



This guest post is from [Drew Steadman](#), who created the top online resource for military professionals to develop their leadership skills. Read more from Drew at [The Military Leader](#) or follow him on Twitter [@mil_Leader](#)

By: Drew Steadman

Pop quiz...

What methods are best for inspiring the team after failure?

How long are you willing to wait for information after an initial report?

How long should a leader wait before jumping in to resolve internal team conflict?

What kind of failure would cause you to relieve a subordinate?

When is micromanagement appropriate?

And one more question:

How did you meet your spouse?

The last question should be much easier to answer. Why is that? It's not like the other questions aren't important. They're just a bit nebulous, contextual, and abstract...and you probably don't think about them very often.

The story of meeting your spouse, however, is clear, memorable, and specific. You lived the experience with anticipation and emotion permanency, recounting the story many times since. You know *how* to tell that story, complete with suspense and inflection to make it enjoyable. It's a familiar narrative.

What I want to assert now is that the best leaders are as familiar with their *leadership narrative*, their perspective on the fundamental components of leadership, as they are with the story of meeting their spouse.

What is a leadership narrative?

A leadership narrative is the tangible representation of your leadership DNA. It originates from your worldview, biases, experiences, and beliefs and is literally the combination of thoughts, words, examples, stories, assertions, and guidance that you communicate as a leader.

Great leaders regularly talk about leadership.

Leadership, for them, is at the very least a dedicated hobby but more often, it is a passion.

What's so important about the leadership narrative?

Great leadership does not happen by accident, and neither does a coherent leadership narrative. A leader with a solidified leadership perspective ponders the varying facets of the environment in which he leads. This leader routinely engages in topics of leadership, ethics, organizational development, training, and so on.

In having these regular interactions, she brings hazy beliefs and scattered thoughts into focus, coalescing them into guidance that is vetted and has intellectual and emotional legitimacy. This effort serves as a rehearsal for future decisions she will make and challenges she will face.

The leader with a formed leadership narrative will face fewer surprises than the person who has resisted this form of personal growth. She will have rational responses to abstract situations and emotional stability when others don't. When the leader with no engaged passion for leadership is still grappling with the dynamics of a problem, the leader with narrative will already be solving it.

How to develop your leadership narrative?

I mentioned above that the best leaders talk regularly about leadership. They weave it into daily interactions, which gives them opportunity to hear opposing perspectives, test theories, and hone their own arguments. Discussion, however, is only part of a holistic approach to developing a leadership narrative, which looks like this: **Consumption - Distillation - Reflection - Refinement - Transmission**

"You are today where your thoughts have brought you;

you will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you." ~James Allen

The process begins with **consumption**. The leader with a narrative to develop actively seeks out and consumes high quality professional content. Books, professional journals, online magazines, blogs, conferences, and many others make up the leader's consumption menu. **Consumption of professional content is such a pivotally decisive step to great leadership that I'm convinced no success can be found without it.**

The leader then **distills** (or filters) the most relevant of that content to identify what will become part of his leadership narrative. If reading a book is consumption, distillation is underlining a passage that resonates. Mentors and leader development programs play an important role here by helping junior leaders extract appropriate insight from professional sources.

Reflection is the step a leader takes in shaping the distilled content into personalized insight. For example, after underlining a book passage, the reflection step is writing in the margins to capture how the text is specifically relevant and applicable. Reflection is intellectually challenging. Anyone can pick out a brilliant quote, but **the great leader is able to convert that insight into lessons that resonate in her own leadership environment**. Leaders can also draw insight from experience, provided that they are open to learning from that experience.

Refinement is the core of developing a narrative, and the step in which leaders often fail to fully engage. In refinement, leaders consolidate the insight they gained from professional content and experience, then continually expose it to the real world. They discuss their thoughts on leadership with their network of peers and mentors, hearing new perspectives and defending beliefs. They say things like, "Hey, I read the other day that... What do you think?" or "A mentor recommended I deal with a situation like so, how would you do it?" Writing and publishing are also excellent ways to refine the leadership narrative. **Putting words to paper consolidates beliefs and requires specificity that casual conversation does not.**

“Thoughts disentangle themselves over the lips and through fingertips.”

~ Michael Hyatt

Transmission. A leadership narrative is purely academic unless the leader transmits it to his sphere of influence. If this preceding steps give the leader an arsenal of insight to apply across the organization, transmission is the deployment of that insight at the right time and place, and to the right people. Transmission is not just regurgitation. It is **how** a leader uses her particular skills to solve unique problems. **Transmission is the art of leadership.**

Become the Leader You Were Meant to Be

New insight does not simply appear. It is formed from the consumption of professional content, growth brought on by experience, and the refinement that everyday discussion brings. Great leaders navigate this process intentionally, honing their leadership narrative so that they are ready when problems arise. The leadership narrative is an intimate familiarity with the type of leader one seeks to be, a familiarity that allows the leader to employ his talent with the same coherence, comfort, and excitement that he tells the story of meeting his spouse.

Maybe now is the time for you to energize your leadership narrative by evaluating how your leadership skills develop. Challenge the efficacy of what content you consume, engage your network to refine your thoughts, and shape your message to reflect a coherent narrative. In doing so, you will prime yourself for the quality of leadership you will one day have to exhibit.

Questions for Leaders

- How does your leadership narrative emerge? Is it a deliberate process?
- In what ways could you be more involved with how your subordinates develop their

narratives?

- Does the quality of your daily conversations create potential for new insight?

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