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Stories that *unite*

Doug McMillon, CEO of Walmart, uses self-reflection and shared values to forge a powerful connection.

A powerful story is never merely a straightforward retelling of the past. Instead, it weaves scattered events into a single thread, converts facts into feeling, and sparks a genuine connection between storyteller and listener—the kind of bond many leaders aspire to, but not all achieve.¹ Doug McMillon, CEO of [Walmart](#), offered a master class in powerful storytelling on [Fortune's Leadership Next podcast](#).² By stitching together criticism, catastrophe, and corporate soul-searching, he reminded employees, executives, and skeptics alike of Walmart's true north.



"The story starts in 2004 and 2005," McMillon said. "We were maturing as a company, so we were going through a process of learning. And we were facing criticism. I think it'd be fair to say we were very focused on the customer stakeholder and the associate stakeholder, but we weren't always thinking about broader issues."



McMillon is setting the stage. Walmart's growth was undeniable during those years, but so were the growing pains. He invites his audience to view Walmart's history as a relatable journey with ups and downs. He mentions honest introspection and open dialogue, underscoring the value of vulnerability in leadership and demonstrating that even a Fortune 100 company can be self-aware.

Then McMillon's story goes deeper. He uses a story-within-a-story to illustrate how a leader can use personal emotions and collective experiences to reframe a challenge as an opportunity to put purpose into practice.



"Right about that time," McMillon said, "Hurricane Katrina came to New Orleans. It's Labor Day weekend. The city is flooded and people are struggling. We're all watching this on TV. I'm at Sam's Club, and we're shipping water and doing the things we would typically do. And Lee [Scott, former CEO of Walmart] had us on a conference call and he said, 'Listen, this is a different situation. It's dire. They need help. We can help. I want to unleash you all to send people, send money, send merchandise, and do everything you can to help, and we'll worry about what it costs later. And if it dings the quarter we'll explain to people why we had a bad quarter. Don't worry about that.'"



In this moment, the CEO's directive is clear and powerful. Four simple words—"Don't worry about that"—are a catalyst that galvanized an entire organization. Overnight, Walmart transformed its focus from retail to relief. Within days, the company had delivered more than two thousand truckloads of supplies and donated tens of millions in cash and goods. But, the numbers matter less than the mindset—service first, spreadsheets later.

McMillon's story highlights how difficult circumstances can serve as rallying points. Rather than view the challenge as a setback or liability, the leadership team reimagined it as a chance to reinforce the company's commitment to its values. McMillon not only paints a vivid picture of the urgency and empathy that defined Walmart's response but also underscores the strategic value of framing leadership's decisions.

The three techniques McMillon uses in telling his story can be used by any leader looking to make the same impact: grounding in a shared past, connecting past events to present values, and framing a vision for the future.



01. Ground in a shared past

A strength of McMillon's story lies in his emphasis on collective rather than individual effort. He illustrates how Walmart's response was marked by teamwork and shared determination. While some leadership stories focus exclusively on personal triumphs, McMillon makes it a point to highlight that the journey at Walmart was a collective one. He remarks on the multifaceted response: "We had people from all over the country go to New Orleans to serve others. We had vice presidents landing emergency helicopters in parking lots. We had officers doing resuscitation on people in the lobbies of Walmart stores."

This frames the entire narrative as a testament to Walmart's organizational culture. By stressing that "we" played the key role in the company's achievements, McMillon reinforces the notion that leadership is distributed and that strategic decisions are informed by the collective experience of all employees. This inclusive framing resonates with a broad audience ranging from employees and customers to external parties, as it underscores a shared commitment to a common cause.

This storytelling strategy enhances the message's authenticity. When the audience hears phrases like "we all were watching" and "we had people from all over the country," it's a reminder that success in challenging times is not the result of actions taken in isolation. Instead, it's the outcome of a coordinated effort that binds each member of the organization in a shared vision. In a business landscape often characterized by hierarchical decision-making, this approach humanizes Walmart's leadership and contributes to a culture where every stakeholder feels personally invested.

02. Connect past events to present values

Throughout his story, McMillon draws direct links between the company's historical experiences and its present-day identity. While some corporate narratives today can emphasize operational efficiency or market leadership, McMillon's story takes on a more human dimension.

In recalling the critical moments of doubt, introspection, and collective action, he positions Walmart as an organization built on resilience, accountability, and proactive leadership. His story suggests that the true measure of a company's strength lies in its ability to face criticism and emerge more unified and purpose driven. He recalls, "We were facing criticism," not with defensiveness, but with a readiness to transform. This framing invites stakeholders to see Walmart not as a distant corporate behemoth, but as an evolving community shaped by shared experiences and mutual commitment.

By serving as a bridge from the past to the present, this storytelling approach not only solidifies the company's brand identity but also serves as a roadmap for future leadership—one which embraces vulnerability, collective resolve, and a forward-looking perspective.

03. Frame a vision for the future

McMillon's story, as presented on the podcast, is focused on human elements such as accountability, crisis management, and collective resolve. By steering the conversation toward the people behind the decisions, he allows the audience to focus squarely on the leadership qualities that drive the organization. His focus on moments of decision-making during crises exemplifies how a leader's voice can galvanize an entire organization toward a common vision of empathy, service, and accountability—elements that are central to Walmart's continued evolution.

In the response to Hurricane Katrina, McMillon highlights the importance of immediate humanitarian action—“It was just incredible to watch what our people did”—versus traditional corporate priorities. The emphasis is on people—employees stepping forward, communities uniting, and leaders setting the tone for decisive action. By spotlighting both shared experience and direct leadership responses, McMillon reframes what might otherwise be seen as challenges into moments of inspiration and progress. Instead of allowing controversy or criticism to define the company's identity, effective storytelling demonstrates an unwavering commitment to taking care of both the business and the community. This storytelling technique holds strategic value. In a business landscape where many external voices shape opinion, reframing internal struggles as catalysts for transformation serves to re-establish the company on a positive narrative trajectory. McMillon's message is clear: Walmart is a company that learns from its past and builds a future powered by unity, accountability, and trust—and he, as its leader, recognizes and values this

Putting it all into action



McMillon's story is a powerful demonstration of how effective storytelling can connect leaders with their audiences in an authentic and memorable way.

Central to McMillon's narrative is a deep commitment to transparency and authenticity. By openly discussing past criticisms and hard lessons learned, McMillon builds a bridge of trust between himself and his audience. Transparent communication of challenging experiences reassures stakeholders that the company's evolution is grounded in real, tangible efforts rather than abstract promises. The audience is invited to witness a full spectrum of organizational growth—from confronting past errors to celebrating decisive actions.

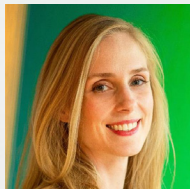
Authenticity is key in today's fast-paced business environment, where audiences demand not only competence but also clarity and responsiveness from corporate leaders. McMillon's willingness to recount challenging moments with frankness positions himself as a leader unafraid of learning, adapting, and fostering a culture rooted in collective accountability.

In recounting these formative moments—acknowledging criticism, rallying resources in times of need, and communicating decisively—McMillon not only tells the story of Walmart but also shares an approach to leadership that emphasizes accountability, and human connection. Ultimately, the power of McMillon's story lies in his ability to make the audience feel as if they are an integral part of the journey—a journey defined not merely by corporate milestones, but by moments of genuine human connection and resolute leadership.

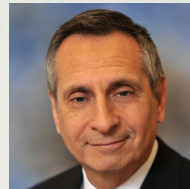
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Transcript

McMillon: Lee Scott [former CEO of Walmart] made a really important speech in October of 2005. It's called Leadership in the 21st century...

We've been working on this for a while. The story starts kind of 2004/2005. We were facing criticism as a company. I think it'd be fair to say we were very focused on the customer stakeholder and the associate stakeholder group. And as we were maturing as a company, we didn't always think about broader issues and the rest of the stakeholders, and we were going through a process of learning. I was part of that. There was a core group that was meeting with critics, reading books related to the environment, reading books related to social issues, having experiences, let's say, that were unusual for us at that time. And our thought process was well, we're maturing as a company. We're facing criticism rather than trying to defend ourselves, let's look in the mirror, and have some of the people that can be most harsh about us tell us what they think and then try to make it a better company.

McMillon: ...and it got into wages and benefits as well as things related to the environment and sustainability. Right about that time, Hurricane Katrina happened in New Orleans, and the city flooded and people were struggling, and the government was slower to react. We're all watching this on TV. It's a Labor Day weekend. I'm at Sam's Club, and we're shipping water and kind of doing the things we would typically do. And Lee had us on a conference call and as we're watching it all unfold, he said, "Listen, this is a different situation. It's dire. They need help. We can help. I want to unleash you all to send people, to send money, and to send merchandise and do everything you can to help New Orleans, and we'll worry about what it costs later. And if it dings the quarter we'll explain to people why we had a bad quarter. Don't worry about that."

So we had people from all over the country go to New Orleans to serve others. We had vice presidents landing emergency helicopters in parking lots. We had officers doing resuscitation on people in the lobbies of Walmart stores. It was just an incredible moment to watch what our people did. Lee then captured that moment and said: How would you like to feel the pride you feel right now after Katrina every day?

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Endnotes

1. See research from Finzi, Fond, Molacek, "Stories that drive action." *Deloitte.com*, 2025.
2. Fortune. "[Walmart's CEO on the shift to centering nature and humanity in relation to the supply chain](#)," *Leadership* Next June 9, 2022.

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