

What's your Story

by
H. Ibarra
and
K. Lineback

2004/100/OB

Working Paper Series

What's your Story?

By Herminia Ibarra & Kent Lineback

All of us construct narratives about ourselves –where we've come from, where we're going. The kinds of stories we tell make an enormous difference in how well we cope with change.

At a recent networking event, senior managers who'd been downsized out of high-paying corporate jobs took turns telling what they had done before and what they were looking for next. Person after person stood up and recounted a laundry list of credentials and jobs, in chronological order. Many felt compelled to begin with their first job, some even with their place of birth. The accounting was meticulous.

Most people spent their allotted two minutes (and lost the attention of those around them) before they even reached the punch line – the description of what they were seeking. Those who did leave time to wrap up tended merely to list the four or five (disparate) things they might be interested in pursuing next. In the feedback sessions that followed each round of presentations, these “fact tellers” were hard to help. The people listening couldn't readily understand how their knowledge and contacts might bear upon the teller's situation. Even worse, they didn't feel compelled to try very hard.

In our research and coaching on career reorientation, we've witnessed many people struggling to explain what they want to do next and why a change makes sense. One of us, in the context of writing a book, has studied a wide variety of major career shifts; the other has worked extensively with organizations and individuals on the use of narrative to bring about positive change. Each of us has been to enough networking events to know that the one we've described here is not unusual. But we've also seen a lot of people in the midst of significant transitions make effective use of contacts and successfully enlist supporters. What we've come to understand is that one factor more than any other makes the difference: the ability to craft a good story.

Why You Need a Story

All of us tell stories about ourselves. Stories define us. To know someone well is to know her story—the experiences that have shaped her, the trials and turning points that have tested her. When we want someone to know us, we share stories of our childhoods, our families, our school years, our first loves, the development of our political views, and so on.

Seldom is a good story so needed, though, as when a major change of professional direction is under way – when we are leaving A without yet having left it and moving toward B without yet having gotten there. In a time of such unsettling transition, telling a compelling story to coworkers, bosses, friends, or family – or strangers in a conference room – inspires belief in our motives, character, and capacity to reach the goals we've set.

Let's be clear: In urging the use of effective narrative, we're not opening the door to tall tales. By "story" we don't mean "something made up to make a bad situation look good." Rather, we're talking about accounts that are deeply true and so engaging that listeners feel they have a stake in our success. This dynamic was lacking in the event described above. Without a story, there was no context to render career facts meaningful, no promise of a third act in which achieving a goal (getting a job, for instance) would resolve the drama.

Creating and telling a story that resonates also helps us believe in ourselves. Most of us experience the transition to a new working life as a time of confusion, loss, insecurity, and uncertainty. We are scared. "Will I look back one day and think this was the best thing that ever happened?" we ask ourselves. "Or will I realize that this was the beginning of the end, that it was all downhill from here?" We oscillate between holding on to the past and embracing the future. Why? We have lost the narrative thread of our professional life. Without a compelling story that lends meaning, unity, and purpose to our lives, we feel lost and rudderless. We need a good story to reassure us that our plans make sense – that, in moving on, we are not discarding everything we have worked so hard to accomplish and selfishly putting family and livelihood at risk. It will give us motivation and help us endure frustration, suffering, and hard work.

A good story, then, is essential for making a successful transition. Yet most of us – like those at the networking event – fail to use the power of storytelling in pursuit of our cause. Or, when we do craft a story, we do it badly. In part, this may be because

many of us have forgotten how to tell stories. But even the best storytellers find tales of transition challenging, with their built-in problems and tensions. Not knowing how to resolve these conflicts, we retreat to telling “just the facts.”

Your Story Has Inherent Drama

At first glance, it's not obvious why stories of transition should present any problems at all. Almost by definition, they contain the stuff of good narrative. (See the sidebar “Key Elements of a Classic Story.”) The protagonist is you, of course, and what's at stake is your career. Only love, life, and death could be more important. And transition is always about a world that's changed. You've been let go, or you've somehow decided your life doesn't work anymore. Perhaps you've reached an event or insight that represents a point of no return – one that marks the end of the second act, a period of frustration and struggle. In the end, if all goes well, you resolve the tension and uncertainty and embark on a new chapter in your life or career.

Not only do transition stories have all the elements of a classic tale, but they have the most important ones in spades. Notice what moves a story along. It's change, conflict, tension, discontinuity. What hooks us in a movie or novel is the turning point, the break with the past, the fact that the world has changed in some intriguing and fascinating way that will force the protagonist to discover and reveal who he truly is. If those elements are missing, the story will be flat. It will lack what novelist John Gardner called profluence of development – the sense of moving forward, of going somewhere. Transition stories don't have this problem.

Think, for example, of the biblical story of Saint Paul's conversion. In his zeal for Jewish law, Saul had become a violent persecutor of Christians. On the road to Damascus, as the story is told in the New Testament, he was surrounded by light and struck to the ground. A voice from heaven addressed him: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He was unable to see; after he changed his mind about Christians, he saw the light, literally. And thus, Saul became Paul, one of the principal architects of Christianity.

What could be more dramatic? Like the Saul-to-Paul saga, most after-the-fact accounts of career change include striking jolts and triggers: palpable moments when things click into place and a desirable option materializes. The scales fall from our eyes, and the right course becomes obvious – or taking the leap suddenly looks easy.

Here's how that turning point took shape for one manager, a 46-year-old information technologist named Lucy Hartman (names in the examples throughout this article have been changed). Lucy was seemingly on a course toward executive management, either at her current company or at a start-up. Being coached, however, revealed to her an attractive alternative. She began to wonder about a future as an organizational-development consultant, but she wasn't quite ready to make that change. She did move to a smaller company, where she felt she could apply everything she had learned in coaching. "By this time, it was clear that I wanted to move on to something different," she said. "But I needed to build more confidence before taking a bigger chance on reinventing myself. So I decided to stay in the high-tech environment, which I knew well, but also to go back to school. I started a master's program in organizational development, thinking it would at least make me a better leader and hoping it would be the impetus for a real makeover." Still, Lucy agonized for months over whether to focus exclusively on school, convinced that it wasn't sane to quit a job without having another one lined up.

Three incidents in quick succession made up her mind. First, she attended a conference on organizational change where she heard industry gurus speak and met other people working in the field. She decided this was clearly the community she wanted to be a part of. Second, her firm went through an acquisition, and the restructuring meant a new position for her, one fraught with political jockeying. Third, as she tells it: "One day my husband just asked me, 'Are you happy?' He said, 'If you are, that's great. But you don't look happy. When I ask how you are, all you ever say is that you're tired.'" His question prompted her to quit her job and work full-time on her master's.

Lucy's story illustrates the importance of turning points. We need them to convince ourselves that our story makes sense, and listeners like them because they spin stories off in exciting new directions. They make listeners lean forward and ask the one question every effective story must elicit: "What happened next?"

The Challenge of the Transition Story

Let's return to that networking event and all the drab stories (actually, nonstories) people told. If transition stories, with their drama and discontinuity, lend themselves so well to vivid telling, why did so many people merely recount the basic facts of their careers and avoid the exciting turning points? Why did most of them try to frame the

changes in their lives as incremental, logical extensions of what they were doing before? Why did they fail to play up the narrative twists and turns?

To begin with, it's because they were attempting to tell the story while they were still in the middle of the second act. Look back over Lucy's story, and you'll realize that the turning points she described were not very different from incidents all of us experience daily. They assumed great significance for Lucy only because she made them do so.

For most of us, turning points are like Lucy's rather than Saul's; they tend to be much more obvious in the telling than in the living. We must learn to use them to propel our stories forward.

Additionally, stories of transition present a challenge because telling them well involves baring some emotion. You have to let the listener know that something is at stake for you personally. When you're in a job interview or when you are speaking to relative strangers, that is difficult to do.

Another issue that makes life stories (particularly ones about discontinuity) problematic: Not only does a good story require us to trust the listener, but it must also inspire the listener to trust us. A story about life discontinuity raises red flags about the teller's capabilities, dependability, and predictability. Listeners wonder, "Why should I believe you can excel in a new arena when you don't have a track record to point to?" And on a deeper level, even greater suspicions lurk: "Why should I trust that you won't change your mind about this? You changed your mind before, didn't you?"

To tell a life story that emphasizes such juicy elements as transformation and discontinuity is to invite questions about who we are and whether we can be trusted. No one wants to hire somebody who's likely to fly off in an unexpected direction every six months. So we downplay the very things that might make our stories compelling. To earn the listener's trust, we make ourselves appear safe – and dull and unremarkable.

Is there a way to tell a lively story *and* inspire others' confidence? Yes, but it requires a deep understanding of what really makes people believe in what we're saying.

The Struggle for Coherence

All good stories have a characteristic so basic and necessary it's often assumed. That quality is coherence, and it's crucial to life stories of transition.

This was a challenge for Sam Tierman, a former corporate HR executive one of us coached through a career transition. Sam had spent 18 years running HR in a number of good-sized regional banks, but his last three jobs hadn't ended well. He'd been downsized out of one, he'd quit another in frustration, and he'd been fired from the last—which finally led him to realize he had a career problem. While he was energized by the interplay between individuals and organizations, he hated the mundane, administrative aspects of the work. When he had a boss who considered HR a strategic function and who included the HR head at the executive table, he thrived. But when he worked for someone who saw HR as a body shop – “Find the bodies, run the benefits, and keep the government off our back”—Sam hated his work. In his last job, his feelings had been obvious, and a minor problem with some personnel analysis was what did him in. Sam, in fact, had taken this job with high hopes. The CEO who hired him considered HR strategic. Unfortunately, that CEO left and was replaced by one who did not.

As a result, Sam gave up on finding or keeping a boss he could work with in a corporate setting. As do so many frustrated executives, he decided he would prefer to work for a start-up. The problem was that he lacked, on the face of it, any of the experience or qualities wanted by people who found and fund start-ups. It was not obvious how Sam could tell a coherent career story that would bridge the chasm between stodgy overhead departments in banks and the high-energy world of start-ups.

Coherent narratives hang together in ways that feel natural and intuitive. A coherent life story is one that suggests what we all want to believe of ourselves and those we help or hire – that our lives are series of unfolding, linked events that make sense. In other words, the past is related to the present, and from that trajectory, we can glimpse our future.

Coherence is crucial to a life story of transition because it is the characteristic that most generates the listener's trust. If you can make your story of change and reinvention seem coherent, you will have gone far in convincing the listener that the change makes sense for you and is likely to bring success – and that you're a stable, trustworthy person.

As important, you will also have gone far in convincing yourself. Indeed, it's the loss of coherence that makes times of transition so difficult to get through. Think of the cartoon character who's run off the edge of a cliff. Legs still churning like crazy, he

doesn't realize he's over the abyss – until he looks down. Each of us in transition feels like that character. Coherence is the solid ground under our feet. Without it, we feel as though we're hanging in midair – and we're afraid that if we look down, we'll plummet to our doom.

Emphasizing Continuity and Causality

Now it becomes understandable why so many speakers in that networking meeting failed to do more than recite facts. They were trying to downplay discontinuity; to gloss over how large a professional jump they wanted to make; to avoid appearing wayward, lost, and flailing. It was a misguided strategy, for listeners are particularly sensitive to lapses of coherence in life stories. They actually *look for* coherence in such stories. Failure to acknowledge a large degree of change will put off listeners and undermine their trust.

As storytellers, we must deal explicitly with the magnitude of change our stories communicate. We can do that and still inspire trust if we focus on establishing continuity and causality. The following suggestions can help.

Keep your reasons for change grounded in your character, in who you are. There's probably no rationale for change more compelling than some internal reason, some basic character trait. In its simplest version, this explanation takes the form of "I discovered I'm good at that" or "I like that – it gives me real pleasure". This approach, noted by Linde and found by us in our work to be extremely useful, allows storytellers to incorporate learning and self-discovery into life stories. We can try something, learn from the experience, and use that learning to deepen our understanding of what we want. Many turning points can be used in this way. Note that it's not wise to base the reasons for transformation primarily outside ourselves. "I got fired" may be a fact we must explain and incorporate into our stories, but it's rarely recognized as a good justification for seeking whatever we're seeking. External reasons tend to create the impression that we simply accept our fate.

Cite multiple reasons for what you want. You might, for instance, mention both personal and professional grounds for making a change. (Obviously, these must be complementary rather than mutually exclusive or contradictory.) The richer and more varied the reasons compelling you to change, the more comprehensible and acceptable

that change will appear. Sam, the former HR executive, was able to cite a number of unusual projects he had worked on, which indicated, though in a big-company context, his ability to think and act entrepreneurially. Additionally, his undergraduate training in electrical engineering and his MBA in finance from a prestigious school were evidence of the technical and analytical bent preferred by the start-ups he knew.

Be sure to point out any explanations that extend back in time. A goal rooted in the past will serve far better than one recently conceived. Your story will need to show why you could not pursue the goal originally, but here, external causes – illness, accident, family problems, being drafted, and so on– can play a leading role.

Reframe your past in light of the change you’re seeking to make. This is not to suggest that you hide anything or prevaricate. We all continually rethink and retell our own life stories. We create different versions that focus on or downplay, include or exclude, different aspects of what has happened to us. Some elements of the jobs we’ve held probably fit well with our change plans and can be used to link our past experiences with the part of our life that we’re advancing toward. The key is to dissect those experiences and find the pieces that relate to our current goals. (For advice on how to do this, see the sidebar “Does Your Résumé Tell a Story?”)

Choose a story form that lends itself to your tale of reinvention. Certain forms – love stories, war stories, epics – are as old as narrative itself. There are stories of being tested and stories of being punished. When it comes to describing transition and reinvention, it can be helpful to present the story in a vessel familiar to most listeners. Of the time-honored approaches, two to consider are the maturation (or coming-of-age) plot and the education plot.

The maturation plot was useful to Gary McCarthy, who quit his job as a strategy consultant with no idea of what he would do next. As he told his story at age 35, he looked back over his career and realized he had always responded to social pressure, bending to what others thought was the right thing for him to do. After receiving a negative performance appraisal, he saw that he needed to be his own man. “You’d better be damn sure when you wake up that you’re doing what you want to be doing,” he said to himself, “as opposed to what you feel you ought to be doing or what somebody else thinks you ought to be doing.”

Lucy Hartman’s story is a good example of the education plot, which recounts change generated by growing insight and self-understanding. It was a mentor, her executive coach, who let her glimpse a possible new future, and she continued to learn in her

master's program and by coaching others. In her version of events, the more she learned about the human side of enterprise, the more she realized her desire to work in and contribute to this area.

All these suggestions are ways to frame the discontinuity in a transition story and provide the coherence that will reassure listeners. They demonstrate that, at your core, the person you were yesterday is the person you are today and the person you will be tomorrow. And they establish that there are good and sufficient causes for change. If you create the sense that your life hangs (and will hang) together, you'll be free to incorporate the dramatic elements of change and turmoil and uncertainty into your story that will make it compelling.

Telling Multiple Stories

We've noted the challenge of crafting a story, complete with dramatic turning points, when the outcome is still far from clear. The truth is, as you embark on a career transition, you will likely find yourself torn among different interests, paths, and priorities. It wouldn't be unusual, for example, for you to work all weekend on a business plan for a start-up, return to your day job on Monday and ask for a transfer to another position or business unit, and then have lunch on Tuesday with a headhunter to explore yet a third option. This is simply the nature of career transition. So how do you reconcile this reality with the need to present a clear, single life story of reinvention, one that implies you know exactly where you're going?

For starters, keep in mind that, in a job interview, you don't establish trust by getting everything off your chest or being completely open about the several possibilities you are exploring. In the early stages of a transition, it is important to identify and actively consider multiple alternatives. But you will explore each option, or type of option, with a different audience.

This means that you must craft different stories for different possible selves (and the various audiences that relate to those selves). Sam chose to focus on start-ups as the result of a process that began with examining his own experience. He realized that he had felt most alive during times he described as "big change fast" – a bankruptcy, a turnaround, and a rapid reorganization. So he developed three stories to support his goal of building a work life around "big change fast": one about the HR contributions he could make on a team at a consulting company that specialized in taking clients through rapid change; one about working for a firm that bought troubled companies

and rapidly turned them around; and one about working for a start-up, probably a venture between its first and second, or second and third, rounds of financing. He tested these stories on friends and at networking events and eventually wrangled referrals and job interviews for each kind of job.

The process is not only about keeping options open as long as possible; it's also about learning which ones to pursue most energetically. In Sam's case, what became clear over a number of conversations was that the consulting firms he respected tended not to hire people of his age and credentials unless they had perfectly relevant experience. Neither did opportunities with turnaround firms appear to be panning out. But Sam did make progress toward some start-ups. After one of them engaged him for a series of consulting assignments, he was able to convert that relationship into a job as chief administrative officer. That position, in turn, exposed him to many contacts in the start-up community.

Most important, it stamped him as a bona fide member of that world. Having stripped the stodgy corporate aura from his résumé, he eventually became the CEO of a startup set to commercialize some technology developed by and spun out of a large company. By this point, four full years had elapsed, and Sam had revised his narrative many times, with each step contributing to a more and more coherent story of change.

Just Tell It

Any veteran storyteller will agree that there's no substitute for practicing in front of a live audience. Tell and retell your story; rework it like a draft of an epic novel until the "right" version emerges.

You can practice your stories in many ways and places. Any context will do in which you're likely to be asked, "What can you tell me about yourself?" or "What do you do?" or "What are you looking for?" Start with family and friends. You may even want to designate a small circle of friends and close colleagues, with their knowledge and approval, your "board of advisers." Their primary function would be to listen and react again and again to your evolving stories. Many of the people we have studied or coached through the transition process have created or joined networking groups for just this purpose.

You'll know you've honed your story when it feels both comfortable and true to you. But you cannot get there until you put yourself in front of others – ultimately, in front of strangers – and watch their faces and body language as you speak. For one woman we know, June Prescott, it was not simply that practice made for polished presentation—although her early efforts to explain herself were provisional, even clumsy. (She was attempting a big career change, from academe to Wall Street.) Each time she wrote a cover letter, interviewed, or updated friends and family on her progress, she better defined what was exciting to her; and in each public declaration of her intent to change careers, she committed herself further.

June's experience teaches a final, important lesson about undergoing change. We use stories to reinvent ourselves. June, like Sam, was able to change because she created a story that justified and motivated such a dramatic shift.

This is the role of storytelling in times of personal transition. Getting the story right is critical, as much for motivating ourselves as for enlisting the help of others. Anyone trying to make a change has to work out a story that connects the old and new selves. For it is in a period of change that we often fail, yet most need, to link our past, present, and future into a compelling whole.

Table 1: Key Elements of a Classic Story

All great stories, from *Antigone* to *Casablanca* to *Star Wars*, derive their power from several basic characteristics:

>> **A protagonist the listener cares about.** The story must be about a person or group whose struggles we can relate to.

>> **A catalyst compelling the protagonist to take action.** Somehow the world has changed so that something important is at stake. Typically, the first act of a play is devoted to establishing this fact. It's up to the protagonist to put things right again.

>> **Trials and tribulations.** The story's second act commences as obstacles produce frustration, conflict, and drama, and often lead the protagonist to change in an essential way. As in *The Odyssey*, the trials reveal, test, and shape the protagonist's character. Time is spent wandering in the wilderness, far from home.

>> **A turning point.** This represents a point of no return, which closes the second act. The protagonist can no longer see or do things the same way as before.

>> **A resolution.** This is the third act, in which the protagonist either succeeds magnificently or fails tragically. This is the classic beginning-middle-end story structure defined by Aristotle more than 2,300 years ago and used by countless others since. It seems to reflect how the human mind wants to organize reality.

Table 2: Does Your Résumé Tell a Story?

Though the terms are often used interchangeably, there's a big difference between a curriculum vitae and a résumé.

A CV is an exhaustive and strictly chronological list of facts about your professional life. You may need one, but don't expect it to serve your cause in a period of transition. To the extent it tells a story, that story is constructed wholly in the reader's mind.

If you want to give your credentials narrative shape, use a résumé— and understand that you will almost certainly need more than one version. Each will highlight and interpret your experience differently in light of the job or career alternatives you're exploring.

The process of putting together a résumé is as valuable as the product, because it entails drafting your story. Everything in the résumé must point to one goal – which, of course, is the climax of the story you're telling. Build it in three parts.

First, describe the position you want.

Second, create a bulleted list of experience highlights that clearly demonstrate your ability to do that job. Consider every piece of experience you have (don't forget volunteer work or anything else that might apply), and identify which parts support the story you're telling.

Third, summarize your professional work. This section of your résumé has the appearance of a CV, in reverse chronological order, and includes all the relevant positions you've held; for each job, it shows dates of employment as well as your responsibilities and accomplishments. But these descriptions are couched in the same terms as your experience highlights.

In fact, every claim in your highlights section (which supports your overall goal) must be supported by your job summaries.

Follow these steps, and your résumé will tell a coherent story. The work you have done, and the skills and interests you have developed and revealed, will point to a clear and desirable resolution: your stated goal.