

Powered by Storytelling

Excavate, Craft,
and Present Stories
to Transform
Business Communication

Murray Nossel, PhD



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INTRODUCTION

Tibetan Buddhist monks excel at concentration. They tell a traditional tale about focus called “The Lion’s Gaze”:

When you throw a ball to a dog, it chases the ball.
But when you throw a ball to a lion, it keeps its gaze on you.

When we tell a story, our Lion’s Gaze is on one thing: connecting with our audience. In this book, my gaze is to connect with you, the reader, about how to use storytelling effectively in business communication. If I were at a sales meeting, my gaze would be to connect with the other sales reps about the sale that changed my life. A leader’s gaze is to connect with his or her management team through a story about why the business exists. Connection is where the transformation of business communication happens. In other words, the effectiveness of your communication is commensurate with the depth

of your connection. And nothing makes that connection better than the story you tell.

In the Narativ method, we create stories in three phases:

1. **Excavating:** Generating your story ideas
2. **Crafting:** Shaping your story elements into a classic story structure
3. **Presenting:** Performing your story for an audience

By the end of this book, you will have a much better understanding of how to excavate, craft, and present a story. Stories don’t live in a vacuum, however, and while you’re learning about storytelling, you’ll also be introduced to a larger framework of communication analysis into which stories are set. This heuristic relies on (1) science and (2) empirical evidence gathered over 25 years of research and practice in listening and storytelling.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE NARATIV METHOD

To tell stories successfully, we need to understand a little about why stories connect and a lot about how to build that connection through listening and storytelling. It’s important for me to emphasize that in our method,

listening is of equal importance to telling, if not more so. We'll explore that idea in depth in Chapter 2. Let's begin by looking at the basic principles of our method:

1. Humans are hardwired for story.
2. Everyone has a story.
3. Everyone can learn to tell his or her story better.
4. Everyone's story will evolve.
5. Storytelling is every person's access to creativity.
6. There is a reciprocal relationship between listening and telling.

Principle 1. Humans Are Hardwired for Story

During a recent trip back to South Africa, I interviewed the paleoanthropologist Professor Phillip Tobias. Collaborating with Louis Leakey in the 1960s, Tobias identified, described, and named a new species: *Homo habilis*.¹ I asked him how far back in human history storytelling might go. I was aware of the Chauvet cave paintings, thought to be over 30,000 years old, in southeastern France and their images of rhinoceroses, cats, and bears. To me, this seemed like evidence of early storytelling.

"My dear," Professor Tobias said, setting down his Clarice Cliff teacup, "we've been telling stories a great

deal longer than that. One to two million years ago, our transition from primates to humans began to engage language as a way of communicating with one another. Even before we spoke with words, human beings used their vocal chords to imitate birds or other animals."

When we try to imagine early humankind speaking, we begin with what they talked about. According to Professor Tobias, the "first primates had a hell of a lot to speak about." The parents had to teach their offspring how to survive, so the first communications were about practical things, functional things—for instance, teaching the young to make a certain kind of stone tool. Professor Tobias asked me to imagine him as one of our earliest ancestors, sharing information with his offspring:

You see this tool. I use it for digging tubers and roots out of the ground. If you want to make a hand axe like this, you have to go out across the valley beyond the river and over to the next hill. At the very top of the hill, you will find a rock that has a fine grain and breaks predictably when hammered. It is a greenish rock. Try to break it. But make sure that you cut it along the grain; otherwise, it will shatter. Don't sit there too long because it will get dark and you will not be able to find your way back home.

We used stories to teach one another how to live. And where we shared these stories, community was formed. Storytelling is one means by which culture is recorded and transmitted because cultures depend on communication for transmission to take place between one generation and the next. Over millennia, this primitive form of storytelling evolved into a form of storytelling that is more inward looking and steeped with meaning.

The Brain's Hardwiring

It is often argued that storytelling is the most powerful and effective form of human communication because it is wired right into our brain hardware. Indeed, story is the brain's way of helping us make sense out of our lives, of creating coherence out of randomness and chaos. Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as story.² It is our way of connecting with our own past (through memory), allowing us to make sense of what has happened to us, and planning for a future in which we envision certain outcomes taking place.

PET Scan Research

To substantiate theories that storytelling is a neurobiological function, scientists have made exciting discoveries about the capacities of our brain to tell and make sense

of stories. Experiments have been conducted in which people have been placed in positron emission tomography (PET) scanners, which create images of brain activity in real time. Specific areas in the brain are found to light up when people are listening to various kinds of information. If someone is listening to just a grocery list, a particular part of the brain lights up. If the person is listening to a song, another part of the brain lights up. But if a person is listening to a story or telling a story, there are *a number* of specific areas of the brain that light up.³

Likewise, there is strong evidence that shows that patients with damage to certain parts of the brain are unable to tell stories or respond to them. This means that there are areas in the brain that are hardwired for the telling of and listening to stories.

What does brain hardwiring actually mean? It means that there is a network of brain cells that are involved with storytelling. When they fire, they wire together more tightly and efficiently. Telling stories is a way of strengthening those connections in the brain. The point is, storytelling is a skill that can be developed, a muscle that can be strengthened. We've certainly seen ample evidence of that through the work that we've been doing over the last two and a half decades. The more you tell stories, the better you get at it.

Principle 2. Everyone Has a Story

In all the years that I have done this work, I've never come across anyone who does not have a story. I've come across many who *believe* they don't. Whether you think your story is not important or urgent enough, or whether you think that other people in your company are the storytellers, I can tell you without hesitation that something has happened in your life that would make a great story. After completing our workshops, every participant—no matter their age or storytelling experience—emerges with a story that genuinely describes a life event. We simply have to know how to excavate for these events. This principle underlies much of Chapter 1. Knowing *why* we want to tell a story can be a catalyst for finding the story itself. For example, what's going on in our business or with our team right now that a story could address?

To get started, we recommend you locate a personal story to begin your training. A story that explains *how* you came to be where you are right now can be especially potent. We call this your “origin story.” My origin story is the AIDS Day Program story, which you will read in all its detail in the first chapter. Then, having experienced the process of telling a story that's close to home for you, you will be prepared *to tell a business story in a personal way*. That means you will be comfortable with using all the

emotional might and impact of a personal story toward a business aim.

Principle 3. Everyone Can Learn to Tell His or Her Story Better

We believe that your storytelling abilities will only improve with time and practice, but if you excavate and craft your story according to our What happened? method, to which we've dedicated Chapter 5, your storytelling can make a quantum leap forward. This method is deceptively simple. It states that interpretations, opinions, judgments, abstractions, concepts, and your thoughts and feelings about what happened are *not* story material. It's what your senses take in that is proven and effective content. If you answer the question “What happened?” according to these instructions, your story will unfold in a way that keeps listeners involved from start to finish.

With the What happened? method as a basis, there is no doubt that telling a story well is an art form with many parts to it. We need to conjure scenes and people, modulate our voices, move around the room, and keep connected to our listeners. By performing our own stories and teaching others to tell theirs, we have discovered a number of useful guidelines that are covered in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Principle 4. Everyone's Story Will Evolve

You may already be familiar with telling a story as part of your business communication, and you may think that the story you've been telling is the end-all story. You've told it once or twice to your team, and they all cheered at the end, so why not keep telling that winner?

We never discourage reusing a story with an established track record, but we do keep the door open to the likelihood that your story will evolve. It will evolve in the different listening environments where you present, allowing you to tailor your message as you speak, see how audiences react, and continue to develop nuance in the way you express your story. From the Narativ perspective, a good story evolves naturally, reflecting the reciprocal, mutually influential relationship of listening and telling. A good story is the spark of communication exchange.

Principle 5. Storytelling Is Every Person's Access to Creativity

The most basic definition of *creativity* is “the bringing together of already existing elements in a novel or surprising way.” Creativity was long deemed the province of artists or those who had special talents and gifts, but we now recognize that creativity is also an essential part of what it is to be human.

Storytelling is the most democratic form of creativity because every human being has access to it. Your story is your birthright. In learning how to tell your story artfully by paying close attention to specific details, you are always creating something fresh and new. For example, many people have fallen in love, but no one has had *your* experience of falling in love. In telling your story, you have a tremendous opportunity to make creative choices. You can take a wide view of things, or you can zoom in, looking at particular details. You can make full use of each one of the senses in constructing your story.

The beauty of storytelling is that whether it is a business story or a personal one, the creativity and freedom of expression you bring to it are yours alone. In Chapter 4, we explore the creativity of storytelling through the Grandparent Exercise, a storytelling heuristic unique to the Narativ method.

Principle 6. There Is a Reciprocal Relationship Between Listening and Telling

We cannot tell a story if we don't feel that there is someone listening to us and paying attention. By the same token, we can't really listen to a story when the storyteller is not aware of his or her audience and is instead

caught up in his or her own speech bubble. In this most basic sense, there is a reciprocal relationship between listening and telling. This principle lies at the very core of the Narativ method. It sounds simple. And it is. As you pay attention to it, you will discover more and more how it affects your communication. Our method provides a pathway to sensitize oneself to this dynamic relationship between listener and teller and to utilize it to tell effective stories. We'll look at this in depth in Chapter 2.

We often think that storytelling is mainly about presentation skills, but those skills are only one part of it. From our point of view, listening is of equal if not greater importance. Without it, storytelling simply isn't possible. So we always begin by looking at the *listening environment* in our work with businesses. You'll read how this principle has been applied at the companies we have profiled in this book and how you can apply this principle to your own communication needs.

I would like to highlight that ideal listening is based on nonjudgment. Nonjudgment in the Narativ method is considered a skill and a technique in and of itself, not an optional attitude toward our thoughts and feelings or those of others. That is because in terms of the purity of communication, judgment always muddies the waters.

EXCAVATING, CRAFTING, AND PRESENTING A STORY

The seven chapters of this book outline the steps of the Narativ method. Together, they form the process of excavating, crafting, and presenting your story. The diagram in Figure I.1 demonstrates the relationship of the chapters to the three parts of our method.



FIGURE I.1 Excavating, Crafting, and Presenting

Excavating

Excavation begins with the identification of your story. In which past event or series of events is your story located? Mine those events for the story itself. When excavating, we are like archeologists: we've found shards or half-buried jewels, but we need to dig the earth around those artifacts to see what else there is. Often, we'll find that our story is made up of more than the initial event that comes

to mind—or even an entirely different memory or moment. To explore like this takes a certain mindset.

Storytelling involves both a critical mind and a creative mind. The critical mind analyzes, compares, and chooses, while the creative mind visualizes, foresees, and generates ideas. Since the critical mind tends to obstruct the creative mind, *the first principle of excavation is the deferment of judgment*. You must be allowed to express ideas without any concern for their value, feasibility, or significance. As you explore what material to use for your story, you allow yourself to become completely uncritical, making way for all sorts of ideas to come to mind. Only then do you bring back the power of critical thinking to become more rational and controlled as you craft and tell your story.

Crafting

When you're crafting your story, you'll begin to hone the ideas generated during the excavation phase, shaping them into a classic story structure of beginning, ending, and an emotional turning point in between. This phase is where the creativity of storytelling comes alive as you use the What happened? method to tell the story. You'll be surprised that in simply telling what happened, you'll discover so much choice. Each choice affects other

choices, compelling and cajoling you to master the plot of your story.

While you're crafting, continue to keep an open mind to new ideas that may bubble up to the surface of your consciousness. It's natural to move back and forth a bit between excavation and crafting. A storyteller operates with some flexibility along with precision, and some patience along with enjoyment.

Presenting

Once you've excavated and crafted your story, you're ready to present. You'll speak without the need to refer to notes or PowerPoint slides. You'll know your ending, and you'll therefore have great confidence in where your story is going. No more guesswork and plenty of time to take your listeners on a journey. A key note here: When we talk about *a business story told in a personal way*, we're saying that your whole being is engaged in telling your story. You're bringing the vividness of the personal to the goals and aims of a business. When a story is told from that place of embodiment, it never fails to connect you with your audience. And that's your Lion's Gaze.



**WHY STORY?
WHY NOW?**

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Why are you choosing to tell a *story* out of the many different ways human beings communicate? And why now? Why is this the moment to tell your story?

There is no right answer to these questions. They are meant to initiate an inquiry into your communication process. You might be telling a story to portray the best way to make a sales call, or to humanize a manager to a team that has faced crisis, or to depict pivotal moments that led to the formation of your enterprise so that new hires know who you are and why you exist as a company. Communication may have collapsed in a department, employees may be saying that they are unclear about the reasons for a merger or acquisition, or you may need to dramatize how policy changes in government will affect your client base. In answering these questions, you'll discover two consistent components: a rationale for storytelling and a call to action.

The Narativ approach to storytelling offers a step-by-step framework in which to excavate, craft, and present a story, beginning with this pair of questions. The

more precisely and deeply you are able to answer them, the greater the focus of your storytelling effort will be.

I begin every corporate training with my origin story, my AIDS Day Program story, because it is a direct response to the questions Why story? Why now?

The story begins in 1990. I walked into a social services building on Willoughby Street in Brooklyn, down the stairs to the basement, looking for the “AIDS Day Program.” On one of the doors was a white laboratory specimen box that said in red letters: “Danger. Hazardous Human Waste Material.” I met with my supervisor, Dr. Mike Katch, who had a bushy gray moustache and one blue and one green eye. He told me that I was to give the clients what they needed, psychologically and emotionally. I shared an office with other social work interns. There were blue vinyl floors, and fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. There were no windows. Paintings made by the patients adorned the walls.

Ronald, my first client, sat across my desk.

“How are you?” I asked.

“I’m dying,” he said.

“What do you need?” I asked.

He told me he wanted to marry his girlfriend, Yvonne.

I told Dr. Katch that Ronald was delusional as a result of suffering from lethal cryptococcal meningitis. As a clinical psychologist, I was trained to work with patients

who would gain insight and grow from reflecting on their experiences. “He’s got no insight,” I said.

“It’s not about insight,” Katch replied. “It’s about being alive in this moment. If Ronald and Yvonne want to get married, that’s their choice. In social work we start with the client, not with fancy psychobabble. There’s no time to reflect. Their story is happening now, in this moment.”

Some weeks later I looked down into Ronald’s open casket. He was dressed in a gray suit, a white shirt, and a red tie with a yellow rose in his lapel. Yvonne came up to me. “I just got married, and I’m already a widow. At least he died knowing he was loved.” Ronald’s name was engraved on a brass plate that read: “In Memoriam.” The plate was the size of a packet of chewing gum, and it was hammered onto a wooden board with at least 50 other names at the entrance to the AIDS Day Program building.

I sobbed in Katch’s office. He gave me a tissue. “At least Ronald had Yvonne. Most of these patients are dying, leaving nothing behind. Nothing. Everything they own ends up in black garbage bags. And no one ever comes to claim their belongings.” Their stories were all they had, and they were dying without having told them. I told Katch that I wanted to start a storytelling circle so that the clients could leave their stories behind to be retold and passed on by others. And those who live can carry others’ stories into the future.

I went into the dayroom where all the patients congregated and said, “I’m starting a storytelling group.”

“What the f--cking hell, Murray, what are they teaching you in that social work school? What are you talking about? I don’t have a story. I’m a crack addict,” Sharon responded. “Do you understand? This is how I got infected.” She had no teeth. She wore gold rings on every single one of her fingers. She said, “I’ve spent my whole life in the alleys of Brooklyn scoring crack.”

I said, “Yes, that’s your story. That’s what I want to hear. Just tell me what happened to you. That’s what I want to know. What happened to you?”

By Christmas 1994, my storytelling group was filled with people. One of the clients, Harriet, said to me, “My daughter, who is three, will never really know who I was because I’m going to die before she can hear my story. Would you mind if we made a videotape of my story? So that I can leave her that videotape as a legacy of who I am after I die?” We did. After that, all the clients in my program wanted legacy tapes.

Newspapers published articles every single week on the number of people infected with and dying of AIDS. By 1995, the *New York Times* reported 159,000 people had died.

At that time, the Department of AIDS Services of New York announced cutbacks, and this affected people in my program. Everyone gathered in wheelchairs or bent

over canes, they got on a bus, and they went up to the state capitol in Albany. They left videotapes of their legacy stories on the desks of the legislators, accompanied by a handwritten note:

Listen to these stories. Listen to my story. Listen to what happened to me, and then tell me that I don’t deserve services. As the numbers you read every day in the papers continue escalating, they become increasingly meaningless. Those in power who are supposed to be affected by these numbers are in fact not responding. The mayor of New York is denying what’s going on. The president is denying it. Organizations aren’t responding fast enough. Pharmaceutical companies aren’t doing research fast enough or presenting medications fast enough. But we are not numbers. This is our lives!

The legislators listened to their pleas for civil rights and funding for AIDS research. Laws were enacted that prohibited discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS in all workplace settings, state and municipal services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, transportation, and telecommunications. *This happened because people told their stories.*

My experience during this unprecedented epidemic inspired me to distill all I knew about listening and

storytelling into the Narativ method. I understood that at a particular moment in time, there is always a reason to use a story rather than graphs, statistical charts, PowerPoints, and all the other forms of communication. Stories are powerful. They change lives. I tell the AIDS Day Program story because it exemplifies the emotional impact of story, the social and cultural role of story, and its practical efficacy in creating change. It is also my origin story; it shows how storytelling became the focus of my 30-plus-year career.

Drawing on that experience, I developed the prompt Why story? Why now? to use at the start of every storytelling engagement. It pulls us out of vagueness into specificity; it helps us identify and pursue our storytelling objective. Let's look at an example.

Craig Kostelic, the chief business officer of Condé Nast's Food Innovation Group (FIG), views every member of his team as a storyteller. He told us, "It's the common trait that links every job. Whether you're in editing, telling stories to consumers, or you're in sales, telling a story to a client or marketing team or closing deals or getting authorizations, or you're in creative services, telling stories to bring numbers to life, we are *all* storytellers." For Craig, storytelling is "the most important and transferable skill set that we all have as part of our professional development."

As we spoke with Craig, he shared an unequivocal understanding that storytelling joins the head to the heart—it brings to life with emotional power the data, facts, and figures embedded in concepts such as cost-benefit analysis and return on investment (ROI). These stories engage and connect. Connection builds audiences and gets them on board. Why story? was abundantly evident for Craig.

But Why now? Why engage Narativ to help FIG tell better stories right now?

In an explosive period of growth in Condé Nast's recent history, the Food Innovation Group was blazing a path ahead in digital storytelling, and FIG had become somewhat renowned inside the company. Craig sought out Narativ for a keynote speech to help take FIG's storytelling to the next level. He also saw story as a way to communicate the power of belonging and teamwork within FIG. He felt that belonging and teamwork had been essential to their success, so it was a message he wanted to reinforce and celebrate.

Every company that approaches Narativ has a different response to Why story? Why now? Storytelling and stories are two sides of the most important competency in business communication. Storytelling puts all of us in the position to know our work more deeply and intimately through a story. Meanwhile, stories themselves

work all kinds of magic on communication, from delivering emotional relevance to bringing data to life to transferring knowledge in an engaging and memorable way. In the following chapters, you'll read about how companies have successfully applied the Narativ method to achieve their business communication goals. Here are some examples that will be explained in detail:

- A social media company's marketing teams were promoting its business globally, but within the company the marketing teams were not always seen as being as essential as the engineers. As a result, they wanted to communicate their stake in the business and show their value in an impactful way. That was their answer to Why story? Why now? Then came a second answer: "We need to be better listeners." We designed training that was entirely about identifying and releasing obstacles to listening so that everyone in the entire department could be better listeners within their various teams and to their business partners, which paved the way for powerful stories to emerge. You'll read more about what happened in Chapter 2.
- A tech company was pivoting, which required reorganization and rethinking, and this made waves in its management culture. We were asked

to create a listening and storytelling environment in which to identify and release obstacles that were preventing clear and clean communication, and then develop a new, forward-thinking story to help them move ahead. Chapter 3 goes into depth about the application of our method for navigating crisis.

- A media and entertainment giant was bringing together 140 employees from 47 emerging market countries for a corporate retreat. The manager wanted an event that would "break down boundaries among people." The manager told us that the event had to be "really good because some participants were from countries whose governments hated one another." Their Why story? Why now? revealed an intense need for collaboration and connection in order to tackle the enormity of their assignment. Read about it in Chapter 4.
- A national medical insurance company was trying to change the perception that the company was a large behemoth out of touch with the customers' real needs. For this company's leaders, the questions Why story? Why now? revealed that it was in fact a customer-centric company that wasn't putting a spotlight on how its

customer service department responded to real client needs. Over the years, the company had invested significantly in training to go beyond the call of duty and exceed expectations. The question made us turn to the managers and employees in the call centers that addressed clients directly. This led to excavating stories of actual customer experiences that brought to life how the company was making a difference in the lives of its customers, challenging the narrative that had been in the media until then. You'll read their story in Chapter 5.

- A multinational pharmaceutical firm's sales and research teams frequently made dry, fact-filled presentations that were so data heavy that it was hard to read what was on each slide of the decks. Some decks were 80 slides long! Their Why story? Why now? was at first related to standard presentation concerns: they wanted to tell stories that engaged, and they adapted presentation decks to those personal stories. And then, as often happens in the process of answering these questions, a second reason arose, even more powerful than the first. The research and sales teams had different agendas and purposes, yet

they had to find a common language so that the whole enterprise could move forward.

“What stories can we tell that would help us be better collaborators and therefore create better presentations?” they asked. Find this also in Chapter 5.

- The chief business officer of an iconic publishing brand sought to craft a story to rouse his team and form stronger bonds. I worked closely with him to create his story, and in Chapter 6 you'll observe the real-world process of excavating, crafting, and preparing for presentation in minute detail.
- A luxury brand's legal team was often seen as creating headaches for the multitude of businesses the company held, and the team members needed to position the team as a business partner to the rest of the company. The team's answer to Why story? Why now? was to change that perception by telling powerful stories that would touch people's hearts and get past preconceptions. You'll read their story and its surprising twist in Chapter 7.

There are common themes and purposes that emerge from asking the questions Why story? Why now? Here are some of them. Feel free to add your own:

- Demonstrate leadership
- Explain a raison d'être and purpose
- Increase collaboration or teamwork
- Generate empathy
- Inspire change
- Resolve conflict
- Humanize or dimensionalize an issue or audience
- Share learning or training
- Celebrate and build culture

Now, take a moment to reflect on a project or initiative at work, some relational issues within a team, or a newly identified target audience. Why would you use story to support that work? And what about this moment in time requires the story to be told? Explore the center and edges of those questions. You will gain greater insight the deeper you probe.

As we move forward from this starting point, excavation evolves into a process of exploration and discovery.

Roll up your sleeves because stories require some digging. They are not ready-made, a product you pull off the shelf. In fact, viewing them that way diminishes their return. A good example is formulaic training material or a clichéd inspirational phrase. They lack the direction and urgency of Why story? Why now? and the vitality of a good story. Work needs to be done to get to the heart of the matter. There've been no surprises yet. We haven't pushed through any boundaries. And this is precisely why we must suspend judgment for a period of time: so that we don't cut short the creative process of excavation and miss out on stories that lie just below the surface. The obstacles that stand in the way, which we explore in the next two chapters, turn out to be part of the creative process itself.