Your Story, Your Leadership

A Guide for Nonprofit Leaders

RAYAH FUND
Amplifying Women's Voices

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Preface

Some of the best stories are filled with unexpected twists and turns. At the Rayah Fund, our own journey took just such a turn. In June 2021, a simple celebration for our mother's birthday unexpectedly evolved into a powerful meeting of women nonprofit leaders and activists. The energy from that initial gathering was so undeniable that the idea stuck - and the Rayah Forum was born. Over the past five years, we have gathered every few months to catch our breath, share our experiences, and renew our sense of purpose and hope.

This guide is a direct outcome of those Rayah Forum meetings. It is inspired both by the incredible 'wonder women' navigating today's challenging realities and by the compelling stories we have shared around our own version of a proverbial campfire.

Over decades of researching civic activism - crisscrossing the country and interviewing hundreds of changemakers each year - I have had the immense privilege of discovering how we translate personal narratives into collective hope and action. True hope, it turns out, is not a passive feeling we wait for; rather, it is a daily practice. Even under conditions that would seem to justify giving up, I have watched so many trailblazers coax hope out of hiding, put on their superhero capes, and jump right back into the arena.

At our regular Rayah Forum meetings, we try to provide the scaffolding for more women to make those heroic leaps, serving as a reminder that the plot of our own epic adventure is still being written. This storytelling guide is a piece of that scaffolding - supporting you as you take your own courageous strides. It is a roadmap to help us share our journeys, mentor others, and lift each other up. The guide is available in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. You can download it, along with materials from our gatherings and years of storytelling, at www.rayahfund.org.il.

This guide came into being thanks to the insightful guidance and collaborative efforts of two wonderful colleagues, Hamutal Gouri and Ghada Abu Jaber - Nijem, whose dedication shaped every page. And a heartfelt thank you to Oso Bayo for giving shape to our ideas through her beautiful design, as well as for the unique creative energy she has brought to the Rayah Forum over the years.

I am immensely grateful to my original band of teammates, my siblings Andrea Schneider, Jeff Kupfer, and Debbie Cosgrove, for everything, including their steadfast support of our work together at the Rayah Fund. Above all, thank you to our 'Chief Inspiration Officer' and the official Wonder Woman of our family: our mom, Professor Barbara Burstin.

June 2026

Nancy

A word from the editors

For many years, wearing many hats, we have accompanied civil society organizations, social change leaders, activists, and professionals as they put strategies into practice for the issues that matter to them and their communities. We have worked with new and long-established organizations, with groups active in diverse communities across Jewish and Arab society, and with teams on the ground as well as those advancing policy change. Again and again, one insight has emerged - leadership that endures is leadership that knows how to tell its own story and how to listen to the stories of others.

That is why this guide matters so much to us. It grew out of the gatherings of the Rayah Forum, a community of women leaders who came together to share their experiences and stories, renew their sense of purpose, and hold on to hope. Almost everything in these pages was first tried in the field, in gatherings and workshops. The result is something the social sector truly needs: a practical tool, grounded in experience and research, that treats storytelling as an essential leadership skill.

I, Hamutal, like to say that I'm fluent in Story - the language of stories is my second mother tongue. That is why this guide moves me personally: it tells its own story about why stories belong in our toolkit of superpowers as leaders. As a consultant, facilitator, program coordinator, and director, I can attest that it is brimming with practical, intuitive, and truly useful tools that help us make sense of things, bring order, and build deep connections, especially in times of uncertainty and instability.

I, Ghada, love good stories that awaken new insights about ourselves and the world. Over the years I have come to know many, some from books, of course, but most from individuals and teams I met along the way. Often, they were not recognized as stories at the time, let alone as stories worth recording or sharing. This guide offers easy-to-use tools for finding the stories that organizations and teams would do well to gather, document, and share. In the end, even the facts and figures organizations are so often asked to present take on real meaning only within their own unique story, as told by the people who carry their work.

Editing this guide in English, Arabic, and Hebrew was a journey in itself. In the process, each of us discovered how we draw on stories in our work with organizations and teams. Moving between three languages, we came to appreciate that each has its own images and expressions and its own ways of speaking about courage, loss, and hope. For us, offering the guide in Arabic, Hebrew, and English makes a statement of what we believe: that our stories can travel between communities, and that we have so much to learn from one another.

In preparing the Arabic and Hebrew editions, we tried to stay close to the spirit of the English original and keep its intimate tone, which speaks naturally to the reader from a deep familiarity with her everyday reality. The Arabic translation was especially challenging, given the particular qualities of both the guide's English style and written Arabic. Thanks to the translator's care and dedication, the final version carries the spirit we most wanted to preserve.

How might you use the guide? There is no single way. Some readers will move through the chapters in order as a personal journey. Others will open the specific chapter that speaks to their moment: a crisis, a transition, a season of exhaustion, or a new beginning. The reflection questions and worksheets can be explored alone, with a trusted colleague, or in a team meeting. They can also serve as the foundation for a workshop or peer learning.

Above all, we hope you will come to these pages with generosity toward yourself. Your story is already being written. This is an invitation to tell it with intention, and to help others tell theirs.

We look forward to continuing the conversation with you in our next guide on organizational storytelling, coming soon.

Ghada Abu Jaber - Nijem and Hamutal Gouri

Editors

Introduction

Every day, with all the ambition we can gather, we set out with our own version of a 'leap for humankind'. In our field of civic activism, we work on adding a daily dose of hope to our communities. It is always an act of courage. We are leaping tall buildings in a single bound. Or some version of this... On a regular basis.

Whether you are leading an organization, building a team, or finding your footing as an emerging activist, you carry a story with you. That story is one of your most powerful leadership tools.

Understanding and telling your own story can strengthen your leadership identity, deepen your resilience, and help you stay connected to your purpose - especially in difficult times. This guide is for you because you are the chief inspiration officer for so many people, showing up every day to do work that matters.[1]

So we are going to grab our superhero capes and take a look back at our origin story, think about how we want to shape our future story, and reflect on everything in between.

Why stories matter for leadership

Storytelling is something we do all the time - to entertain, to communicate, to make sense of the world around us. For those of us working in community engagement, we are often spending much of our time trying to rewrite the script by tossing out outdated playbooks, challenging the norms, and working toward what we like to call 'positive disruption'[2] by introducing new narrators and new stories. We are doing our job if previously taboo topics are addressed, stigmas are unmasked and conversations begin.[3]

The stories we tell help us to challenge both the prescribed roles and the old narratives that so often have restricted so many in society. We start seeing heroes and heroines in all shapes and sizes. Our expectations of who should get rescued and who should do the rescuing slowly begin to shift.

And yet, even for those of us who embrace the role of troublemaker, chaos can get the best of us. Each time it seems as if the plot of our story has been upended too many times. We are endlessly required to navigate new landscapes.

As always, stories can help us get through anxious times. Stories can inspire and renew our sense of purpose. Stories can show us the link between the everyday and our bold imaginations.

This guide offers a different way of thinking about storytelling - not as a talent some people are born with, but as a tool for personal resilience, leadership identity, and meaningful activism.



Each chapter asks a different leadership question and offers a set of story frameworks, reflection questions, and everyday 'story catcher' practices to carry with you. At the end of the guide you will find worksheets - for writing, for drawing, for bringing to a group conversation.

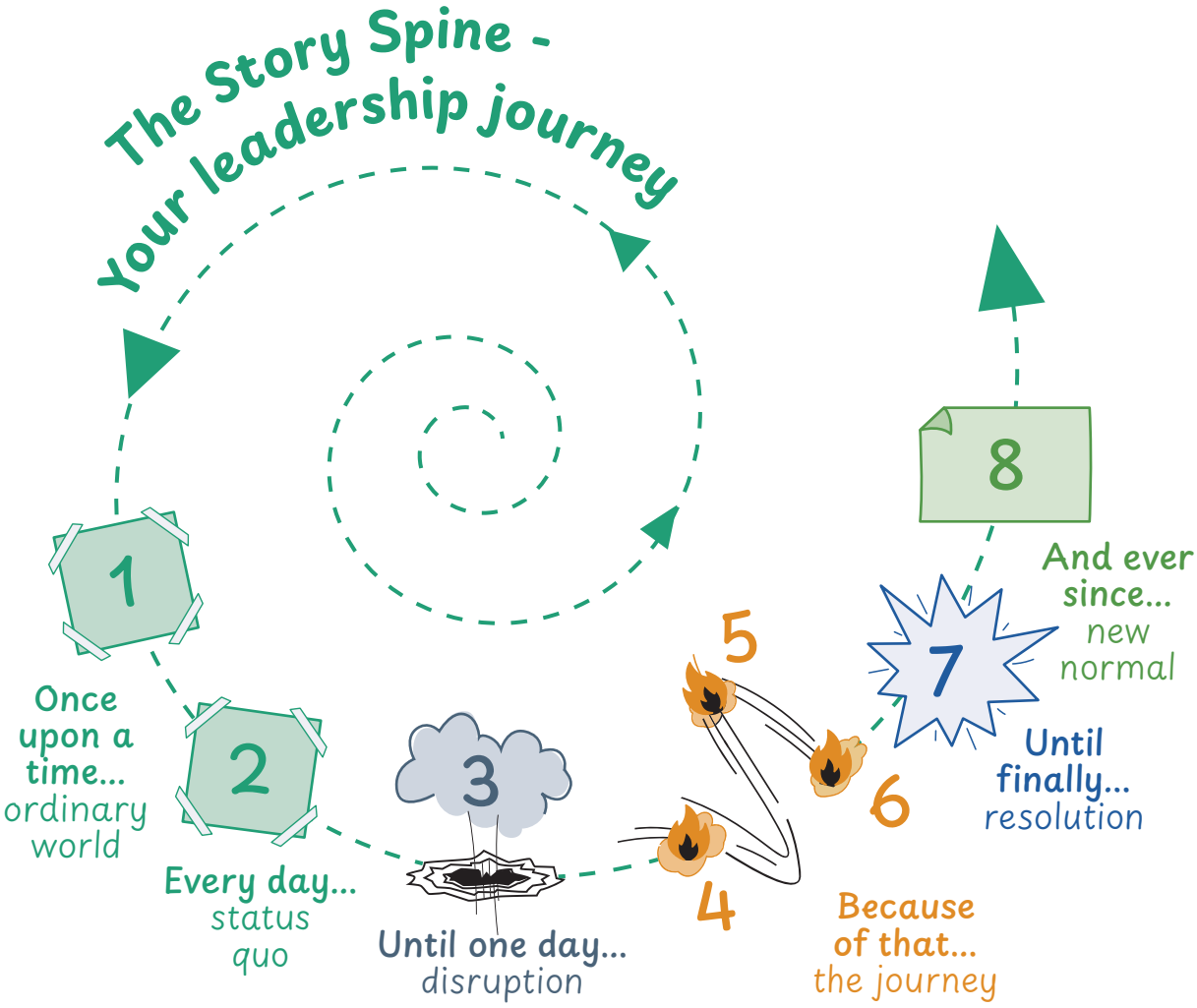
The story spine: a framework for all of us

Throughout this guide we return to a simple storytelling structure called the 'story spine'.[4] You may already recognize its shape - it appears in myths across the globe, as well as in your favorite stories, books, and films.[5] And while we can identify this narrative arc in stories of our heroes and heroines, we also spot it in the everyday.

Remember, our heroic journey doesn't need to be one in which we go out on a quest to explore foreign lands to search for meaning. Our grand adventure is most often staying right where we are, helping others see their own greatness in their routine lives.

The Story Spine - 8 stages[6]

1. **Once upon a time...** The ordinary world - who we are and where we begin.
2. **Every day...** The routine, the status quo - before anything changes.
3. **Until one day...** The inciting incident[7] - the moment that disrupts the balance.
4. **Because of that...** The first response to disruption[8] - the journey begins.
5. **Because of that...** Escalating challenges - the stakes keep rising.
6. **Because of that...** The struggle deepens - we are truly tested.
7. **Until finally...** The turning point - the moment of resolution.
8. **And ever since then...** The new normal - what we carry forward.



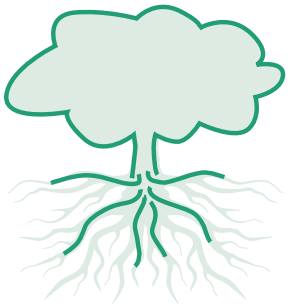
Each chapter of this guide opens with a story spine prompt drawn from the chapter's theme, setting the stage for you to explore your own leadership journey.

Stories as leadership tools

Stories matter for leadership because they do several things at once.[9] They anchor us - grounding us in where we came from and why we do this work. They help us imagine new possibilities. They build the resilience we need to stay in the work over the long haul. And they can better connect us to our teams and communities.

One more thing worth saying before we begin. The classical technique of starting a story in the middle of the action captures something true about how we experience our own lives.[10] We are never at the beginning. We are always mid-story. The question is not where your leadership story starts. It is which chapter you are in right now, and what the next one might be.

So as we go along working through this guide, we can think about how our own stories may unfold and what the memorable moments might be that someday cause the audience to lean forward in their seats, waiting to hear how it all turned out.



Chapter 1
Who am I as a leader?

Roots, identity, and stories that shaped you

- **Once upon a time...** you chose this work - or it chose you.
- **This chapter...** is an invitation to reflect on your origin story.

The shape of your story

So long before we began talking about leadership frameworks, there were 'story shapes'.[11] There are a handful of these basic patterns that recur in our legends and myths, across centuries of storytelling in cultures around the world.

Why does naming the shape of your story matter? It can give us needed perspective as leaders. When you can see the shape of your story, you are no longer only inside it. You can locate the difficulty in the structure rather than in yourself. And you can begin to tell your story, enabling you to become an especially reliable narrator.[12] In the midst of our superhero journeys, this can all be especially helpful.

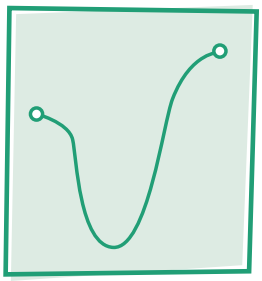
What does your arc look like?

Track your leadership story so far on a simple graph - good times at the top, hard times at the bottom, duration from left to right. Here are three shapes that tend to resonate:[13]

- **The deep dive.** Not every origin story starts with a lightning bolt. Sometimes it starts at the bottom. You went somewhere hard - and instead of just surviving it, you found something there that you brought back with you. That is not failure. That is where the real powers get discovered.
- **The spiral.** You have been here before. Same questions, same terrain. But if you look again, every loop of the spiral brings you to a higher altitude. What feels like repetition is actually accumulation.

- **Voyage and return.** You left the familiar. You were tested out there - in a new role, a new community, a landscape that did not come with a map. And you came back changed not with a trophy but with something better - the kind of wisdom that only comes from having actually been there.

What shape is your leadership story so far?



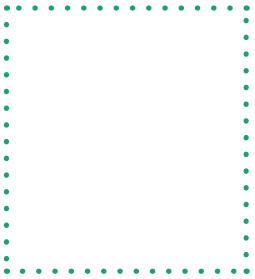
The deep dive
into difficulty, back up changed



The spiral
returning deeper each time



Voyage & return
away, changed, home different



It's your story
draw its shape!

There is no correct shape. The point is to see your story as a story, with movement, texture and chapters still to come.

The deep dive, the spiral, voyage and return - or something entirely yours. Which feels most true at the current time?

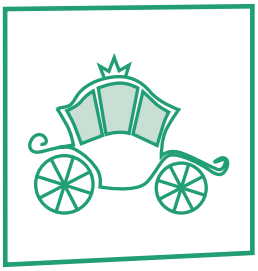
Which plot are you living right now?[14]

While considering our story arc, we also want to become familiar with the standard story plots that recur across centuries of storytelling.[15] Read through them and notice which one resonates the most with you.



Overcoming the monster

Fighting a systemic injustice or destructive force. You bring the strength of persistence and perspective.



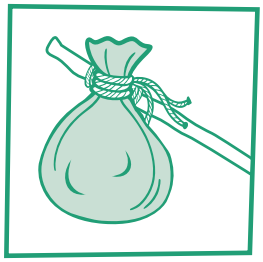
Rags to riches

Building something real from nothing, often without credit.



The quest

Moving toward a North Star against all obstacles. The fellowship gathered on the way matters as much as the destination.



Voyage and return

Crossing into an unfamiliar world and returning changed. What you bring back is hard-earned wisdom.



Comedy

Navigating chaos and crossed wires, and somehow finding the thread that holds it all together.



Tragedy

A pattern that keeps repeating. Naming the flaw is not defeat, it is the beginning of a different story.



Rebirth

Losing yourself to burnout or to a role that asked too much and finding your way back.



Mystery

Still asking the question everyone else stopped asking. Digging until the truth surfaces.

Your Story

Which one?
Which plot are you living right now?



Reflection Questions: **Your story shaper**

- **The arc so far.** Which story shape best describes your leadership journey so far?
- **The plot.** Which of the eight plots feels most true right now, and what does naming it change?
- **The old narrative.** Is there a story about yourself as a leader that no longer fits? What might it mean to set it down?

Your superpowers

And right before we dive more into our origin story, it is worth considering our current superpowers that keep us in the field of making the world a better place. We already know that we have many, including sharing optimism with everyone around us.

Lots of superpowers are required for any civil society leaders working in such complicated settings as we do.[16] Here we are going to review skillsets that may get less attention than their flashier counterparts.[17] Below is a list of leadership capacities that are part of your superhero toolkit. In all likelihood they are things you are already doing.

A few of your superpowers - consider them already part of your toolkit

- **Fierce compassion.**[18] The ability to hold deep care for others while also holding a line. This is more difficult than it sounds, and requires a delicate balance.
- **Relational intelligence.**[19] Reading the room, tending the web, knowing who needs what and when. The invisible infrastructure that holds every functional team together. Often unnoticed. Always essential.
- **Holding contradictions.**[20] Being both angry and hopeful. Both exhausted and committed. Both uncertain and decisive. The capacity to keep moving without waiting for resolution.
- **The courage to begin again.**[21] After failure, after burnout, after being told no. Pressing reset and trying once more - not from naivety, but from a purpose deep enough to handle disappointment.
- **Oscillating resilience.**[22] Not the resilience of never falling, but the resilience of falling and returning. The knowledge, earned from experience, that you have been down before and come back.

- **Naming what others won't.**[23] Walking into the room and saying the thing everyone has been carefully not saying - making the invisible visible.

In such tenuous times, we can take heart in acknowledging what is already part of our toolkit. As we move forward, this guide will help you see these capacities more clearly - and draw on them more deliberately.

Reflection Questions: **Your superpowers**

- **The one you use most.** Looking at the superpowers list - which do you draw on most? When did you first discover you had it?
- **The one you underuse.** Which superpower do you have but rarely claim? What would change if you used it more intentionally?

Knowing your history

So what is the best predictor of resilience, in individuals, in families, in organizations? Research offers a surprising answer: it is how much we know about our own history.[24]

Those who understand where they come from - who know the struggles, the turning points, and the small moments of courage in their past - tend to have a stronger sense of who they are and a greater capacity to handle difficulty. We build narrative resilience by understanding our roots. Knowing your own story is one of your most powerful leadership tools.

The four roots of your leadership identity



Heritage
& identity



Resilience
& turning points



Fellowship
& connection



Vision
& values

Heritage and identity



Every leader arrives at their role with a backstory - a particular family, a particular community, a particular set of experiences that shaped

how they see the world and what they believe is worth fighting for. That backstory is not background noise. It is the source code for you moving forward.

Taking time to understand your personal narrative map gives you a foundation to stand on when things get difficult.[25] And of course we know that is bound to happen... But this is not just nostalgia here. It is what storytelling traditions call an origin myth: the account of how you became who you are.

When you know your origin story well enough to tell it, something shifts.[26] You stop reacting to circumstances and start authoring your response to them. That is not a small thing. That is how leaders are made.

Reflection Questions: **Your roots**

- **The awakening.** What was the specific moment or experience when you knew you had to do this work?[27] Describe it concretely - where were you, who was there, what happened?
- **The inheritance.** What value was passed down to you - from your family, community, or culture - that you carry into your leadership today?[28]
- **The catalyst.** Are you driven to do what you do because it touches you personally? Or did you choose this path because you felt it was your calling - aligned with your abilities, skills, or values? Either way, how does the source of your work influence your commitment?

Resilience and turning points



Think back to the moment, or series of moments, when you first understood that this work was yours to do and you tapped into a deep sense of purpose. Perhaps it was a specific event that moved you to act. Perhaps a co-conspirator believed in you before you believed in yourself.

These turning points are the fuel of your leadership. The capacity for 'good trouble' - the willingness to disrupt the status quo in service of something more just - rarely arrives from nowhere.[29] It is rooted in something specific - a family legacy, an injustice witnessed up close, a community you belong to, someone who modeled what it looks like to keep going when keeping going made no obvious sense.[30] Find that thing. Name it. It is where your superpower comes from.

Reflection Questions: **Your turning points**

- **The good trouble moment.** What is the most courageous or risky thing you have done in service of something you believe in?[31]
- **The wall.** Think of a time when you were closest to walking away - from a project, a role, or the work entirely.[32] What specific person, resources, or ritual brought you back?
- **The moral compass.** Can you recall a decision guided purely by your values, even when it was the harder path? What did it cost you - and what did it give you?

Fellowship and connection



No leader's story is told in isolation. The people around us - mentors, colleagues, community members, family - are woven into the narrative. Sometimes they are the reason we started. Sometimes they are what kept us going when we nearly gave up.

One of the quiet miracles of storytelling is that it creates multiple entry points.[33] These moments are where others recognize themselves in your experience. When you share something authentic about your own journey, you give other individuals permission to do the same.[34] That permission is a meaningful gift a leader can offer. It builds trust faster than almost anything else and deepens a team's collective courage.[35]

Your story - the real one, with the hard parts in, is a gift to the people around you. Share it generously.

Reflection Questions: **Your fellowship and connection**

- **Your co-conspirators.** Who are the individuals you call when the work feels overwhelming? How did those relationships form?
- **The mentor.** Who took you under their wing when you were starting out? What did they see in you - and do you see it in yourself now?

Vision and values



Understanding where you come from is also a way of clarifying where you are going. Our values - the things we will not compromise on, the beliefs that guide our decisions - do not usually come from abstract principles.

They come from experience: from watching someone act with integrity, from having your own integrity tested, from loss, or from unexpected grace.

The daily act of returning to your values, not as a performance but as a quiet recalibration, is itself a form of leadership.[36] It is one of the superpowers that looks most ordinary from the outside and takes the most from the inside.

And here is the thing about values: the leaders who stay in this work over the long haul - who sustain hope and energy across decades - are almost always the ones who know exactly what they will not compromise on.[37] That clarity keeps you grounded. It is also what gives you altitude when you're ready to get your superhero cape back on.

Reflection Questions: **Your vision and values**

- **The face of the mission.** When you feel most drained, whose face do you think of to remind yourself that the work is real and worth it?[38]
- **The north star.** If you had to describe your deepest purpose - not your job title, but the change you are trying to make in the world - what would you say?



Story catchers:[39] everyday practices

1. **The origin story conversation.** Invite a colleague to share the 'kitchen table' story - the moment where their commitment to this work first took shape.[40] Then share yours. Notice what happens to the conversation afterward.
2. **'Homework for life'.**[41] At the end of each day this week, take two minutes to write the one thing that happened that you would tell a friend over coffee. Over time, these small entries become a record of who you are as a leader - the heroism in ordinary days.
3. **The resilience timeline.** Draw a simple line representing your leadership journey. Mark the high points and the low points. Below each low point, write one word for what you learned, or what kept you going. This is your oscillating resilience - the story of a leader who has been both up and down, and is still here.



Chapter 2
What is my vision and voice?

Finding your North Star and the story that moves others

- **Every day...** you did what needed to be done - effectively and reliably. But something felt slightly out of reach.
- **Until one day...** you stopped looking at what was, and started asking: what could be?
- **What happens next...** is what this chapter explores.

The quest plot - locating your true horizon



Think of great 'quest' stories - the ones where someone sets out toward something worth reaching for, against all the obstacles the world puts in the way. Somehow, the protagonists are always put to the test. We see how they organize their energy, their relationships, their decisions, their capacities to keep going when the path gets bumpy along the way.

We too are continually tested. As we know in the best stories, the 'quest' is rarely about a single dramatic goal. It is more often a direction, a set of values so clear that they act as a compass in every decision.

You already have a North Star. You have been moving toward it probably for longer than you realize. This chapter is about naming it clearly enough to use it deliberately.

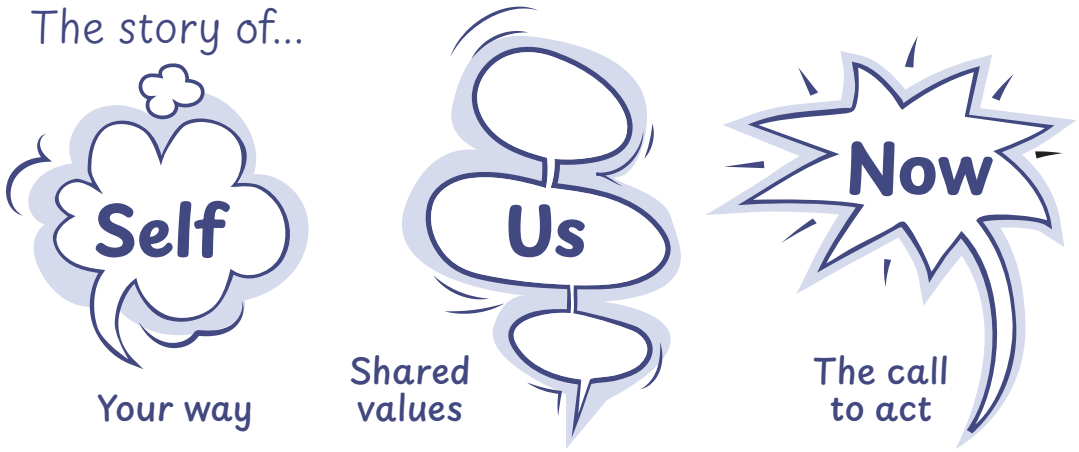
Story of Self, Us, and Now

As invigorating as a purposeful direction is, we still need the personal 'why' at the forefront. Otherwise, it is just a destination. Before you can bring others with you on the quest, you need to be able to articulate why it is yours - where it comes from, what it has cost you, what you believe it makes possible. That is where the storytelling begins.

The public narrative framework (Ganz, 2011) offers three distinct stories, and ideally we are able to weave all three together.[42]

Three stories - one voice[43]

- **The Story of Self.** Your personal 'why.' The specific experiences and 'moral resources' that called you to this work - not your resume, but your actual origin story. This is the foundation everything else stands on.
- **The Story of Us.** The shared values and collective identity of your community or team. What you have in common. Why you are more powerful together than apart. This is how you turn a direction into a movement.
- **The Story of Now.** The urgency. Why this moment specifically calls for action, and what becomes possible if you move together. It is hope with an infrastructure, specific and immediate. This is what gets people off the fence to join in.



With this kind of compelling storytelling, you begin first in the personal, then broaden into the collective, and lastly, land yourself in the urgent present. You are better able to take your potential team of co-conspirators along for the ride, thereby increasing the chances of them signing up for the adventure.

Reflection Questions: **Your voice**

- **The story of self.** What specific personal experience most explains why you do this work? Have you ever told it fully and honestly?
- **The story of us.** What do the people you work with and for have in common - and have you named that out loud recently?
- **The story of now.** What is the urgency right now? Why does this moment specifically call for action?

Radical imagination - dreaming what does not yet exist



Once you know your personal 'why' and can articulate through the story of self, us and now, the next question is: how far can you see? Our work often requires something that does not always get named as a professional skill - the capacity to imagine, seriously and practically, a world that does not yet exist.

Wishful thinking? Perhaps. But better for us to think of it as disciplined imagination. The kind that asks: If a miracle happened tonight and your ideal future became real, what would be the first difference you would notice tomorrow morning?[44]

Your answer tells you what you actually believe is possible. It tells you where your deepest energy is still alive and kicking (even if it may be exhausted and a bit burned out these days).[45] That is your vision. The capacity to hold a bold vision of what could be, while doing the 'behind the scenes' daily work of moving toward it - that is one of the most extraordinary things a leader can do.

From self-knowledge to storytelling voice



Your north star
Self-knowledge

Your personal 'why' made shareable
Public narrative

Radical imagination
What could be

The listening superpower
Proximity & curiosity

Your voice
Already yours

Reflection Questions: **Your vision**

- **The miracle question.**[46] If a miracle happened tonight and your ideal future became real, what would be the first difference you would notice tomorrow morning?
- **The North Star.** In one sentence, distill the essence of your life's work: what is the singular, transformative shift you are determined to manifest in this world?
- **The quest.** What is the specific destination you are moving toward, and who has joined you on the way?

The listening superpower



And one more thing to consider as we reflect on what grounds us and shapes our vision. You know the version of the quest story where the protagonist arrives with all the ready-made answers? This is the story to resist.[47] We want to make sure that our superpower of radical imagination is always accompanied by curiosity and listening.

In the field, our community-based efforts are often centered around flipping outdated scripts. We tend to keep challenging outdated storylines, switching up who gets rescued and who does the rescuing. As leaders, we want to make sure we don't play out an old narrative, including the idea of the savior story.[48] This is what radical imagination becomes without listening - the hero who arrives with the dream already designed, the solutions already written, the community already cast in the role of grateful recipient.

As we build our vision, we want to always consider our stance. The most powerful quests are built with the community, not for them. Are we the 'expert' or the 'listener'; the 'fixer' or the builder?[49]

Relational intelligence, knowing who to listen to, and how to listen well, is one of your superpowers. The more intentionally you use it, the more powerful your vision becomes - not despite the community's input, but because of it. It is the story where proximity to the community is not a credential to display but a practice to maintain.

Reflection Questions: **Your proximity**

- **The closest you have been.** When have you been closest to the communities you serve - and what did you learn that you could not have learned any other way?
- **The savior check.** Is there anywhere in your work where you have slipped into the expert role when the listener role would serve better?
- **Hidden superpowers.** Whose superpowers around you are you not yet fully seeing or naming?

The story only you can tell

The quest plot, the Story of Self, radical imagination, the listening superpower - all of it has been pointing here. It is the account of how you got here: the roots, the vision, the community that keeps you honest. Your storytelling voice is not something you develop. It is something you uncover. And it has been here the whole time, cape and all.



Story catchers: everyday practices

1. **The one-sentence North Star.** This week, distill your personal leadership purpose into a single sentence, not polished, just true. Write it down. Read it back. Revise it as you go…
2. **The first fifteen.** The next time you are with a community or team member, spend the first fifteen minutes asking questions you do not already know the answer to. Notice what you learn.
3. **The story of self practice.** Find five minutes to write the two or three personal experiences that most explain why you do this work. Not for anyone else - just to know them clearly yourself. These are the foundation of your voice.

Chapter 3
How do I keep learning?

Staying curious, catching your blind spots, and asking tough questions

- **Until one day...** something did not go as planned. An assumption turned out to be wrong.
- **Because of that...** you had a choice: defend the plan, or get curious about what was actually happening.
- **What happens next...** this chapter sets out to examine.

The voyage and return - and the mystery plot



In this next chapter, we turn to the courageous act of learning. We know that life will always keep surprising us, keeping us on our toes even as we grab for our superhero cape. The plot twists are always going to happen. We want to make sure to keep updating our understanding as the world changes constantly.

Two classic story plots are particularly relevant here. The first is 'the voyage and return': the protagonist crosses into unfamiliar territory - a new community, an unexpected role, a crisis that changed everything - and when they return, they are somehow altered, shaped by newfound wisdom. The second is the mystery plot: the protagonist, ever the detective, works to find what is invisible, seeking true answers.

In any kind of tale, there are all sorts of ways to be brave.[50] And just as good storytelling requires authenticity and vulnerability, these traits of openness and curiosity are also a requisite for continuing to learn as we go. These superpowers - the capacity to cross into unfamiliar territory and come back changed (rather than defensive), and the capacity to keep asking the question everyone else has stopped asking - these are essential leadership skills. This chapter is about using them with intention.

Reflection Questions: **The mystery and the voyage**

- **The mystery question.** What question are you still asking that others seem to have moved past? What story are you still waiting to hear the end of?
- **The voyage and the return.** A time you crossed into unfamiliar territory - a new community, a difficult challenge, an assumption overturned. What story did you bring back? Have you told it?

Stories as your navigational GPS

We can think of stories as one of the ways to expand our own navigational system. Stories can be a GPS for us, generating not just information but knowledge and, over time, wisdom.[51] When you listen carefully to what is happening on the ground - the unexpected outcomes, the community members who surprise you, the moments when the plan and the reality diverge, you are collecting qualitative data in real time.

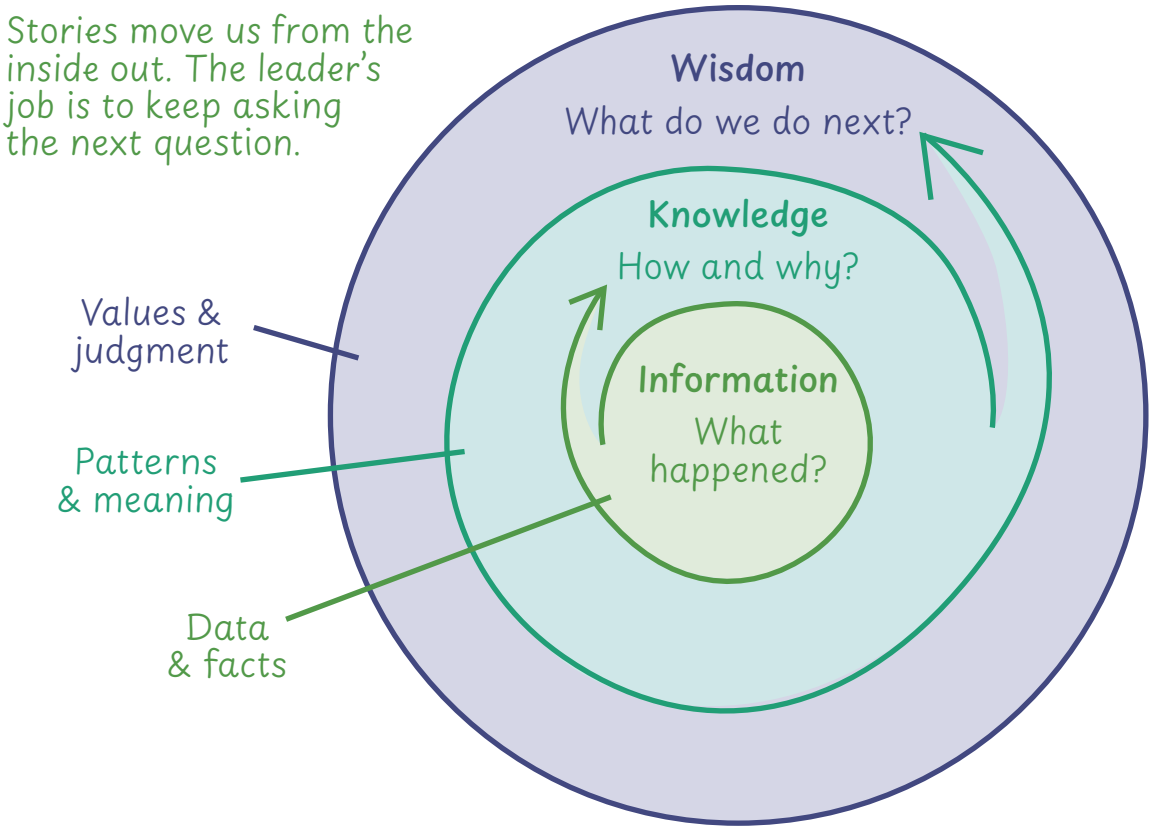
Our efforts in the field have always generated this kind of intelligence.[52] We have been able to create mini-revolutions by gathering data that had never existed before.[53] Legions of activists, equipped with new awareness from the stories they collected, have made decisions that shifted narratives and galvanized the public to advocate for positive change in their communities.[54]

We are continually in the process of making meaning from the data - thereby enabling us to move from information to knowledge, and then, with measured judgment, to wisdom.[55]

From information to knowledge to wisdom[56]

- **Information.** The facts - what happened, who was there, what changed. This is necessary data, but it is not enough. A good story starts here but does not stop here.
- **Knowledge.** What the information means, including the patterns, the connections, the 'how and why.' This requires the storyteller to pause - what is this story actually about?
- **Wisdom.** What you do with the knowledge - the judgment, grounded in values, about what matters and what comes next. This is when stories and lived experience become strategy.

The learning leader



Our job as leaders is not necessarily to collect more information. It is to create the conditions, in ourselves and in our teams, for that information to become hard-earned wisdom. We have to carefully check in, as we go, to document the most reliable and representative 'story' of what is happening in our communities.

Reflection Questions: **Stories as your GPS**

- **The plot twist.** What story came from the field recently that did not fit the strategy - and turned out to be more valuable than what was planned? What did it teach you?
- **The so what? test.** Take a recent project. Ask: 'So what?' What is the real story of difference it made in one person's life, as told in their words?
- **The energy audit.** Where are you seeing the most energy and the least resistance right now? What story lives there - and have you told it to anyone?

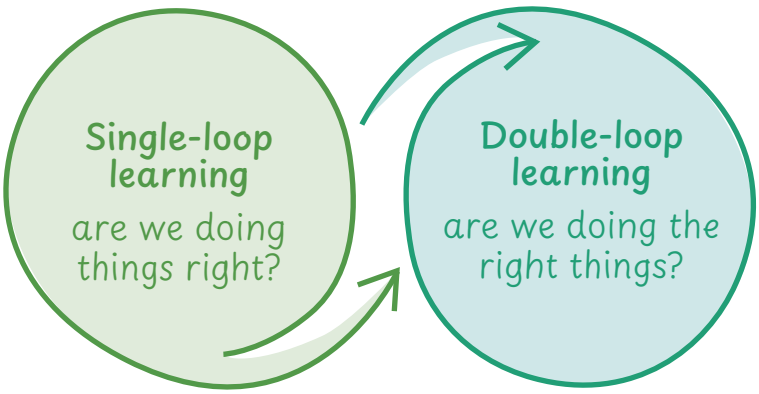
Double-loop learning - are we telling the right story?

We can recall our 'listening superpower' as discussed in Chapter 2. Here it really takes center stage. Genuine listening asks much of us.[57] We have to stay open to our community, to our team, and to stories that may contradict our best-laid plans. We not only ask 'are we doing things right?' but more importantly, 'are we doing the right things?'[58]

Consider the distinction between single and double-loop learning.[59] Single-loop learning checks whether your implementation of the plan is going well. Double-loop learning checks whether the plan itself is still the right one.

A useful way to think about it: single-loop learning edits a scene. Double-loop learning rewrites the plot. If we are only editing scenes, we get better and better at applying a strategy that no longer fits. We may become technically accomplished leaders, but we are telling the wrong story.

Single-loop edits a scene. Double-loop rewrites the plot.



One accessible tool for catching surprises and noticing plot twists is the Most Significant Change methodology - the practice of systematically asking 'what is the single most significant change you have seen this month?'[60] Basically, it is a formal version of what many of us have always done intuitively.

We want to make sure to treat the unexpected stories from the field as intelligence rather than inconvenience. And then we want to go out and share it, making sure that the learning gets translated into action on the ground.

Reflection Questions: **Double-loop learning**

- **The double-loop check.** Are you editing scenes or rewriting the plot? When did you last ask - 'is the story we are telling about our work still the right one?'
- **The most significant change.**[61] Looking back over the last month - what is the single most significant change you have witnessed in a participant, partner, or in your team? And who else needs to hear this story?

Blind spots and brave stories

Even with the best intentions, it is not easy to keep up with the ever-changing reality we operate in. We may have superhuman talents but we still have blind spots. And inevitably, our blind spots may affect which stories we notice, which ones we tell, and which ones we quietly set aside because they do not fit the narrative we have been building.

Consider the shadow questions[62]: What feedback have you dismissed too quickly this week? What story did you hear from the community that you have not yet told anyone? These are important diagnostic tools a learning leader can run regularly.[63]

We want to make sure to set the tone for welcoming the brave, inconvenient stories.[64] It's worth keeping in mind that the single highest predictor of team learning is whether people feel safe surfacing difficult truths.[65]

Organizations that deliberately engage with tough stories tend to be the most effective ones. Not because conflict is productive in itself, but because the willingness to hear the difficult story is what keeps strategy connected to reality.[66]

Reflection Questions: **The bravery of learning**[67]

- **The surprise.**[68] What is happening right now that you did not plan for - and is it a distraction or a new door opening?
- **The shadow question.** What story did you hear recently that you have not yet shared because it was inconvenient or uncomfortable? What would happen if you told it?
- **The strategy check.** Does the story you are telling about your efforts still match what is actually unfolding? Where is the gap?

The learning leader - bringing it all together

This is the full arc of the learning leader: self-knowledge feeds curiosity, curiosity enhances listening, listening generates stories, stories transform into wisdom, wisdom leads to better leadership.

If we picture this, it looks like progress. But it wouldn't be a straight line. It would look more like the spiral - which you may recognize from Chapter 1 as one of the story shapes most common among individuals engaged in sustained community building efforts. Each time around, you are accumulating stories. You are building wisdom. That is the learning superpower.



Story catchers: everyday practices

1. **The surprise opener.**[69] Start your next team meeting by asking: 'What story came from the field this week that we did not expect - and what does it tell us about what is actually happening?' Normalize the plot twist. Make it safe to name the story that does not fit.
2. **The most significant change ritual.** Once a month, ask your team: 'What is the single most significant change you have seen in a participant, partner, or in the work itself this month?' Collect the stories. Compare them, and reflect on potential insights.
3. **The shadow journal.** Once a week, write down one story you heard that you initially set aside - because it was inconvenient, uncomfortable, or did not fit the plan. Sit with it for 24 hours before deciding what to do with it. The stories that make you uncomfortable are usually the most important ones.
4. **The 'so what' story.**[70] At the end of your report back sessions with your team, ask: 'Based on the stories we just heard, what is the most useful thing we can do in the next 48 hours?' Turn the story into action and consider how it shapes strategy moving forward.



Chapter 4
How do I lead through difficulty?

Lifequakes, the oscillating narrative, and the descent that changes everything

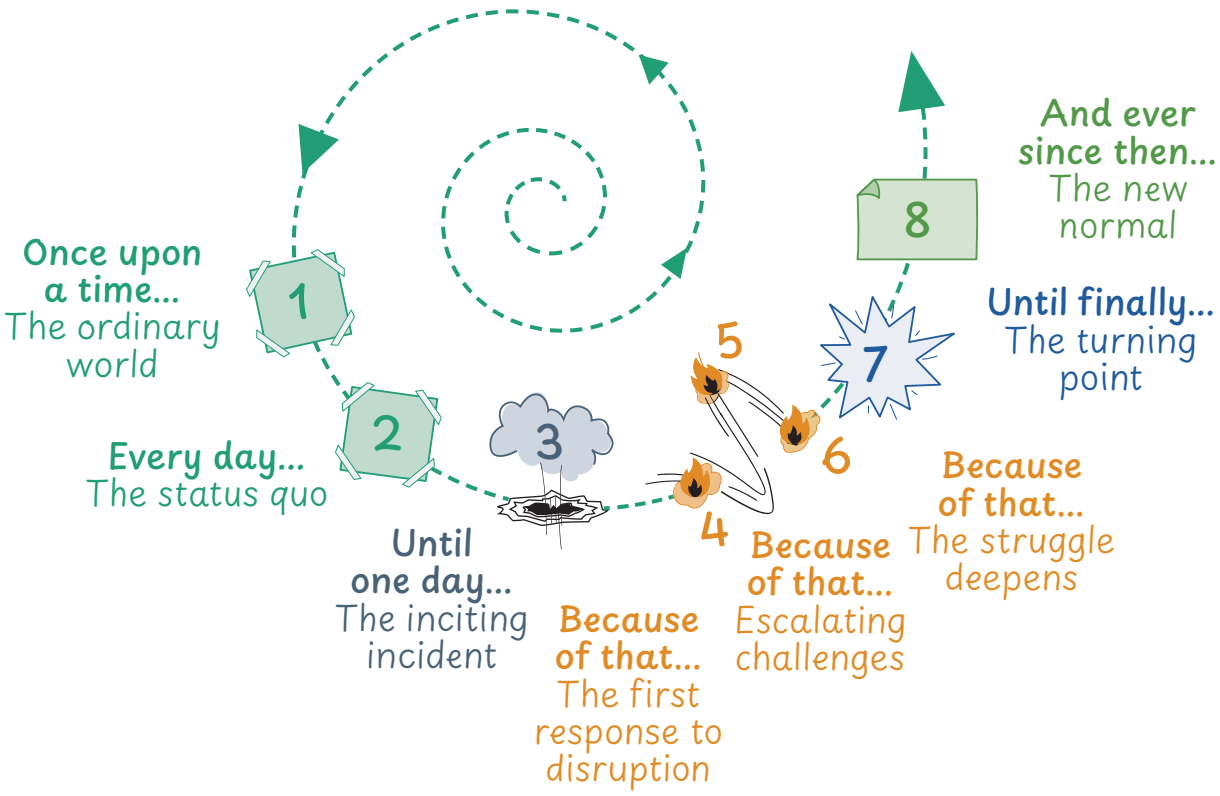
- **Until one day...** something broke. Or threatened to. A crisis arrived - from outside, or from within, or both at once.
- **Because of that...** you discovered things about yourself that easier times had not required of you.
- **What happens next...** this chapter explores.

Storytelling is the operating system of resilient leadership

So we are going along, seemingly doing all the right things - perhaps even midway on a superhero rescue mission. And then somehow the plot twist gets much darker. Even with all of our many superpowers, it is not enough. Our efforts seemingly fall apart. We scramble to find the scaffolding under us, not able to leap any tall buildings, and certainly not in a single bound. Our 'once upon a time' takes a sharp turn for the worse.

We know, ultimately, that every story has a 'descent.'[71] Every hero has an origin story that includes a moment of peril, a conflict or unforeseen disaster when everything has to be reset. It is during these intense chapters that we get tested most thoroughly. And it is precisely here that storytelling becomes most essential. We can think of stories as the 'operating system' of resilient leadership.[72]

How so? Because stories, as always, help us make sense of what is happening to us. When everything we are striving for all of a sudden seems lost, the practice of storytelling awaits. We can revisit our story spine that has been woven throughout this guide:



Stories can help us locate the difficulty inside a larger story arc. We can see how there is a built-in disruption, one that is followed eventually by some kind of recovery. In the face of great challenges, we discover what we are actually made of. This chapter helps us reflect on our own courageous journeys.

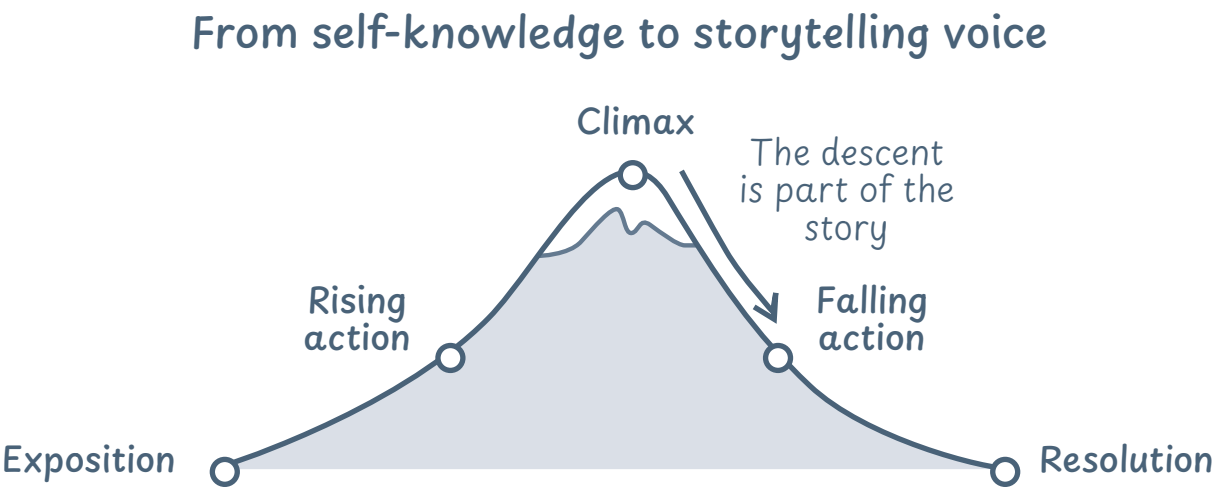
Every story has a shape - and the descent is always in it

Along with the story spine, we can consider different kinds of storytelling arcs and frameworks to help in our exploration of resilience. One story arc is shaped as a pyramid and is based on the idea that every story, across cultures and centuries, consists of five stages. The stages are: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.[73]

Known as the Freytag pyramid, it is often taught as a prescription for how stories should be written. For us, it is useful to read as a description of how stories actually work, including the story of your leadership.

Think about the arc of your own work. There has been a rising action - effort, momentum, the gathering of energy and fellowship and purpose towards meaningful change in your community. There has probably been a climax - a peak of intensity, a moment of maximum stakes.

And then, almost certainly, there has been a 'falling action' at some point - a coming down from the peak. A period when things got harder, more uncertain, more depleting.



Often we treat the 'falling action' as a problem to be solved, a weakness to be hidden, or a sign that something has gone wrong.[74] And yes, things can be seen as impossible to overcome. But we want to remember that descent itself is not failure. It is where the character discovers what they are actually made of. It is where the story earns its resolution.

So if you find that you are in the 'falling action' right now - if things feel harder than they did at the peak, that is not evidence that all is lost. After all, without the falling action, there is no resolution to the story. And the resolution is well-earned because it only comes after a major test.

Let's make sure to think about how we mark where we are along the journey. Perhaps we are just getting a signpost to indicate we are right in the middle of our story.

The oscillating narrative - a truer picture of resilience

In Chapter 1 we discussed the superpower of oscillating resilience. It is not the resilience of never falling, but the resilience of falling and returning. In Chapter 3 we then talked about how inconvenient stories are data for us, as the plot twists that provide key intelligence. In our discussion throughout this chapter, these two ideas come together in practice.

The most resilient leaders do not tell ascending stories: 'things went from bad to better and better.' They tell oscillating stories: 'we have been up, we have been down, but we

stuck together and got through it'.[75] Individuals and teams who know their oscillating narrative, who can name both the high points and the hard seasons, are significantly more resilient than those who only celebrate the wins.

Every low point on your timeline is a season in which you learned something you could not have learned any other way. That is oscillating resilience at work.

The oscillating narrative
This is what a real leadership story looks like



We all need a push to keep taking leaps of faith in a difficult reality. Keep in mind that the 'downs' are not embarrassing footnotes to the chapters of your superhero legend. They are evidence of survival. They are the source of some of the most important capacities you now carry.

And it's not just that we are tough, but that we also know how to make a comeback. Our leadership role is also to recall instances of past mastery, giving a sense of confidence to our fellow band of teammates (and reminding ourselves).[76] It helps make current challenges feel doable rather than overwhelming.[77] And when more bad news hits, we want to make sure it doesn't knock us down again for too long.

Reflection Questions: **The shape of your story**

- **The story arc check-in.** Where are you in the arc right now - rising action, climax, falling action, or somewhere in the resolution? What does naming this change for you?
- **The oscillating audit.** Map your leadership journey. Below each low point, write one thing you learned there that you could not have learned anywhere else.
- **The reclaimed ending.** Take a difficult chapter from your story. How do you tell it so that you, and your community, come out as people who survived and grew?

The goal is not to get back to normal.
It is to find what comes next.



Lifequakes - when everything has to be reset



Some disruptions are not just difficult, they are disorienting. They shatter the assumptions on which your sense of self was built. A sudden loss. An outburst of violence. A failure of a magnitude you did not think possible. A shift in the political or social landscape so severe that the work you were doing no longer exists in the same form. These can be defined as 'lifequakes' - massive ruptures that require not just adaptation but a fundamental renegotiation of identity and meaning.[78]

The question a lifequake demands is not: 'how do I get back to how things were?' That path is closed. The question is: 'how do I integrate this latest rupture into my next chapter? '[79] Transitional times are always periods in which we adopt new rituals and new perspectives. The goal is not to return to the old normal. It is to navigate what we can call 'the messy middle', and to find the 'new normal' on the other side.[80]

And, then as we navigate through the messy middle in our story, some of what emerges in the aftermath of a lifequake may surprise us. New capacities. New partnerships. New clarity about what actually matters. Possibilities that could not have existed without the rupture. Of course, this is not because the rupture was welcome at all. But it does mean that we have been able to gather our resources enough to build from what remains.[81]



Reflection Questions: **Lifequakes**

- **The lifequake.** The most significant disruption you have experienced - What did it ask of you? What did it give you?
- **The messy middle.** Are you in a difficult chapter right now? What would it mean to stop asking 'how do I get back to normal?' and start asking 'what is the next chapter?'[82]
- **The courage to begin again.** Think of a time you pressed the reset button - when you started over with less than you had before. What did you build? What does that tell you about what you are capable of now?

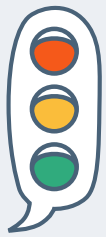
Shared resilience and collective care

As we go through these more challenging times, we want to make sure to understand that our own resilience, and that of our community, is not each individual's own burden to carry. One of our skillsets as leaders is the awareness that this is a collective responsibility.

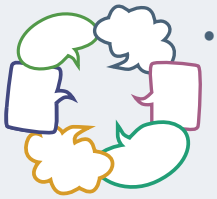
And indeed, the highest-performing teams are those that build structures of care into their daily operations.[83] It is built-in not as a response to crisis, but as a standing practice that absorbs difficulty before it becomes catastrophe.

A sample of everyday practices below gives a few options, which of course includes storytelling. At these moments of team building, we find that part of our leadership skillset is not only modeling strength but also modeling vulnerability.[84] These are not soft interventions. They are the infrastructure of a team that can survive a lifequake and come out with new capabilities.

Structures of care[85] - everyday practices



- **The attunement check-in.** Start every meeting with a quick traffic-light check-in: green (ready), yellow (tired or distracted), red (overwhelmed). Leaders go first. This makes collective exhaustion visible before it becomes a crisis, and it models the psychological safety that learning cultures require.



- **Story circles.** A monthly space where staff share a challenge of the month. Not a status update - a real story. Leaders participate first. This shifts the burden from the person to the context. Holding stress is a sane response to a difficult world, not a personal failing.[86]



- **The 'kitchen table' conversation.** Small-group informal sessions where the power hierarchy is purposefully flattened.[87] The kitchen table is where the most authentic stories get told. It is also where the most useful ones get built.



- **The transition ritual.** After a hard season ends (e.g., a difficult project, a loss, a sustained period of stress) do not simply jump into the next thing. Somehow mark it - maybe with a short reflection, a shared meal or a letter to yourself. The ending of one chapter and the beginning of the next deserve to be named.[88]

Remember that relational intelligence - knowing who to lean on, and when, and how to build the conditions in which others can lean on each other - is one of your skillsets.[89] Structures of care are what superpowers look like when they are built into the scaffolding of how you work.

Reflection Questions: **Structures of care**

- **Your safety net.** Who are the people and what are the practices that form your actual, not aspirational, support structure right now?
- **The team's oscillating story.** Recall a time your team was 'down' or facing a major setback. What shared value kept you from falling apart and how did you use it to come back?
- **Dignity in the telling.** When you tell your hardest stories, do they leave you feeling more powerful or more depleted? What would it take to reclaim the ending?[90]

- **The transition ritual.** After a hard chapter ends, how do you mark it before moving on?[91] If you don't have a ritual, what might one look like?

The story so far - and what comes next

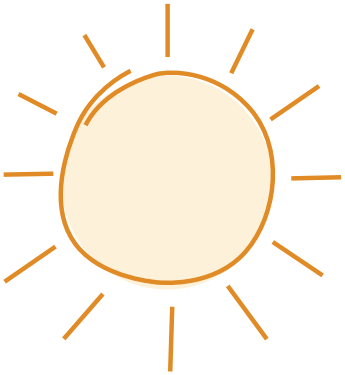
We have asked much of you so far. We talked about how to name the hard seasons, sit with the descent, locate the lifequakes, and begin again. It has drawn on your oscillating resilience, your relational intelligence, and your courage to start anew.

But while we may be able to get through difficulty, we may be exhausted, and perhaps traumatized. So how do you stay hopeful while doing it? How do you tend to your own internal compass, and stay focused towards purpose - even when the path is hard to see and our superhero capes have started to fray? That is where we go next.



Story catchers: everyday practices

1. **The oscillating narrative workshop.** Map a project timeline as a heartbeat monitor. Mark the highs and the lows. Below each low, identify the specific capacity or knowledge your team gained only from that difficulty. Rename the lows as 'turning points.' Notice what changes in the room.
2. **The 'kitchen table' conversation.** Once a quarter, arrange an informal gathering without an agenda or status updates, where the power hierarchy is deliberately flattened. Ask one question: 'what is the most honest thing you can say about how the work is going right now?' Then listen.
3. **The brave sparks walk.**[92] In pairs, take a fifteen-minute walk.[93] One person shares a story of quiet courage from their past - not a heroic act, but a moment when they found bravery they were not sure they had. The listener draws a line connecting that past bravery to a current challenge.[94] What strength from then is available now?



Chapter 5
How do I stay hopeful?

Mindfulness, self-compassion, and the inner compass

- **Until one day...** you noticed the question underneath all the doing: what keeps me going?
- **Because of that...** you understood that more was required of you in order to continue moving forward with optimism.
- **What happens next...** this chapter explores.

The rebirth plot - and the courage to begin again



The dailyness of hope. It seems to be an on-the-job requirement for the work you do. So often we are acting as 'chief inspiration officers', for ourselves, our teams, our communities.

We know that our efforts often require us to be in a high-stakes setting. But while high stakes can be great for compelling storytelling, it is not always so great for our own wellbeing. In this next chapter, we consider those times when we need to press the reset button for ourselves.

The rebirth plot can be of most relevance here, and it may be one of the most personally honest of all the story shapes. The rebirth story arc tends to begin, not with a quest or a battle, but with a slow drift away from oneself. We can think of it as a time when the hero starts to become an unreliable narrator... until something breaks and a reset is required.

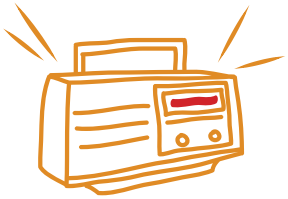
A rebirth plot can be a critical story of gradually rediscovering what matters to us. It is getting back to who you are when no one is watching. It will ultimately enable you to display the kind of leadership that feels sustainable rather than performed. The rebirth plot is always well-earned. While it may not be a splashy comeback, this quieter heroic act is no less triumphant.

Pointing the compass inward

Our efforts to advance social causes often require us to deliberately make noise, calling attention to critical communal needs. To effectively reach the broader public and decision-makers, we need to amplify our voice. But for ourselves, to recuperate as we go, we also need to know how to lower the volume.

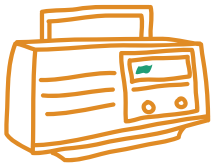
Raising the volume

and knowing how to dial it back



For others

Turn the volume up



For yourself

Turn the volume back down

By focusing inward, you are nurturing mindfulness, the practice of paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, without judgment.[95] And you are building it every time you stop, take notice, pause and only then respond.[96]

We have to be careful how often constant stress is triggering the brain's 'alarm system' - which may lead to reactive rather than measured decision-making.[97] And for leaders working in demanding environments, it becomes an essential strategic tool.[98]

After all, action is required during chaos as much as in calmer times... and likely before we are able to fully adapt to each 'new normal'. We are constantly receiving difficult information, managing conflict, and making decisions under pressure.

The ability to choose your response, rather than simply reacting from habit or fear, is one of the most valuable capacities.[99] And it is expandable, just like so many of our best superpowers.

Reflection Questions: ***Presence and the inner compass***

- **The space between.**[100] Think of a recent moment when you quickly reacted rather than carefully responded. How would you have handled it if you had taken one more breath first?
- **Radical acceptance.**[101] What is one current reality of your work that you are resisting? What would happen if you simply acknowledged that this is how it is right now?
- **The witness identity.**[102] Can you look at your current difficult situation as a neutral observer? What does the witness see that the person inside the difficulty misses?

Fierce compassion

We can recall the Story of Self, Us and Now from Chapter 2. Conceptually this may be a balancing act for us in articulating our public narrative. But also in practice, with all the empathy and generosity we give on a daily basis to others, we sometimes forget the 'self' part of our stories. The fierce compassion we hold for our communities has to be turned inward too.[103]

This is not an indulgence at all. Rather, you should see it as being strategic. How so? The leader who is running on empty has nothing to give. Protecting your energy, your clarity, your sense of purpose is essential. It is how you stay in the work over the long haul.

What happens when you direct all the compassion inward? We get to ask ourselves: 'what do I actually need right now, to stay whole and stay useful?'

We also want to keep watch on our anger. We get to keep it of course. It can be helpful to propel our work. But it needs to be a source of information for change without allowing it to become the sole fuel for our identity.[104] To make our activism sustainable over time, we have to be careful to focus on what gives us most meaning. At each step we want to make sure that we are staying motivated by fierce compassion for ourselves and our communities.[105]

Reflection Questions: **Fierce compassion - turned inward**

- **The self-compassion break.** Think of a significant mistake you made recently. Can you look at that past version of yourself with the same kindness you would offer a colleague facing the same difficulty?
- **Anger as data.** Where is your anger in the work right now, and is it fueling you or consuming you? What would it look like to only use your anger as a source of information?
- **The equanimity check.**[106] Are you attached to the result of this work (which you cannot fully control) or committed to the effort of it (which you can)? What is the difference in how those two feel?

The trauma-informed leader

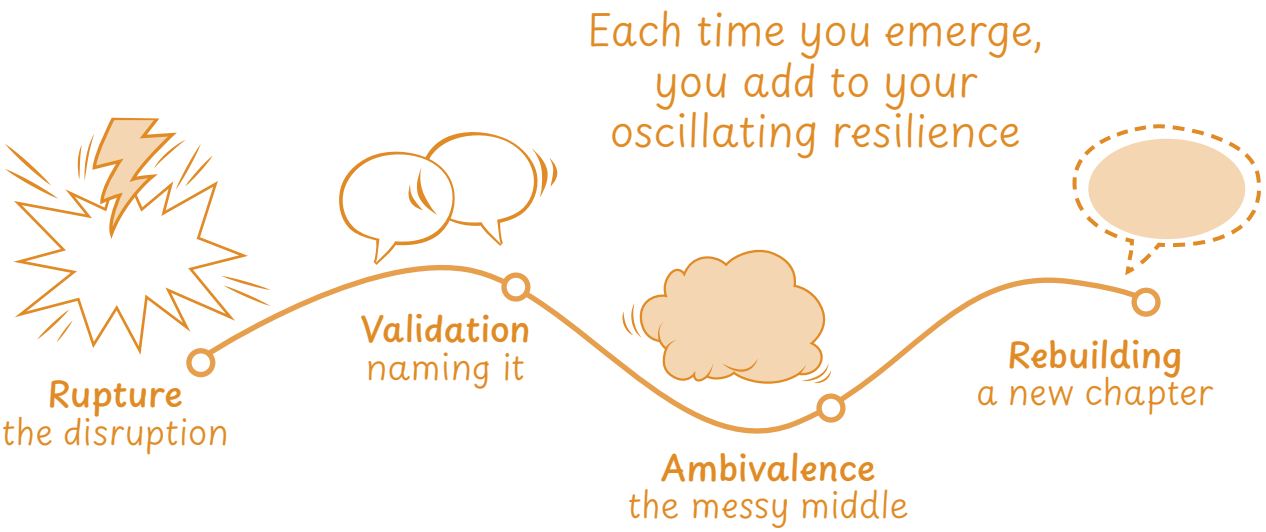
And still, nothing is exactly easy these days. In this chaotic reality we are living in, we can't promise magic solutions. But we can try to make the spaces we inhabit as much of a sanctuary as possible, where everyone who shows up can get an easy reminder of how to be compassionate to themselves and to others.[107] Another essential aspect of our toolkit is also to be trauma-informed leaders.

As a practical leadership tool, it is critical to understand how we can move ourselves and our teams through lifequakes, recognizing that the recovery phase may continue long after the initial rupture.

The trauma-informed framework includes four phases, and you may recognize more than one of them from your own experience. We can see that the element of storytelling is naturally interwoven throughout:

Four phases - from rupture to rebuilding[108]

- **Rupture.** The disruption - a crisis, a loss, a period of sustained stress. The moment when the ordinary way of functioning is no longer available. This is not weakness. It is the beginning of necessary change. And it connects directly to the lifequakes you met in Chapter 4.
- **Validation.** Naming what happened and having it acknowledged by yourself and by others. Moving from 'what is wrong with me?' to 'what happened to me, and what did it ask of me?' [109] This shift is not small. It is the moment the story stops being about failure and starts being about survival.
- **Ambivalence.** The messy middle of recovery and yes, it is the same messy middle from Chapter 4. Wanting things to be different while also grieving what had been. Moving forward while still feeling the pull of what was lost.[110] This phase is uncomfortable precisely because it is real.
- **Rebuilding.** Not a return to who you were but the emergence of someone who has integrated the experience.[111] Fiercer in some ways. More honest. More whole. This is the rebirth plot, lived from the inside. This is not the ending of the story. It is a new chapter.



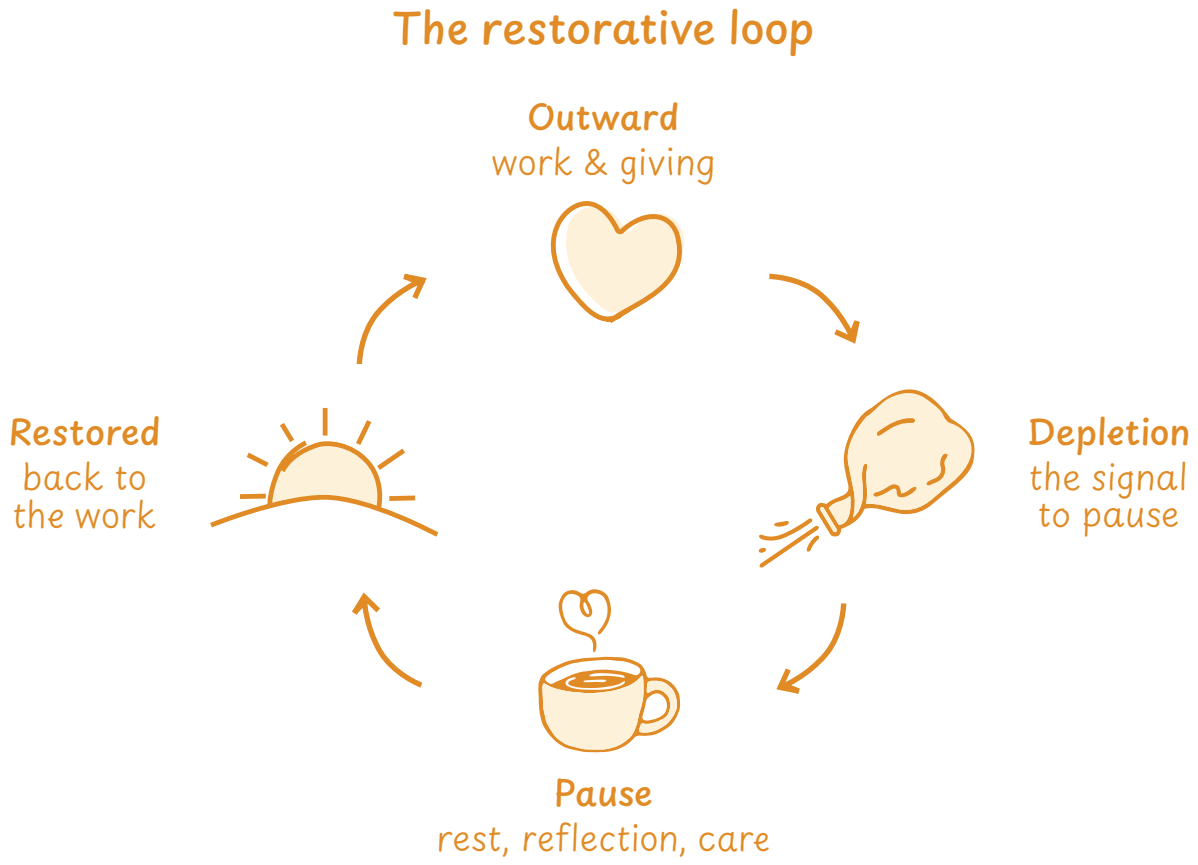
You may possibly recognize one of these phases. And if so, remember, there is courage in acknowledging which phase you are in. Each time you move through them and come out the other side, you add something to the oscillating resilience you have nurtured as part of your journey.

Reflection Questions: **Trauma-informed awareness**

- **Transition point.** Looking at the four phases - rupture, validation, ambivalence, rebuilding - are you currently in one right now? And if so, what does that phase need from you?
- **Naming what happened.** Is there a difficult experience from your leadership journey that you have not yet named or validated in yourself or with others? What would it mean to do that?

The restorative loop - building your practice

As we consider the idea of recharging our batteries, we can consider what a 'restorative loop' looks like for ourselves and those around us.[112] After all, being hopeful is not a feeling that arrives and stays. It is a practice. It is something you tend, deliberately, alongside everything else. The restorative loop is a simple way of thinking about how that practice works.



The outward energy - the giving, the doing, the holding space for those around you - is not the problem. It is the point. But your leadership requires fuel. A deliberate pause can help you fill up again. The pause is not a break from your community efforts. It is the practice that makes those efforts sustainable.[113]

What fills your restorative loop? For some people it is physical movement, time in nature, sleep. For others it is relational, maybe a conversation with someone who knows you outside your role. For many it is creative, or contemplative, or simply the experience of being a person who is not at work. The quality of your attention, your care, your presence in a room - all of it is richer when you are replenished. Make sure that a restorative loop is a part of your story.

Managing burnout - the right diagnosis

And if your restorative loop isn't enough? You want to turn your inner compass again inward and reflect. After all, you chose this work for a reason. That reason is still there, even when the exhaustion makes it harder to see.

You can keep in mind that if you are feeling burnout, it is likely not the result of caring too much. It is more often the result of chronic misalignment - doing the wrong kind of work, for too long, without adequate return of meaning.[114]

This distinction matters because the solutions are different.[115] If the problem is volume, the answer is rest. But if the problem is misalignment (i.e., if you are spending your energy on work that does not connect to the purpose that brought you here) rest alone will not fix it.[116]

The question to ask is not 'how do I recover?' but 'which parts of this work actually give me energy, and which parts drain it for very little return?'

The superpowers you identified in Chapter 1 are a useful guide here. The work that draws on your actual superpowers tends to energize rather than deplete.[117] Alternatively, the work that requires you to suppress what you are most built for tends to accumulate into exhaustion over time. Carefully consider what keeps you sparked. We want to make sure that you are happy to put back on your superhero cape, ready to go.

Reflection Questions:
The restorative loop and managing burnout

- **What fills you?** What are the two or three practices or experiences that most reliably restore your energy? How regularly do they actually appear in your week?
- **The misalignment.** Which parts of your current work give you energy, and which parts drain it for very little return? What is one small shift that might move the balance?
- **What keeps you hopeful?** Not the official answer. The actual one. When the work is at its hardest and the news is at its worst, what keeps you in it?

From staying hopeful to sharing your story

Sustaining hope over time does not mean that we shouldn't get tired or discouraged.[118] It does mean though that we know how to pause, to refuel, to name what is happening. And it means we build a restorative loop, and treat ourselves with the same fierce compassion we extend to everyone else.

These are not small things. And they connect directly to what comes next. Because the leader who has done this inner work, who knows how to tend their own compass, who has moved through rupture, who can hold contradictions without being consumed by them, that leader has quite a story to share.



Story catchers: everyday practices

1. **The 60-second reset.** Start every meeting, or every morning, with one minute of silence. Put down the phone. Take three slow breaths. Scan how you are actually feeling. This is not meditation. It is a needed check-in.
2. **The restorative loop audit.** At the end of this week, look back at your calendar. How much time was genuinely restorative, not productive rest but actual replenishment? If the answer is close to zero, that is information. What is one thing you could change next week?
3. **The self-compassion letter.** Write a short letter to yourself about a difficult experience in your leadership, one you have been harsh with yourself about. Write it as if you were writing to a close colleague who had been through the same thing. Notice what changes in how you see it.



Chapter 6
What story will I share?

Legacy, mentorship, and anchoring storytelling as practice

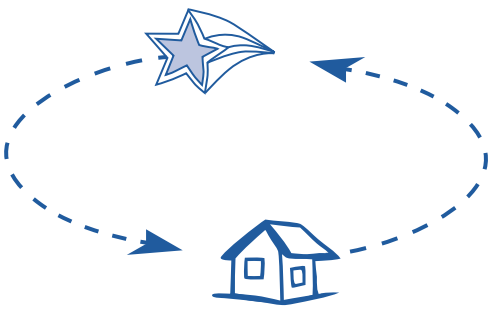
- **Until finally...** something exists now that did not exist before.
- **And ever since then...** the question has been shifting - from what am I building, to what am I sharing with those who will come next?
- **This chapter...** asks whether you have started telling that story yet.

Reflecting on your own narrative arc

In Chapter 1 you named your roots, your turning points, and your superpowers. In Chapter 2 you found your North Star and your storytelling voice. In Chapter 3 you learned to treat plot twists as data. In Chapter 4 you navigated the 'descent' and built structures of care. In Chapter 5 you turned the compass inward and learned to tend yourself so you can keep going. And in this last chapter, we ask a different kind of question. The question shifts from 'what are you building?' to 'what are you passing on?'.

In the great quest stories, the return is as important as the departure.[119] The protagonist who goes out and never comes back is only half a story. The point of the journey is to bring something home - wisdom, capacity, a new way of seeing.

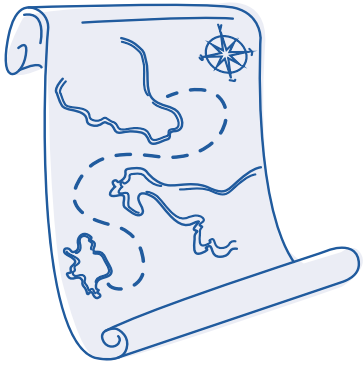
The return - coming home with something worth giving



Reflection Questions: **What you are carrying back**

- **The return story.** Are you able to identify some kind of journey? If so, what are you carrying back that you did not have when you started? Who needs to receive it?
- **The kitchen table story.** What is the informal origin story of your work - the unpolished version you would tell a friend?[120] Have you told it recently? Who in your team has never heard it?
- **The 'Oh Dear' moment.** What is the part of your story you are most afraid to tell, and that is probably the most useful part for a future leader to learn from?

The living archive



The living archive is how you make your hard-earned knowledge a shared asset rather than a private one. A leader who builds a living archive, who creates the conditions in which no one starts from zero, is doing something that outlasts any program, any fundraising campaign, any budget cycle.

Reflection Questions: **The living archive**

- **The Aha! moment.** What is the one thing that happened this week that you cannot afford to forget?
- **The legacy log.**[121] If you moved on tomorrow, what is the one story of significant change you would want to leave as a gift to this team?
- **The skill transfer.** What do you know that currently lives only in your head? What would it take to make it available to the people who come after you?



Sharing your story

Our most important storytelling skill is not the ability to craft a perfect narrative. It is the ability to tell our own story in a way that gives others permission to step forward with their own.

How so? When you share something real about your journey - the wrong turns, the moments of doubt, the season that nearly broke you - you are not only being vulnerable. You are being generous. We can recall that one of the gifts of storytelling is that it creates multiple entry points.[122] These are the moments where others recognize themselves in your experience.

And when you share something authentic about your own journey, you give others permission to do the same. That permission is one of the most powerful things a leader can offer.

So when your own story takes center stage, you can keep these tips in mind:

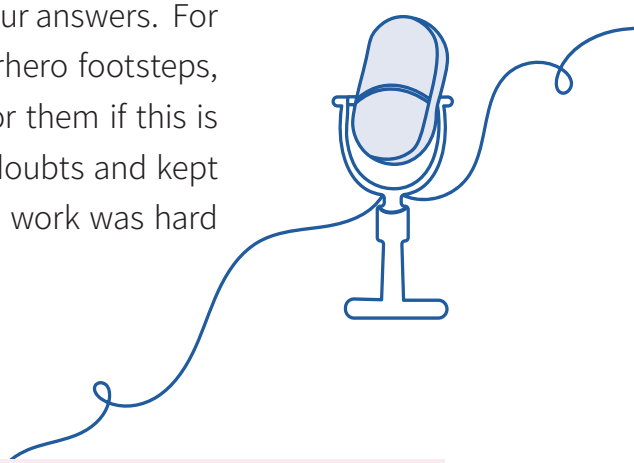
Principles of storytelling[123]

- **Tell the story of us, not just of you.** Your audience will care about your story if it connects back to their own lives. Help them see why it matters to them.
- **Make the big idea small.** Take ambitious visions and translate them into common experiences. Authenticity is where audiences find themselves.
- **Talk with people, not at them.** Keep it conversational. No one wants to be lectured to or told how to feel.
- **Drive one theme at a time.** Think memoir, not autobiography. What is the underlying thread that holds this particular story together?
- **Show how you have evolved.** Great storytelling is always about transformation. Start in one place, land in another.
- **Stay real.** No one wants flawlessness. In storytelling, it is the quirks and the imperfections that are celebrated.
- **Raise the stakes.** Stakes are why we keep listening. What is at risk in this story and what becomes possible depending on how it ends?

The activism interview - questions worth answering

And perhaps you need more structure, or more prompts? One practice that is especially helpful in surfacing and passing on a leadership story is the structured interview. These questions work equally well as written reflection prompts, as the basis for a mentorship conversation, or as the foundation for the living archive you are building.

This is the time to answer fully, without sugarcoating your answers. For those who may be considering following in your superhero footsteps, well, they need the real stuff. It will be more helpful for them if this is not a highlight reel. They need to know that you had doubts and kept going; that you failed at things that mattered; that the work was hard and deeply meaningful. That is the story to pass on.



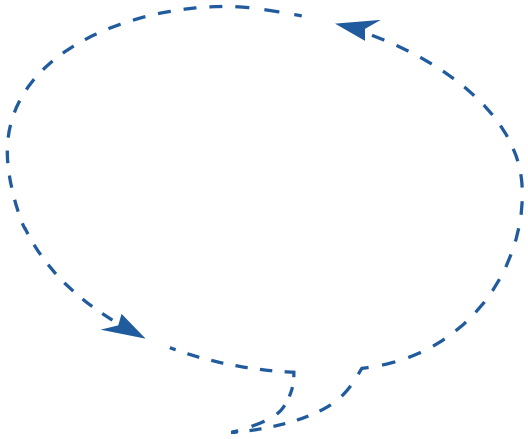
Questions worth answering[124]

- **How would you introduce yourself?** Tell us about yourself beyond your formal title.
- **How would you describe the spark of your activism?** What drew you to this particular form of change-making?
- **Why is this work important?** How does your own core purpose connect to your efforts?
- **What brought you here?** Share the origin story of how you began.
- **What keeps you going?** Especially when the news is bad… what gets you back in the arena?
- **What are your successes and your challenges?** Tell us about both the setbacks and the wins.
- **What are you working toward?** Describe the tangible change you are hoping to see.
- **What do you see as possible?** Sketch out the future you can imagine.
- **What advice do you have for others?** What do you wish someone had told you when you started?
- **What keeps you inspired?** Name the ultimate source of your hope.

The story you are still writing

Each time we share our stories, we help more and more heroes leap buildings in a single bound. We help to provide more scaffolding underneath. We get more narratives, more stories, more awareness.

And as we keep evolving, the plot of our own epic heroic adventure is still being written. The story spine ends with 'And ever since then...' - the new normal, what we carry forward. You are right in the middle of your story. Our hope is that this guide has given you more ways of seeing where you are, what you have already built, and what the next chapter might hold.



Reflection Questions: **Passing it on**

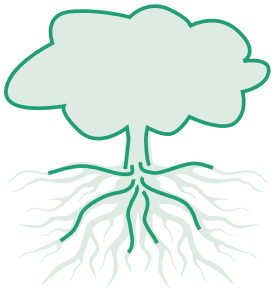
- **The emerging leader.** Who is earlier in the journey than you, and what do you see in them that they might not yet see in themselves? Have you told them?
- **The narrative onboarding.** If a new team member joined tomorrow, how would they learn your initiative's real story within their first 48 hours?
- **What keeps you hopeful?** When the work is at its hardest and the news is at its worst, what keeps you in it? This is the story most worth passing on.
- **And ever since then...** Looking at your leadership story so far: what is the 'and ever since then' sentence? The one that carries everything you have learned forward into the next chapter.



Story catchers: everyday practices

1. **'Homework for life'.**[125] At the end of each day this week, write down the one thing that happened that you would tell a friend over coffee. Not the official update but the actual moment. Over time, these small entries become a living archive of what the work really felt like. The heroism in ordinary days.
2. **The Aha! moment ritual.** Once a week, record one moment of significant change you witnessed in a journal, a voice note, an email to yourself. The specific second when something shifted. Who was there? What did it look like? Do it before the week ends and the moment is lost.
3. **The kitchen table conversation.** Invite a long-serving colleague or founding member to share the informal origin story with a newer team member.[126] Then stay in the room and listen. Notice what you had forgotten. Notice what still matters. This is narrative onboarding, and it is one of the most powerful things an organization can do.[127]
4. **The activism interview - with yourself.** Set aside thirty minutes to answer the questions from this chapter as if you were being interviewed for a documentary about your work. Write freely, without editing for an audience. This document belongs to you first. Then consider who else might need to read it.

Appendix
Worksheets per chapter

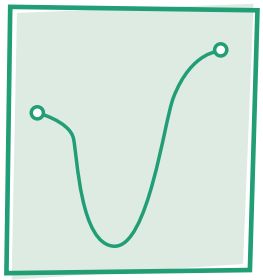


Worksheet 1A - **What shape is your story?**

Your Story, Your Leadership · Chapter 1

Which shape describes your story so far?

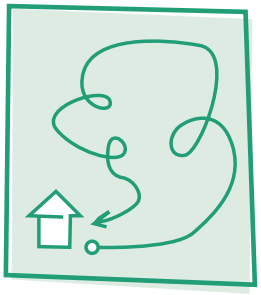
Circle one - or draw your own:



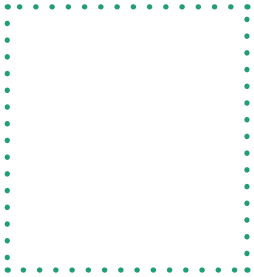
The deep dive



The spiral

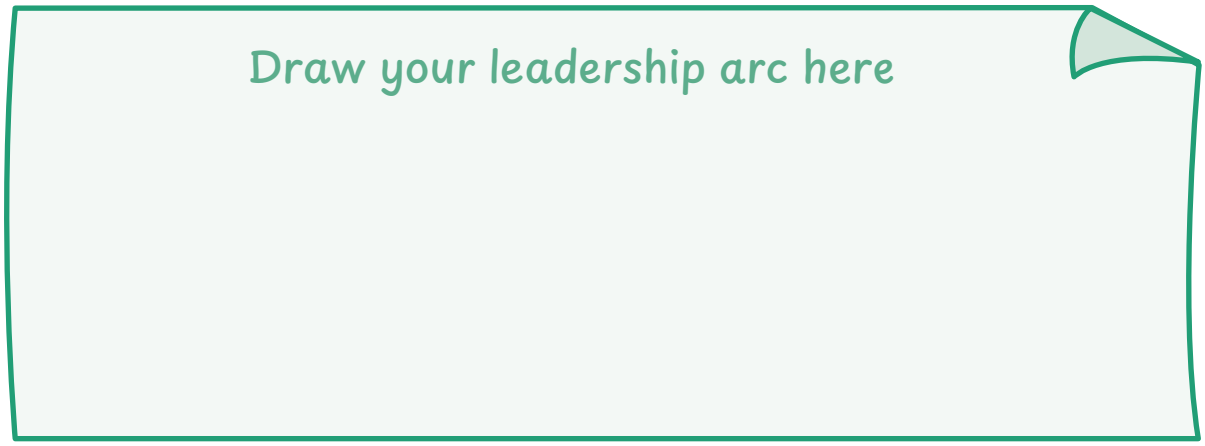


Voyage and return



Something else entirely

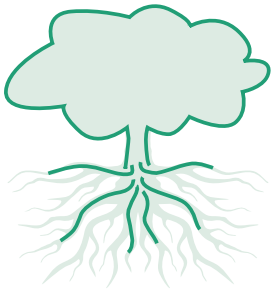
Plot your leadership story on the graph below.



In one sentence - what does the story tell you about where you are right now?

Which superpower are you drawing on most right now? Circle one:

Fierce compassion	Relational intelligence	Holding contradictions
Courage to begin again	Oscillating resilience	Naming what others won't



Worksheet 1B - **Reflection questions**

Your Story, Your Leadership · Chapter 1

Your roots

1 **The awakening**. What was the specific moment when you knew you had to do this work?

2 **The inheritance.** What value was passed down to you that you carry into your leadership?

3 **The catalyst.** Are you driven to do what you do because of a personal connection, or because you felt it was your calling? And how does that shape your commitment now?

Your turning points

4 **'Good trouble'.** What is the most courageous thing you have done for something you believe in?

5 **The wall.** When were you closest to walking away - and what brought you back?

Your fellowship and superpowers

6 Co-conspirators. Who are the people you call when the work is overwhelming?

7 The superpower you underuse. Which do you have but rarely claim?

Your story

8 The arc. The deep dive, the spiral, voyage and return - which describes your journey so far?

9 The plot. Looking back at the eight story plots introduced in Chapter 1, which feels most true for you right now?

10 The old narrative. What story about yourself as a leader no longer fits?

This worksheet is a companion to Chapter 1. Use it on your own, with a colleague, or bring it to a group session.

Worksheet 2 - **Vision and voice**

Your Story, Your Leadership · Chapter 2

Your vision

1 The miracle question. If a miracle happened tonight, what would you notice first tomorrow?

2 The North Star. In one sentence - the most vibrant, personal version - what is the change you are trying to make?

3 The quest. What is the destination - and who has joined you?

Three stories

4 Story of Self. What personal experience most explains why you do this work?



5 Story of Us. What do the people you work with have in common?



6 **Story of Now.** What is the urgency right now - and what becomes possible if you move together?



Your proximity

7 **Closest to the community.** What did you learn from that proximity that you could not have learned elsewhere?

8 **Hidden superpowers.** Whose strengths are you not yet fully seeing?

This worksheet is a companion to Chapter 2. Use it on your own, with a colleague, or bring it to a group session.

Worksheet 3 - **How do I keep learning?**

Your Story, Your Leadership · Chapter 3

Stories as your GPS

1 **The most significant change.** The single most significant change you have witnessed this month? Why this story? And who else needs to hear this story?

2 **The plot twist.** A story from the field that did not fit the original plan - and turned out to be more valuable. What did it teach you?

3 **The so what? story.** The impact of a recent project - as told by someone directly affected. What is the real story of difference it made?

The mystery and the voyage

4 **The mystery question.** The question you are still asking that others have moved past. What story are you still waiting to hear the end of?

5 **The voyage and the return.** A time you crossed into unfamiliar territory and came back changed. What story did you bring back?

Blind spots and learning culture

6 **The shadow story.** A story you heard recently that you have not yet shared because it was inconvenient. What would happen if you told it?

7 **The double-loop check.** Are you editing scenes or rewriting the plot? Where is the gap between the story you are telling and what is actually happening?

This worksheet is a companion to Chapter 3. Use it on your own, with a colleague, or bring it to a group session.



Worksheet 4 - **Leading through difficulty**

Your Story, Your Leadership · Chapter 4

The oscillating narrative

Draw your leadership timeline

Mark your high point above the line. Mark your low point below. Label each turning point

Beginning ..... Now

1 The story arc check-in. Where are you in the arc right now - and what does naming that change?

2 The oscillating audit. A low point in your journey, and what you learned there that you couldn't have learned elsewhere.

3 The reclaimed ending. A difficult chapter told so that you come out as someone who survived and grew.



Lifequakes

4 The lifequake. The most significant disruption - what it asked of you, and what it gave you.

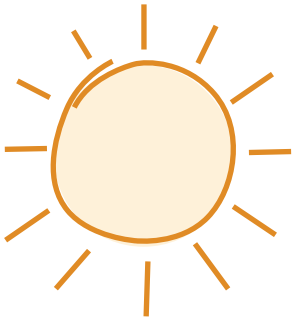
5 The courage to begin again. A time you started over with less than you had. What did you build?

Structures of care

6 Your safety net. Who are the people and what are the practices that make up your support structure?

7 The transition ritual. How do you mark the end of a hard chapter before moving into the next?

This worksheet is a companion to Chapter 4. Use it on your own, with a colleague, or bring it to a group session.



Worksheet 5 - **How do I stay hopeful?**

Your Story, Your Leadership · Chapter 5

Presence and the inner compass

1 **The space between.** Consider a moment when you reacted rather than carefully responded. How would you have handled it if you had taken one more breath first?

2 **The witness identity.** Can you look at your current difficult situation as a neutral observer? What does the witness see that the person inside the difficulty misses?

Fierce compassion - turned inward

3 **The self-compassion break.** Think of a significant mistake you made recently. Can you look at that past version of yourself with the same kindness you would offer a colleague facing the same difficulty?

4 **The equanimity check.** Are you attached to the result of this work (which you cannot fully control) or committed to the efforts of it (which you can)?

The restorative loop

5 What fills you up? The two or three practices that most reliably restore your energy.

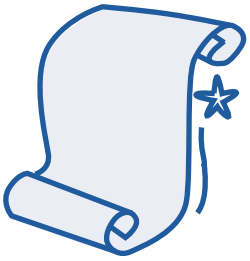
6 The misalignment. Which parts of your work give you energy, and which drain it for little return?

Staying hopeful

7 Transition point. Consider the relevance to you of each of the phases - rupture, validation, ambivalence, and rebuilding. Where are you right now?

8 What keeps you hopeful? When the work is at its hardest and the news is at its worst, what keeps you in it?

This worksheet is a companion to Chapter 5. Use it on your own, with a colleague, or bring it to a group session.



Worksheet 6 - **What story will I share?**

Your Story, Your Leadership · Chapter 6

The return - what you are carrying back

1 **The return story.** What are you carrying back from this journey that you did not have when you started? Who needs to receive it?

2 **The 'kitchen table' story.** The informal origin story of your work - the version you would tell a friend. When did you last tell it?

3 **The 'Oh Dear' moment.** The part of your story you are most afraid to tell, and probably most useful for someone else to hear.

The living archive

4 **The Aha! moment.** The one thing that happened this week that you cannot afford to forget.



5 **The legacy log.** If you moved on tomorrow, what is the one story of significant change you would leave as a gift to your team?

6 **The skill transfer.** What do you know that currently lives only in your head? What would it take to make it available to the people who come after you?

Passing it on

7 **The emerging leader.** Who is earlier in the journey and what do you see in them that they cannot yet see in themselves?

8 **What keeps you hopeful?** Describe the inspiration that is worth passing on.

9 **And ever since then...** The sentence that carries everything you have learned forward.

This worksheet is a companion to Chapter 6. Use it on your own, with a colleague, or bring it to a group session.

Endnotes

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15 Booker, C. (2004).

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18 For more on Fierce compassion see Salzberg, S. (2020). Real Change. Flatiron Books. And for more details on fierce compassion as active, boundaried care see Neff, K. & Germer, C. (2024). Mindful Self-Compassion for Burnout. Guilford Publications.

19 For more on Relational intelligence, see Gittell, J.H. (2016). Transforming Relationships for High Performance. Stanford University Press. Relational coordination - shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect - is the strongest single predictor of team performance in complex environments.

20 See Heifetz, R., Grashow, A. & Linsky, M. (2009). The Practice of Adaptive Leadership for more on the ability of leadership to hold tension between competing values.

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22 Duke, M.P. & Fivush, R. (2013). The oscillating narrative and intergenerational resilience. Leaders who can name both highs and lows - and find meaning in the pattern - show significantly higher psychological resilience than those who tell only ascending stories.

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25 For more on this topic, see Duke, M.P. & Fivush, R. (2013).

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28 Duke et al. (2008) found that knowledge measured by the "Do You Know?" Scale is the single highest predictor of emotional resilience.

29 The phrase 'good trouble' is associated with civil rights leader John Lewis. On leadership identity and moral agency: Brown, M.E., & Treviño, L.K. (2006). Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. The Leadership Quarterly, 17(6), 595—616.

30 For more on excavating our stories, see Strichman, N. (2022) Excavating stories, building empathy. Times of Israel. https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/excavating-stories-building-empathy/

31 Grounded in Brown (2006), which explores how leaders use identity to navigate ethical dilemmas. Cited from Lewis. A term coined by Civil Rights leader John Lewis, referring to necessary disruption. Identifying these moments reinforces a leader's sense of moral agency.

32 Duchek (2020) notes that our ability to cope and adapt is linked to the ability to reflect on past crises as a core stage in resilience.

33 On storytelling and entry points for connection: Schumann, K., Zaki, J., & Dweck, C.S. (2014). Addressing the empathy deficit. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 107(3), 475—493.

34 For more on sharing stories, see Strichman, N. (2022) Excavating stories, building empathy.
For an important example of how sharing life stories creates entry points across communities, see Hani, G., & Rubin, D. (Eds.). (2025). Women Write Hope. Self-published. The book documents the life stories of 21 Jewish and Arab women working toward peace and shared society, created in memory of Vivian Silver.

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43 Ganz (2011) offers the framework of the Story of the Self, Us, and Now, as a communication bridge between internal values and external action.

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46 See de Shazer, S. (1988).

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48 See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Ted Talk: "The danger of a single story" (2009) https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

49 See Ernesto Sirolli's Ted Talk "Want to help someone? Shut up and listen!" (2012) https://www.ted.com/talks/ernesto_sirolli_want_to_help_someone_shut_up_and_listen

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66 See Strichman, N., Marshood, F., & Eytan, D. (2018). Exploring the adaptive capacities of shared Jewish—Arab organizations in Israel. VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 29(5), 1055—1067.

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70 For more on how to design strategy after the 'So What?" question, see Patton (2010)

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https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/its-my-blogaversary-heres-what-ive-learned-about-storytelling/

124 These interview questions were posed to Rayah Forum members since 2021, led by Louiz Green.
https://www.rayahfund.org.il/louiz-green/ For a video about the process and the Rayah Fund video library, see https://www.rayahfund.org.il/storytelling/ .
See also Hani & Rubin (2025), in which a group of women, guided by Professor Amia Lieblich, interviewed and documented the life stories of 21 women peace activists.

125 See Dicks, M. (2018).

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127 Also seeFeiler, B. (2013). The secrets of happy families: Improve your mornings, rethink family dinner, fight smarter, go out and play, and much more. William Morrow. 'Onboarding' through storytelling ensures new members internalize the group's history of overcoming adversity, fostering a "learned art of re-creating ourselves."