

What Do Your Stories Tell about You?

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We all make meaning of the circumstances in our lives. We communicate that meaning to others through the stories we tell describing what we've experienced. We also share our expectations and hopes for the future through our stories about "what could be."

Annette Simmons, in her 2007 book entitled *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*, states, "Our psychological needs are met or unmet based on the stories we tell ourselves and each other about what matters most and who controls it....To understand the power that stories wield is both an incredible opportunity and an awesome responsibility."

Leaders communicate their purpose and vision for their organization's future through the stories they tell. Your favorite stories say a lot about who you are and how you see the world.

Today's article provides an activity which will provide you insight on what hidden messages you may have been communicating. More importantly, once you've experienced the process, you can use the activity to help those you influence better understand themselves. In particular, your new awareness could provide very beneficial insight for future leaders whose development you support.

Step 1. Think about the stories you tell that include you as a character in some way. Generate a title or a brief description that captures the essence of each story. List five to ten titles of stories you frequently share about yourself.

These may be descriptions of how you overcame adversity, they may be funny experiences, or they may explain relationships that you've developed. These could be stories about any situation you've faced. What they all have in common is that you are involved in the narrative in some way.

(Note: Steps 2 and 3 are optional. I like including them because they give some practice that I think helps you and your team members prepare for step 4.)

Step 2. Now think about stories that don't involve you. These may be stories about friends, relatives, or fictional characters. They may be tales that inspire or scare you. You may have been told a fable when you were a child, or you may have appreciated a narrative you read on the internet. You might choose to include a Bible story or a historical account told to you by a college professor.

As you did in step one, create a brief descriptive phrase for each story. List five to ten story titles.

Step 3. Most dramatic stories have three important characters. The villain is usually an individual who abuses power; sometimes the villain is a circumstance that creates an overwhelming obstacle. The victim is someone who suffers in some way at the hands of the villain. And the rescuer frees the victim from the domination of the villain.

Of course, not every story contains all three roles. Sometimes, however, the roles may just be hard to distinguish. For example, the villain may be a situation like a flood, or the economy, or a disabling condition. Additionally, the victim and the rescuer are sometimes the same individual merely displaying different character traits.

The task in this third step is to analyze the stories you identified in step 2. To the best of your ability, identify the villain, the victim, and the rescuer for each story.

Step 4. This time, go back to the stories you identified initially--the ones where you are a character in the story. For each of those stories, identify the villain, the victim, and the rescuer.

A relative, a close friend, or a coach might be helpful at this stage. Think collaboratively with that individual to determine what your stories are unconsciously telling others about you.

Are you the villain in some of the stories? If so, what might that say about your motives and the way you accomplish your objectives? What does that imply about your relationship with others?

Are you the victim in some of the stories? What does that tell you? How did your relationship with the villains and rescuers develop? Are they authority figures? Do you contribute in some way to situations where you need to be rescued? Do you present yourself as a victim as a way of making fun of yourself or your situation?

Maybe you are the rescuer in your stories. Are you using your talents and position to serve others? Or are you cocky and proud, boasting of your strength or ingenuity? Could you choose instead to collaborate with the villain or victim to encourage either to choose different options?

This activity may yield insights you'd not realized before. If you gain significant awareness about yourself or a team member from this process, I invite you to share your discoveries with me.

I'll share some observations about this storytelling process--and maybe some reader experiences--next week.

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