Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

© Thinkstock/bestdesigns

society for **SoL** organizational learning

Applying Organizational Learning to Health Challenges in the Developing World
Joan Bragar

Many developing countries lack adequate health-care delivery due to limited resources and entrenched medical systems. But for more than a decade, frontline health managers and their teams in more than 45 countries, including Egypt, Afghanistan, and Tanzania, have overcome these challenges to achieve measurable improvements in critical areas such as family planning, HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention, and maternal mortality. They have achieved these results through a program that teaches leadership and management practices and shared visioning – a powerful antidote to the low morale that often plagues healthcare workers. These successes show that practical organizational learning approaches can contribute directly to improved outcomes in public health.

Leaders and Their Stories: Becoming the Master of Your Personal Narrative
Steven Ober

Have you ever been in the middle of a leadership situation and felt, "I've been here before?" The content of the situation may have been new, but the territory seemed familiar. All of us have deep personal stories that shape our patterns of behavior and influence our present-day leadership styles. The most effective leaders are masters of living in congruence with those stories – and of reframing them to be more aligned with their changing aspirations. This article describes how, through story work, we can become clear about who we are and learn to create new stories – with new assumptions, feelings, and behaviors – that are more aligned with the results we want.

Re-Viewing the War on Drugs: Scenarios for the Drug Problem in the Americas
Adam Kahane

Over the past 40 years, the war on drugs in the western hemisphere has produced disappointing results, with continued high levels of addiction, incarceration, and violence. In 2012, the Organization of American States engaged Reos Partners and the Center for Leadership and Management to apply a transformative scenario methodology to explore drug policy in the Americas. The scenario team's task was to construct clear and plausible future scenarios regarding drug policy, based on current political, economic, social, cultural, and international dynamics. The four scenarios the team came up with – *Together, Pathways, Resilience,* and *Disruption* – have created radically different ways of understanding and responding to the drug problem.

Starting a Social Lab: Seven How-Tos
Zaid Hassan

Just as we have scientific and technical labs for solving our most difficult scientific and technical challenges, we need social labs to solve our most pressing social challenges. For almost 20 years, people around the world have been participating in social labs focused on issues ranging from eliminating poverty to combating climate change. In this excerpt from *The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges,* Zaid Hassan introduces social labs as a strategy – requiring a long-term commitment – rather than a short-term tactical approach. He also gives seven rules of thumb for starting social labs in any context.

A Spiritual Model of Care: Lessons from a Faith-Based Hospital

Stephen Berkeley

Although there is a widespread belief that spiritual practices can improve workplace performance, we know little about how that improvement actually happens. How are spiritual principles and practices operationalized and manifested in the workplace? What are some indicators that they improve the well-being of patients, staff, and the surrounding community? What kinds of challenges does a faith-based organization face? In this article, Stephen Berkeley describes how the integration of faith-based principles and practices at Global Hospital & Research Centre in Rajasthan, India, affects the day-to-day operations of the organization, its growth, and the personal and professional development of its staff.

The Importance of Being Mindful

Art Kleiner

A growing body of research has shown that mindfulness improves people's effectiveness in and out of the workplace. But many of our organizational structures are designed in ways that challenge our ability to pay focused attention to our work. For instance, the relentless influx of email can drain us of the mental capacity to tackle more strategic issues. Fortunately, organizations can be designed to foster contemplative awareness in every aspect of their processes and practices. In this article, Art Kleiner shares how a consulting firm improved knowledge sharing in the organization by changing mindless practices one team at a time.

Leaders and Their Stories
Becoming the Master of Your Personal Narrative

STEVEN OBER

Have you ever been in the middle of a leadership situation and felt, "I've been here before?" The content of the situation may have been new, but the territory seemed familiar. All of us have deep personal stories that shape our patterns of behavior and influence our present-day leadership styles. The most effective leaders are masters of living in congruence with those stories – and of reframing them to be more aligned with their changing aspirations. This article describes how, through story work, we can become clear about who we are and learn to create new stories – with new assumptions, feelings, and behaviors – that are more aligned with the results we want.

Steven Ober

Recent work in leadership and leadership development suggests a new answer to the age-old question, "What makes a leader?" My colleagues and I have searched for, among other things, common traits, patterns of behavior, and core competencies that characterize leaders. But we are discovering that the most powerful leaders – the authentic leaders – do not necessarily possess a shared set of abilities or particular ways of behaving. The most effective leaders are masters of living in congruence with their own personal stories – and are skilled at reframing those stories to be more aligned with their changing aspirations.

For example, one executive I was coaching talked about his upbringing in a poor family. He reported feeling different and alone. He had to "fake it" in his middle-class grade school to look like and be accepted by the other students. "When I was in school, I felt like a fraud," he said. Later in the same conversation, when speaking about a desired pay increase he hadn't received at work, he talked about how he had to "fake it" when he did all the things that leaders were "supposed to do" in order to be recognized and to advance in the company. "When I do that stuff, I feel like a fraud," he said.

"Isn't that the same story you told a few minutes ago about what you did in grade school?" I asked. "Brilliant!" the executive exclaimed. In that moment, he saw how his lifelong personal story was shaping his assumptions, feelings, and behavior as a leader. By understanding why he felt like a fraud, he realized that he had a broader range of choices for thinking, feeling, and acting than he previously thought. He became much more confident in being the kind of leader he wanted to be rather than trying to be what he thought others wanted. This executive ultimately received a promotion and successfully led a high-visibility, high-impact corporate program. He still describes that coaching session as transformational.

Underlying Ideas

My work on understanding and reframing the stories that shape our actions is rooted in *two fundamental ideas:*

1. Reality is created through *interactions* between ourselves and a myriad of forces within complex systems.
2. *We participate in creating our reality* through the stories we tell ourselves about these interactions. As such, if we change how we think and act, we can modify our reality.

In 1927, German physicist Werner Heisenberg proposed a pivotal theory, the Uncertainty Principle, which came to influence a broad range of disciplines – from subatomic particle physics, to philosophy, to biology, to management, to leadership studies, to family therapy. In his work on subatomic particles, Heisenberg found that "Any attempt to measure precisely the velocity of a subatomic particle, such as an electron, will knock it about in an unpredictable way, so that a simultaneous measurement of its position has no validity." A related concept, the Observer Effect, refers to the influence observers have on the system they are observing. This influence is often the result of instruments that, by necessity, alter the state of what they measure. Here are some practical examples of this principle:

1. When we check the pressure in an automobile tire, we inevitably let out some of the air in the tire. This action in turn changes the tire pressure.
2. In electronics, we use ammeters and voltmeters to measure the current or voltage in a circuit. These instruments create an additional load on the circuit, thus changing the circuit's behavior.
3. In thermodynamics, when recording a temperature, a standard mercury-in-glass thermometer absorbs or gives up some thermal energy. In the process, it changes the temperature of the body that it is measuring.

Thus, the process of measuring, and the instrumentation we use, influence what we see and don't see.

This kind of thinking turned the Newtonian Paradigm – the idea that an incontrovertible external reality can be discovered through objective observation – on its head. One of the fundamental insights of the 20th century then is that the results we get are not created solely by objectively measuring something. Rather, they are a function of how we relate to, interact with, and participate

in what we observe. As soon as an observer enters a field of observation, she becomes a part of it, helps shape it, participates in it – and ultimately begins to create a story about what the experience means.

> **As soon as an observer enters a field of observation, she becomes a part of it, helps shape it, participates in it – and ultimately begins to create a story about what the experience means.**

Examples from the Social Sciences

Numerous bodies of work in psychology, social psychology, biology, and other disciplines reflect the view that we participate in creating our reality. Three examples from the social sciences are Social Constructionism, Symbolic Interactionism, and the Ladder of Inference.

Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism suggests that we largely – some would even say wholly – construct our individual and social reality through the internal narratives we tell ourselves about our experiences. What is reality? Is it what happens to us or is it our interpretation (story) of what happens to us? What is our past? Is it what occurred or is it our memory, our stories, our internal narrative about what occurred? And what most influences our present? Is it what occurred or is it what we tell ourselves about what occurred that influences us most? The Social Constructionist view suggests that our stories about our experiences and about what is happening now influence our behavior more than what may have actually happened.

Symbolic Interactionism

American sociologist Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism states the same core principle in a slightly different way. Symbolic Interactionism suggests that we are not simply stimulus-response creatures. We are stimulus-*interpretation*-response

beings. We not only have experiences, but we also ascribe meaning to them. Our experience of reality and our response to it have as much or more to do with our *interpretation* of events as they do with the events themselves, and those interpretations arise from our interactions with one another and with the world.

The Ladder of Inference

Chris Argyris created the Ladder of Inference – a model that depicts how we take in data, process it, and act upon it. It suggests that we are bombarded by data from things happening all around us, more data than we can possibly process effectively. We therefore instantaneously screen out some of the data and take in what we deem as most important. Thus, our mind shapes our experience of reality – first by screening what we take in and second by adding meaning to, making interpretations of, and making attributions about that input. Our mind not only determines what we process and what we don't, but it also shapes our interpretation of that reduced field of data. Then, based on that interpretation, we reach conclusions, make decisions, and take action. Therefore, most often our conclusions and actions are several steps removed from the actual data. They are based as much on our sorting of the data and the meaning we have added to it as they are on the events, data, and stimuli themselves.

Where do our interpretations, ascribed meanings, and attributions come from? Social Constructionism suggests that they come from our *internal narrative*. Put another way, our interpretations of events, the meaning we give to them, and the actions we choose to take are as much about ourselves and our experiences as they are about the external world. And, once our internal narrative is formed – often in childhood – we tend to continually re-create it, hence the concept of "self-fulfilling prophecy."

To learn something about our deeply ingrained stories, we need to pay attention to how we interpret and react to various situations, especially ones that we experience as threatening or high

stakes. What we tell ourselves, what we do, and what we feel, particularly in challenging circumstances, can be windows into our deep personal narratives.

The Larger Array of Stories

Our personal stories are part of a larger array of stories that contribute to the fabric of our culture. Human history and literature are replete with myths about the heavens and earth, planting and harvesting, light and darkness, war and peace, families and individuals.

All of these stories – our personal ones and our larger myths – are interconnected. Our individual stories are narratives we have told ourselves about our personal experiences. Our cultural myths are narratives we have created about our collective experiences. In a sense, myths are more universal versions of our own stories, and our own stories are personal versions of age-old myths. Understanding one group of stories can help us learn more deeply from the other.

Why Do We Tell Stories?

We human beings are meaning-making creatures. We make meaning of our individual experience through our personal stories. We make meaning of our larger world and our place in it through our cultural stories and myths.

For example, creation stories make meaning out of the earth's beginning and connect it to a higher, purposeful power. The Exodus story makes meaning out of the formation of the children of Israel into a communal group and then a nation: "We

who were no people are now the people of God." By telling and retelling our stories through liturgy, rituals, songs, books, movies, and other formats, we pass on those deep meanings to one another and to the next generations.

Joseph Campbell and the Hero's Journey

Furthermore, the stories told by different groups in different historical periods show remarkable similarities. These parallels reflect commonalities in the human condition. One story type identified by Joseph Campbell – the Hero's Journey – is a common archetype for individual narratives and is particularly applicable to leadership.

Hero's Journey stories appear in all cultures, but their underlying character, plot, and thematic structure are much the same. Table 1 on page 20 shows how the Hero's Journey story reflects the cycle of our lives.

The right-hand column in the table reflects David Kantor's model of life cycle. Also note that all major life crises have components of feeling, power, and meaning. I have suggested what seems to be the primary focus of each crisis.

In this view, our lives are quests that follow a sequence similar to that in the stories of Adam and Eve, Moses, Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz,* Harry Potter, and the great heroes of mythology. Many of us start in what we initially experience as a safe, protected place, at home with our parents. We feel loved unconditionally. Over time, we learn that our situation and the love we receive are not perfect. We go on our life's journey, experience

ONCE UPON A TIME

TABLE 1   **Hero's Journey Archetype**

THE HERO'S JOURNEY	OUR LIFE'S JOURNEY
The hero is in a stable place.	We have an idyllic early childhood.
Something breaks the hero loose.	We come to realize that our world – and the love we are receiving – are not perfect.
The hero goes into a difficult period.	We ask ourselves: "What's wrong with *me."* We experience the childhood *crisis of affect* – "Am I loved, am I loveable?"
The hero emerges from that dark night of the soul and goes on a journey to accomplish great things, meet daunting challenges, and reach a desired destination.	We begin our life's journey to restore love to our world.
The hero experiences tests along the way.	We experience the young adulthood *crisis of power* – "What will I do with my life? Who is the best person I can be in the world?" We experience the midlife breakdown/breakthrough *crisis of meaning* – "What has my life meant? Have I been living a life of worth and meaning?"
If the hero passes the tests and is successful in her journey, she achieves her goal, meets her daunting challenge, and reaches her desired destination.	We go through the *legacy story of maturity* – "What is the legacy I will leave behind to make the world a better place, to ensure that I have led a good life, to feel good about my time on this planet?"

> **One of the most powerful ways to understand your leadership style, to learn why you behave and lead as you do, and to discover ways of dramatically increasing your effectiveness as a leader is to understand your story.**

many tests, and hopefully reach our destination – the satisfaction that we have led a life of worth and meaning and have left the planet a better place.

Our Deep Stories in Our Lives and Work

How do our stories manifest in our leadership and in our professional lives? Have you ever been in the middle of a leadership situation and felt, "I've been here before"? The *content* of the situation may have been new, but nonetheless the territory seemed familiar. Have you experienced a tough, high-pressure challenge in which you felt stuck? You may have experienced yourself trying the same things over and over again, each time striv-

ing a little harder, and each time feeling a little more stuck. Conversely, you have probably experienced leadership challenges that you resolved successfully, despite huge problems; you performed to the max, your energy flowed naturally, and you were effective. You may or may not have known why things went so well, but you knew that they did, and you felt great.

Experiences like these reflect your deep systemic story at play in your present-day leadership. One of the most powerful ways to understand your leadership style, to learn why you behave and lead as you do, and to discover ways of dramatically increasing your effectiveness as a leader is to understand your story.

Three Levels of Understanding

There are three ways to think about yourself and your behavior in complex systems, such as a workplace setting. To increase your effectiveness as a leader, it is useful to understand all three and how they interact. You can understand yourself in systems by looking at *Events*, by seeing *Patterns,* and by examining *Structure*.

Event Level

When looking at your leadership at the event level, you pose the questions, "What just happened? What occurred and how did I respond?" In this context, an event is a particular leadership incident and the leader's response.

Pattern Level

When you look at patterns, you consider the questions, "What's been happening? What have been my patterns of behavior over time in response to these kinds of events?" A pattern would be a recurring sequence of thoughts, feelings, and actions that you exhibit in response to particular kinds of challenges.

Structural Level

When you examine structure, you answer the questions, "Why do I keep engaging in these patterns? What is the root cause of my behavior in response to difficult challenges?" When you see particular events and a repeating pattern in your leadership/professional behavior, you can begin to identify your *deep systemic story*. Your story is the place from which your entrenched patterns of behavior emerge.

Your leverage for change increases as you understand events, patterns, and then structure. At the event level, you may change your reaction so that the outcome of one situation is more desirable. As the pattern level, you can work on changing your patterns of behavior over time. At the structural level, you can shift your underlying assumptions and change how you see yourself as a person and leader. At this deepest level, you can learn to transform your story and thereby transform how you lead.

To summarize, the steps to seeing and changing your deep story are:

- Make a **clear choice** to do so.
- Deepen your capacity to **observe yourself and reflect on what you observe.** Metaphorically save "15% of your mind" to practice watching yourself doing what you are doing.
- Identify key **events**, e.g., important leadership or coaching challenges.

- Track your **patterns** of thinking, feeling, and behaving over time.
- Examine the **structure**—the story you told yourself about your experience in your first system. That story will reveal how and why you learned to behave and be in human systems as you do.
- Decide what you are going to **do** with what you have discovered.
- Think about **alternatives**—different ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that are likely to foster success.
- If necessary, **create a new story**. Choose new, high-leverage ways of approaching difficult situations.
- **Practice, practice, practice.** When challenges come up, continue to make choices in favor of your new story.

Our Stories in the Workplace

Surprisingly, some people, even those who have had coaching or counseling, haven't thought about the implications of their stories for the workplace. After a two-hour conversation during which we discussed his story, one leader commented to me, "I always knew the value of looking at our earlier experiences to help us grow in our personal lives, but I never saw the connection to my work."

© Thinkstock/marekuliasz

Needing Affirmation to Feel Good About Myself

Here is an example of the event, pattern, structure framework applied to a real leader's story:

Event: In Q1 I felt great. My group and I were at the top of our game. We were exceeding our numbers and getting rave reviews from the organization. Now, here we are in Q2 with leveling off of the numbers, and we don't hear anything from anyone. I feel terrible.

Pattern: For as long as I can remember, I have felt great when I was accomplishing great things and getting recognition for it. Then, even a short time later, when I am not achieving the best and getting recognition for it, I feel terrible. I've wondered my whole life why I need so much external affirmation to feel good about myself. I don't think I will ever know the answer.

Structure: My father is a bright but reserved writer. He relates to other people, including me, mostly on an intellectual level. As his daughter, I learned I could get his attention by doing things like making perfect grades and excelling in sports, which I did. My father noticed me and gave me lots of praise for my achievements, but he didn't pay much attention to me at other times.

Seeing the structure – that is, why *she felt terrible about herself when not getting immediate external affirmation – enabled her to rise above the negative feelings and choose to think, feel, and act in more productive ways.*

Story work is really about understanding self as a system within a larger system. Most of the story work I have done has been with leaders, and the focus has almost always been on how their stories influence them in complex work situations. Illuminating the powerful connection between our deep personal stories and our work as leaders and professionals is a key contribution of this approach.

Our stories are not only reflected in our interactions with others (boss, employees, peers) – the "soft stuff" – but also in how we deal with hard, tangible work issues, for example budgets, financial projections, sales quotas, business objectives, and project and strategic plans. One VP I worked with was regarded as the best "people person" in her company. At the same time, her reviews showed that she was not tough enough with subordinates and not assertive enough about issues regarding money and power.

As we talked about both aspects – her skill at relating to people and her goal to be stronger at creating and achieving business plans and financial objectives – we discovered that the same story lay beneath both. The VP had a high need for affiliation – for connecting with other people – that caused her to act in certain ways. Her story was about her parents, who were extremely attached to one another, so attached that there wasn't room in that relationship for their children. They even said to their kids, "Our relationship with each other is more important than our relationship with you." Therefore, this executive had spent much of her life developing and maintaining connections with other people. She had learned to avoid any issues she feared might push people away –for example, language about money, budgets, work plans, action. Her ability to work well with people and her need to refine her hard business skills emanated from the same source – her systemic story.

By understanding that underlying narrative, the VP was able to reframe her thinking. She came to realize that being clear and assertive about "the hard stuff" wouldn't push people away; it could actually improve her relationships by engendering respect and creating shared goals and expectations. The VP ultimately created a leadership development plan that included being more direct with employees, creating clear business plans and aggressive targets, and presenting those goals to her team assertively.

Grace and Transformation

You hold your story deeply; you are so close to it that you often can't see it. But your deep story

does not have to impede your success. In fact, it can become a source of energy and growth. *When you learn to see your story and how it both helps and constrains you,* you can tap into your success story and enhance it, transcend your difficulty story, and broaden your range of options.

Remember that *if you created the story, you can learn to change it.* The ability to see your story and reframe it is a learned skill. When you look at your personal narrative as a source of strength, forgiveness, and wisdom rather than as a source of hurt and constraint, you can keep the parts that are helpful and modify the parts that hold you back. You can emphasize the aspects that work and create a new story that is more aligned with your desired results and highest aspirations.

Working with our stories is ultimately a journey of learning, integration, and grace that can take us to a new place. We are transformed in our minds, in our hearts, and in our use of power.

Meaning

We change how we think about things and the meaning we make out of them. We come to recognize our implicit assumptions and how they may hold us back. We become able to move beyond these now outdated assumptions, thinking more broadly, more openly, more wisely, and more lovingly. *We develop a new story of what we want our lives to be from here on.*

Affect

We recognize and embrace our feelings, both our good feelings and our unpleasant feelings. We face them and acknowledge that they are part of who we are. We come to feel a mix of fear, anxiety, and mortality along with a deep sense of surrender and peace. *We accept the feelings that were part of our old story and develop others that support our new one.*

> **The ability to see your story and reframe it is a learned skill.**

Power

We acknowledge our own power and learn to exercise it more constructively. We come to peace with the fact that while we can't control complex situations, we can work with them – and we do. We develop the ability to move forward with our lives in new ways. *We learn to bring our new story into being.*

The transformation we experience may not change the fact that our core issues are part of us and cause us pain. We may never totally eliminate the pull of our difficulty stories. But we *will* transform *how we see them, how we frame them, and how we relate to them*. We will *reframe* them, and in so doing, change them from instruments of pain and destruction to instruments of learning and grace. We will truly see them, and ourselves, anew. ∎

Note: The approach to stories explicated in this article grew out of Steve's 10 years of work with noted systems consultant and family therapist David Kantor. This article is adapted from Steve's new book Unleashing the Power of Your Story, *to be released Spring 2014 through smashwords.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Ober is a senior practitioner in executive coaching, leadership development, organizational learning and change, and executive team learning. He was a vice president and partner at Arthur D. Little, a principal at Innovation Associates, and a key member of the ADL Strategy and Organization Practice. Currently, he is the president and principal of Chrysalis Executive Coaching & Consulting. *steve@chrysalisconsulting.org*

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

Volume 13, Number 3

SUBSCRIPTION OPTIONS

To order online and for a full description of subscription options, please visit our website.

Receive *Reflections* as a SoL Connections member:
- USD$125 U.S. (electronic edition only)

One year individual subscription:
- USD$75 U.S. (electronic edition only)

University/Non-profit Institution
- USD$175 United States
- USD$195 International

For-profit Institution
- USD$275 United States
- USD$295 International

Reflections: The SoL Journal is published by the Society for Organizational Learning. Inquiries regarding subscriptions, address changes, back issues, reprints, and permission requests should be directed to:

reflections@solonline.org
Reflections: The SoL Journal
PO Box 425005
Cambridge, MA 02142-0001

+1.617.300.9530 (phone)
+1.617.812.1257 (fax)
E-mail: reflections@solonline.org
www.solonline.org/?Reflections
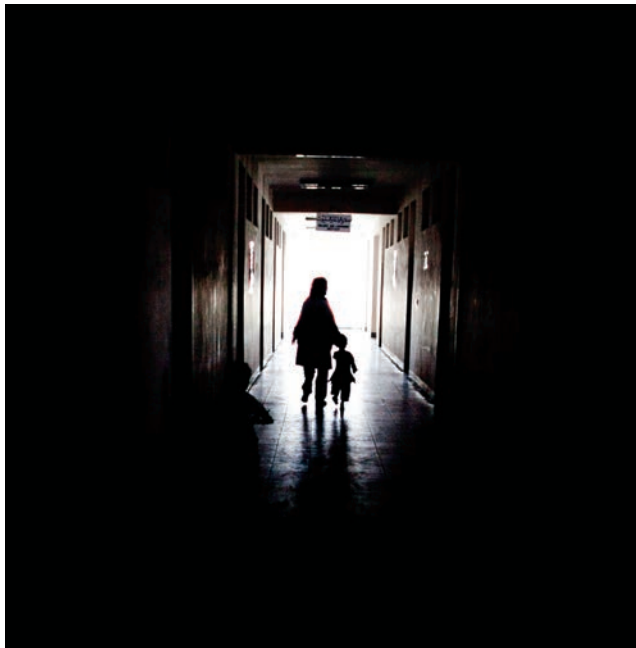
© Thinkstock/Majid Saeedi

Design & Production: NonprofitDesign.com

society for **SoL** organizational learning