amazon	Strategic influencer	Future press release; six-page memo	A funding gate built on narrative
Airbnb	Team leader	Customer-journey storyboard	Shared map; gaps found and owned
Microsoft	Communicator	Personal transformation story	Culture shift from know-it-all to learn-it-all
Apple	Communicator	Three-in-one reveal	A launch the market remembered
Kodak	(missing)	None that made the future urgent	An invention shelved

04

Putting it to work



Avoid the predictable pitfalls, then build narrative into how decisions get made.

Seven pitfalls and how to fix them

Pitfall	Fix
The idea is the hero	Make a person the protagonist; the idea is the turn
No tension	Name the real problem and the cost of standing still
Over-embellishment	Keep upward pitches short and true
Story without evidence	Pair it with the two or three numbers that confirm it
No ask	End with a decision, owner and date
Slogan drift	Model it from the top; correct misuse publicly
Spin	A story caught overstating poisons the next idea too



The most common failure

The room is moved, then leaves without a decision. Every story needs an ask.

A 30-day agenda for the C-suite

1 2 3 4

WEEK 1

Find your stories

Each leader brings one true story of a customer or employee an innovation already helped.

WEEK 2

Change the funding gate

The next three proposals open with a future press release or storyboard, before financials.

WEEK 3

Practice the spine

A 60-minute session: draft a Story Spine, tell it in 90 seconds, have a peer retell it.

WEEK 4

Tell it at scale

The CEO tells one priority's story personally; leaders cascade it with local protagonists.

Before any innovation pitch, check

- The ask is written down before the story
- One named, recognizable protagonist
- A real tension or cost of standing still
- A concrete future, told from the customer's side
- Two or three numbers that confirm the story
- Fits in 90 seconds; a listener can retell it
- Ends with a decision, owner and date

Lead with the story. Close with the data.

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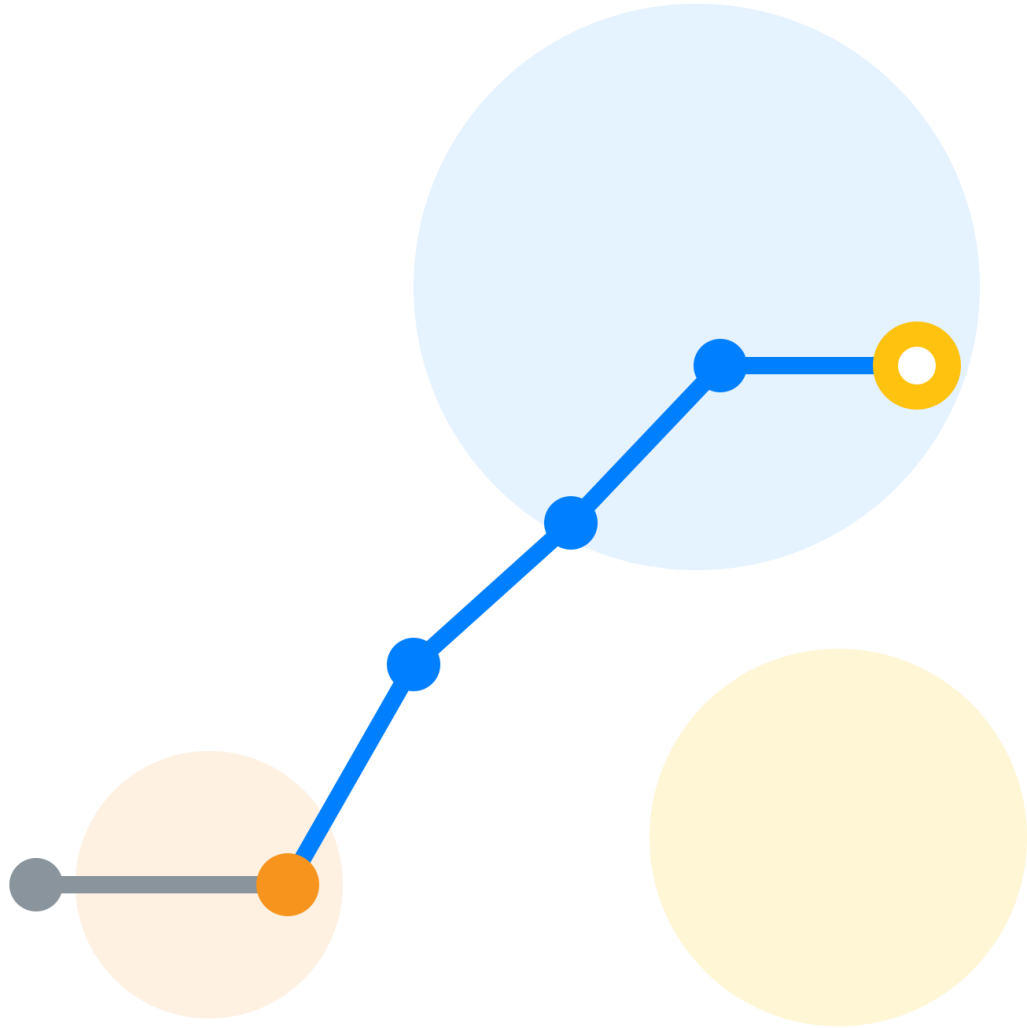
If you can't tell the story of the customer after the change, the idea isn't ready yet.

Retail strategy · Organization design · Executive search

thegraysoncompany.com



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- NPR, "Meet the creator of the Story Spine," 2026