

# Public Narrative Participant Guide

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Originally adapted from the works of Marshall Ganz of Harvard University  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This workshop guide has been developed over the course of many trainings by Liz Pallatto, Joy Cushman, Jake Waxman, Kate Hilton, Tiffany Steinwert, Devon Anderson and many others.

We welcome your suggestions for improving this guide further for future trainings. We also welcome you to use it and adapt it for your own trainings, subject to the restrictions below.

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**PUBLIC NARRATIVE  
& STORY OF SELF**

# INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC NARRATIVE

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Goals for this session:

- \* To learn the basics of how public narrative works: values, emotion & story structure
- \* Each participant practices, receives feedback on his/her story of self, and learns to coach others

## Public narrative as a practice of leadership

Leadership is about accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve purpose in the face of uncertainty. Narrative is how we learn to make choices and construct our identities – as individuals, as communities, as nations.

## Each of us has a compelling story to tell

Each of us has a story that can move others to action. As you learn this skill, you will be learning to tell a compelling story about yourself, your constituency, and the need for urgent – and hopeful – action. In addition, you will gain practice in listening, and coaching others to tell a good story.

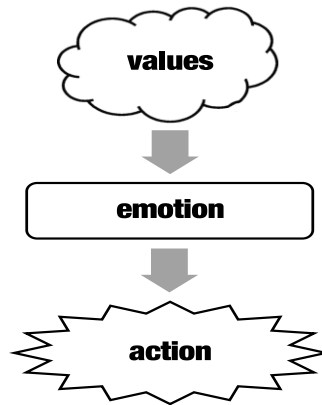
## Why Use Public Narrative? Two Ways of Knowing (And we need both!)

Public leadership requires the use of both the “head” and the “heart” to mobilize others to act effectively on behalf of shared values. It engages people in interpreting why they should change the world – their motivation – and how they can act to change it – their strategy. Public narrative is the “why” – the art of translating values into action through stories.



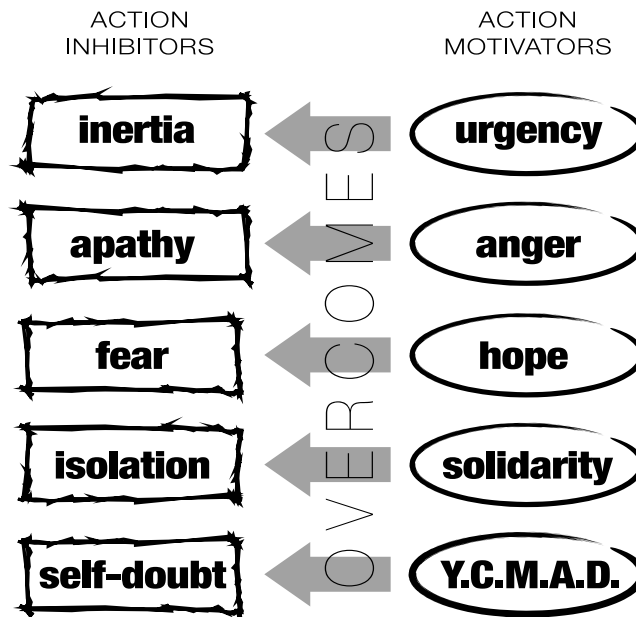
**The key to motivation is understanding that values inspire action through emotion.**

Emotions inform us of what we value in ourselves, in others, and in the world, and enable us to express the motivational content of our values to others. Stories draw on our emotions and show our values in action, helping us *feel* what matters, rather than just thinking about or telling others what matters. Because stories allow us to express our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others.



**Some emotions inhibit action, but other emotions facilitate action.**

The language of emotion is the language of movement—they actually share the same root word. Action is inhibited by inertia, fear, self-doubt, isolation, and apathy. Action is facilitated by urgency, hope, YCMAD (you can make a difference), solidarity, and anger. Stories mobilize emotions of action to overcome emotions that inhibit us from action.



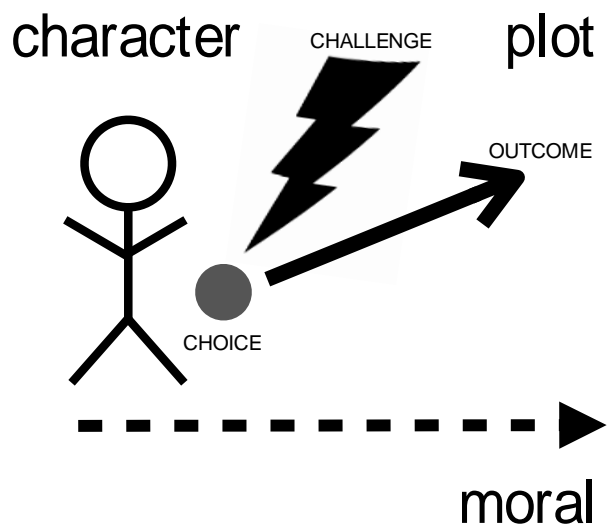
## The Three Key Elements of Public Narrative Structure

### Challenge – Choice – Outcome

A plot begins with an unexpected challenge that confronts a character with an urgent need to pay attention, to make a choice, a choice for which s/he is unprepared. The choice yields an outcome – and the outcome teaches a moral.

Because we can empathetically identify with the character, we can “feel” the moral. We not only hear “about” someone’s courage; we can also be inspired by it.

The story of the character and their effort to make choices encourages listeners to think about their own values, and challenges, and inspires them with new ways of thinking about how to make choices in their own lives.



*Narrative Structure*

**Public narrative combines a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now.**



*Public Narrative*  
COURTESY: MARSHALL GANZ

**A “story of self” tells why you have been called to serve.**

Every one of us has a compelling story to tell. We have all made choices that shaped our life’s path—how to respond to challenges we faced as children, whether or not to take leadership in our places of worship, our schools, where we found the hope to take risks, etc.

The key focus is on choice points, moments in our lives when our values become real when we have to choose in the face of uncertainty. When did you first care about being heard, about concern with others, about abuses of power, about poverty? Why? When did you feel you had to do something? Why did you feel you could? What were the circumstances? The power in your story of self is to reveal something of yourself and your values—not your deepest secrets, but the key shaping moments in your life. We all have stories of pain, or we wouldn’t think the world needs changing. We all have stories of hope, or we wouldn’t think we could change it.

**A “story of us” communicates why our community in particular is called to act, and why we in particular have the capacity to lead.**

Just as with your story of self, the key choice points in the life of the community are those moments that express the values underlying the work your organization does. The key is to focus on telling a story about specific people and specific moments of choice or action that shaped your community. Tell a story that invites others to join you in this community.

**A “story of now” communicates the urgent challenge we are called upon to face now.**

The story of now focuses on the challenge that requires action, the hope for that action, and the choice we are calling upon others to make. In a story of now you call on others to join you in action.

### ***Incorporating Challenge, Choice, and Outcome in Your Own Story***

There are some key questions you need to answer as you consider the choices you have made in your life and the path you have taken that brought you to this point in time as a leader. Once you identify a specific choice point, perhaps your first true experience of challenge, on your choice to do something about it, dig deeper by answering the following questions.

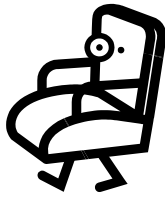
**Challenge:** Why did you feel it was a challenge? What was so challenging about it? Why was it your challenge?

**Choice:** Why did you make the choice you did? Where did you get the courage (or not)? Where did you get the hope (or not)? Did your parents or grandparents' life stories teach you in any way how to act in that moment? How did it feel?

**Outcome:** How did the outcome feel? Why did it feel that way? What did it teach you? What do you want to teach us? How do you want us to feel?

A word about challenge. Sometimes people see the word challenge and think that they need to describe the misfortunes of their lives. Keep in mind that a struggle might be one of your own choosing – a high mountain you decided to climb as much as a valley you managed to climb out of. Any number of things may have been a challenge to you and be the source of a good story to inspire others.





## PRESENTATIONS AND FEEDBACK: Public Narrative PRACTICE WORK

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### GOALS

- Practice telling your Story of Self and get good, constructive feedback
- Learn to coach others' stories so they become better storytellers

### AGENDA

**TOTAL TIME: 35 min.**

1. Review the agenda. **Choose a timekeeper.** 5 min.
2. Take some time as individuals to **silently develop your Story** 5 min.  
Use the worksheet that follows.
3. **Go around the group and tell your story one by one.** Each person has 2 minutes to 25 min.  
tell his/her story and 3 minutes for coaching from the group.

NOTE: You have 2 minutes to tell your story. Stick to this limit. Make sure the timekeeper cuts you off. It encourages focus and ensures everyone has a chance.



**WORKSHEET:**  
DEVELOPING YOUR STORY

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What is the change you want to make in the world: your story of now?

Why are you called to make that change: what specific experiences have shaped your story of self?

What personal story can you tell that will help others understand why you want to make that change?

CHALLENGE:	CHOICE:	OUTCOME:



## WORKSHEET: INSTRUCTIONS FOR SELF-FACILITATION

When listening to the stories of others, listen and pay attention to how the story resonates within you. During the feedback portion, comment on the following:

### Public Narrative #1

What connects with me?

*be specific: choices, feelings/values, images*

What would I like to know more about?

- focusing in: what details and moments do you want to hear more about?
- bridging parts of the story: what gaps in the story did you want to know about?

### Public Narrative #2

What connects with me?

*be specific: choices, feelings/values, images*

What would I like to know more about?

- focusing in: what details and moments do you want to hear more about?
- bridging parts of the story: what gaps in the story did you want to know about?

### Public Narrative #3

What connects with me?

*be specific: choices, feelings/values, images*

What would I like to know more about?

- focusing in: what details and moments do you want to hear more about?
- bridging parts of the story: what gaps in the story did you want to know about?

### Public Narrative #4

What connects with me?

What would I like to know more about?

- focusing in: what details and moments do you want to hear more about?
- bridging parts of the story: what gaps in the story did you want to know about?

