

**Business Narrative Templates**  
*for*  
**The Leader's Guide to Storytelling**  
*and*  
**The Secret Language of Leadership**

**Templates and Exercises**  
**For**  
**Becoming**  
**A Transformational Leader**

**Stephen Denning**  
**October 2007**

## Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	3
<b>PART I: THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>A. ENABLING CONDITIONS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP.....</b>	<b>4</b>
EXERCISE #1: IS YOUR CHANGE IDEA CLEAR? (CHAPTER 2, SLL) .....	4
EXERCISE #2: IS YOUR CHANGE IDEA WORTHWHILE? (CHAPTER 2, SLL).....	5
EXERCISE #3: ARE YOU FULLY COMMITTED TO YOUR CHANGE IDEA? (CHAPTER 3, SLL) .....	6
EXERCISE #4: UNDERSTANDING THE AUDIENCE’S STORY (CHAPTER 4, SLL).....	7
EXERCISE #5: RE-TELLING THE AUDIENCE’S STORY (CHAPTER 4) .....	8
EXERCISE #6: FROM SALES PITCH TO TRUSTED PARTNER (CHAPTER 6, SLL).....	9
<b>B. THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP .....</b>	<b>10</b>
EXERCISE #7: HAVE YOU CAPTURED THE AUDIENCE’S ATTENTION? (CHAPTER 8, SLL) .....	10
EXERCISE #8: ARE YOU ELICITING DESIRE FOR CHANGE? (CHAPTER 9, SLL) .....	11
EXERCISE #9: HAVE YOU REINFORCED THE CHANGE IDEA WITH REASONS? (CHAPTER 10, SLL) .....	12
EXERCISE #10: ARE YOU CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION? (CHAPTER 11, SLL).....	13
EXERCISE #11: DO YOU REFLECT THE BODY LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP? (CHAPTER 7, SLL) .....	14
EXERCISE #12: ARE YOUR POWERPOINT SLIDES APPROPRIATE? (CHAPTER 7, SLL) .....	15

## ***Introduction***

These templates are intended to assist and accelerate crafting and performing the narratives discussed in *The Secret Language of Leadership* (SLL) and *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling* (LGTS).

They constitute prompts and checklists, rather than absolute requirements or unbreakable rules. They are like training wheels on a bicycle: you use them to get started, but once you have got a feel for it, you discard them and make your own way.

The templates were developed in workshops conducted over the last seven years.

They are typically done in exercises that last generally less than five minutes. This creates time pressure, of course, but the real world also has time pressure. Time pressure helps create the energy, the momentum, the impetus that drives leadership forward.

The exercises here are as much about the content of ***what*** we are to say as it is about ***how*** we are going to say it. Leaders often overlook the fact that if we don't use the right body language and "sound like we mean it," our presentation is going nowhere.

With calm assertiveness, even the simplest, most mundane and everyday things can come to seem wonderful, magical, even hallowed. It isn't the stories themselves that are extraordinary—it's the psychic energy that the speakers invest in them that makes them extraordinary to the listeners.

For the duration of the performance the speaker embodies the idea. When leaders have a firm conviction in their minds, their stories become holistic. When they re-experience and re-tell the story, they become the story: they are at one with the audience, with themselves, and with their message. Their voice expresses. Their demeanor expresses. The way they hold their body expresses. Their tone of voice expresses. The look in their eyes expresses. In this way, leaders communicate their true nature in the simplest, most direct way, as one living being to another.

Performance is a matter of bringing into harmony body, emotion, and thought. It draws on all elements: "on their bodies like athletes and dancers, on their feelings like singers and lovers, and on their minds like mathematicians and thinkers."<sup>1</sup>

And leaders develop this capability by practice. It's practice, practice, practice, and then more practice. There is no end to practice. These templates serve as a vehicle by which to pursue that practice.

---

<sup>1</sup> P. Brook, *Threads of Time: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1998), 85.

## Part I: The Secret Language of Leadership

### A. Enabling Conditions of Transformational leadership

#### *Exercise #1: Is your change idea clear? (chapter 2, SLL)*

##### **Background**

Transformational leadership is about change. There are a zillion worthwhile change ideas out there. The hard reality is that any single individual can only promote only a few of these ideas. If you really want to change the world, you have to decide which of these ideas you are going to pursue and throw your whole weight behind and then do that.

The object of the exercise is to enhance the clarity of the change idea being pursued. True, all change ideas undergo significant adjustment during implementation. But a minimal degree of clarity is needed to get started.

Research indicates that one of the most difficult aspects of crafting a story to spark change is in getting clear on the change idea. If the change idea isn't clear, it is hard to craft a story that will communicate that idea clearly.

If you are having difficulty crafting a story to spark change, go back and check whether your change idea is really clear.

##### **Exercise**

#### A. Specify the domain in which you want to make a change:

Your organization.....	Your community.....
Your family.....	Your town.....
Your country .....	Your planet .....
Other .....	

#### B. Write down: what is wrong with this domain?

#### C. Write down: what the domain would look like if the change was successfully made?

#### D. Write down briefly: how would you get from here to there? What would be the five main steps?

## ***Exercise #2: Is your change idea worthwhile? (chapter 2, SLL)***

### ***Background***

Change ideas can be seen as falling into four main categories:

1. ***Inherently worthwhile changes***: i.e. changes that are inherently inspiring, (whether or not they have financial or other benefits). These are changes that are good in themselves.
2. ***Changes that have instrumental benefits***, like winning in the marketplace, like rent more cars, or profits. There is a business case supporting it. (e.g. "Let's help the firm meet its quarterly sales target." Not very inspiring, in itself, though of course it is relevant.
3. ***Changes that are mainly churn***: It's like the grand old duke of York, who marched the troops to the top of the hill and then marched them down again. It occurs either because that's what other organizations are doing, or because the management can't think of anything else to do, and hopes that by creating an illusion of a crisis or burning platform, something useful will come of the disruption they cause. Many reorganizations and corporate acquisitions fall into this category.
4. ***Changes that are genuinely bad ideas***, like "Let's market this food with harmful health effects" or "Let's sell educational software that slows down kids' learning to read."

Most change ideas not inherently good or bad. Most change ideas can be formulated in any of the four categories. For example:

	Medicine	Knowledge management	Education
Inherently worthwhile	Help people lead healthy happy lives	Enable clients to solve their own problems with knowledge	Help children learn faster
Instrumental goal	Help people fix specific health problem	Increase profits by using knowledge more efficiently	Make money from selling educational software
Churn	Induce people to go on using unnecessary medications	Assemble all available knowledge in case it might be useful	Induce parents to think that useless software is helpful.
Inherently bad idea	Induce people to use dangerous medication	Spend so much money on KM that the firm goes bankrupt.	Induce parents to think that software which actually slows down learning is helpful.

### ***Exercise***

1. Formulate your change idea:
  - i. as an idea that is inherently worthwhile;
  - ii. as an idea whose main object is to produce instrumental benefits;
  - iii. as an idea which is mainly about churn; and
  - iv. as an idea that is inherently bad.
2. Compare your change idea (as formulated in exercise #1) with these four formulations. Can it be formulated as an idea that is inherently worthwhile?
3. Examine the instrumental benefits of your change idea (revenue, profits, market share and so on): can these instrumental benefits be maintained or enhanced, while still pursuing your change idea as an idea that is inherently worthwhile? If so how?
4. Examine any problems or costs that may accompany the pursuit of your change idea, e.g. environmental damage, negative health consequences, loss of employment. Can these problems or costs be reduced or eliminated, while still pursuing your change idea.

***Exercise #3: Are you fully committed to your change idea? (chapter 3, SLL)******Background:***

Many change initiatives come unglued because the leaders themselves are not wholeheartedly committed to the change idea. Because they lack authentic passion for the change, this attitude rubs off on their audience.

Before they begin transformational change, leaders need to look within the innermost depth of their being and ask themselves honestly how enthusiastic they are about the change idea.

If you find that you are not passionately behind the change, you may decide to pursue the idea in a managerial fashion, e.g. explaining your attitude to the idea as well as the reason why it needs to be implemented. In this way, you maintain your integrity. You will not generate enthusiasm for the idea, but at least you may be able to get it implemented, and preserve your integrity for supporting other ideas that you can wholeheartedly support.

***Exercise:***

Take the change idea you have developed in exercises #1 and #2 and tell your story:

- Are you clearly committed to making the change happen, come what may? Have you thought through what's at stake?
- Are you willing to make the necessary changes in your own life to make this happen? Are you willing to give whatever it takes, in terms of time, energy, effort, patience? Are you ready to sacrifice yourself and your ego and ambition and pride in order to make the change happen? Are you willing to commit to making the change happen, even if it involves personal loss, humiliation and lack of recognition?
- Imagine that the change has gone very well: Are you ready for success and its ramifications? What are likely to be the repercussions on you and your family? On your relationships with friends and colleagues?
- Imagine that the change has gone badly: Are you ready for failure and its ramifications? Are you ready for the impact on you and your family? On your relationships with friends and colleagues? Can you live with all that?
- Is this how you want to be remembered? Does this change have your name written on it?

***Exercise #4: Understanding the audience's story (chapter 4, SLL)******Background***

Abraham Lincoln once said, "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."

The object of the exercise is to give practice in understanding the subjective world, the values, the mindset of the person who doesn't want to change. Unless you understand that world, feel how it makes sense, and is logical and sensible, then it's going to be very hard to craft a story that can change that world.

Although you will not know all the details of that person, try to imagine or intuit what must be going on in that person's mind for them to adopt the point of view that they do.

***Exercise***

1. Pick one (or more) of the people who needs to change if your idea is to be a success. Pick someone who finds the change difficult, perhaps the person who is most likely to be opposed to the change, someone who is central to making the change happen:
  - If it is an organizational change, it is going to be someone who isn't likely to be enthusiastic about the change—perhaps someone who has a lot to lose with the change in terms of power, access, career.
  - If it is your teenage son, it's going to be your teenage son.
  - If it is global warming, it is a person who is unwilling to change his life-style in order to save the planet from global catastrophe.
2. Then write down the story of that person. Tell the story of why they feel the way they do, how they have come to feel that way. It will include what their values are, as well their hopes, their dreams and their fears. The story will end, "That's why the person doesn't want to change."
  - Tell their story as persuasively and coherently as possible. The story should make clear why the world of that person makes sense.
  - The story should expose what are the reasons for not wanting the change.
  - It should indicate how the person came to hold these views.
  - The story will end: "And that's why this person does not want to change."

**Exercise #5: Re-telling The Audience's Story (Chapter 4)****Background:**

It is one thing to examine the subjective world of another person as an observer, a scientist, a voyeur. It is another to get inside that world and experience the feelings that the person is feeling. This exercise aims to give that intense experience of being inside another's person's world.

It's usually done in a group where a number of people are pursuing change ideas.

The object of the exercise is to:

- give you further practice getting inside the subjective world of the person you are trying to change.
- give you practice in listening to a story
- give you practice in telling a story.

**Group exercise:**

1. Form groups of three people.
3. Select the change idea of one of the three participants. at person will tell the story of the person who does not want to change in the **third person**. It will end: "That's why **the person** does not want to change.)
3. The second person in the group then tells the same story of the person who does not want to change in the **first person**. It will end. "That's why **I** don't want to change."
4. The third person will tell the same story of the person who does not want to change, but this time in the **second person**. It will end. "And that's why **you** don't want to change."



**Exercise #6: From sales pitch to trusted partner (chapter 6, SLL)****Background**

Transformational leadership differs from the familiar sales pitch in the marketplace where half-truths, quarter-truths and even blatant deception are prevalent. Transformational leadership aims at generating enduring enthusiasm, and for this purpose, one needs to become a trusted partner of those one is trying to lead.

<b>Approach</b>	<b>The sales pitch</b>	<b>Trusted partner</b>
<b>Modalities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overstate quantity of benefits</li> <li>- Understate cost/effort needed to get benefits</li> <li>- Use the foot in the door: i.e. get commitment and then raise the price</li> <li>- Use groupthink: everyone else is buying it.</li> <li>- Generate artificial scarcity or time pressure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Be transparently honest</li> <li>- Only talk about what you definitely know.</li> <li>- Show real concern in the problems of others.</li> <li>- Reveal vulnerability</li> <li>- Be curious and receptive to the listeners' interests</li> <li>- Be ready to learn yourself.</li> </ul>
<b>Focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"What's in it for me?"</li> <li>"What can I get out of this?"</li> <li>"What can I get away with?"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"What's good for them?"</li> <li>"How I can help them meet their goals?"</li> </ul>
<b>Audience response</b>	"I've been had."	"I can trust this person."

**Exercise:**

1. Consider the change idea that you are pursuing and the audience you are addressing.
2. Are you ready to:
  - Be transparently honest?
  - Say what you really feel?
  - Practice deep listening?
  - Be open and curious?
  - Be vulnerable?
  - Learn together?
  - See things from the audience's perspective?
3. Are you ready to do these things without any assurance of a specific return?
4. Is this conduct compatible with the habits, practices and norms of the context in which you find yourself? If not, are you willing to conduct yourself in accordance with the "trusted partnership" principles, even if other people aren't acting this way?

## B. The Language of Leadership

### *Exercise #7: Have you captured the audience's attention? (chapter 8, SLL)*

1. Which of the following communication tool will you use to get attention?

TOOL	EXAMPLE	COMMENT	EXERCISES
The story of the audience's problems	"I know we're facing problems with x and y. And in fact the problems are worse than we thought they were."	This is often the best way to get attention.	
The story of how you handled adversity	A concise story about how you dealt with a turning point in your life, which is some way related to the subject under discussion. "Let me tell you how I got into this situation . . . ."	Only appropriate where the speaker is relatively unknown to the audience	See exercise #15
A question	"Do you know how many U.S. women the XYZ Corporation routinely reaches?"	This works best if the question or the answer is surprising to the audience.	
A striking metaphor	"We are facing a retirement tsunami that will never recede."		
Have the audience do something unexpected.	Ask them to tackle an exercise when they thought they were just going to listen to a lecture.	The best exercises are related to the subject under discussion.	
A challenge	"What I am about to tell you is a bit frightening. . . ."	Be careful to ensure that the challenge is not misleading.	
Share something of value	"I'm pleased to announce that we have just won the PQR deal that we've all put so much effort into."	The news must be unexpected and relevant to the listeners.	
Admission of responsibility	"We all have to face the fact that there were poor management decisions in the recent past. . . ."	Leveling with the audience can help generate trust.	
A musical performance that is relevant to the presenter's theme	The presenter sings a rap song with lyrics about the subject under discussion.	The risk is that people may remember the rap song, not the message.	

2. Does your communication meet the six criteria for capturing attention (SLL, pp. 150-152):

- Have you said something *unexpected*?
- Have you engaged the audience's *emotions*.
- Are you talking about what is *personal to listeners themselves*.
- Are your attention-getting devices *relevant to the subject at hand*?
- Are your attention-getting devices *proportionate* to the scale of the task in changing minds?
- Is your message sufficiently *negative* to be attention-getting?

**Exercise #8: Are you eliciting desire for change? (chapter 9, SLL)**

1. Which of these communication tools are you using to elicit desire for change?

COMMUNICATION DEVICE	EXAMPLE	COMMENTS	RELEVANT EXERCISES
Actual live experience	J. Allard demonstrates the Web at Microsoft.	Experiential evidence is the most compelling.	
A springboard story	"Let me tell you about an example where this is already happening."	The happy ending must be credible and positive for the audience.	See exercise #13
Externalization accompanied by a new story	Abraham Lincoln proposes a "new Union" committed to liberty for all.	Effectiveness depends on listeners seeing themselves as living a new story.	
A metaphor	"If you want to enjoy the fruits of the tree, you must keep the tree healthy."	Make sure that the metaphor points to a story.	
The story of who we are	Henry V's "band of brothers"	The audience needs to identify with the community.	See exercise #14
A common memory story	You all remember when we . . . .	The story should be positive and related to the change.	See exercise #17
A positive challenge	"Who can help solve this problem?"	It's hard to craft challenges that elicit enduring enthusiasm.	

2. Have you met the eight criteria for stimulating desire (pp: 168-170, SLL):

- Is the change idea should be *worthwhile for its own sake*?
- Is the idea *memorable*?
- Is it likely that the idea will become *the own audience's idea*?
- Have you left room for *the audience to contribute*?
- Is the idea expressed *positively*?
- Is the idea *positive for the particular audience*?
- Have you turned *abstractions into narratives*?
- Are you *generating a new story* in the mind of each listener?

**Notes for participants:**

"Actual live experience" will often be—in theory at least—the most powerful stimulator of desire for change. However in practice, it is often not possible for leaders to create actual live experience for their audiences. In such circumstances, the springboard story is likely to be the most reliable stimulator of desire for change.

**Exercise #9: Have you reinforced the change idea with reasons? (chapter 10, SLL)****Background**

Once leaders have stimulated desire for change, it is important that they reinforce this desire with solid, rational reasons for change. Without that, there is a risk that the desire for change will evaporate.

Reasons are given after the desire for change has already been stimulated. If reasons are given to a difficult audience at the outset, the confirmation bias will kick in and the audience will be reinforced in their existing viewpoint (SLL, pp. 23-26)

Once we want something, we become much more open to the reasons that support the change.

**Exercise**

1. Which of the following are you using to reinforce the change idea with reasons:

- The story of what the change is?
- The story of how it will work?
- The story of how we will get from here to there?
- The story of why the change will work?
- The story of why the change is inevitable?
- A common memory story?
- Relevant images?

2. Do your communications meet the criteria for reinforcing the reasons for change (SLL, p. 190):

- Have all *abstractions been transformed*—to the extent possible—into *narratives*, typically set in the present or immediate future?
- Are the stories a *plausible* account of how the future is likely to unfold?
- Are the stories told in a *minimalist* in form, that is, told without a great deal of context or detail?
- Are the stories *neutral in tone*, aimed mainly at clarifying the underlying rationale for the change idea?
- Do the stories make use of one or more *archetypical characters* through whose eyes the audience can understand the main elements of a complex idea?
- Do the stories build on *prior stories* that have stimulated desire for change?

**Exercise #10: Are you continuing the conversation? (chapter 11, SLL)****Background**

We all know what a good conversation is, even if we enjoy it all too rarely. Think of an interesting dinner party where participants have fresh points of view but don't try to thrust their opinions upon others; where the discussion is inclusive and participants create openings for each other, drawing everyone into the discussion and drawing each other out; where the talk is lively but participants speak respectfully even when they disagree; where they share relevant stories rather than make abstract pronouncements; where participants are willing to speak on a variety of subjects but are not afraid to admit ignorance or mistakes; where the language is intelligible and free from jargon; where the flow of serious thought is lightened by periodic laughter; where people feel it is easy to make their contribution; where they listen to each other with genuine curiosity and learn.

Such interchanges are atypical in the communications of managers with their staff, of teachers with pupils, of parents with teenagers, or of politicians with their electors. The communications of authority figures traditionally follow a different path, starting from what the authority figure "knows," what the system or program "requires," what the institution "wants." It's talking *at* people rather than *with* people. All too often, it involves lecturing and preaching rather than participating in a conversation that makes everyone want to continue the dialogue.

Those in authority have a special responsibility for making a conversation person-to-person, because in a hierarchical setting subordinates will assume initially that the interchange is role-to-role, where they're expected for the most part to listen and obey.

**Exercise:**

1. Which of the following communication tools are you using to continue the conversation?

- Asking open-ended questions?
- Leveling with people, telling people the whole truth?
- Showing vulnerability?
- Building on the inputs of others?
- Sharing your own story?
- Encourage others to share their stories?
- Have participants tell one another's stories?

2. Do your followers see themselves as participating in a conversation?

***Exercise #11: Do you reflect the body language of leadership? (Chapter 7, SLL)***

***Background***

Whatever leaders communicate through their body language will usually speak louder than their spoken words, because listeners will conclude that the body language is what the speaker really feels and means, even if the words are saying something else. So although this book devotes less space to the body language of leadership than to verbal language, in performance, body language is at least as important.

***Exercise:***

1. Make a videotape of your presentation?
2. Does your presentation comply with the most important principles of the body language of leadership:
  - Do you maintain constant eye contact with all the audience?
  - Have you eliminated anything between you and the audience, e.g. notes, podium?
  - Is your manner calm and assertive, square shoulders, relaxed, with a total focus on the audience?
  - Do you have an open body stance, with feet firmly planted your feet firmly on the ground and face the audience openly.
  - Are you making effective use of gesture so that you are communicating with your whole body?
  - Are you demonstrate energy and enthusiasm?
  - Is your body in in sync with the context?

***Exercise #12: Are your PowerPoint slides appropriate? (chapter 7, SLL)***

Do your slides comply with the hygiene criteria of PowerPoint hygiene:

- Are your slides self-explanatory?
- Are your slides easy to understand at a glance?
- Have you eliminated jargon and acronyms?
- Are you using large fonts that are legible at the back of the room?
- Do your slides have full sentences as headings, not single phrases?
- Are your slides as simple as they can possibly be?
- Have you used striking, relevant images?
- Have you eliminated any irrelevant images?
- Are you using slide motion to accentuate key points?
- Have you eliminated any distracting slide motion that doesn't add meaning?
- Have you used color to clarify the meaning?
- Have you used curves and soft corners rather than straight lines and boxes?
- Are your graphs and tables of figures instantly understandable?
- Is the structure of your whole presentation congruent with the language of leadership, following the sequence of:
  - Get attention
  - Stimulate desire
  - Reinforce with reasons?
- Are you using stories to convey the message?
- Do the PowerPoint slides reflect and reinforce the storytelling?
- Have all facts, figures and arguments into stories?
- Are the slides calculated to generate a meaningful discussion.