

# Putting Narrative Into Practice:

Tips, Tricks, Exercises and Templates

A (possible) new book by  
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## Chapter 11: Understanding Your Audience

*"When I'm getting ready to reason with a man, I spend one-third of my time thinking about myself and what I am going to say—and two-thirds thinking about him and what he is going to say."* –Abraham Lincoln

*"The modern leadership industry, now a quarter-century old, is built on the proposition that leaders matter a great deal and followers hardly at all."*— Barbara Kellerman, HBR, December 2007

*"The best way to understand the complexities of a human being is through a story."*—Dan Adams: The Stories We Live By.

*"Through tacit knowledge, we know more than we can tell. But through a story, we can tell more than we think we know."* Stephen Denning

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**Purpose of the chapter:** To understand the audience for a transformational leadership communication, i.e. a communication that inspires your audience to do something new or different.

**Description of the chapter:** A set of exercises designed to help leaders get inside the subjective world of their listeners so that they will be able to craft a story that will resonate with an inattentive, difficult, skeptical, cynical, or even hostile audience.

**Sample contexts for which these exercises are relevant:**

- You are about to implement a major change in the workplace and your subordinates are anxious about what it will involve.

- You need to persuade your boss, or your boss's boss, to implement a change which he/she has not previously supported.
- You are about to launch a revolutionary new product in the marketplace that your clients are not expecting and have not shown any signs of wanting.
- You need to persuade your teenage son to come out of his room and rejoin the human race.
- You want to persuade an entire country to make a significant change in policy.

## A. Preparatory exercise

### *Task 1: Identifying Your Audience*

**Nature of task:** assembling background material

**Time:** variable depending on size of audience and quantity of available material.

**Degree of difficulty:** Variable.

This exercise is analytically not difficult. However how much information is available, or whether it can be obtained, will be determined by the context.

**Mood indicator:** Tedious analytic work

Not recommended for use in a workshop. Do this *before* the workshop.

#### **Steps:**

1. Determine who are the members of your target audience. Who are the people you need to persuade if your change idea is to be implemented with energy and enthusiasm? This might be one person or billions of people, depending on your cause.
2. Sort out the members of the audience in terms of importance to your cause:
  - a. Mission-critical: if they don't buy in, you are doomed.
  - b. Important
  - c. Helpful
  - d. Peripheral
3. Assemble any analytic information you may have about the composition of the audience, including
  - a. Bio data
  - b. Nationality
  - c. Ethnic background
  - d. Religious views
  - e. Education
  - f. Attitude survey results
  - g. Age
  - h. Jobs and career to date

4. Assemble any information you may have about the likely attitudes, values and beliefs, hopes, fears or dreams of your audience.
5. Discuss with any available collaborators the main implications of your material. Then move to Exercise #2.

**Note:** The utility of this review of this analytical material will depend on the extent and quality of the material as well as your ability to make sense of it. A large volume of abstract material can be difficult to digest or to derive practical implications.

Don't spend large amounts of time in a workshop on this exercise. Use it as reference material for the narrative exercises that are to come.

## B. First pass at understanding your audience's story

### *Task #2: Telling your audience's story*

**Nature of task:** individual writing

**Time taken:** 2-5 minutes

**Degree of difficulty:** Easy.

**Mood indicator:** Neutral

#### **Steps:**

1. Identify one of the key people who do not share your enthusiasm for the change that you are attempting to introduce. Choose someone who is central to the accomplishment of the goal.
2. Jot down on a piece of paper the story of that person, ending with the sentence, "And that's why this person doesn't want to change."
  - a. Tell the story of that person as coherently and persuasively, showing it's logical for this person not to change.
  - b. Do **not** explain their conduct through abstractions, such as "he is stupid," or "She is lazy," or "He's an asshole."
  - c. Instead, explain the person's conduct in terms of the individual background and values and experience, that all point him/her inexorably towards not changing.
  - d. The story should show why it is logical and sensible and perfectly rational why such a person would not want to change.
3. The story will end: "That's why the person does not want to change."

### *Task #3: Re-telling your audience's story*

**Nature of task:** Discussion in groups of three

**Time:** 5-10 minutes

**Degree of difficulty:** Easy

**Mood indicator:** usually fun and energizing

1. In a workshop setting, the participants should form into groups of three. (Outside a workshop, get together with two collaborators who are also interested in promoting change.)
2. The three participants quickly share their change ideas and then pick one of the change ideas.
3. The person whose change idea it is then tells the story of the person who doesn't want to change to the other two members of the trio. The story is told **in the third person**. It will go something like: "The person has these experiences, and this background and these values," and so on. It will always end, "That's why **this person** doesn't want to change."
4. The second member of the trio then impersonates the person who doesn't want to change and retells their story **in the first person**. It will go something like: "This is my background and I feel this, and these are my experiences and my values," and so on. It will always end: That's why **I** don't want to change."
5. The third member of the trio then retells the story **in the second person**. It will go something like: "You feel this, and this is your background and these are your values," and so on. It will always end: That's why **you** don't want to change."

**NOTE:**

The phenomenon of tacit knowledge means that we know more than we can tell and we can also tell more than we think we know. When we role-play the behavior of the resister we illustrate these phenomena in action.

Thus we usually know more about the people who are resisting us than we are able to articulate in abstract terms. And when we role-play a situation, we discover that we intuitively surmise what's going on in the situation and what's driving people to behave in the way they are behaving. In the process, we often surprise ourselves with what we already know but were unable to articulate.

As a result, this exercise is usually accompanied by shrieks of laughter, as people discover what they didn't know they knew.

Exercises 2 and 3 are usually enough to get a quick fix on the nature of a resistant audience. If more time is available, then one can deepen the understanding of the audience.

## C. Deepening your understanding of the audience's story

### *Task #4: Segmenting your audience's stories*

**Nature of task:** Group discussion or individual analytic work

**Time:** Variable, depending on the size of the audience.

Minimum: 20 minutes

Maximum: several days

**Degree of difficulty:** Moderate

**Mood indicator:** Group discussion will be more energizing than individual work.

#### **Steps:**

1. Separate your audience into those people who understand and support the change, and those who don't.
2. Take those who don't understand or support the change and sort them into five categories:
  - Those who are ignorant about the change
  - Those who are informed about the change but indifferent
  - Those who are involved in the change but have other priorities
  - The active opponents of the change
  - The diehard opponents of the change
3. Jot down on a piece of paper **the story of one of the diehard opponents of the change**.
  - a. Tell the story of that person as coherently and persuasively, showing it's logical for this person to be a diehard opponent of change.
  - b. Do **not** explain their conduct through abstractions, such as "he is stupid," or "She is lazy," or "He's an asshole."
  - c. Instead, explain the person's conduct in terms of the individual background and values and experience, that all point him/her inexorably towards being a diehard opponent of the change.
  - d. The story should show why it is logical and sensible and perfectly rational why such a person would be a diehard opponent of the change.
  - e. The story will end: "That's why the person is a diehard opponent of the change."
4. Jot down on a piece of paper the story of **one of the active opponents of the change**.
  - a. Tell the story of that person as coherently and persuasively, showing it's logical for this person to be actively opposed to change.
  - b. Do **not** explain their conduct through abstractions, such as "he is stupid," or "She is lazy," or "He's an asshole."

- c. Instead, explain the person's conduct in terms of the individual background and values and experience, that all point him/her inexorably towards being actively opposed to change.
  - d. The story should show why it is logical and sensible and perfectly rational why such a person would be actively opposed to change.
  - e. The story will end: "That's why the person actively opposes change."
5. Jot down on a piece of paper the story of **one of the people who are actively involved in the change but who have other priorities.**
  - a. Tell the story of that person as coherently and persuasively, showing it's logical for this person to have other priorities than the change.
  - b. Do **not** explain their conduct through abstractions, such as "he is stupid," or "She is lazy," or "He's an asshole."
  - c. Instead, explain the person's conduct in terms of the individual background and values and experience, that all point him/her inexorably towards having other priorities than this change.
  - d. The story should show why it is logical and sensible and perfectly rational why such a person would have other priorities than this change.
  - e. The story will end: "That's why the person has other priorities than this change."
6. Jot down on a piece of paper the story of **one of the people who is knowledgeable about the change but it is indifferent to it.**
  - a. Tell the story of that person as coherently and persuasively, showing it's logical for this person to be indifferent to the change.
  - b. Do **not** explain their conduct through abstractions, such as "he is stupid," or "She is lazy," or "He's an asshole."
  - c. Instead, explain the person's conduct in terms of the individual background and values and experience, that all point him/her inexorably towards being indifferent to the change.
  - d. The story should show why it is logical and sensible and perfectly rational why such a person would be indifferent to the change.
  - e. The story will end: "That's why the person is indifferent to the change."

## ***Task #5: Getting a fix on the mission-critical individual***

**Purpose:** To understand the individual or individuals without whose support your change cannot go forward.

### **Examples:**

- Your CEO where a significant strategic shift is being attempted
- Your boss where a unit-wide change is being undertaken
- The CEO of your client, where a major sale involving change is under consideration

- Your teenage son, where the change is to persuade him to rejoin the human race

**Nature of task:** Group discussion or individual analytic work

**Time:** Variable, depending on the size of the audience.

Minimum: 20 minutes

Maximum: several months

**Degree of difficulty:** Hard

**Mood indicator:** Because it has an all-or-nothing outcome, the task generates both excitement and anxiety.

**Steps:**

1. Assemble any analytic information you may have about the composition of the audience, including
  - a. Bio data
  - b. Nationality
  - c. Ethnic background
  - d. Religious views
  - e. Education
  - f. Values
  - g. Communication style
  - h. Age
  - i. Jobs and career to date
2. Assemble any information you may have about the likely attitudes, values and beliefs, hopes, fears or dreams of the individual
3. Identify the people in this individual's network:
  - a. The inner circle—people who are trusted and communicated with regularly—and their values.
  - b. The outer circle—people with sporadic relations, who may or may not be trusted.
  - c. The perceived opponents or adversaries
  - d. The people beyond the network who are admired
  - e. zThe people beyond the network who are disapproved of
4. Identify the individual's current knowledge of, and attitude to, the change idea.
5. Jot down the story of the individual as coherently and persuasively as you can, concluding, "That's why this individual feels about the change the way he/she does."
6. Get into a group of three and retell the story of the individual:
  - a. First, in the third person, and it will end, "That's why this individual feels about the change the way he/she does."

- b. Then in the first, person, and it will end, "That's why I feel about the change the way I do."
  - c. Then in the second person and it will end, "That's why you feel about the change the way that you do."
7. Discuss: what kind of a benefit could possibly get this person positively excited?
8. Discuss: is this person:
- a. A charismatic
  - b. A thinker
  - c. A skeptic
  - d. A controller or
  - e. A follower
9. Discuss, in the light of #8, what is the most likely kind of approach that would be successful: e.g.
- a. If a charismatic, a big, bold formulation of the change idea in which the individual could be the hero
  - b. If a thinker, the analytic elements that are important.
  - c. If a skeptic, why the risks are manageable.
  - d. If a controller, how the individual can stay in control.
  - e. If a follower, how others are already doing it.
10. Discuss: which person or persons would be most likely to be effective in communicating the change idea to the individual?
11. Discuss: what would be the most propitious time to communicate with the individual?



## Further Reading

S. Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership*, (Jossey-Bass, 2007) chapters 4 and 11.

S. Denning, *What Leaders Need to Know About Followers: Review of Kellerman's HBR article 2007*.

B. Kellerman, *What Leaders Need to Know About Their Followers*, *Harvard Business Review*, December 2007

G. A. Williams and R. B. L. Miller, "Change the Way You Persuade," *Harvard Business Review* 80, no. 5 (2002).

G. A. Williams and R. B. L. Miller, *The 5 Paths to Persuasion: The Art of Selling Your Message* (New York: Warner Business Books, 2004).