

Session 5: Stories

GOAL: During this session, your goal is to get clarity on STORIES – what you perceive, how you interpret it, and how the STORIES you and those around you tell shape your perceptions, beliefs, and choices.

WHAT TO DO:

1. Pick a leader.

- Pick a team member to lead the session. You can select the same person who led an earlier session or rotate to give different people a chance.
- The leader should prepare the agenda. A standard agenda is with the course materials on the Culture in Action website. You can use the standard as is or adapt it to your needs.
- The leader should read the “Leader Tips,” which are available on the Culture in Action website.

2. Get ready.

- The leader should schedule a 90-minute session, distribute this pdf (or a link to the website’s “Course Materials” page) to all participants, and let participants know whether they should submit their session prep before the meeting.
- All participants should spend 30 minutes or so prepping for the session.
 - First, they should do the pre-reading (below), which discusses STORIES.
 - Second, they should do the “Session Prep” (below), focusing on ACTION, STORY, and TENSIONS.
 - Review the ACTION(S) you agreed on at the last session. Have people done what they committed to do? Are patterns emerging in the follow thru on ACTIONS that merit the team’s appreciation and/or attention?
 - Think about one short, very specific, very recent STORY that shows the best of how you come together as a team to get things done. While the practice of sharing STORIES should be developing well by now, try to integrate the pre-reading to raise your practice to a higher level.
 - Think about one TENSION you’d like the team to discuss at the upcoming session. As you frame the TENSION, think about how your STORIES may be affecting how you view the TENSION and/or how you approach CONVERSATION regarding the TENSION.

3. Go.

- Hold the session. Go through each of the practices in order. As always, if you get stuck, the leader can refer to the Leader Tips for help.
- If you’d like, set aside a few minutes to discuss the role of STORIES.
- Briefly review ACTIONS from the last meeting. Pay attention to any patterns that may be emerging in how you are (or aren’t) following thru on ACTIONS.
- Name TENSIONS, select the one you’d like to focus on, and agree on any other actions you want to take on other TENSIONS.
- Continue to pay attention to making sure every person has a chance to be heard.

Session 5: Pre-Reading

In the last session, you explored how meaningful CONVERSATION can help you understand and develop strategies to manage TENSIONS and move you toward your desired future state.

In any CONVERSATION, some of what we say is fact. But a lot of what we say – and think – is about STORIES.

That's the focus for this session.

STORIES are critical for two reasons.

One, by regularly recounting recent, positive STORIES, you engage in a simple, straightforward practice of explicitly naming the best parts of your culture, putting specific actions front and center so they can be appreciated and replicated.

At the same time, STORIES are grounded in what we perceive. In our minds, we often convert our perceptions into truths and become tied to the STORIES we tell ourselves about what's going on around us. When our STORIES are outdated or imperfectly capture what's happening, they can trap us or cause us to misperceive our reality, our limits, and our opportunities.

The practice of STORIES is quite straightforward. After privately doing the PRESENCE and FOCUS practices and then checking in with the group, members of the group tell short, simple STORIES about things that happened since the previous session that, in their view, represent the best of the group's culture.

As you tell and hear STORIES, pay attention. Don't discuss or debate them, but think about what they tell you about where you are, individually and as a team. Are your STORIES positive and creative, or are they negative and destructive? Do they create a foundation for action, or relegate you to a more passive/reactive role? Do they connect you to others, or isolate you? Are they optimistic or pessimistic?

We can each experience the same event but then tell a very different STORY. Imagine a car crossing into your lane just inches in front of you. You might tell a STORY about the driver's incompetence or irresponsibility. Or you might tell a STORY about their skill (or your skill) at avoiding a dangerous situation through quick maneuvering. You might tell a STORY about a crisis you presume the other driver was experiencing that caused them to drive so aggressively. Or about how they were probably texting. You might generalize to a STORY about they "type" of driver who cuts people off (people with expensive cars, people with old cars, men, women, young drivers, old drivers, whatever). Or about how you're victimized by poor driving every day. Or about the lack of traffic enforcement in your community. Or even more broadly about what the government should be doing that it isn't. You might become excited by the driving challenge, light up with anger, full of compassion for the rushed and distracted driver. The possibilities are endless. The point is that we quickly process events, but rarely recognize our choice in how we experience any given circumstance. Instead, we react, judge, and mindlessly create a STORY.

Think also about how your STORIES and the group's STORIES relate to one another. Each individual STORY almost always lives within a pattern of similar STORIES. When we were young, we formed ideas about the world that allowed us to function in our environment. The STORIES that we formed in our early years persist for the rest of our lives. Like a fish that is unaware of the water in which it swims, we often live in our STORIES, unaware of how they shape our identity and behavior.

Think about what parts of your STORIES may be outdated, limiting, or even inaccurate.

For example, Greg (the creator of Culture in Action) moved to a new town when he was seven years old. He remembers being bullied on the playground in his first few weeks at the new school. He developed strategies to avoid the bullies. He learned to stand back and observe before engaging with kids he didn't know. He found that waiting to be invited into a social circle was safer than jumping into a new and chaotic scene.

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It's no surprise that Greg makes his living observing groups from the outside as a consultant. He's learned some really useful group observational skills that continue to serve him well. At the same time, Greg has to consciously, mindfully initiate new relationships rather than waiting for others to make the first move. When it comes to business development, for example, it feels less natural to Greg to reach out and form new relationships. He does it now, and he does it relatively well, but only because he has worked on changing his STORY to accommodate new behaviors and outcomes. The old STORY was, "New relationships are scary – I don't know who to trust – I'll wait for others to demonstrate kindness and interest before I engage with them." The new STORY is, "New relationships often lead to exciting opportunities." Each STORY drives very different behaviors and leads to very different outcomes. Greg still catches himself every once in a while living in the fearful STORY from decades ago. More often, with disciplined practice, he is able to live from his purposeful STORY.

Similarly, Mary (a Culture in Action facilitator) had a close, fulfilling working relationship with a peer. When that peer left, his successor didn't engage with her. He ignored her when she raised issues. He rejected her offers of help. It didn't take Mary long to have a strong STORY about him – his arrogance, his lack of collaboration, how impossible he was to work with. Luckily for Mary, however, she had colleagues who didn't let her live within her stories. Pushed by these colleagues, Mary forced herself to listen to her nemesis's STORY about her. What she heard amazed her. In his view, he inherited a job with some major fires that needed putting out. Mary could have helped, but she didn't. Instead, she hounded him about lower priority items, increasing his level of anxiety and isolation. Knowing one another's STORIES didn't immediately cure a difficult relationship. But it made it possible for them to begin communicating better, getting aligned, and working productively.

Think about what lies at the heart of your STORIES and how they shape your perceptions. For example:

- What fear STORY keeps you from your highest self? (It's often useful to search ages 4-8). Examples could include:
 - "I am never good enough."
 - "Others always disappoint me."
 - "I am much smarter than others."
 - "Nobody notices how much I...care, work, contribute, etc."
 - "There's a problem around every corner."
 - "I can't trust authority figures."
- Conversely, what purpose STORY might create the context for your highest self? Examples could include:
 - "Every person deserves love."
 - "Underdogs matter."
 - "We are smarter and more capable together."
 - "Fun energizes."
 - "Grace and ease leads to high quality results."
 - "When I trust people, good things happen."

Just as individuals live out of certain STORIES, so do communities. A group's collective STORIES shape its behaviors, actions, and outcomes. And, just like individuals, organizations often live out their STORIES like the fish that are unaware of the water in which they swim.

Within Culture in Action, we pay particular attention to positive culture STORIES. By making STORIES a regular part of each session, we intentionally bring positive behaviors front and center to inform and shape the behaviors, actions, and outcomes we want.

The practice of STORIES is about challenging yourself:

- What STORIES do you tell yourself and others?
- How do these STORIES serve you?
- How might you shift your STORIES to create different behaviors and better outcomes?
- How might you let go of STORIES that are outdated or inaccurate?

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES

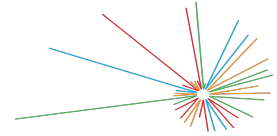
- Personal Fear Story/Old Story:
 - What STORY made sense in the past, but doesn't serve you well anymore?
- Personal Purpose Story/New Story:
 - What new STORY will align with your purpose and create better behaviors, actions and outcomes?
- Story & Identity:
 - Sometimes, we relate to others in a way that actually causes the behaviors actions and outcomes associated with our fear STORY to become real. Imagine introducing yourself to somebody from within your fear STORY. Now imagine introducing yourself from within your purpose STORY. Can you imagine how this change might shift perceptions, behaviors, actions and outcomes?
- "Trying on" a New Story
 - Pick a situation that makes you feel uncomfortable, disappointed, excluded, or something of the sort. Explore what STORY surrounds that situation – for example, "Those colleagues don't take me seriously" or "I don't have the expertise to contribute anything meaningful". Make up a different STORY. The next time you are in that situation, pretend your alternative story is real – for example, behave as somebody who's taken seriously and has something to contribute. What shifts? How does it feel? What holes in your old STORY does it expose?

GROUP ACTIVITY

Divide into small groups and explore your STORIES.

- Team Fear Story/Old Story:
 - What STORIES have you noticed that are getting in the way of working together in the way you want, or achieving what you want to achieve?
- Team Purpose Story/New Story
 - What's a new, upgraded STORY that aligns with your purpose and will create better behaviors, actions, and outcomes?
- Shared Stories
 - Think of the work you've done so far in Culture in Action around TENSIONS. Find a STORY you share that is important in understanding the TENSION. Jot it down. Then pull out only the facts – the specific, observable behaviors in the STORY. Finally, tell at least three other STORIES that would be consistent with those facts.

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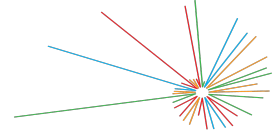
Session 5: Session Prep

Before every session, each participant should read the background materials for the session and think: about the last session, about what’s happening and what it means to them, and about the session to come.

The following chart will help you prepare. You can use this written form if it’s helpful.

If you like, your group can collect submissions in advance and share them. Doing so can help make **STORIES** more visible and streamline the identification of **TENSIONS**.

<p>PRESENCE: What are your current practices and how do you feel you’re doing with them?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SKIP FOR SESSION</p>	<p>The goal of this pre-work is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Think about PRESENCE, ACTION, STORIES and TENSIONS before the session. ➤ Collect TENSIONS in advance in order to make the session as efficient as possible. ➤ Make the STORIES, TENSIONS and ACTIONS public and a normal part of work. <p>Even though you won’t have time to address all TENSIONS during the session, it’s still valuable to spend some time naming them.</p> <p>At a minimum, it helps the group see things more clearly.</p> <p>Sometimes, simply naming TENSIONS is enough to make slight shifts to the system over time.</p> <p>If you want, you can agree to get together to talk about them in another setting.</p>
<p>ACTION: What actions did you agreed to at your last session? What progress have you made?</p>	
<p>STORY: Jot down a positive culture story – a real, recent example of something that you believe demonstrates the best of your culture in action.</p>	
<p>TENSION(S): What TENSION(s) do you want to FOCUS on/raise with the group? Remember to phrase them as questions: “How might I/we?”</p>	



Session 5: Additional Resources

For more on STORIES, see the Additional Resources page on the Culture in Action website.