

# Mitch Ditkoff

## The power of storytelling in innovation

### Speakers:

**Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit**

Mitch Ditkoff

### Expert Interview transcript:

**Nick Skillicorn:** The concept of storytelling at work Mitch lovely to have you here.

**Mitch Ditkoff:** Thank You Nick. Happy to be here

**Nick Skillicorn:** We are going to be focusing on today's session for anyone who is tuning in, it's the concept of storytelling, how it's so powerful not only in work context but also in a way to get ideas across and help innovation teams. Mitch what's your background on innovation and how did you get into this concept of storytelling.

**Mitch Ditkoff:** My background in innovation goes back to 1986 which is when I started Idea champions, my company along with the other co founder Steve McHugh and since that time we have been working with organizations all around the world in pretty every industry on earth at least ones that we know of, from literally rocket science to MTV. We have identified the need to what they call innovate and of course it means different things to different people. If you will Google definitions of innovation, there's something like three hundred million references.

You will find that everyone has their pet phrase for it but no matter what the word is referencing, on behalf of our clients, they recognized the need to get out of the box, to think differently, to innovate and at point we became a candidate, idea champions to intercede and help them on their way which is what we have done and which is what we do in various ways depending on who the people are, how many they are, what their commitment is, what their skills set is and what their hope for outcomes are. So there's no blue print, there is no road map, although every client will like a road map, just tell us what to do, it's not six sigma and it's not just do all these techniques and all of a sudden you will have no more defects. So it's a lot more of magical mystery tour but we have been in that space for twenty eight years.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect. I am sure that during that time, the way that you have approached innovation has probably changed as well. So how did it start and evolve into what it is now?

**Mitch Ditkoff:** I agree. Great question, we began with one offer which was a creative thinking training for AT&T, at the time which they were deregulating and were no longer going to be a monopoly. They realized they now had competition and their workforce had been habituated to do the same thing all the time, like their mother did or their grandmother did, they were all employees of AT&T and they just had to show up to work and collect their pay check. With Sprint and MCI in the

game, the senior leadership of AT&T realized that they need an entrepreneurial workforce, they need people who think for themselves and challenge the status quo.

At that time we were in the right place at the right time, we met the head of learning and developmental training as it was called then. He got very curious about who we are and what we were doing, and we taught him how to juggle at the ASTD, American society for training and development conference. He had been trying to learn for twenty five years he told us and that's what we did in our booth, since we were trying to walk our talk about creative thinking and creativity, we didn't just want to hand away little brochures, we wanted to get people to experience and have them really access their own creativity real time rather than just think about it.

On the third day he came to our booth, he stood his ground, looked around, he frowned, crossed his arms he said what is this. I looked at him and said what does it look like, I said juggling and I looked at him and I asked him if he wanted to learn and then he paused and smiled and he told me that he is been trying to learn for twenty five years unsuccessfully. He paused and said if you can teach me to juggle, he paused again you have my attention. That's all not a contract, not a promise.

Anyway we taught him in five minutes because we have a technique for teaching people to do things that they think are impossible. His mind was blown and he gave me his card and said call me on Monday and we did. He invited us in to do a beta test of our one training, our one offer at that time called get out of the box, it was a big success. He then looked at us and said this could be a false positive, you could have had an easy group of people, come back here in a month and I am going to give you a tougher group, it also worked and we thought we were in, he said well let's try one more time, we came back yet another time and all three times was a big success and he finally got it that it was a process that worked.

And then they license that program from us and we taught their trainers how to teach the course and that's really how we really got our start but In the beginning it was just one thing and then as we really learnt about the market place, the customer needs and organizational needs, we started to develop services and products to meet those needs. We just were real time in it and when we saw there was need we invented it and that morphed into many different forms from workshops and keynotes and products and one on one coaching and various ways in which we address the need to become innovative.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Mitch earlier on you talked about story telling as something that's useful for innovation. So lets elaborate a bit on that, what do you mean by storytelling and how does it actually help companies think about new ideas.

**Mitch Ditkoff:** Storytelling can be reduced to one sentence basically, it's a narrative. There is a person, a protagonist, a hero with a goal a quest an obstacle and there's something in their way and that person has to do something different in order to get to their goal, to get to their holy grail of their quest and they do it or they are done. That's it, that is the classic hero story. All of us in business, all of us in the world area of innovation are basically involved in that story. As a catalyst of innovation or a catalyst of creative thinking, we are trying to do everything we can to help people reframe or really experience the result in a new way instead of banging your head against the world and being eaten by the big bad wolf again and again.

What would be a different path, what would be a different way to go about their business? So a story is one frame or one way to spark some insights and some new ways of preceding classically this may be spoken of in the world businesses best practices. So a best practices is nothing other than someone recounting on a story, something they did that worked and they tell other people and the hopes of those other people benefitting from that story that has practice and emulating it or adapting that best practice in some ways toward their particular work. But basically it's a story, so story is a vehicle to spark behavior change, it's really what I'm on to these days and why I am so excited about storytelling as an enabler of innovation because in my experience it works and I am all about what works. I have tried a lot of things some has worked better than others, some hasn't work at all, failed experiments. But storytelling almost always works and so looking for interesting new ways of integrating that into what I do with my clients.

**Nick Skillicorn:** How would those work, can you give us some examples about how you might use this concepts or ways that you have seen it work?

**Mitch Ditkoff:** Absolutely, from my side as the facilitator or the speaker, I knowing what the client is up to, what their goals is, their hope for outcomes are of my interventions. I select a story from my own business life or a classic teaching story known as spring boards stories that have nothing to do with me being the hero of the story, it could be somebody else. A traveler, a wayfarer, a person from another business and I tell that story now it seems as soon as I start telling that story, everything changes in the room, people from being kind of intellectually curious, half involved, wondering who I am, what's going to happen next, how is this related to their life. They sit up and take notice because something in our DNA is primed to listening to and be involved and engaged with stories. It goes all way back to our childhood.

So the story gets their attention, that's number one if you don't have any one's attention you are screwed and really good presenters find ways to get people's attention. Story telling is a great way to capture attention. So the story is told and inside the story is a metaphor, it's an example of the behavior of thought form, an action or result that translates to the listeners as hmmm that's interesting, wow I am wondering if we could apply that to here. So now they are emotionally involved, you have cut through the clutter of their mind static, you have got them engaged and then the real rubber meets the road is how that story is debriefed. So there's the what, there's the so what and the now what. So most presenters they will tell us stories as an ice breaker, that's the word and then they just move on. They don't really process it very well necessarily some stories don't need to be processed by the way, that can become too academic or too intellectual or analytical. But done well, the story is told, there is a processing part of it where the audience gets to actually dig into it, what was that really about and then how does that apply to my life or our life and then they are off to the races. Getting to build a bridge and the story to their life and that's very powerful it can be called fairy tale.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Is there any chance we could try out one right now if I give you a sort of a situation you could give me an example of how you might approach that in the story context

**Mitch Ditkoff:** Maybe.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Let's take one that a lot of business people can probably relate to, they will come to you and they will say we have got this great new idea but our manager is telling us that we should focus on our day job or that this shouldn't be a priority right now.

**Mitch Ditkoff:** Okay so a story that would help be an example of another way of approaching that. Okay. So here's an example they are many anyway I am just going to pick one of my own hard disk. Elias Howe who as the inventor of the lock stitch sewing machine many decades ago, a brilliant man was stuck in his effort in inventing this machine, he couldn't get the something right every time he built the needle and ran his experiments, the needle will break and this was really deflating for him. Months went by, many months went by, one night he had a dream and in the dream he was surrounded by natives from the classics spear carrying indigenous in the forest, scary natives and they brought him to a boiling cauldron of water and they were about to put him in the water to boil him alive. They brought him to the place of execution, interesting as a double entendre, execution as die and execution as to get something done finally. So as they lifted him up to lower him down into the boiling cauldron of water, he looked at the natives and each one of them had a spear and on top of each of these spear there was a little hole cut out, a little eyelet which dawn down to him to be the design of his needle he had been building the needle with the eye lid in the middle of the needle, now in his dream on his subconscious, he saw something on the top, he woke up, he carved out the prototype and he made it into a real device and he tested and it worked and the lockstitch sewing machine was now an invention that made him and many other people a lot of money.

So that was an offline moment Nick. That was not work faster, have a spread sheet, show up at more meetings. That happened off the job in his sleep state where he had access to very genius intuition instincts and his subconscious mind was processing and mile in a minute what his conscious mind couldn't figure out. In the modern day business world, this is translated by companies like Google and WH Gore who give their employees a percentage of their time to work on projects that have absolutely nothing to do with what they were hired for. Kind of dream time fascination time, half of these services that you see on Google's home page, Google's maps being one and Gmail being another. They were actually invented or conceived of by Google's engineers during this twenty percent down time, in a way their dream time.

For a CEO or senior executives who are from the top don military model work harder, work faster, show up earlier, stay earlier and show me the money make no mistakes, exactly that's an addiction and that's not a prelude or innovation to breakthrough, that's like a very old school mindset which runs a lots of businesses or at least some. For somebody who was habituated in that realm and that was their default condition. It might be a wise thing to tell them The Elias Howe story where then they go "oh wow", "interesting, hey you know I once had a dream", "really what was your dream about", "I was really stuck" and so on and then ok say more and so you begin to build a case if you will for the power of the sub conscious mind or what can happen offline or what happens when we give people some more space and time to think and dream and noodle not just the six sigma world but a world of what Einstein spoke of the mystery. The imagination said Einstein meant more to him than the knowledge, and he used to conduct what he thought experiments in his lab in Princeton. Imagine him stocked standing in front of a blackboard with all of these, with a lot of equations and algorithms and he was stuck, he couldn't figure it out. He will sit down on his chair and he would call a thought experiment which is a fancy name for day dreaming, in his day dreams state, a softer fuzzer logic he would get access to little bits and pieces, little threads, little clues that eventually

would be the spark for him to get up and have his insider breakthrough and even him coming up with E equal MC squared. When he was asked about that, he said he imagined himself riding a light beam into an infinite space holding a mirror in front of himself and being unable to see his reflection in the mirror, something clicked in him and that led him to E equal MC squared. I don't know how he did that, and that's not a technique necessarily, that's been a translate for me. But most of my clients for left brain, they are extremely analytical, completely all business and its understandable, they have got a business to run so you want them to be all business but not *all* business, you want them to open up what has been called the right brain, softer fuzzier, illogical associative playful aspects of themselves where some of the good stuff abides but if their culture is such that it relates to a very important date, get back to work, give me the list, give me the spread sheet they are basically eliminating the very one thing that they need the most of, they think they are being efficient, they think they are being good business men but actually they are making it very unlikely the people that they work with to tap into a place of brilliance.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I know, it's such a shame that a lot of managers have grown up and essentially told that their job when overseeing other people is to make the decision on everything to say no to. Whereas real leaders and real innovative bosses they are the ones who enable people to do better work and they often have the opposite mindset like how often can I say yes rather than I need to say no unless I am a hundred percent sure.

**Mitch Ditkoff:** Exactly, and parents too to their children, psychologically parenting behaviors have identified that nine out of ten statements the parents makes to a child is no. One is a yes, don't do that, don't do this, okay. You know when the kids want to get out of the house and like, let me out of here. It's crazy but again this brings us again back next to the story. So if you believe in the premise that there is two parts of us, a logical rational part and analytical part and the more creative, inventive, novel possibility seeking part sometimes spoken of the left brain and the right brain. If you believe that battle goes on and most people do and the question becomes how do we help people make the shift. It's been that left brain world of analysis and logic rationality to the world of possibility where something different is going to happen.

Now there are many things that one can do, many things, there are many many catalysts, there could be music, and there could be story, there could be drawings, there could be so many creative thinking techniques or really well run brain storming sessions. You know Socrates used to take the student out for a walk, it was called the peripatetic school of learning and he knew that when people moved that their mind would also move and there would be more accessing that part of them that he was interested in helping them access. So what do we choose to do if we are a facilitator, a consultant, a trainer who is there to help increase the odds of innovation or creativity happening, what do you choose?

Storytelling, anybody listening to this I am just making a big plug for this I didn't invent storytelling, guess what, storytelling went way back into the stone age, our ancestors stood around, way back and there is a beautiful quote by Ursula Le Guin, the author of some very science fiction books, she said "there has been many cultures that don't have the will but there has been no culture that did not have story telling".

Story telling is how we transmit what is called tacit knowledge. In other words we know something, something deep, something timeless and universal, something powerful, how do we communicate

what we know to another person in a way that really sticks and it's memorable? Now in our very mechanistic world these days, the overly twitterfied world, the Google it world, people are usually trying to seek out a three minute tutorial or a list or an instruction manual that's like "get me the how tool. Right the first time" as if reading about how to ride a bike is going to teach you how to ride a bike. You can't really learn how to ride a bike without getting on the bike.

And so stories and storytelling help people get on the bike and it gives them another avenue, another access to contact a principle that's already within them, equality, the courage, risk taking, experimentation, collaboration, perseverance, the biggies. You know if you were to consult the characteristics of your favorite innovators and then try to find the qualities that made them such, these qualities would emerge, they have that in spades and yet how do you activate those qualities in another person? Instead of them just being the hero, like "Oh Steve Jobs is my hero", Albert Einstein or Richard Branson all the ones that make it on the cover of the magazine, all the fantastic and wonderful people. But how do we activate those qualities that those folks have in spades and help other people live that.

One way to do that is by telling stories that embody those qualities and then activate the memory or the buried quality within the listeners such that they have easier access to it. Neuro scientists have done many studies on the impacts of storytelling and what they have found out in their experiments where they will wire up the listener with an electrode and they have electrodes on the story teller. What they discover is that when the story teller is telling his story, the same part of their brain that lights up in the telling of the story which is their memory of something that happened to them lights up those same parts of the brain in the mind with the brain of the listener. So in other words there was a transference an activation happens and the story itself was sufficient to make real that experience that the listener is going "Oh my God" and now they have that feeling. It's sort of the sleeping beauty, the sleeping giant in them is now awake

And if there is somebody in the room who is playing the role of the facilitator and that person has some skill, they can make that access to that lit up part of the brain, they can help that listener or all those listeners explore that, so what's that like for you. What's the story like that in your life or how does this apply to you or if you took the essence of what Steve Jobs or Elias Howe did that situation, how will that apply to you, well I guess we keep our people a little more time and what would that look like, "well maybe Friday in the afternoon we can have pizza day. We can have walking meetings..." so you start to translate into actions these subtle buried principles that are the DNA of an innovator that's what interests me. Not teaching at another technique, not giving someone another ring binder that is going to sit there on the shelf forcing them with everything I know (and a lot of stuff) but who cares about what I know. It's what they know, that's their job, that's my job, that's your job. I am not saying that story telling is the only way to do it; there are lots of ways to do it. I know you are doing great work Nick in getting the word out. There are so many facets of that diamond because I read your stuff and it's good

**Nick Skillicorn:** Thank you

**Mitch Ditkoff:** You are most welcome. I am choosing in the time that I have left to focus primarily on the power of story and storytelling and of course something that is in very short supply these days story listening because most people just endure what the other person is saying so that they can have their say.

**Nick Skillicorn:** One thing that has been really click with is I have been listening to you right now is that there is more than one benefit to the story telling concept, the first one that you talked on is to think through problems in a new way, so you have got an obstacle and you can then think of stories of how it work previously. I am also saying is the way that you communicate, the value and the meaning behind what your ideas and what your offering is, that's probably both within the company but also when you then start to take it out to the customers and the market and the audience quite often people never interpret what you are telling them the way that you do, one thing that I always tell my clients your customers don't care what you think of your own ideas. Quite often they're taken aback a bit, they are always in love with their own product and their own offering. But if you use this concept of describing experiences and describing over coming challenges based on your trying to communicate with them, that must add a lot of value to the listener

**Mitch Ditkoff:** It has a ton of value and you are on to a very powerful part of human psychology. Psychologist reduced what you just said down to three words: motivation affects perception.

The Indians and the classic continent of India have a beautiful aphorism: when a pick pocket meets a saint, all he sees are pockets.

So the HR person sees everything as an HR issue, the chief financial officers sees everything as a money issue, the creative director sees everything as an idea, a brain storming and a thinking issue and so on and so forth. Because we are all looking through our own particular filters. Now that's why there's so much disagreement and a disenchantment because everyone is like forming a different world and they are trying to collaborate and yet they are all looking through different lenses and no wonder no one can agree. That happens in every marriage, in every parent and child relationship, you see it differently.

In storytelling what gets fascinating this gets back to your very lucid point after the story is told whether you tell it or somebody in the room tells it, there is a chance to explore what that story means and then what you find happen is that different people hear the story in different ways and if you would ask them what the story is about, you would get different points of view just like after CNN spin doctors talk at night, they are trying to convince the listening audience what the president or some political heavy weight said to influence your mind so that you think the way they think. But you don't think that way

So stories get to the place in the listener where they can find out what they think and what's valuable to them and a really a good story has more than one element of value. So it doesn't matter if the person X thinks this is the main thing or a person Y thinks that's the main thing, the fact is what does that thing mean to you and how does that apply to our business, our customers and what do you learn from that story that will change the way that you market, sell, develop, distribute whatever.

And all of a sudden you have Nick, or whoever is doing it, tap into the right brain, the part of them that's looking at possibility and something different and new, and they are in a "wow you know we couldn't really, that's really interesting I wonder if we could try that", the catalyst for that shift of thinking was the story, that's what it is. It's like a raft to get you from one shore to the other shore, then you can throw the story away. You want people to get to the other side.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Mitch it's been fascinating listening to you. We are coming up to the end of the session now but if you can give someone listening one actionable piece of advice that they can go out and try tomorrow obviously getting yourself in to help the company being the obvious answer but something that they can try themselves tomorrow, what will that piece of advice be?

**Mitch Ditkoff:** Very simply, get together with your team, or your think tank or your closest colleagues and then ask each person to identify a story, a personal story something that has happened in your life whether it's work life or non-work life that to them they consider to be a memorable moment of truth.

Something that has happened that they never forget but they may not have told that story very often because they think that other people don't care or they are not a good storyteller whatever their excuse is and then begin to process that circle of people telling each other that story and then unpacking the story to see what the true meaning is there for each person in that room and how the essence of that story applies to their life and their business and all of a sudden you opened up the box and now you have got a different quality of communication going in with those people.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Mitch thank you so much. If you want people to find out more, where is the place they are going to go if they want to find out about your work?

**Mitch Ditkoff:** Well the idea champion's website [www.ideachampions.com](http://www.ideachampions.com) is the mother ship of everything we do and on that site you will find descriptions of our workshops, our keynotes, of our trainings. I have some of my books on storytelling on the blog heart of innovation which carries this conversation forward

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect, thank you so much for being here Mitch

**Mitch Ditkoff:** Thank you Nick, I enjoyed it thank you so much for taking time to spend this time with me.