

Public Narrative: Story of Self

Using Narrative to Build Relationships and Shared Vision

This tool offers an overview of how to develop a stewardship group's shared purposes and to build values-based relationships among individual leaders through public narrative. Its purpose is to explain how to use narrative as a sustainable leadership practice to motivate others to work together effectively.

Learning Objectives:

- To explain why narrative matters
- To understand how the leadership practice of public narrative works
- To develop your own public narrative and to coach others in theirs
- To identify opportunities to apply narrative in your leadership work

Phase(s): This tool is best used by individuals who are a part of a group engaged in a Phase 2 effort along the Pathway for Transforming Regional Health.

How to use this tool

This tool is most effective when completed by people deeply engaged in the regional change effort, such as those who are part of the core stewardship team leading the effort, or part of the backbone or integrator organization.

Leaders can use narrative to develop a team's shared purpose by developing and sharing their personal stories of self to engage and motivate others to join in the effort and encouraging individuals to write their own stories of self to share and to build a shared view of your effort.

This tool begins with an overview of narrative and its three components: (1) story of self, (2) story of now, and (3) story of us. The overview defines narrative, explains why it can be a powerful tool and offers guidelines for when to use narrative in practice. This tool focuses specifically on the first narrative component, "Story of Self", and the last section offers a step-by-step guide to develop your own story.

Why Narrative?

One of the challenges facing multi-stakeholder stewardship teams is forming relationships, sometimes in a context of little existing trust, with other leaders from other organizations—relationships that can



withstand challenging and difficult subjects and the hard work of leading change over time. A second key challenge is arriving at a compelling shared purpose that is genuinely motivating for leaders who work together, and that can supersede individual and potentially competing interests. That purpose must be clear and shared to guide collective work.

Narrative provides a method to identify the shared values of a diverse set of stakeholders. It offers a framework for developing a clear and collective vision guided by those values. It invites and inspires new leaders to join in action. It builds a values-based culture around the effort. It identifies and sustains stakeholders' intrinsic motivations to steward shared resources on an ongoing basis. It recalls leaders to their core values, which are sustaining in the face of differences, conflict, and complex decision-making. It reminds leaders of what unites them as equals, and how together they can make a difference.

What Is Narrative?

Narrative is the skill of creating a shared story around our common values to motivate others to join us in action.¹ It involves three core components: personal stories that illustrate our own values ("story of self"); collective stories that illustrate shared values ("story of us"); and stories that illustrate both the challenges a group faces and the hopeful actions groups can take to address those challenges ("story of now"). In this tool, we focus specifically on the first narrative: Story of Self.

How Does It Work?

Narrative establishes a foundation on which to: (1) lead; (2) collaborate with others; and (3) discover common purpose and vision to take action.

Narrative is how individual leaders learn to access their own moral resources—and courage—to make choices in the face of urgent challenges. Because it connects leaders to their individual motivations to act ("story of self"), it is critical to sustaining volunteer commitments in change efforts.

Hearing one another's stories allows leaders to build empathetic connections and a collective capacity. Stories have the power to move others because they allow leaders to express values through their lived experiences. And sharing them allows leaders to learn where they have shared experiences and shared values.

¹ Ganz, Marshall. (2010). Leading change: Leadership, organization, and social movements. In N. Nohria & R. Khurana (Eds.), *Advancing Leadership*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston: MA.



Narrative allows leaders to discover common purpose, or a motivating vision, to act on. Leaders tell stories to motivate others to join them *in action*.. As one coalition leader stated, “It’s not just telling a story for a story’s sake; you are trying to accomplish something with it.” In other words, narrative is a motivational “call to action,” through which leaders describe the urgent challenges they face, a hopeful vision of what life could be, and the specific choices that they have made to move toward that vision.

When Do We Use Narrative In Practice?

To Develop a Shared Purpose as a Stewardship Team

Leaders can use narrative to develop a team’s shared purpose. When we ask leaders to engage in narrative with each other, we ask them to tell a brief story to the group that illustrates:

- **Challenges:** What challenges, obstacles, or difficulties did you experience in your history that can teach us something about why you feel called to lead change toward a healthy health system?
- **Choices:** What choices did you make that illustrate that calling?
- **Outcomes:** What happened as a consequence of your choices? What might happen if we work together toward some shared purpose? Why are you hopeful that it is possible?

This discursive process allows stakeholder groups to envision the future collectively, make choices to move toward that vision, and construct an identity around the values that motivate their choices.

Leaders often share stories about loved ones who experienced harm in hospitals (for example). They describe personal trials navigating the health system themselves, or as children of elderly parents, and as parents of young children. They tell stories about patients whose lives could have been saved by population health efforts, whose families went bankrupt paying for care, and whose surviving caregivers suffered secondary mental and physical health problems. They share personal, yet universal, moments of grief and loss—and how those moments transformed them as human beings and as professionals.

In using narrative, leaders view their peers differently. With an emphasis on values, narrative provides a way to connect on equal footing with others from very different groups and constituencies. As one leader remarked, “Different people [in our coalition] are motivated to participate for a range of reasons—a belief in the Triple Aim, a market motivation, a population health mandate. But it is the use of narrative that connects us around a shared moral purpose, and everyone is united by that.”



Story of Self

A “Story of Self” Illustrates Why You Have Been Called To Act

Everyone has a compelling story to tell. We all have stories of pain, or we wouldn't think the world needs changing. We all have stories of hope, or we wouldn't think we could change it. We all have made choices that shaped our life's path—how we responded to challenges, whether to take leadership positions, where we found courage to take risks. In a story of self, we focus on choice points, moments in our lives when our values become real and we exercised agency in the face of uncertainty. When did you first care about health and health care? Why? When did you feel you had to do something? Why did you feel you could? What were the circumstances? The power in a story of self is to reveal something of yourself and your values—not your deepest secrets, but the key moments in your life.

Telling the Story

A Story Is Lived and Breathed in the Details

Stories are specific and visual. They evoke a time, place, setting, and mood as well as colors, sounds, textures, and tastes. The more you can communicate this visual specificity, the more power your story will have to engage others. This may seem like a paradox, but like a poem or a painting or a piece of music, it is the specificity of the experience that can give us access to the universal values or insight they contain.

The Craft of Narrative Involves Being Authentic and Speaking from the Heart

Learning the craft of public narrative is not learning a script, developing a message, or creating a brand. It is not a formula, but a framework. Our public narrative changes as our lives, communities, and challenges evolve. But each narrative we tell should be a genuine reflection of real choices that define who we are.

Once Again: Why Stories?

You may think that your story doesn't matter, that people aren't interested, that you shouldn't be talking about yourself. But when you do public work, you have a responsibility to offer a public accounting of yourself—who you are, why you do what you do, and where you hope to lead. If you do not author your public story, others will, and they may not tell it in a way that you like.

A good public story is drawn from the series of “choice points” that have structured the “plot” of your life—the challenges you faced, choices you made, and outcomes you experienced. Your story gives others emotional and intellectual insight into your values, why you have chosen to act on them in this way, what they can expect from you, and what they can learn from you.





By telling our stories, we also become more mindful of our own moral resources. And because stories enable us to communicate our values not as abstract principles but as lived experience, they have the power to move others to join us in action now.

Example: Dr. Elliott Fisher's Narrative

Listen to Dr. Elliott Fisher tell his Story of Self, by clicking the audio review link. If you are not able to listen to the audio, please read the transcript on the next page.

Audio Review: [Dr. Elliott Fisher's Story of Self](#)

Think about the elements of **personal history and choice** that you hear in his story. ***Please use the space below to take notes.***

1. What was Elliott Fisher's purpose in telling these stories? What was he asking people to do?
2. What values did his narrative convey?
3. What details or images in particular reflected those values?
4. What were the challenges, choices, and outcomes in his story? What values do these convey?

Dr. Elliott Fisher Story of Self Video Transcript

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"I grew up, you know, the son of a very prominent Harvard law professor who had been a meteorologist in World War II, flying over Japan back and forth, doing weather forecasts. After the war, he discovered that those lone flights up over Japan in a B29 had taught the residents of Hiroshima that they could ignore that first early morning flight of a lone B29 in the morning. So many thousands of additional people died in Hiroshima thanks to those morning flights. He came back from World War II having lost many of his friends, thinking that violence and war were no way to solve problems. And so devoted his life to reducing the risk of conflict, focusing on nuclear war, establishing the field of conflict resolution, and devoted really his life not just to the study of stuff, but to try and make a difference. So my brother and I grew up, you know, both feeling we knew we had to grow up and, you know, become people who were making a difference in the world, but with no clue how to do it. So I majored in mountaineering in college as I sometimes say, although that wasn't an approved major back in those days.

When I graduated, I still had no idea what I'd do in my life. So I decided to drive an ambulance in Somerville, Massachusetts, three miles from where I grew up in the fancy part of Cambridge. And where I was driving the ambulance, kids were getting diseases like diabetes and seizure disorders and that none of my classmates had, asthma. And so, seeing this sharp disparity between what I got to experience growing up and what was happening with, you know, basically neighbors, and seeing how terrible the health care they got was, led me to think, gosh, you know maybe there's something I could do, you know, at the interface between healthcare and public policy that would sort of where I could make a difference, and it would be far enough away from my father that I thought I'd have my own identity.

One of the things that I do go back to, as I think about my year and a half on the ambulance was this, was seeing really for the first time through the eyes of a patient, what it felt like to be, you know, a poor person of color going into a, you know, a hospital where they did not feel valued or respected and they felt fearful about what was going to happen to them there, just because of their social position. And then it was later in medical school where I learned that that happens all the time because most of the people who are sick actually are also poor. It's a much higher burden of illness among poor people in this country than among the rest of us. But everyone feels, feels vulnerable and scared, and the ambulance really let me come into the emergency room, with the eyes of a patient in ways that probably I wouldn't have otherwise had experienced."

Develop Your Call to Action and Coach Others

TOOL: Draft Your Story of Self

Draft a one-page narrative that conveys why you are called to being a change agent in health (and exchange it with your learning partner for feedback).

Narrative is an exercise in leadership that motivates others to join you in action on behalf of a shared purpose. The goal in this tool is to identify sources of your own calling (story of self). Use the guide below to help you create your draft.



Why are you called to being a change agent in health? What stories can you share that will enable other leaders to “get you?” How can you connect with others to experience the sources of the values that move you not only to act, but also to lead? Identify key choice points that set you on your path.

Important note: This tool is not about answering the above questions in order. However, it helps to start with what you imagine you are going to ask of others in joining you in this leadership work. That outcome toward which you would like others to join you in leading can help you identify the aspects of your own history and experiences that make that outcome important to you, personally.

Also remember that learning public narrative is a process, and it is iterative. This is not about writing a script that will fit all situations. It can be learned only by telling, listening, reflecting, and telling again—over, over, and over. This work will be a beginning.

1. Identify the challenge: What specific challenges have you faced in your life? Choose one that is relevant to the values you want to express about yourself in this context. What vivid details (characters, settings, images) will help a listener experience what it was like to face that challenge?
2. Identify the choice. What did you do in facing that challenge? How did it make you feel?
3. Describe the outcome. What happened as a consequence of your choice? Is the lesson for you positive (it offered a hopeful direction), or negative (it made you rethink your choices, aspire to something different)?

Coaching Each Other

Listening to and coaching stories is just as important (if not more) as telling your own. Public narrative is not a script that comes ready-made to take into the world. It is important to ask sharpening questions that will guide the storyteller to consider the effect of their narrative and the values it expresses. And, as you help in another’s learning process, you in turn fine-tune your own story.

Below are some coaching tips. Read carefully through the kind of reflective and probing questions that can help bring clarity to someone else’s story.

When giving feedback to your learning partner, be curious and genuinely interested! Probe where a story needs sharpening, and share what connects you to their story. The purpose of coaching is to listen to the way stories are told and think of ways that the storytelling could be improved.

- **The Challenge:** What were the specific challenges the storyteller faced? Did the storyteller paint a vivid picture of those challenges? Is there a sense of urgency around that challenge, not just for the speaker, but also for us?

“When you described _____, I got a clear picture of the challenge.”

“I understood the challenge to be _____. Is that what you intended?”

“The challenge wasn’t clear. How would you describe _____?”



- **The Choice:** Was there a clear choice that was made in response to each challenge? How did the choice make you feel? (hopeful? angry?) Is the choice we are being asked to make clear? Does it seem significant and doable?

*"To me, the choice you made was _____, and it made me feel _____."
"It would be helpful if you focused on the moment you made a choice."*

- **The Outcome:** What was the specific outcome that resulted from each choice? What does that outcome teach us?

"I understood the outcome to be _____, and it teaches me _____. But how does it relate to our work now?"

- **The Values:** Could you identify what this person's values are and where they came from? How? How did the story make you feel? Is the value claim about the choice we need to make clear? What shared value does the narrative animate? How?

*"Your story made me feel _____ because _____."
"It's clear from your story that you value _____; but it could be even clearer if you told a story about where that value comes from."*

- **Details:** Were there sections of the story that had especially good details or images (e.g., sights, sounds, smells, or emotions of the moment)? Did you feel like the moment was captured vividly? Or, did the speaker merely explain the circumstances from a certain angle of remove?

*"The image of _____ really helped me identify with what you were feeling."
"Try telling more details about _____ so we can imagine what you were experiencing."*

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