

Stop Telling People the Future. Give Them a Story They Can Help Write.

A narrative can create direction without becoming a script.

**What part of the future are we asking people merely to accept -
and what part are we genuinely inviting them to help write?**

1 WHAT STORY ARE WE ALREADY TELLING?

What do people currently believe about who we are, what is possible here, and why previous change has succeeded or failed?

2 WHICH ASSUMPTIONS HAVE BECOME FACTS?

What phrases or explanations do we repeat so often that we no longer examine whether they are still true?

3 WHOSE STORY IS MISSING?

Whose experience, memory, evidence, or interpretation is least visible in the dominant organizational narrative?

4 DIRECTION OR SCRIPT?

Does our change narrative give people a meaningful orientation - or has leadership already written the future, the meaning, and everyone's role?

5 WHERE IS THERE ROOM FOR AUTHORSHIP?

What can employees, students, clients, partners, or teams genuinely shape, test, interpret, and create?

6 WHAT ELSE COULD BE POSSIBLE?

If the current story were not inevitable, what alternatives, futures, or possibilities might become imaginable?

BEFORE YOU LEAVE

One story we need to protect

One story or assumption we need to question

One place where people need more authorship

Direction matters. So does authorship.

Build the Narrative With Three Horizons.

A 25-30 minute practice for moving from inherited stories to shared possibility.

Do not begin by writing the communication. Begin by examining the story.

1 THE STORY WE INHERITED

- What stories do we already tell about this issue?
- What happened before?
- What assumptions have become normalized?
- What are people afraid of losing?
- Which stories are rarely heard?

2 THE STORY EMERGING NOW

- What are we noticing that no longer fits the old story?
- What surprises or contradictions are appearing?
- What are people, evidence, or context telling us?
- What may be becoming possible - or necessary?

3 THE STORY WE MIGHT HELP CREATE

- What futures would be worth working toward?
- What would people experience differently?
- What would we need to learn?
- What could we make, model, or test now?
- Who needs to help write this story?

MAKE THE POSSIBILITY VISIBLE

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1 a future headline | 4 a scenario |
| 2 a sketch or storyboard | 5 a model |
| 3 a prototype | 6 a conversation with your future organization |

What would have to become true for this story to be possible?

— • FROM THE BLOG • —

STORY $\neq$ SCRIPT

A narrative can create direction without becoming a script.



A SCRIPT says:



Here is
the future.



Here is what
it means.



Here is
your role.



Follow
the plan.



A STORY invites:



Here is what
matters.



Here is what
is changing.



Here is what
we are learning.



What might
become possible?



What part can
you help create?

Direction matters. So does authorship.



ELK WILLOW CONSULTING

Innovative Ideas for an Inspired Future

Stronger stories.

Stronger organizations.

Better futures—together.

FROM NARRATIVE TO POSSIBILITY

Change becomes imaginable before it becomes possible.



1

NOTICE

What stories are already being told?

- Listen widely.
- See patterns.
- Surface the fragments.



2

QUESTION

Which assumptions are shaping them?

- Interrogate the taken-for-granted.
- Invite different perspectives.



3

IMAGINE

What else could be possible?

- Open the field.
- Consider multiple futures.



4

CREATE

What can we make, model, or test?

- Prototype.
- Experiment.
- Combine ideas.



5

LEARN

What new story is emerging?

- Observe.
- Reflect.
- Adapt and evolve.



Every cycle of story and learning creates new possibilities.



ELK WILLOW CONSULTING
Innovative Ideas for an Inspired Future

Stories shape meaning.
Imagination shapes futures.
Together, they shape change.



How Do Stories and Leadership Create Possibility?

Current findings on storytelling, vision, creativity, imagination, and organizational change

Current research suggests that stories matter because they shape sensemaking, expectations, and what people believe is possible. But strong change narratives do more than simplify. They can leave room for different interpretations, invite people to examine assumptions, and create conditions in which imagination and creativity become part of organizational change.

1 Organizational stories do not need to be perfectly linear.

Sandham challenges the assumption that clarity always requires one coherent story. Emerging fragments and antenarratives can reveal how people are making sense of change before the story has settled.

Source: Sandham (2025)

2 Narrative reflexivity creates room to question dominant stories.

Chung and Norvell describe narrative reflexivity as examining the stories we tell ourselves and one another, including marginalized stories, to create curiosity, doubt, and co-creative tension.

Source: Chung & Norvell (2025)

3 Vision communication can strengthen support for change.

In a study of 279 employees, vision communication shaped change-supportive behaviour through expectations about change outcomes, with stronger effects under greater work uncertainty.

Source: Zhang et al. (2025)

4 Leadership strongly shapes team creativity.

A 2026 meta-analysis of 232 papers and 98,769 participants found positive relationships between multiple constructive leadership approaches and team creativity, while abusive leadership was negatively related.

Source: Lu & Kong (2026)

5 Creativity training is useful - but transfer is not automatic.

A 2024 meta-analysis found positive effects of creativity training, while transfer into sustained on-the-job creative behaviour was less certain. Workplace conditions still matter after the workshop ends.

Source: McKay et al. (2024)

CANADIAN RESEARCH ADDS THREE USEFUL IDEAS

Beliefs about creativity can get in the way.

HEC Montreal research found that strong implicit beliefs about what should boost creativity can sometimes reduce creative effort.

Agogue et al. (2024)

Different tools can change the thinking.

ETS and HEC Montreal researchers found tangible tools produced more elaborated divergent-thinking proposals than pen and paper, though with greater cognitive effort.

Lesage et al. (2026)

Spaces can be designed for knowledge collision.

HEC Montreal research on Hacking Health identified exploring, complementing, mapping, and modeling as forms of knowledge work supported by different temporary spaces.

Dionne & Carlile (2025)

The strongest story may be the one people can locate themselves inside.

Stronger stories.
More possible futures.

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From the Blog

What Leaders Need to Get Right

Use narrative to create orientation and possibility - not certainty and compliance.

CREATE CONDITIONS FOR

- A clear sense of what matters and why change matters.
- Listening for unfinished, contradictory, or marginalized stories.
- Questions that interrupt assumptions and make alternatives imaginable.
- Divergence before convergence - enough time to create options before choosing.
- Tools, prototypes, and temporary spaces that help people think beyond words and slides.

WATCH FOR THE HAZARDS

- Finishing the story too early and closing down interpretation.
- Treating counter-stories as resistance rather than information.
- Inviting participation after all consequential choices are already made.
- Assuming a creativity workshop will overcome everyday structures that suppress creative behaviour.
- Making the leader the hero instead of making organizational learning the protagonist.

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- 1 What story are we treating as fact?
- 2 Who experiences that story differently?
- 3 Where is there genuine room for authorship?
- 4 What could we make or test before we finish the story?

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