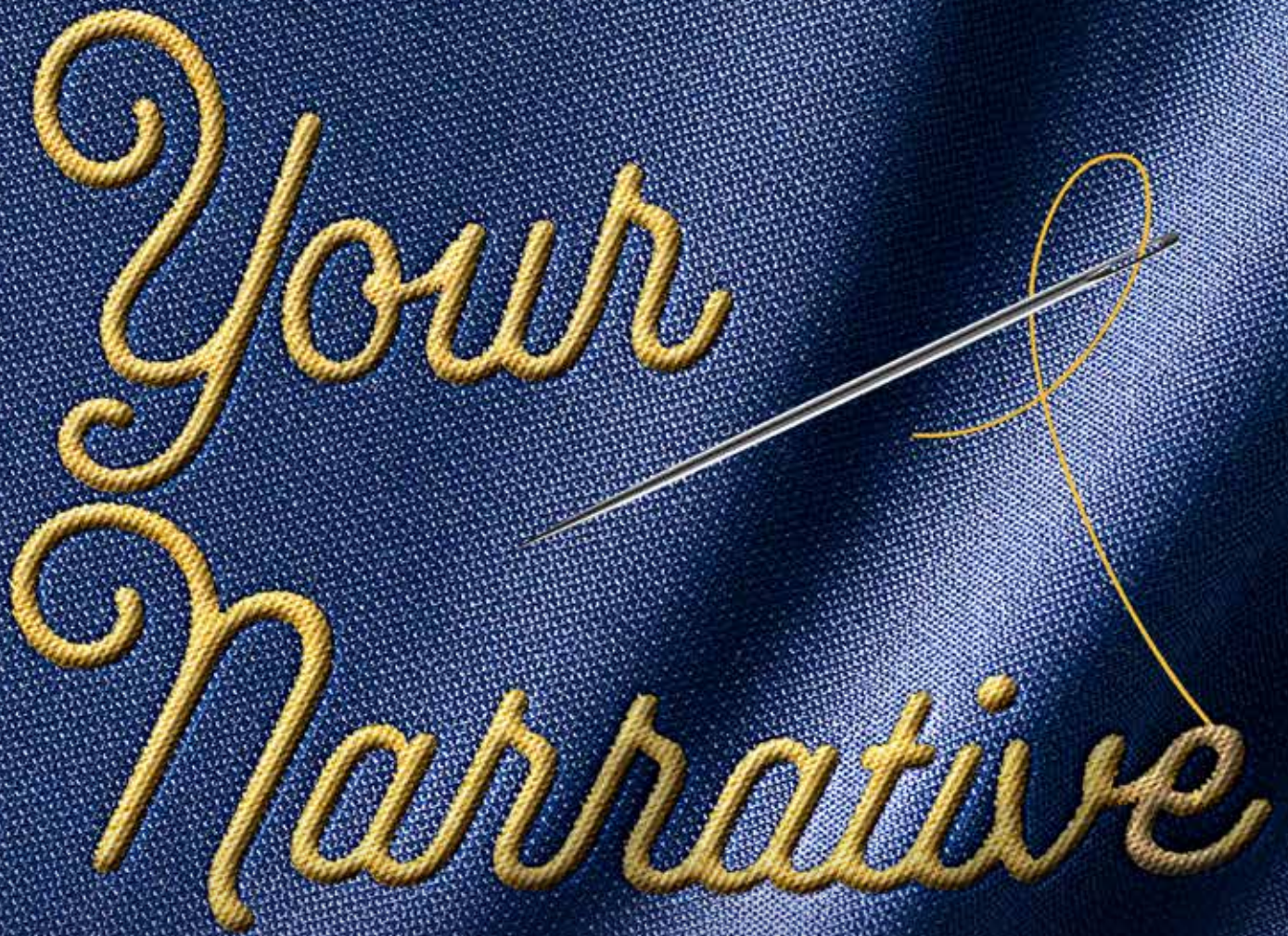


Level Up Brand

Before your next career move, leverage your golden thread.

The image features the words "Your Narrative" written in a cursive, yellow, rope-like font. A silver needle with a yellow thread is shown stitching the letters onto a dark blue, textured fabric background. The needle is positioned diagonally across the text, with the thread looping through the letters.

Your Narrative

— which ties the breadth of your experiences together.

BY TOSCA DIMATTEO



Are you ready for a career breakthrough? If so, pulling up your resume should not be the first item on your to-do list. In the pursuit of new roles, companies, or careers, the first thing people do naturally—and often unconsciously—is tell ourselves a story about our job history. Those stories are not the pretty ones that we share with big smiles and wide eyes. The narratives are often outdated, harsh, and do not account for where we are going next. They make us feel constricted and inadequate.

In turn, the stories we relay to others are clouded with that warped perspective, not just in what we are saying, but how we feel beneath it all. In that way, we can be our own obstacle to reaching our next career goal.

A lack of focus on the now

One of the main reasons our narratives become outdated is that we tend to tell stories about our past from the perspective of who we were then, what we were trying to achieve, and what our situation was at that point in time. What's more effective is sharing our stories based on the complete understanding of our journey—and with our future career in mind.

Let me use a personal example to illustrate how a narrative can shift by keeping in mind where you are going. For context, my current career focus is on my speaking, thought leadership, and coaching services.

Old narrative: Upon graduating with a bachelor's degree, my first job in a corporate landscape was working in the training and development department at Wegmans Food Markets. I created Produce University and rolled it out for the then 65-store chain, training trainers in every region for both existing stores and as part of the new-store-opening process.

New narrative: Since the early days of my career, I've been passionate about helping people reach their potential by ensuring they have practical tools for their unique dynamics and work environ-

ment. As an instructional designer within Wegmans Food Markets, I created both on-the-job and classroom training materials for produce employees. To this day, I support professionals looking to level up their career, with context being an integral aspect that informs my content and services.

Notice how the new narrative uses context that's important to the type of people I want to influence while also teasing up my experience as an additional proof point for the work I do now. That is a shift that takes you from speaking from your past to speaking to the future you want to create for yourself.

Write out or record a voice memo of how you currently tell your stories of the past. Don't overthink it or try to perfect it. Next, ask yourself: "Are these stories the most empowered versions I can tell for what I want to do next?" Don't worry about what to do next. Awareness that you have an opportunity in your storytelling is the first step to unlocking the power of your personal brand.

A narrow viewpoint

Another reason our narratives become outdated is that people process their experiences in a vacuum and in a compartmentalized way. It's difficult to find new ways of looking at how everything connects without getting a neutral, outside perspective.

For example, people update their resumes, bios, profiles, and websites without the benefit of having someone ask deep questions about their experiences and impact. We overlook or downplay our superpowers because they are second nature to us. As a result, we don't emphasize or call them out in our narratives.

Let's take one of my clients, "Darby," as a case in point. She started a fashion business as side work but omitted that experience from her resume, online profiles, and interview conversations. She didn't see how the entrepreneurial skills she gained could apply to the next full-time job she was pursuing in an unrelated field. She also couldn't see how the experience enhanced her narrative about being a results-oriented analytical thinker.

In our work together, I asked Darby deep reflection questions about all her experiences, and she started to identify how those experiences applied to the field she was pursuing. As a result, her inner confidence grew, and she chose to include those experiences she previously excluded from her resume. She now sees how those stories contribute to her brand narrative and personal strengths of being creative and tenacious.

Having someone to ask you questions, mirror what you're saying, and point out the things you can't see is critical to developing your stories in a way that lights you up. If you don't absolutely and unapologetically love your journey, how can you expect someone else to value it?

An unresolved past

Most of us have emotions about our past that we haven't worked through and released. It's difficult to fully embrace and share your stories authentically, powerfully, and without reservation when

heavy emotions linger in your mind. That's a third reason our narratives are outdated.

Individuals who have experienced a layoff at some point in their career, for example, often feel shame or embarrassment, even years after it happens. When you carry past baggage, it clouds the truth of how you grew as a result (which is great fodder for interviews) as well as limits your beliefs about what's possible for the future.

You have many different options for doing the work to clear, heal, and accept your past and develop trust. For instance, the common experience that many of my clients have had is not feeling that past managers valued or supported them. One practice for clearing such experiences is to write a letter to people who conjure negative feelings with no filter for anything you need to express. Doing that enables you to gain more clarity about your experience and the emotions you associate with it.

The point is not to send the letter, but rather to give yourself permission to express yourself fully and then discard it. Finding the right coach, therapist, or mental health resource can go a long way to finding peace (and healing) with parts of your journey that have left an emotional imprint and open wound.

The prework to creating a new narrative

Being aware of your outdated narratives will enable you to begin creating new ones. The first step to crafting a new personal brand narrative is to zoom out of your day-to-day way of thinking and operating. Think of it like this: When you're in the middle of a project with technical challenges, political landmines everywhere, long hours, and stressful days, how often are you stepping back to think about the awesome project on which you and your team are working and the impact it will have?

The key to zooming out in a way that will truly serve you is to do so while being your own best friend. That is no small feat, especially if you're prone to experiencing internal criticism. But if you practice being a best friend to yourself, you train the muscle of seeing your strengths even when things don't work out the way you wanted. You also become more adept at seeing your incredible accomplishments on the path you've taken thus far.

See your experience with a new lens

The next step is to get in your CAR to write a new, empowering narrative about your past experiences. Whether you're working on your resume or LinkedIn profile or preparing for an interview or prospective call, look at each experience—and even the specific tasks within each role—by using the CAR model.

Context. Recall the context in which you started your job or specific responsibility. By fully honoring the context, you will better understand your impact. For example, context can include:

- Inaugural roles. Having to define a role, or take on responsibilities that someone else once had, says a lot about the situation.

Pull on your
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- Industry disruption or a misalignment of resources. Changes in marketplace dynamics and budget realities are contexts that set the stage for how big your wins were.
- Political climate. Having to rebuild trust with your team due to past leadership mistakes or being part of high-stakes company projects are factors that set the stage for your strengths in navigating challenging environments.

Action. Consider what actions you took and how you went about doing your job. People often overlook the *how*, but that component of your action is what's most unique to you. Examples of the *how* of your actions include:

- Values with which you led (such as integrity, transparency, or tenacity)

- With whom you collaborated (such as departments or external vendors)
- Whom you needed to influence (such as teams or decision makers)
- Approach to analysis (such as using new data or looking at information in a new way)

Result. Mine your experience for all the results of which you were a part. That includes both quantitative and qualitative aspects. People are often more comfortable identifying their quantitative results because goals and objectives typically sync in that way. However, qualitative goals are also significant and speak to another layer of what differentiates you from others. Qualitative wins could be:

- Ideas or projects on which you gained approval
- Ways in which the team or organizational culture shifted (such as becoming more people-centric)
- New mindsets, paradigms, or ways of working that you influenced

Make sure to review all your experiences, including the ones in your personal life such as volunteer activities or managing your home. Such undertakings provide information for the strengths you have, which you can carry into what's next on your career path.

If you aren't sure where to start, begin with the three proudest moments in your life. When you put your stories together (hopefully on paper), you will start to see the results people attribute to you as well as the unique impact you have when you step into a room. For example, while a result may be that you helped create a more people-centric culture, the impact may be that you created a more motivated workforce and developed leaders versus followers.

Embarking upon the CAR process and recognizing your unique impact will naturally enable you to see the threads that tie your experience together, which is the next step in elevating your narrative. You will have many threads, corresponding with your interests and skills, because you are multidimensional.

The goal is to tease out your golden thread, which is the through line that connects your experiences, strengths, and impact. That thread connects who you are with what you are looking to do next. The direction can range from seeking a promotion to taking a tangential role to starting something new.

Have a sense of where you're headed

If you don't know your exact destination, that's normal. Having a general direction is perhaps more beneficial than a concrete destination because it can help you remain open to possibilities that you haven't yet imagined.

To help find that direction, ask yourself bite-size questions versus heavy, overwhelming ones. For instance, heavy questions sound like "What's my purpose?" or "Where do I want to be in 10 years?" Bite-size questions feel a bit less daunting, such as:

- What do I want more of (and less of) in my career?
- What conversations do I like to be a part of or problems do I like to solve?
- What kinds of people do I like to spend time with?
- What are the three proudest moments in my life? Why?

I have had many clients who thought they knew what they wanted next, but once they did the deep work of excavating their career journey, they started to see where they weren't being fully honest with themselves about what they wanted. One client, "Jackie," came to me for support on her hunt for a new brand strategist role after a long string of them during the past 20 years. After excavating her experiences using the CAR method and seeing the truth about what was frustrating her in her current position (and society at large), she realized that she didn't want to take a linear next step. Instead, Jackie decided to launch her own business, which is something she didn't imagine before we started working together.

Identify your golden thread

Pull on your golden thread to craft a new, empowering, and superior personal brand narrative. Your task is to design the new narrative in a way that explains why your journey has provided the perfect circumstances to step into what's next.

Once Jackie realized that she wanted to start her own consulting agency to help brands in targeting a specific demographic, she created a narrative about why companies should hire her. In the beginning, she felt a lot of self-doubt, mostly because she wasn't an expert in the demographic. But then she started to adjust that old narrative—the one in her head that ultimately leaked out in conversations and undermined her expertise.

Jackie's old narrative: I'm a seasoned and expert brand strategist, having worked for big-name-brand strategy and communications firms. I enjoy sharing research I find, but I'm not the person who provides a point of view on it, especially not on social media.

Jackie's new narrative: I'm an expert at helping brands stay relevant to and be accepted by a target audience that encompasses a diverse set of needs and circumstances. As someone who is an expert in the process of uncovering deep and nuanced consumer insights and who is passionate about that ignored demographic, I can support a brand's growth by successfully engaging an untapped market. I conduct primary and secondary research on the target audience and the content I send out in the world deeply resonates with that segment.

For Jackie, the new narrative was possible because she embarked upon the task of getting out of her comfort zone to honor the new direction she was going. She started to use her voice online and could finally see, at scale, how her perspective struck a chord with the target audience she was passionate about helping.

In sharing her new narrative with old colleagues as well as potential clients, she realized that she could launch her business and take on clients. Her inner critic slowly started to fade away, and her enthusiasm to talk about her budding business grew.

Time for change

Once you have begun to find the seedlings of your new narrative, practice sharing your story with friends, colleagues, and strangers. Experiment with your stories, language, and descriptions until it feels empowering and exciting to you.

Even if you aren't looking for something new right now, going through the process is invaluable. It will go a long way to boosting your confidence and perhaps inspire you to make updates to your branding materials. It's always a good day to proactively manage your personal brand messaging, because if you aren't managing your narrative, someone else is.

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