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Stage One

Discovering the Story

Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact.

—Robert McKee

Alex has been working for a very successful, elite consulting firm for the last three years. In the last year his professional relationships with the CEO and the director of research at the firm have become strained. While there are several things that Alex can point to as poor performance incidents, he cannot explain the extreme decline in collegiality and good will that he has experienced this year. He knows that his future with the firm is in serious jeopardy, which means his career future is in doubt. Two years ago Alex thought his future was fast-track and unstoppable. Now he is simply hoping to salvage something.

Alex's relationship with the company CEO, Taylor, goes back more than a decade; Taylor was a faculty member in Alex's graduate program in organizational development. Alex and Taylor first met when Alex was a young graduate student straight out of an Ivy League undergraduate institution in the same region. Alex was bright, ambitious, and creative. He was clear about his goals of obtaining his master's degree and doctorate and working for a high-powered think tank or consulting firm specializing in large-scale organizational change initiatives. Taylor was an associate professor who was rapidly becoming disenchanted with the academy. He openly discussed his dissatisfaction with colleagues, students, and administrators. As Taylor planned his consulting firm, he made it known that he was recruiting the best and brightest graduate students as potential future employees.

Alex quickly identified Taylor as a promising potential mentor and worked very hard to gain his respect. After Alex completed his master's degree, he enrolled in the doctoral program with Taylor as his doctoral adviser. The two became very close and worked together on academic and consulting initiatives.

Taylor left the department two years before Alex completed his PhD. Within two years Taylor's firm had quadrupled revenues and staff and had landed several plum contracts. Alex worked as an independent contractor during the two years in which he finished his dissertation. Alex's dissertation topic on organizational dispute system design (ODSD) for geographically dispersed organizations using project team structures was a topic that he decided on with Taylor's advice, largely because of Taylor's vision that it would be quite lucrative for several of the firm's clients.

As soon as Alex graduated, Taylor hired him as a senior consultant in the firm. Taylor put Alex in charge of soliciting clients for the organizational dispute system design models he had developed in his dissertation. Taylor told Alex to do whatever research he felt was necessary to perfect the model and prove the organizational impact of the dispute system designs.

For the first two years Alex and his team worked independently of the rest of the firm. Alex knew what others were doing in terms of major consulting contracts, but no one other than Taylor and the director of research knew of Alex's progress. Even in staff meetings Alex was not asked to report on his clients or contracts but was often asked to comment on projects overseen by other consultants. The impression that most of the firm had was that Alex had already been selected as a future partner, and as such, he was treated with almost as much respect as Taylor.

Alex thought his work was going well, although there had been some setbacks recently. His largest clients were four pharmaceutical firms that had all been involved in major mergers and acquisitions in the last three years. These firms were most interested in the application of Alex's work to manage conflict among international, dispersed teams of research scientists planning research agendas for their R&D divisions. Given the rapid changes in the pharmaceutical industry, the client organizations were particularly interested in systems that identified low-level conflict before escalations that resulted in interteam struggles and attrition of top-level scientists. The setbacks in the last year were mostly about the difficulty of developing stochastic modeling processes that had high predictive power. The setup and implementation of the systems were good, but the data were just not showing the kinds of outcomes the clients wanted.

Even with these setbacks, Alex assumed that he would prevail. He thought it was only a matter of time, and once he produced the results the clients wanted, the firm would be over this hurdle and on to applications in other industry areas. But, about a year ago, he sensed a chilling between him and Taylor. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he started feeling that Taylor was avoiding him. Three months ago Taylor asked Alex, for the first time, to justify the expenses on his research budget.

Alex has tried to find times to talk privately with Taylor but in the last two months has not seen him except at staff meetings. When he's pushed for an appointment, he gets rescheduled with the director of research, who seems reluctant and uninterested. Last month Alex received a call from one of his clients indicating that they wanted to make sure the new guy coming on to help Alex would be brought up to speed by Alex before starting his work. Alex was caught completely unaware.

Alex's entire life has been his work and his dedication to Taylor's firm. Most of his friends work at the firm and are past students of Taylor's; they depend on Taylor for consulting contracts. Alex feels he has no sounding board for the current situation.

Given his work in organizational dispute system design, he has a number of professional contacts in the ADR field. One person whom he greatly respects, Don, is an ombudsperson at a government agency who sometimes works with private clients as a conflict coach. Alex makes the call and is scheduled to start coaching with Don as soon as possible.

Every conflict is a story waiting to be told. In the story and in the telling, there is a wealth of information about the conflict experience, the conflict context, and the conflict management potential. The first important task of the conflict coach is to help the client discover and clarify the client's story. As we present in this chapter, the conflict management and dispute resolution field has a rich history of attending to narratives or stories as a means of understanding and intervening in conflict. How that process works is slightly different in conflict coaching than in mediation. But, as you will see, there are strong similarities.

We begin this chapter by summarizing some of the humanistic and social science theory that focuses on narrative as an important communication and cognitive process. We follow that with an explanation of insights from two areas of narrative theory applied to conflict management. Then we discuss the specific steps of discovering the story and some of the techniques that can be used. And as we do in all of our stage chapters, we finish the chapter with a statement of principles and approaches for this stage.

Narrative Theory

A cogent overview of narrative theory and its application would easily take this entire volume and more. Why is narrative accorded such power both analytically and socially?

Stories have "persuasive functions, and more generally, they may contribute to the reproduction of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, norms, or values of a group or of society as a whole" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 125).

There is something about a story that is inherently sensible, memorable, and persuasive as well as entertaining. Stories allow us to challenge the taken for granted “ordinariness or normality of a given state of things in the world” (Brunner, 2002, p. 6). Telling a story a certain way can create heroes and villains, can produce alternate realities, and can elevate the mundane. As Witten (1993, p. 106) summarized,

In addition to their cognitive impact, narratives can have strong persuasive effects. Narratives are more effective than facts or statistics in generating belief among listeners who agree with the argument. . . . The narrative form contributes further to a narrative’s credibility by imposing a sense of coherence on the disparate elements the narrative contains. This effect occurs through structuring devices of plot, which unifies episodes; narrative sequence, which unifies time; and characterization, which unifies action.

FISHER’S NARRATIVE THEORY

As communication scholars, we naturally gravitate to narrative theories developed in the communication discipline. In a series of several works, Fisher (1984, 1985, 1987, 1989) argued that all human experience consists of narrative texts. People naturally tell stories, think in terms of stories, and organize information into narrative forms without consciously intending to do so.

People gravitate to narrative. Since the time of the Greeks, orators have understood that telling a good story is the most effective way of presenting a key argument. Historians and folklorists appreciate that people become emotionally attached to narrative and that stories are the most lasting, powerful and effective means of cultural transmission. Campbell’s (1972) work on myth is an excellent example of scholarship that illustrates the universal power of a good story.

But, there are distinctions between a good narrative and a bad narrative. One of Fisher’s main contributions was elucidating the characteristics of narrative that can be used in critique and construction. Fisher argues there are two key tests of the validity of a narrative—the extent to which the story hangs together, or has narrative coherence; and the extent to which the story rings true, or has narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1987). Fisher later added the concept of narrative comparison, or the extent to which a story is consistent with other stories about the same basic thing. Let’s review each of these in slightly more detail, because the ideas of coherence, fidelity, and comparison are other ways of talking about the refining and testing tasks in the CCC model.

Narrative Coherence. A coherent narrative exhibits three characteristics: (1) internal or argumentative consistency; (2) external consistency, which is a measure of the extent to which the focal story matches other stories considered accurate; and (3) believable characters (Brown, 1990). Another way of thinking about narrative coherence is to ask the question, "Does this story make sense?" If it doesn't make sense, the storyteller must add information or clarification that will bring its elements into line.

One of the aspects of narrative that contributes greatly to coherence is the plot. "A plot can be seen as a theory of events" (Ochs, 1997, p. 193). The plot of a story is the statement of assumed cause and effects in a sequence of events. If events seem to happen out of order, or if characters cannot be seen performing certain acts in the plot, the audience will reject the narrative.

Narrative Fidelity. A narrative's fidelity, its truthfulness, rests in its ability to present values that are aligned with the values of its audience. Fisher (1987) believed a narrative's fidelity is bolstered when the values presented are seen to be appropriate, positive, and indicative of a better life for those involved. Stories encapsulate the narrator's values and reduce uncertainty about that which is being described (Brown, 1990). Brown also asserted that the strength of narrative fidelity may be assessed by focusing on the "extent to which the story fits with the history, knowledge, background, and experiences of the audience members" (1990, p. 171).

Narrative fidelity plays a fundamental role in evaluating the quality of persuasive appeal. The degree to which the message resonates with the audience will play a part in whether the audience accepts the persuasive message. Conversely, audience members who do not find the story faithful to their lives may simply ignore it.

Narrative Comparison. In addition to coherence and fidelity, Fisher also talked about how a narrative compares with other narratives. While he did not introduce this as a test of narrative, we see powerful application of the idea in conflict coaching. For, as Fisher argued, "The meaning and value of a story are always a matter of how it stands with or against other stories" (1985, p. 358). Stories do not exist in a vacuum; they reside in a cultural context in which other stories compete with their message. If a client has a story that makes less sense than a competing story, the client will have a difficult time persuading others to adopt his story and act on his behalf.

Narrative Theory Applied to Conflict Management

Narrative theory has found a strong application in the field of conflict management. There are two areas where narrative has been highlighted—narrative theory of mediation and narrative theory of dialogue and change. We will very briefly review both and concentrate on insights from Winslade and Monk's (2000, 2005) narrative mediation model and Kellett and Dalton's (2001) narrative approach to achieving dialogue and change.

Before introducing narrative theory in other areas of conflict, we want to briefly address why we believe it is essential in conflict coaching. We see narrative as an inherently powerful way people understand their experience. The coach best understands the client's experience and perspective through the client's story. Without that story the coach's ability to engage the client in analyzing and altering the conflict is limited. As important is the power of narrative to help the coach and client consider how to transform the conflict. And part of that transformation of the conflict will be the ability of the client to craft and present a narrative that has coherence and fidelity to other listeners. Given our basic belief in the importance of narrative for all conflict management, including conflict coaching, we now turn to previous applications of narrative theory in mediation and dialogue to discern how we may appropriate these concepts for coaching.

COBB'S VIEWS OF NARRATIVE IN MEDIATION

Sara Cobb (1992, 1993) and her colleagues (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991) are usually credited with introducing narrative theory to the field of mediation. They suggested that mediators should focus on the stories that are being told by disputants in the mediation and that the mediator's response to those stories—the extensions of the narratives—had great impact on the unfolding and outcome of mediation. Cobb's views of mediation were one of the first social constructionist orientations to mediation and one of the first theories that challenged the notion of mediator neutrality.

Within this genre of research, Cobb (1994, p. 50) suggested two approaches to a narrative framework: structural and poststructural. The structural approach makes a distinction between the story and the telling of the story and "emphasizes the representation of real events as a whole, as a unit, as a structure" rather than focusing on the interactive unfolding of the story. A structural approach to narrative in mediation focuses attention on the content of the story regardless of how it is told or how someone responds to it. Cobb said that a poststructural approach to narrative "not only begins to focus attention on the role of discourse in

mediation . . . but it permanently *includes* the mediator as a co-participant in both the construction and the transformation of conflict narratives” (pp. 61–62). The poststructuralist approach is more concerned with how the narrative is extended and encouraged in interaction. For example, Cobb suggested that the poststructuralist perspective “*requires* attention to narrative politics; as they unfold, some stories become dominant, others can be marginalized” (p. 52)

Both structuralist and poststructuralist insights about narrative are helpful in conflict coaching. In our orientation, there are two levels of narrative analysis that can be pursued. On the structural level we are interested in the story content and what that content says about the conflict experience and the conflict potential. The story helps the client make sense of the conflict and the context. Ultimately, the story will help the client consider how to respond and how to enlist the support of others in the response. There is great value in examining the story as well as the telling, and we devote the majority of our attention in this chapter to that focus.

At the same time, we acknowledge that there is merit in understanding how the telling of the story is a co-construction that can influence insight and action. These poststructuralist analyses can be focused on interaction between the client and the coach and on interaction between the clients and others outside the coaching relationship. There is definitely a mutual influence process occurring between the coach and the client. In fact, this entire stage of the conflict coaching model is an exercise in the interaction of influence between coach and client in presenting, refining, and testing the narrative. Similarly, when the client and coach, in Stage Three, concentrate on crafting the best story, we clearly see the mutual influence process at work.

WINSLADE AND MONK’S NARRATIVE MEDIATION

Winslade and Monk (2000, 2005) have developed and elaborated their narrative approach to mediation. Drawing heavily on narrative therapy, their approach shares some assumptions with Cobb but branches out into new orientations to practice. Obviously, both Winslade and Monk and Cobb see narrative as a primary discourse structure that mediators influence intentionally and unintentionally. While Cobb’s work focused more on explaining how a mediator might privilege one narrative over the other and, by so doing, empower one party more than another, Winslade and Monk advocate a certain approach to a mediator’s intervention in the narratives of the disputants. Cobb adopts a more critical theory perspective, and Winslade and Monk are more prescriptive.

With their theory based in narrative therapy, Winslade and Monk see people as stuck in conflict-saturated narratives. They suggest that people get caught up in the conflict cycle because they see themselves bound to it. As mediators, they invite the stakeholders to label the conflict-saturated story. Then, through a series of careful questions, they invite each stakeholder to slowly distance himself or herself from the conflicted part of the story.

Increasing perspective taking is a goal in narrative mediation. Each party gets the opportunity to hear the story from the perspective of the other individual and finds out whether the other person wants to be in the conflict. People who are deeply involved in a conflict often believe the other person somehow enjoys the conflict. Finding out that the conflict is unpleasant and negative for the other party helps the person let go of the conflict-saturated story.

Winslade and Monk have provided examples of questions and discourse mediators might use to move the mediation in a more constructive direction. For example, they suggest that a common block in mediation is a party who feels entitled to treat the other badly, even if such individuals don't realize that is what they are doing. Narrative mediation provides mediators a way to listen for entitlement in a narrative and challenge it through questions.

The goals of narrative mediation are to help people separate themselves and their relationships from a conflict-saturated story and to reconnect with a story of cooperation, understanding, peace, or mutual respect. Following White and Epston (1990), Winslade and Monk suggest that securing constructive conflict action (e.g., making agreements or accommodations) does not precede but follows the construction of a new narrative that allows for the recognition and embrace of the effectiveness of these actions. They emphasize the use of externalizing language—language that presents to the parties the assumption that the conflict is not inherent to them as people or to their relationship or situation. Thus, the parties are free to stand apart from the conflict and approach it as such.

Among the critical procedures of narrative mediation are

- /// Mapping the effects of the conflict story on the participants and on the relationship between them
- /// Asking questions that attempt to deconstruct the dominant story by raising taken-for-granted assumptions
- /// Asking the disputants to evaluate the conflict story and the future trajectory
- /// Inviting the participants to articulate their preferences for a future that is not limited by the conflict story
- /// Listening for the implicit story of cooperation or understanding that is always in the midst of a conflict story and inquiring into its possibilities (Winslade & Monk, 2005, p. 224)

KELLETT AND DALTON'S NARRATIVE APPROACH TO ACHIEVING DIALOGUE AND CHANGE

Kellett and Dalton (2001), in their book *Managing Conflict in a Negotiated World*, introduce the idea that any conflict may be better understood through a narrative lens. They encourage people to tell conflict stories as a way of deepening interpretive understanding of their own and others' conflict processes and experiences. They suggest that the more clearly we see our conflict narratives, the more we empower ourselves to create change in ourselves and our relationships.

The majority of their work is focused on helping average individuals understand their conflict narratives. What is implied in the stories we tell ourselves and others about the conflicts that we live? They reference Langellier (1989) who says that narratives give us information about the social context, information about what the teller expects as reaction to the story, insight into the teller's culture, and insight into the power dynamics and political situation of the story. Later, we will revisit these perspectives as we suggest some questions that can be asked by conflict coaches when they hear clients' initial stories.

While Kellett and Dalton strongly encourage a narrative approach to understanding conflict, they are quick to remind us that there are limitations to narratives. Narratives can convince the teller of their "rightness." If Alex convinces himself that his story of the conflict with Taylor is the only possible correct explanation of the conflict, he is shutting down the possibility of dialogue and new interpretations leading to new actions and insights. We should always be mindful that narratives are inherently political, so there is always some degree of self-serving bias in them. Our tendency is to see ourselves as innocent and the other as blameworthy.

Discovering the Story

In Chapter 2 we presented the CCC model of conflict coaching, and we explained that the first stage helps clients construct a coherent narrative of their experience of the conflict and engage in perspective taking about the possible narratives of other parties in the conflict. In this stage, the coach concentrates on discovering as much of the story as possible to have a full understanding of the conflict, the parties, and the context. The discovery process is systematic and is aimed at increasing comprehension. Most coaching will involve at least the following three levels of clarification: the initial story, refining the story (increasing coherence), and testing the story (assessing fidelity).

INITIAL STORY

This refers to the client's story that comes with little urging from the coach. The conversation begins with the coach asking very general questions about the conflict and listening as the client tells his or her story for the first time to the coach. The initial story provides information about how the client sees important issues, persons, and opportunities in the conflict. The initial story often presents characterizations of other parties and assumptions about information and actions.

The initial story may unfold much as Alex's initial story presented at the beginning of this chapter. The main task of the coach in this stage is to listen and assess the extent to which the client has presented a narrative that has basic coherence and fidelity. The coach is trying to understand the conflict from the client's point of view but is also listening for how well the client understands the conflict. In some cases the coach may suspect that the client is not competent for coaching based on the quality of the initial story. Obvious confusion, paranoia, or delusions that are presented in the initial story are certainly warning signs that an alternate referral is necessary.

However, in most cases, the coach will hear a client who has a basic story in need of considerable elaboration. Incomplete initial stories will usually take one of several forms:

What's happening? The client, like Alex, has a sense of unease and indicates that there is a problem, but the story consists of a great deal of suspicion and innuendo rather than a detailed description of events and actions that can be verified and examined. The "What's happening?" story suggests a need for significant information acquisition and investigation before strategies for action can be considered.

Why me? The client has a detailed list of events and actions and characters but has trouble understanding the reasons why she or he is involved in this conflict or is being treated this poorly. The most important missing element in the story is the motivation of the others and the contributions or responsibility of the client.

Where's the connection? The client has a voluminous set of facts and events but they are relatively or completely unconnected and do not seem to be presented in order of chronology or cause and effect. It is as if the client is throwing out segments that have no link, and the client does not or cannot see the need for a coherent framework that ties things together.

There's no hope. The client has painted a pessimistic story about a very negative future; the story is presented as conclusion rather than expostulation, and there is little detailed information to justify the conclusion.

Self-righteous rant. The client is presented as a complete innocent who has been treated badly by those with evil motivations. The story is told, often as a repetitious recounting of specific attacks (real or perceived) that demonize

the other and eliminate the apparent possibility of a cooperative resolution. This form of narrative usually identifies clients who are using the narrative as a protective device, one in which they can feel better about themselves while making very hostile attributions about the other. As we discuss later, this type of initial story should signal a coach that more testing of the narrative and its assumptions is needed.

The conflict coach should assume that the initial story, even if it appears complete, is not. While listening to the story, the coach should make notes of areas that need elaboration and testing. As Clegg (1993, p. 31) says,

The first step in orienting to the narratives of everyday life in this way is to listen to what people say. Not necessarily to retell it in exactly those terms but to inquire into how it would be possible for them to say that. What kinds of assumptions in what types of possible worlds could produce those accounts?

Sometimes the coach can ask clients to reflect on their story and consider questions of elaboration. Returning to Kellett and Dalton's (2001) reference to Langellier's perspectives, the following questions can be posed to clients to have them reflect on the story they have just told:

1. From the context of social and political discourse
 - ✎ What are the storyteller's goals in creating this narrative?
 - ✎ What does the story tell about the social and political context of the conflict experience?
 - ✎ What is the essential moral of the story?
 - ✎ How does the story represent the power dynamics of the parties in conflict? What are the points of resistance, empowerment, and oppression?
 - ✎ What social constraints and boundaries are confirmed in this story?
2. From the standpoint of a culture
 - ✎ How does the story reflect the social and cultural values of the conflict context?
 - ✎ How does the story define who is in the in-group and who is in the out-group?*

REFINING THE STORY

After the client presents the initial story, the coach helps the client refine that story. The story is expanded through some basic questions that ask the client to add information or detail. Part of the refinement is encouraging the client to provide information about how other parties in the conflict may be experiencing the conflict and talking more about how

SOURCE: *Kellett, P. M., & Dalton, D. G. (2001). *Managing conflict in a negotiated world: A narrative approach to achieving dialogue and change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

the conflict is affecting others in the system. A key aspect of refinement is that coaches do not challenge the narrative of clients but encourage them to provide the most comprehensive and coherent version of their narratives. The story refining comes to closure when there doesn't seem to be more important information for the client to add.

In Alex's story there is obviously a need for refinement. The conflict coach can begin with a standard list of questions that can be applied to refine most conflict narratives. We can discuss the process of refining in three general ways. First, the coach can refine by identifying "missing pieces" in the story and asking for information concerning those pieces. These questions address the issue of coherence. In the following list, we present a short set of exemplar questions that could be asked by most coaches and a specific question that may be asked by Don in his work with Alex. (The general question is in italics and the question specific to Alex's story follows it.) We do not intend this list to be exhaustive or even comprehensive. We present these examples to suggest the kinds of questions a coach should consider.

Are there characters presented in the story who are not well explained in terms of roles, actions or motivations? Tell me more about the director of research. She seems to be a critical part of the organization, but I don't have a good sense of her role in the organization, her relationship with Taylor, or her relationship with you.

Are there characters not presented in the story who should be? Is there someone else in the situation who has something important to add to our understanding of the situation? Who are the liaisons you work with at the pharmaceutical companies and what is their relationship with Taylor?

Is there additional information about the context (for example, the nature of your organization) that would help us understand what is happening? Can you give us more detail about the consulting firm in terms of size, operations, and patterns of practice? How atypical would you say this firm is compared with other firms you know?

Are there important events that have not been included in the story? Why? Why not? Did anything happen in your interactions with Taylor or the director of research that may have been misunderstood or have led to the current situation?

Are there patterns of events that could help explain this situation that haven't been discussed? In the past, have you noticed that Taylor has a tendency to act out against junior associates or people he perceives as a threat? Have you seen Taylor behave this way (the way you believe he is behaving toward you) toward someone else in the firm?

Second, since we are dealing with workplace conflicts, it is helpful to encourage clients to refine their story by giving more attention to the

impact of the organizational culture and climate on the conflict. Often a client will “telescope” his understanding of a conflict, giving attention to the immediate issues and actions rather than the context within which this is happening. Clients may not have a strong “systems sense” and may be unaware of questions they could or should ask about the workplace. Kellett and Dalton (2001) suggest specific questions from the organizational point of view. The following is an incomplete and restated list (pp. 134–135):

- /// How might the organization and relationship of management and employees have contributed to the conflict?
- /// In what ways was the storyteller resisting or supporting organizational power and domination through his actions in the conflict ?
- /// How might leadership style of management be contributing to this conflict?
- /// How might the organization’s approach to motivation, reward, and assessment be contributing to this conflict?
- /// How might the story reveal or capture broader tensions or conflicts in the organization?
- /// How does the organizational culture create and maintain conflicts such as this?
- /// How does this conflict demonstrate the need for organizational change?
- /// How might this conflict serve as a lever to increase or decrease the chances for organizational change?
- /// What kinds of resistance could be expected if the organization started to change in the ways suggested by this conflict story?
- /// What communication skills would the organization and key personnel need to develop to implement change effectively?*

A third way to refine the story is to ask the client to reflect on the meaning of the story and to add information or make changes based on this reflection. This third level is the most sophisticated and should be used after the missing pieces and additional context questions have been considered. The more refined and complete the narrative is before attending to this level the better.

Once again, Kellett and Dalton present an excellent list of potential questions in this area (2001, p. 95–96). The following list is an elaboration of some of the questions originally posed by Kellett and Dalton.

- /// How does the story create the sense that the conflict is both inevitable and necessary in this relationship?
- /// In what way does the conflict seem to be both beneficial and damaging to the client and the other?
- /// How are the actions and reactions in the story different from an ideal form of collaboration or peacemaking in this relationship?

SOURCE: *Kellett, P. M., & Dalton, D. G. (2001). *Managing conflict in a negotiated world: A narrative approach to achieving dialogue and change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

- /// What clues do you have that communication skills are lacking or absent in this conflict?
- /// What clues do you have that conflict style choice skills are lacking or absent in this conflict?
- /// What clues do you have that negotiation skills are lacking or absent in this conflict?
- /// What clues do you have that emotional competence is lacking or absent in this conflict?
- /// What clues do you have that political competence is lacking or absent in this conflict?
- /// What clues do you have that identity management skills are lacking or absent in this conflict?
- /// How might hearing this story be beneficial or damaging to the other party?
- /// What are the motives of the participants in the conflict? What do they want to achieve?
- /// In what ways could this story limit or open up dialogue with the other?
- /// How might this story help the client recognize her or his negative patterns in the conflict?
- /// How might this story help the client recognize her or his positive patterns in the conflict?*

TESTING THE STORY

At this point the coach becomes more assertive by “testing” the refined narrative. Testing addresses the fidelity aspects of the narrative. The coach is trying to make the client see the situation in a different way. As we mentioned earlier, especially when a narrative seems very self-serving or paints the client as innocent victim to another’s evil actor, the coach can focus on testing this story to see whether denial or bias is preventing the client from entertaining a different and more helpful reality for moving through the conflict. There are a variety of tests that can be applied by the coach.

One common test is whether the story is created to persuade and is intentionally or inherently biased. This test often asks the client to consider the narrative from another person’s point of view.

How would the story change if it were being told by the other? If Taylor were explaining this situation to me, what would the story be?

How would the story change if it were being told by bystanders or witnesses to the conflict? If you were telling this story in a staff meeting of the firm, or to one of the pharmaceutical representatives, what parts of the story would change? What would you say differently? Why? What wouldn’t you say at all? Why?

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The coach can ask questions to challenge the client's understanding of facts or information. Or, the coach can test assumptions that the client is making about the situation or the people involved. In this way, testing can lead to challenges of hostile attributions the client is making about the other party and can increase the client's ability to consider alternative explanations for a person's actions.

Is it possible that you are misunderstanding the behavior? Are there alternative explanations? Are there other reasons that Taylor has not been meeting with you? If you assume the best, what might explain the behaviors you've seen in the last year? Can you put a positive spin on these behaviors in a way that makes sense?

What does the other party gain from this conflict? What is Taylor getting from this conflict, if your interpretation of the situation is correct? What benefits are there to his antagonizing you in the way you perceive?

Why would the other party risk the damages that you describe? Taylor must realize that this conflict is making the firm look bad to the organizational clients. He must see that other members of the firm are negatively affected by this conflict. Why would he incur those damages? If he wanted to hurt you, isn't there a way he could do it without causing himself harm?

Through the testing process the coach can help identify information that the client does not have and needs to have to make strategic decisions.

What don't you know that would change your perception of this conflict? Do you know what the implications are of ownership of the ODS model? Do you own this model? Does the firm? Does Taylor stand to gain the model if he loses you? Vice versa?

How are others impacting the conflict in an unforeseen way? What do you know about the reaction of the pharmaceutical clients to your work?

The testing process can be repeated with each new iteration of information until the client finds a rough edge that simply won't be denied or becomes comfortable given the coherence and fidelity of the narrative.

Of course that is not the whole story, but that is the way with stories; we make them what we will. It's a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained, it's a way of keeping it all alive, not boxing it into time.

—Jeannette Winterson

As a parting note, it is important that a conflict coach appreciate the balance between refining and testing the story and "finalizing" the story.

The former processes, as we have described, bring the narrative more clearly into focus in terms of content and utility. But the latter suggests that the perfect and final story can be told, and that is a view that we do not support. There is always a tension between discovery and clarification and the reality that a story is a constant possibility for elaboration and construction. Stories are truly never ending in that sense. And a conflict coach is well served by remembering that no story is ever completely told, nor should it be.

General Principles for Discovering the Story

Principle #1: Never treat the narrative as factual; help the client see the narrative as a construction of reality. While a narrative presents actions, events, and characters, it is rarely something that can be thought of as factual and should not be thought of as factual. The client should be reminded that stories are what we make of them, and we construct our realities through our stories. This orientation prevents clients from getting bogged down in “proof” and encourages them to think about how they are creating a situation and whether they want to live through that situation.

Principle #2: Appreciate that most clients will be strongly attached to their stories and that change of the story may be met with resistance until they see that the change serves them. Our stories are an extension of our identity, a discourse about our power, and a rendition of how we feel about the situation. Don't be surprised when a client owns a story and actively resists having it refined or tested. Before you test a story, talk with clients about why this step is important and how the step can be helpful to them.

Principle #3: Assume that most clients will not have a completely coherent narrative or be ready to tell you a narrative that is complete or coherent. Helping them tell the story is a significant part of the coaching experience. A good conflict coach endorses the idea of the never ending story—the idea that a narrative is never complete and that there is always room for expansion. Most coaches realize that clients are often not practiced storytellers and are likely to have problems putting their conflict experience in the form of a well-articulated narrative.

Principle #4: Emphasize that there are always alternative stories that could be told. This principle is most important in terms of encouraging perspective taking. A good conflict coach will encourage a client to try to tell the story from as many points of view as possible. Even when the retelling stretches the clients' abilities to conceive an alternative story, the exercise is valuable because it encourages them to explicitly surface assumptions they are making that may be problematic.

Principle #5: Understand that narrative tries to simplify (motives, identities, actions, time lines, etc.) but that simple is not always empowering. Sometimes clients want a neat and simple story that makes sense to them, and they actively resist refinements and testing that make the story messy. A conflict coach should be able to explain that a richly detailed and comprehensive story will ultimately give the client more potential power by helping him or her consider alternatives for interpretation and action, even if the details result in a few loose ends.

Specific Approaches for Discovering the Story

Throughout this chapter we have presented a number of specific ideas about how a conflict coach can help a client discover his or her story. In this section, we present some additional ideas about techniques that may aid in the development of narratives.

Approach # 1: Script the story.

What is it? Have the client talk out or write out the narrative as though it were a screen play or script.

Why is it important? The act of writing or carefully detailing a narrative (rather than simply presenting it as stream of consciousness) helps clients to reflect more specifically on behaviors, events, and chronology. The act of recording the “script” in writing or on audiotape also makes them slow down and more carefully consider the content of the narrative.

How do you do it? Give the client a script worksheet or a set of prompting questions, and ask the client to present the narrative accordingly.

Approach #2: Retell the story.

What is it? It is asking the client to repeat the same basic story more than once in order to see which elements of the story are told the same way and which elements change, are omitted, or are embellished.

Why is it important? This is one way of identifying which aspects of the story seem to be most critical to the client. Items in the story that are told in basically the same way over and over again are likely to be components that are very meaningful and often are emotionally triggering the client.

How do you do it? The easiest way is to ask clients to give you an initial story and, after a break or in a subsequent session, ask them to repeat the story. Ask them to identify the factors that were consistent and the factors that changed.

Approach #3: Re-place the story.

What is it? Ask the client to tell the story of the conflict but change the context. Tell the story as though the conflict were happening in a different workplace or in a different context all together.

Why is it important? This exercise helps the client consider what parts of the narrative are most context dependent. For example, if the client cannot tell the story of a character in a different context, it may help the client see that the character's behavior may be much less volitional and much more contextually scripted than the client had previously assumed.

How do you do it? You can give clients an alternate context and ask them to tell the story assuming that was the context. Or you can give them the ability to generate their own alternative context.

Approach #4: Tell the next chapter.

What is it? This application asks the client to project what the next chapter in the story will be. If none of the critical aspects of the story are changed by anyone or anything, what does the client think will happen next? Where will this story go next and why?

Why is it important? Forecasting into the future helps give a sense of the trajectory of the conflict from the client's point of view. It suggests how the client sees escalation or deescalation tendencies. It also indicates what the client has assumed may be potential courses of action for him or her to take, or potential courses of action the other may take.

How do you do it? Simply ask clients to fantasize about what they think the next natural steps in the story will be if the situation does not change.

Approach #5: Tell the story from another's point of view.

What is it? Select another character in the client's story or another party to the conflict, and ask the client to tell the story of the conflict from that character's point of view.

Why is it important? This pushes the client to take the perspective of another party and to create a coherent narrative from that person's point of view. It increases the client's perspective taking, and it makes clear assumptions the client is making that may need to be tested.

How do you do it? One technique that has already been mentioned is to simply ask the client to tell the story as the other would tell it. This can be done orally or in writing, the latter may be more helpful if the client is having a lot of trouble taking the other's perspective. Another technique is to have the coach take the part of the client and repeat the client's story while the client takes the role of the other and interjects comments and alternative facts or interpretations. In this way, clients actually challenge their own stories but from the point of view of another.

Chapter Summary

The first stage in the conflict coaching model is helping the client to tell a coherent story about the conflict that makes sense. Drawing from narrative theory as applied to mediation and dialogue processes, this chapter suggests why narrative is a powerful tool for conflict analysis and includes techniques useful in uncovering, clarifying, and testing the story. We suggest that during this stage the coach help the client to present an initial story that the coach and client then refine and test.

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- Principle #4:* Emphasize that there are always alternative stories that could be told.
- Principle #5:* Understand that narrative tries to simplify (motives, identities, actions, time lines, etc.), but that simple is not always empowering.

SPECIFIC APPROACHES FOR DISCOVERING THE STORY

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- Approach #2:* Retell the story.
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