

Leadership as a Narrative

Understanding the where, what, how and why of it



 By Sudhanshu Palsule and Frank Guglielmo



Sam had been the CEO of a large multi-national retail company for seven years. Enormously successful, he had an entire article called “The Game Changer” about him published in a very reputed business magazine. He was on every top head-hunter’s list. The company had been successful but stagnant when he took the reins. Sam brought tremendous change that reignited growth. He challenged the industry standards of low margins and high employee turnover by focusing on creating a culture of service rather than transactions. “Care for the customer” was the operating model he drove across every aspect of the business and managed to enlist both his employees and customers into loyal long-term relationships with the company.

Two years ago, Sam left this high profile role and took over as CEO of small medical services company. The company had been struggling - three terrible years of low growth and a dismal outlook. When Sam took the job it raised more than just the

share price of the company: quite a few eyebrows went up in the corporate world. At 48-years old Sam felt that the challenge of the medical services company had come at the right time.

Some of Sam’s history:

Sam was almost 48 years old and at the top of his game. And yet for the past year or so, he was starting to feel a kind of emptiness inside himself. He was happy with his life and work and that made the emptiness a bit strange. One evening while walking with his wife, he started talking about it. When they were back home, on an impulse he called an old college mate who knew Sam better than anyone else. At one point in the conversation his friend said, “You were meant for other things, Sam. But then you always compromised with yourself.” Never comfortable with introspection, Sam hurriedly ended the call. He got into bed but lay awake for a long time. Three months later, he quit his job and joined the medical services company.



Sam's mother had been a nurse in a city hospital for thirty devoted years. Her smiling face and her willingness to endure hardship for the sake of the others hid her own fragile health, she was now in a wheelchair. Sam's father had been a blue-collar employee at the local paper mill but he spent much of his free time working at the local care home with the elderly and the infirmed. When he passed away at the age of 80, it seemed like the entire town had turned up at the funeral.

Take a look again at the paragraphs above. Can you connect the dots? Had we not shown you the "history" paragraphs, the first two paragraphs wouldn't have made the same sense. "*Life is lived forwards but understood backwards*", said philosopher Kierkegaard. Sam's "narrative" makes sense when the dots connect backwards. Understanding his whole story, his personal narrative, gives us some insight into why Sam leads the way he does. Operating from a place of care and service that he lived and learned in his early life shaped Sam's approach to leadership in many ways. This raises two questions: one, how does our own narrative develop over the course of a lifetime, and two, can we become more conscious of this narrative and thereby influence its course? To understand our narrative better we need to understand its Where, What, How and Why.

Where:

- This is a career decision. Which company, which department, which profession you choose. A lot goes into this: opportunity, interests, skills, aptitudes, family obligations, and chance. The important thing is that you want to end up in a career *intentionally*. That means being aware of certain key elements in your narrative, such as passion, skill, and values. Of course, it is not easy to be aware of these elements in your early in your career but for many, a thoughtful review of the decisions we've made along the way can start pointing the right direction.

What

- This is about what you need to accomplish as a leader, what you actually get done. What a leader needs to deliver *in general* has not changed much over time – setting a course of action, influencing and supporting others and helping to shape meaning. What you need to do as a leader *in particular* is a function of the goals of the organization and the specific challenges of the moment. To succeed at delivering the "What" you need to cultivate your ability to listen to, and relate to, the stakeholders in your life– including yourself.

How:

- How we approach leadership needs to be unique to each of us. We each must find the productive conversations, actions and behaviors that are consistent with "who we are", consistent with our personal narratives. In today's highly inter-connected business landscape where disruption, complexity, ambiguity and instant, socially driven communication is the rule, certain aspects of our approach to leadership are critical, and these are:

- **Mindfulness:** The capability to maintain and act on four types of awareness: *Temporal awareness* (being present), *Situational awareness* (seeing things as they are), *Peripheral awareness* (seeing over the horizon), *Self-awareness* (monitoring our actions and reactions)
- **Proactivity:** The belief that one is in control of one's own

actions and seeing yourself as able to influence events rather than being dragged along by them

- **Authenticity:** Engendering in others a belief in your own credibility; the ability to build personal trust in a relationship and positively confront disagreement and competing points of view
- **Openness:** The capacity to act, thrive, and learn from situations that are complex, novel, and ambiguous
- **Social scalability:** Fluidly communicating separately and jointly to: one individual, a small group and the entire organization

However, there is no one right way to be productive in these five areas. Each of us must find our own approach, one consistent with our own narrative.

Why:

- This is very personal; you need to discover your own "Why" - what is your purpose, why do you want to lead? It is well worth the time to explore your values and the larger reasons for why you get up in the morning.

Your "Why" trumps all the other variables. In your leadership narrative, the why is the *leit motif*: the core of the story. And once we are in touch with that core, we discover our authenticity and our personal place of power. Leaders who do that create a significantly more meaningful impact on those around them that who operate without a sense of their purpose.

Sam was able to unravel the *leit motif* of his narrative at an important time in his life. Despite all the success in his life and work, Sam had a small but crucial part of him unfulfilled; he needed to discover his purpose. It took courage to do what he did but he first had to understand his narrative and how it had developed over the course of a lifetime. Once he did that, Sam could influence its course. For the first time, he became the author of his narrative rather than being a character in it and in so doing he discovered his authenticity. That is the ultimate gift that our narrative gives us. **LE**



Sudhanshu Palsule is an award-winning educator, CEO Advisor, and leadership coach, regarded as one of the leading thinkers in the field of transformative leadership. He teaches at Duke Corporate Education and is an associate professor of the Advanced Management Program at INSEAD. Visit sudhanshupalsule.com



Frank Guglielmo is an award winning educator, consultant and coach. He is the Managing Director of Park Consulting, specializing in executive development and organizational change. Prior to this, Guglielmo was Senior Vice President, Leadership and Organizational Development at the Interpublic Group of Companies. LinkedIn [Frank Guglielmo](#)

