

The Narrative Lens and Organizational Change

Nick Nissley and Stedman Graham

What do a CEO and a six-year-old child grieving over the death of her pet dog have in common? More than you might think.

Recently a friend told us a story about her daughter, who after the death of the family's chocolate Labrador said, "I wish we could just give Woody a pill and make him a puppy again." It reminded us that when people's health fails them, they often seek *prescriptions*. Our friend's daughter was hoping for a drug remedy to restore her dog's health and vitality.

Later that evening we attended a client engagement in San Diego, where we listened to the organization's CEO speak to more than a hundred shareholders, telling them the story of the organization he founded. He proudly talked about the company's founding and its history of winning. But he also painted an honest picture of a less-than-optimistic market outlook and the complex challenges and risks the company was facing. He said that strategies that had worked for the company in the past would no longer help it navigate through future challenges. He described how the company would be forced to

shift gears. He confidently told the shareholders that a new strategic plan had been drawn up at the company's recent leadership retreat and that his management team was beginning to deliver on it.

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After the CEO finished speaking, we reflected on his speech. His approach sounded quite similar to approaches detailed in many other executives' speeches to shareholders we had heard over the past few years.

The next day we continued to reflect on the similarity of the CEO's speech to many we had heard before. At the same time, our

friend's story of her daughter's response to the death of the family dog—her desire for a prescription to make everything right—was percolating in our minds. We came to appreciate both stories through the lens of narrative. The CEO was telling his shareholders a story—actually two stories: one a proud story of organizational health and the other, like the story of Woody, a story of demise and the desire to restore good health. It was as if the CEO had to let go of one script and embrace another—a new strategic plan for his team to enact.

In the months following our experience in San Diego, we came to more fully appreciate the power of the narrative lens. The business world in recent years has shown increasing interest in the narrative lens and more specifically in the relationship between leadership storytelling and organizational change. Consider some of the recently published books that address the power of leadership storytelling: *The Power of Story: Rewrite Your Destiny in Business and in Life*, by Jim Loehr (Free Press, 2007), *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact*, by Annette Simmons (AMACOM, 2007), and *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative*, by Stephen Denning (Jossey-Bass, 2005). It was

Editor's note: Issues & Observations is a venue for CCL staff members and associates to express their personal views about leadership.

When It's Time for a New Script

The idea (and the term) of rescription arose from Nick Nissley's applied research at the Banff Centre and Stedman Graham's leadership coaching experience with executives around the world. Rescription is a narrative tool, a process employed by leaders to create new stories when their old stories no longer serve them. For example, organizations and their leaders often

become stuck in dysfunctional story lines and find themselves repeating scripts that don't yield the desired results. Similarly, individuals in their personal lives often unconsciously enact scripts that produce unintended results, and in their work lives they often find themselves enacting scripts describing what they unconsciously believe about organizational life—about leadership, decision

making, and conflict, for instance. When an organization and its leaders are stuck, they need a new script that allows the organization to move its story forward.

In the final analysis, a rescription is analogous to a prescription received from a physician—the drug-based remedy that restores good health. Except in the case of a rescription, the remedy is story based.

becoming clearer to us: leaders must cultivate their awareness of the stories they are a part of, and they must be able to transform those stories when old stories no longer serve their organizations. However, as our own curiosity revealed, leaders and leadership development practitioners know relatively little about how to engage in this process.

REWRITING DESTINIES

In Loehr's *The Power of Story*, he suggests that leaders may face a time when they must rewrite their destinies. He asserts that because leaders' destinies follow their stories, it's imperative that they do everything in their power to get their stories right. He says leaders may have to consider editing a dysfunctional story and asking themselves the question, "In which important areas of my life is it clear that I cannot achieve my goals with the story I've got?"

"That's it," we thought. Our experience in San Diego, which was being played out similarly in corporate boardrooms across the country, was being described by Loehr. Although Loehr is discussing something that occurs at an individual level—rewriting personal stories—

leaders can ask the question he suggests not just about their own goals but also about organizational goals: "Why can we not achieve our company's goals with the story we have?" This question, framed by the narrative lens, affords leaders a new perspective.

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Here's where theory—narrative theory—can help leaders better understand how they can effect change. *Narratives* allow leaders to prepare for and guide their actions. Narratives, or stories, are composed of bits we refer to as *scripts*. Scripting produces an ordered set of expectations about what will happen next; it's a means by which one moves a story forward. Thus, when

leaders need to find new stories, new ways forward, they must articulate new scripts. We realized that the process movie directors and screenwriters use to keep audiences engaged may also, often unconsciously, be used by leaders in the workplace.

We call this process of leaders finding new stories when old ones no longer serve their needs *rescription*. It is a powerful tool for guiding actions when change is needed. As executive coaches, we are finding ourselves being called on by leaders to help them find the tools to *right* their organizations by *rewriting* the stories that are no longer effectively serving their organizations. Leaders are asking themselves, "Can we achieve our goals with the story we have?" Honest answers to this question are often leading to the leadership actions we refer to as rescription.

SHIFTING GEARS

Rescription is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the case of the U.S. Big Three automakers—Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors. On the brink of collapse, these automakers, in late December 2008, received up to \$17.4 billion in emer-

Helping Leaders See New Possibilities

Recently, Nick Nissley conducted a rescription workshop in the University of Oxford's strategic leadership executive education program. As a former executive, program director Marshall Young is astutely aware that executives often become stuck in dysfunctional story lines and find themselves repeating scripts that don't yield the desired results. He also understands the value of the narrative lens as a tool for helping executives see new possibilities when they're stuck.

So Young encouraged Nissley to develop an experiential learning opportunity that would offer the participants a practical tool to develop new scripts that would allow them to move their stories forward.

Nissley used CCL's Visual Explorer tool to aid the rescription exercise. Visual Explorer enables imagination and encourages dialogue through the use of visual imagery. The tool comprises more than a hundred diverse images that help people visualize their challenges and imagine new possibilities.

Participants were first asked to

consider a challenge they were facing—where they felt they were stuck. They then found an image from Visual Explorer that spoke to them, helping them visually explain the challenge they were dealing with. Then they found a partner to begin a dialogue with about the challenge, using the Visual Explorer image to help describe the challenge. The partners were engaging in the first step of the rescription process—*titling the present script*.

Second, the partners were asked to find another Visual Explorer image that suggested a way out—a possibility for getting unstuck. This simple technique helped the participants access their imaginations and begin visualizing a future script. Again the partners engaged in a dialogue mediated by their Visual Explorer images. What they found was that the images and dialogue offered insights and a more expansive vocabulary in order to surface a future script that would enable them to become unstuck. This is the second step in the rescription process—*founding the future script*.

Finally, the participants needed to consider the process of enactment—*actualizing the new script*. In this phase Nissley played a greater coaching role, asking the participants what was needed for them to enact the third and final stage of the rescription process—letting go of the old script and embracing the new one.

At the end of the workshop, one participant commented: "I knew I was stuck, but I didn't know how to get unstuck. The Visual Explorer images allowed me to see new possibilities—I was literally able to see a new script emerge as my partner and I dialogued about my challenge."

To be sure, the use of Visual Explorer isn't a sort of tarot card exercise in which executives have their futures read. Rather it is a blending of narrative therapy-like techniques with creative visualization techniques that enables leadership storytelling. It is a practical tool for helping leaders when they are stuck and need a new script that allows them to move their stories forward.

agency loans, with the caveat that they restructure and demonstrate their viability by the end of March 2009. Now the automakers must retool and shift gears. They can no longer rely on the trucks and sport-utility vehicles that in the past provided a large portion of their revenue. A new story line is emerging in Detroit. The new script reflects a radical rethinking and change: shifting production from trucks and SUVs to small, fuel-efficient passenger cars.

For example, President and CEO Alan Mulally is leading the rescription at Ford, which had a loss of \$15.3 billion in 2006–2007. At the heart of Ford's strategy is a plant retooling that will allow the com-

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pany to build its next generation of passenger cars on a common platform, resulting in significant savings in production costs. Mulally is

using the power of story—rescripting the company's strategy—to effect change at Ford.

THREE-STEP PROCESS

Unlike our friend's daughter who was grieving over the death of her pet dog, executives cannot rely on a childlike naiveté and simply wish for healthful rejuvenation. Rescription is the organizational antidote that's needed when a company can no longer achieve its goals with its existing story. Rescriptions are similar to physicians' prescriptions that restore good health to ailing individuals. The organizational physician is the company's leader, who must courageously and accurately prescribe a

new way of doing business—as Ford’s Mulally is doing by rescripting the company from one focused on making trucks and SUVs to one focused on manufacturing efficient and economical cars.

How can leaders undertake the process of rescription? From our observations, we have devised a three-step process for rescription: titling the present script, founding the future script, and actualizing the new script.

Titling the Present Script

First, leaders must face the truth and honestly identify the present scripts that are being enacted. Many leaders struggle to accurately diagnose their current challenge. Effective leaders must not only diagnose the challenge but also communicate it in such a way that everyone in the organization believes the leader and commits to the interpretation. The most effective leaders are able to title the story that’s being played out, affording others in the organization an opportunity to easily grasp the challenge. Ford’s Mulally honestly identified the debilitating, truck-and-SUV-centric script of the auto manufacturer. To armchair analysts this may seem to have been a simple step. However, as all of Detroit knows, breaking from what worked in the past is more difficult than it appears. In many ways, leaders need to articulate what’s *stuck*. Good leaders, like good writers, identify a future turning point and what needs to become *unstuck*. Turning points are not always obvious—many are subtle and recognizable only in hindsight.

Founding the Future Script

Once leaders have confronted and identified the dysfunctional present script—in which the company is stuck—they must even more courageously ask what’s needed when the company can no longer achieve its goals with the story it has. By ask-

ing what’s needed, leaders open the door to considering an alternative script and founding a future narrative that will identify what’s needed to become unstuck. When Mulally asked the what’s needed question, he accessed the automaker’s engineering intellectual capital. The organizational response to his questioning was the global-platform concept. Ford realized that to achieve

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significant savings in production costs, it needed a common base on which to build its next generation of passenger cars.

Actualizing the New Script

The third and final step is to take the answer to the what’s needed question and begin to act on it. Writers refer to this step as *actualizing the narrative* or *enactment*. If action doesn’t transpire, the new story remains an unrealized dream. Mulally initiated this step when he traveled to Wall Street to meet with analysts and the news media and begin telling the new story, the rescription for Ford’s future good health. However, there is much more to be done. The true measure of a successful rescription is the whole-hearted acceptance of the executive’s compelling new narra-

tive by those in the organization and their subsequent adoption of effective actions toward the desired outcome.

TIME FOR A CHANGE

As we have noted, leaders, leadership development practitioners, and executive coaches have become increasingly aware in recent years of the importance of narrative competence to the success of leaders. This is evidenced by the growing number of books, course offerings in MBA programs, and executive development programs that delve into this subject. However, little insight as yet exists into *how* leaders are engaging story as a means to lead more effectively, and especially into *how* a narrative lens might afford a new perspective on leading through times of change.

Our observation of the rescription process has led us to ponder as we look through the narrative lens, seeking new perspectives on leadership, how might playwrights, theater directors, screenwriters, and others involved in the narrative arts offer insights into how to lead and effect change in organizations?

We ask you to consider this: Is your organization’s dominant story allowing the organization to achieve its goals? Or is it time to rewrite your organization’s story? If an organization and its leaders can no longer achieve their goals with the story they have, it’s time for a leadership rescription. ✍

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