

A hand is holding a large, white, cutout letter 'Q' against the left page of an open book. The book's cover is dark, and the pages are a light, aged color. The background is a plain, light color.

Q

A Consistent
Personal
Narrative
is the Key to Leading
in the Social Age

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The Social Age is here, and it is the context in which you lead from today onward. So it is important that your personal narrative and the stories you tell are consistent and authentic.

We once had the opportunity to work with two highly successful C-suite executives in the same company, let's call them Bob and Tom. Both were corporate stars and had risen to the very top of their professions. The company's Board, Wall Street analysts, and customers all thought they were both terrific. They each could confidently discuss their successful careers and leadership abilities without seeming to be full of themselves. But as they settled into their top roles one difference became very clear.

Whenever something would go wrong or when there was an urgent issue to be addressed, other executives in the company would say, “Lets go tell Bob”. But when it came to Tom, the question would turn to, “How should we tell Tom?” The impact of this difference was overwhelming. Bob got the straight story quickly and was able to make fast, clear decisions. Tom got a version of the truth. He had to sift through several conversations before having a complete picture and was never sure if he had the whole story. His decisions and actions came slower and he often had to hedge.

Why did this happen? As leaders, our conversations, actions, and behaviors are always in the spotlight, especially in this new world dominated by social media where almost everything is transparent and anyone can comment on our actions to everyone else. Over time the things you do become the story of your leadership, your own “Personal Leadership Narrative.” The consistency of your narrative over time and the way others tell and retell your story powerfully shapes the way your constituents react to you.

The stories that people told about Bob were heroic and consistent. They were stories of how he resolved internal differences, saved customer accounts and brought fiscal discipline. In each story there were common themes in terms of style and values. In the stories people told about Tom, there were no recurring themes. The stories were told for surprise value: “that’s how he did it that time, but then let me tell you about this other time...”

If your narrative is clear, if others have a reasonable understanding of how you are likely to react to a situation, they will believe they understand the “real” you. Once this happens the odds are very good that they will interact with you in a consistent, reliable way.

If your leadership story does not allow others to see consistent themes, your narrative will be one of unreliability. No one will be sure of the “real you.” Each interaction will be a carefully staged test with you as the unpredictable variable: “be careful, you just don’t know how Tom will react.”

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The Tenets of Social Leadership

In the new world of deep interconnectivity, what we call the Social Age, leaders are confronted with challenges that constantly test “who they are,” and each of these tests are now public with everyone able to comment. In the Social Age there are five areas of “who we are” as leaders that most impact our leadership narrative.

These five areas are:

Mindfulness: being fully present in the moment and being aware of other critical aspects of the immediate situation, trends that are lurking over the horizon, and the impact our own responses.

Proactivity: seeing yourself as able to influence the events around you and then taking action, even in the face of ambiguity and contradiction.

Authenticity: creating positive momentum with your constituents through broad inclusion, emotional engagement, and conveying a sense of purpose for the organization.

Openness: finding connections within complex situations, using multiple models to frame situations and make decisions, and conveying to others your personal sense of purpose.

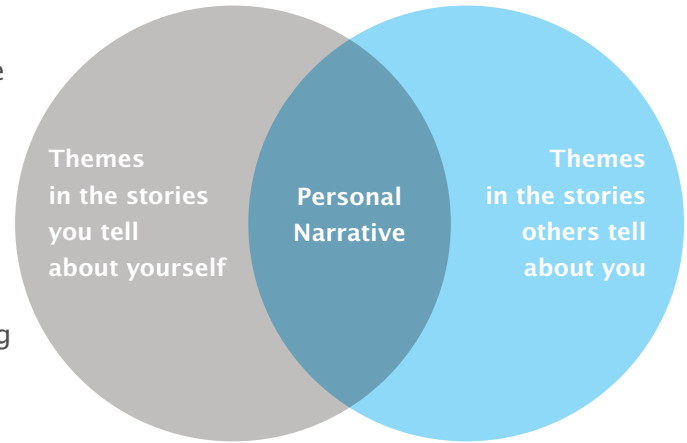
Social Scalability: recognizing and acting on the realities of today's social/digital nature of communication where a leader's needs to communicate simultaneously to one person, one group, and every group at once.

Your leadership narrative is uniquely yours. There is no one right way to lead in these five areas. Rather, they are aspects of who you are as a person. Thriving as a leader in the Social Age means taking a good look at your self and understanding how you are most productive in each of these five areas.

The Learning Arc

Taking a hard look at your own leadership narrative allows you to accomplish two important things. First, it gives you the opportunity to bring your autobiography (the stories you tell about yourself), and your biography (the stories others tell about you), into alignment. This alignment is the road to consistency and the foundation of demonstrating the personal authenticity needed to succeed as a leader in the Social Age.

Second, understanding your own narrative allows you to take control of your growth as a leader meaningfully and thoughtfully. Joseph Campbell, in his book *A Hero With A Thousand Faces*, describes what he termed “The Hero’s Journey.” In Campbell’s view, the Hero’s Journey is the common structure that underlies almost all mythology from the stories of Osiris and Prometheus to Anakin and Luke Skywalker.



In the Hero's Journey, a hero is called to adventure, struggles with accepting this call, receives aid, meets with a series of trials, atones for his past, receives a great gift or power, and returns to his home amidst additional trials where he uses his new gift or power for the good of all. From Campbell's eloquent 17-stage model, we have created what we call a "Learning Arc," which consists of six parts:

1. **Seminal Situation:** a significant or defining career event.
2. **Struggle:** this seminal situation causes difficulties that have not been encountered before.
3. **Help:** someone or some event provides new skills, learning or insight to help overcome the struggle.
4. **Trial:** the new skills, learning or insight are put to the test.
5. **Success:** the leader overcomes a set of obstacles and deals with success within the context of the current challenge.
6. **New state:** the leader now has a new set of learning, skills, or insight to apply broadly.

You can use this model to look at the stories of your life and uncover the themes that drive you and that others assume are the “real you.” Begin by making a list of 4-6 seminal experiences in your career. Use the chart below as a map for these stories, answering the questions in the chart for each.

The Social Leader Learning Arc

→ Seminal Situation:

1. I **struggled** with:
2. I was **helped by**:
3. The main **trial** to my abilities was:
4. I **succeeded** in overcoming this trial by:
5. Now in many **new situations** I am able to:

Once you’ve done this, look at all of the maps at once and search for themes in each of the five areas of social leadership: Mindfulness, Proactivity, Authenticity, Openness, and Social Scalability.

Use the following questions to uncover themes in each of the five Social Leadership areas:

Mindfulness

- Did I react to what was going on in the moment or to something that had gone on in the past?
- Was I looking at the situation from all possible angles? How do I know?
- Was I also looking out beyond the immediate situation?
- What weak signals was I paying attention to? What did I do about them?

Proactivity

- How did I drive this situation?
- Was I reactive rather than proactive?
- Did I control my reactions or did I react from emotion?
- Was I concerned about losing control? Being too much in control?

Authenticity

- How did I communicate the course of actions I intended to take and wanted others to take?
- What were my motives?
- How did I show those I was leading I had their, and the company's, best interests at heart?
- Did they believe my take on the situation?

Openness

- What assumptions did I make?
- How much certainty did I have in my actions? Was it justified?
- Did I listen to others? Did they believe I was listening?

Social Scalability

- Did I convey the importance and necessity of where I am trying to lead:
 1. In a way that engaged the entire group (organization, department)?
 2. To the team in a way that let them see themselves as members of a potent team?
 3. To each individual in a way that was meaningful just to that person?
- What stories are others telling about this event? Are they helping to establish my leadership?

Once you have a clear sense of your leadership themes, you can begin to understand and engage in conversations, actions, and behaviors within each of these five Social Leadership areas that are authentically productive, and help you accomplish your personal leadership objectives for the benefit of everyone. Your path to growth as a leader is now clear: **expand your productive conversations, actions, and behaviors and diminish your use of the unproductive or counterproductive ones.**

This approach, growing your authentic productive capabilities, stands in stark contrast to the many approaches to leadership development which advocate adopting a specific set of leadership actions without regard to whether or not they are consistent with “who you are.” Authentic growth as a leader involves expanding your productive capabilities, not adopting behaviors that are “not you.” Growing authentically allows your constituents to see your leadership style more clearly and brings your personal narrative—the intersection of your biography and autobiography—into closer-alignment.

How do you go about developing your productive capabilities?

“Understanding your own narrative allows you to take control of your growth as a leader meaningfully and thoughtfully.”

Light bulbs and lightning bolts

It is time for a small thought experiment. This will require you to picture four different things and describe them.

1. **Picture a light bulb.** Describe it. What words come to mind? Bright, illuminating, useful, controllable, predictable, boring?
2. **Now picture a lightning bolt.** What words come to mind now? Bright, illuminating, powerful, dangerous, unpredictable, exciting?
3. **Now think of the last time you were in a “classroom.”** This could have been in school, some corporate training event, or in front of a computer for online training. Describe the experience. Are the words you used more like a light bulb or a lightning bolt?
4. **Finally, picture the last time you took on an assignment where in the beginning you had no real idea what to do or how to succeed.** Describe it. More like a light bulb or a lightning bolt?

With these images in mind, consider the options for developing your leadership capabilities. Trying to help people become leaders by placing them in a classroom has some distinct advantages—the time is focused, you know what the expected outcomes are, you can create

awareness and even inspire people. Also, no one gets fired, so it's a great safe environment. However—and it's a very big however—you don't really learn to be a leader. Welcome to the “light bulb” approach to development.

On the other hand, put someone through the lightning bolt-like crucible of a career altering experience and they will certainly learn an approach to leadership. However—and again it's a big however—you have no idea what type of leadership they are learning and, as happens, some people fail and do get fired. We call this a “do-then-hope” approach to development. Balancing these two approaches has been the dilemma facing leadership development for more than half a century.

In a series of research experiments performed in the 1970's, the influential psychologist Albert Bandura demonstrated two important things. First, he discovered what was so eloquently stated by the great wit Yogi Berra, “you can observe a lot just by watching.” The second thing Bandura discovered is that while observing can teach you something, it is not part of you unless you use it successfully in real circumstances. This led to an approach that we call “learn-then-do,” a combination of: learning in the classroom, attempting it in “real life,” and then getting feedback. Seems a lot like a light bulb.

The “learn-then-do” mode also has limited utility. In this mode we tend to develop “automatic” responses that we mindlessly fall back into every time we are faced with a leadership situation or problem. This is the essence of the athlete’s motto—“Don’t think, react.” This approach to development seeks to create leadership muscle memory with leaders reacting to situations with common, pre-determined, pre-approved behavior patterns.

There are two significant challenges with this approach. First, unfortunately life is much more diverse and unpredictable than what may occur on a football field or a tennis court. As your behavior patterns become more engrained and automatic, it can become difficult for a leader to recognize nuances in situations where the old patterns do not apply. Worse still, this “learn-then-do” approach encourages a lack of adaptability and flexibility.

Authentically growing your productive capabilities requires an approach that is more personally meaningful, insightful, and focused on development that is unique to you. Rather than a “learn-then-do” approach, this requires a “learn-while-doing” approach.

In the learn-while-doing approach, you enter new, challenging situations with an intent for growth. You need to turn lightning bolt experiences from do-then-hope moments to learn-while-doing opportunities.

Seminal Experiences

As we discussed, “seminal situations” are the setting for all of the critical experiences in our careers. Seminal situations render our normal way of responding insufficient. New challenges confront us, and we find ourselves in deeply unfamiliar waters. Seminal situations involve four features, they are: novel, energizing, allow for “behavior innovation,” and have feedback on success and failure available in the moment.

We know how to set up seminal situations—significantly change either the content of what a leader is doing, the context in which they are doing it, or their scope of responsibility. Or, perhaps change two or all three of these. Limit the constraints on what they can do to succeed. Ensure there is something real at stake and be sure they will know if they are succeeding along the way. We have been throwing people into the deep end of the pool for many generations. The ones that don’t drown seem to come out better.

These types of experiences are truly lightning bolts: bright, illuminating, exciting and powerful... and dangerous and unpredictable. Recall the last time you were in a situation such as this. As likely as not you were in survival mode, doing whatever seemed best to survive the challenge and come through to the other side.

Do you learn from this? Certainly yes. Did you grow as a result? Sure—just ask the dozens of people whom you have told your heroic story to over and over. But what did you learn and how did you grow? You may never fully know. In some ways you will have grown the productive ways in which you lead. Some things were so idiosyncratic to surviving the experience that you fail whenever you resort to those approaches in other situations. And some of the conversations, actions, and behaviors you leaned on to survive prove destructive everywhere else. We refer to these situations as thought-less seminal experiences.

We suggest an alternative approach, which we refer to as thought-full seminal development. In these experiences the individual approaches the challenging seminal experience with a learning mindset and an expectation of growth and change.

“Put someone through the lightning bolt-like crucible of a career altering experience and they will certainly learn an approach to leadership.”

Thought-full Seminal Experiences

Thought-full seminal experiences begin with three things:

1. Self-awareness
2. Purposeful intent
3. The occurrence of a Seminal Situation

Self-awareness involves knowing and owning the productive and unproductive aspects of your leadership approach. You have already done this by examining the critical leadership stories in your career thus far. These have been do-then-hope situations and have brought you where you are today.

Purposeful Intent refers to deciding early on that this challenge/event/opportunity in front of you is one you will use to expand your leadership capabilities. Once you make that decision you will then engage in two actions. The first involves setting up the conditions to create a learn-while-doing leadership growth opportunity out of the situation. The second involves creating a mindful intent to learn.

You can accomplish both of these, learn-while-doing opportunities and mindful intent, by returning to the Social Leader Learning Arc. Look at the six parts of this Arc and turn the questions into future tense.

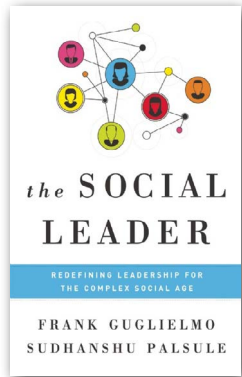
Now use the first three elements of the Learning Arc to create the opportunity: Turn new projects and assignments into *seminal situations* by putting yourself into a role that is novel and where you have the opportunity to innovate. Outline the *challenges* you can anticipate in advance and line up *help* and opportunities for feedback before you embark on the adventure.

Create mindful intent to learn by using the last three elements of the Learning Arc to remain focused on growth. Note the problems and *trials* you are having along the way and the conversations, actions and behaviors you use to productively *overcome* these challenges. Purposefully expand these newly productive activities to *other areas* of your life and your leadership responsibilities.

“ Self-awareness involves knowing and owning the productive and unproductive aspects of your leadership approach.

The world we live in today, The Social Age, confronts us with leadership challenges at a pace and scale we are just beginning to understand. It is no longer practical or productive to seek out a set of pre-fabricated behaviors to adopt as a leader. The transparency under which we lead requires consistency and authenticity in all we try to accomplish. As leaders we must find our own Personal Narrative, our own story of who we are and how we succeed as a leader. **Understanding and growing your own individual approach to being productive in the five core areas of Social Leadership is the key to success in the Social Age.** 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | **Frank Guglielmo** is managing director of Park Consulting, specializing in executive development and organizational change. He has held senior positions in a range of Fortune 500 companies. He holds both an MS and PhD in organizational psychology, and is a member of the American Psychological Association, and the Metropolitan New York Association for Applied Psychology. **Sudhanshu Palsule** is an educator, CEO Advisor, and leadership coach, regarded as one of the leading thinkers in the field of transformative leadership. He teaches at Duke Corporate Education and is an associate professor in the Advanced Management Program at INSEAD. Palsule has written several books spanning many areas, including science, technology, social change, leadership, management, and personal growth.

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