

Creating Helpful Narratives

How you talk about and frame the work of a network has a huge impact on the group's sense of efficacy and their confidence in success. After all, it's likely that few people in the network have done anything like this before, so they may rely on you for making meaning of the group and its work.

Be aware that a narrative of scarcity and uncertainty is often saying more about your own uncertainties and anxieties than what's actually happening with the group. If the group expresses frustration with the work, clearly you need to address that openly and honestly. But projecting your worries onto the group rather than leading with a clear, intentional narrative will impair both your leadership and the group's sense of itself.

Being conscious and intentional about how to talk to the group about its work is critical to helping to shape narratives that are helpful in building cohesion, resolve, and momentum. We want to be real in our narrative but avoid using narratives that focus on limiting language about resource scarcity, for example, to narratives that convey abundance, progress, and momentum.






In our work with networks, we distinguish Micro-Narratives and Meta-Narratives. Micro-Narratives are the small ways that we frame and shape the dialog in our daily interactions as network participants. A Meta-Narrative is the overall story about the network's work that frames both the struggle and the opportunity before us. Meta-Narratives operate at the level of myth—they are not objectively true but they create meaning for people in the face of uncertainty.

Helpful Micro-Narratives: Common Examples

A. More Helpful	B. Less Helpful	Why
"If we can X, Y and Z, that will be powerful, wouldn't it? Let's figure that out."	"We'll need to figure out how to do X, Y and Z."	B is less inspirational and doesn't connect people to possibility.
"Yeah, we had some real setbacks, but we're getting traction now."	"There are many reasons we're not able to move ahead."	A fosters momentum while B foster stuckness.
"Good. We have a great team here so let's get started."	"I'm not sure where so-and-so is today. We'll have to look into that."	A is about abundance; B is about deficiency.
"If this was easy, people would have done it already."	"I know this is really hard, but we'll just have to figure out what we can do."	A is bracing and exciting; B is dull and sounds like drudgery.

<p>“This work is so important to the lives of real people who are being directly impacted.”</p>		<p>A is about why this work is meaningful and needed. 😊 B is about nothing. 😞</p>
<p>“We have the opportunity here to lead transformational change. Let’s decide what we want and then figure out how to resource it.”</p>	<p>“We’ll have to figure out what we can do with the resources we have.”</p>	<p>A is about grit and determination (Luke Skywalker as a Jedi); B is wimpy and uninspiring (Luke Skywalker as a sand farmer).</p>
<p>“Okay, we’re doing X, right?”</p>	<p>“So, are we doing X?”</p>	<p>A prompts clarity and determination; B leads to more discussion and uncertainty.</p>
<p>“I’m hearing that it might be possible for us to create this new program that would do X, Y and Z and this would be way beyond anything that’s been done before. Is that right? How might we make this happen?”</p>	<p>“So what do folks think we should do?”</p>	<p>‘nuff said.</p>
<p>“If we’re only going to do what others could do, then we don’t need this level of collaboration.”</p>	<p>“I’m wondering if we can do more than that.”</p>	<p>A is challenging and galvanizing (and should be used carefully!); B couldn’t inspire a hungry dog to eat.</p>

Meta-Narrative Types in Collaborative Innovation

Name	 Trailblazing Work	 Small Group, Powerful Change	 Human Need	 Moment in Time	 Scale is Needed
Use	When the goal seems impossible, under-resourced, or just plain difficult.	When they need to be reminded of the abundance of capacity and resources they actually have.	When they need to be reminded of the urgency of the real suffering that will continue—or increase—if they fail in this work.	When they lack a sense of urgency.	When they are thinking small-scale or incrementally.
Stories	Putting a person on the moon. Sailing from Hawai'i to Tahiti with no instruments.	Migrant farmworkers and the Delano Grape Strike boosts. The suffragists and suffragettes and womens' right to vote.	Child labor in the industrial revolution. The Ethiopian/East Africa Famine, Bob Geldof, and Band Aid.	French revolution. U.S. civil rights movement.	The Green Revolution ¹ . Million Man March.
Example	"This hasn't been done before and no one said it would be easy. We have 15,000 chemicals being used by over 15 million workers. And yet, we've set out on this path together because we believe it's important..."	"We have the largest electronics brands in this network, some of the most capable leaders from those companies, and potentially millions of dollars at our disposal. If we can make this happen, who can?"	"Whatever our challenges, we are not working on a factory line using toxic solvents to clean boards with no ventilation. The factory workers can't solve this problem. They need us to make this happen."	"You all have been working separately on this issue for many years, but things have not significantly changed. This is our best shot at fixing this. We need to act now."	"This is a massive challenge involving millions of farmers around the world. We can't solve this one farm at a time or by lining up a handful of pilots. What is the scale at which we need to work to really transform this system?"

¹ A global set of research and technology transfer initiatives, led by the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Norman Borlaug, that resulted in a doubling of global agricultural productivity.

EXERCISE: DEVELOPING A NETWORK NARRATIVE

Instructions:

In small teams...

1. Spend 3 minutes working silently and individually to draft a narrative that will help support greater cohesion, resolve, and momentum in your network.
2. Spend 12 minutes in each team sharing your narrative ideas and shaping one that's most powerful and compelling.
3. Have each team pitch their draft narratives to the network. Do a straw poll to discover the top candidates and identify what's compelling and powerful about those.
4. Assign a small team to take the network's output and shape a powerful yet simple narrative to test and refine with the network.

Our Network Narrative:

Team: _____

Narrative: