

# Developing the Stories of Women Leaders

Rick Lash and Christine Miners

## Why is taking back self-authorship so critical for women?

After years of working with senior executives, we noticed something interesting: even though they've spent decades in leadership development training, both formal and on-the-job, many still struggled when stepping up to broader enterprise roles. Why was that? Something more subtle, just below the surface, was getting in the way. In listening more carefully to leaders, we realized it wasn't about a lack of skill or competence, it was what these leaders were saying to themselves – the story about who they are as a leader and what it is they want to achieve. The stories we heard leaders telling themselves were often fragmented and fragile, sometimes in conflict with other internal narratives, and they didn't know what to do about it.

An accumulating body of evidence suggests that confident, [authentic leaders](#) possess a strong internal leadership narrative that gives meaning to their world, drives their actions and defines their core purpose. Their narratives are highly personal, drawing on lived experiences and imbued with strong emotion and conviction. These leaders draw upon their narrative as a source of inspiration and personal agency. Their leadership narrative and the core narrative that defines who they are as individuals are integrated. In other words, the narrative they tell themselves about who they are – their core narrative – overlaps with the narrative they tell themselves about who they are as a leader. This cohesive internal story is instrumental in their ability to be truly effective and impactful in their roles.

Leadership narrative is the inner dialogue that you tell yourself about who you are as a leader – it shapes what you focus on in your environment, how you make meaning, and enables you to more easily draw upon patterns of behaviour that lead to success. Leadership narrative is our organising and meaning-making function and it's a critical ingredient for executive leaders.

When a leader is aware of their narrative and core identity, it enables them to pursue goals and actions that are more consistent with their deeply held values and beliefs, creating authentic followership in the process.

**Leadership narrative is our organising and meaning-making function.**

## Why women often give up authorship of their leadership narrative

There are factors that predispose someone to giving up authorship of their narrative. For example, it is very common for people of all genders to hand over authorship of their leadership narrative to their organization. Organizations can be adept at satisfying our innate needs for feeling special, finding meaning and connecting with others. Organizations can make us feel valued through high salaries, providing desired job titles and other forms of recognition. Organizations also stand ready to give us a sense of meaning and that we are working for a bigger, shared purpose. They also satisfy our need for connection with others by providing a ready-made

community of peers. And while inadvertently turning over our story telling rites to our organization can have short term benefits, organizations are unreliable sources of narrative construction, primarily because they view each of us not as authors of our own narrative but as instruments of the business. And overtime this can erode your narrator's ability to construct a coherent story of your experience. Once that ability is gone, it is very difficult to [get it back](#).

Evidence (both anecdotal and academic) shows that women's internal narrators can be particularly prone to intrusion from outside forces – especially when it comes to their roles as leaders.

From an early age, girls are often socialized to focus on the feelings of others. Although both men and women develop internal narratives around their leadership roles, women in particular tend to develop memories that contain more emotional and cognitive recollections, making their internal narratives more available and emotionally resonant. As a consequence, women may rehearse or ruminate on their narratives more than men. This may make it easier for women leaders to use their internal leadership narrative as a source of inspiration, but it also can allow an outdated leadership narrative to get in their way.

For many other women leaders, we find that they are aware of their leadership narrative, but it conflicts with internal narratives around the other social roles. In their new series exploring women's limiting beliefs and assumptions – called [Thinking Patterns that Hold Women Leaders Back](#) – Jill Flynn and Kathryn Heath call this a “focus on others”. This idea results in a variety of damaging stories that women tell themselves: “I must take care of everyone else”, “my needs come last,” “I’m a great number two,” “I don’t belong on centre stage.” Of course, it is important that we all consider how we can help those around us; but when this guiding force pulls the pen away from our own hand, we can begin to experience narrative conflict.

In their book *How Women Rise*, Sally Helgesen and Marshall Goldsmith write about the 12 Habits that hold women back. Many of the habits that they identify are key reasons that lead to women giving up authorship of their leadership narrative.

1. Reluctance to Claim Your Achievements
2. Expecting Others to Spontaneously Notice and Reward Your Contributions
3. Overvaluing Expertise
4. Building Rather Than Leveraging Relationships
5. Failing to Enlist Allies from Day One
6. Putting Your Job Before Your Career
7. The Perfection Trap
8. The Disease to Please
9. Minimizing
10. Too Much
11. Ruminating
12. Letting Your Radar Distract You

Of course, the pandemic has only exacerbated these habits – particularly for women. In [The Impact of the Pandemic on Women: Stories from Work and Home Life](#), we interviewed fifteen women, working in various industries, in different areas of business and of varying seniority, to find out how they are living this new reality. As they described the shift in their work and personal life, some common themes emerged. During our interviews it became clear that the influence of the pandemic on the work environment has heightened the impact of three of the above 12 habits in particular: building rather than leveraging relationships, the disease to please, and ruminating. As we emerge from the pandemic and try to re-establish habits that facilitate our return to a new working normal, it is important for women leaders to understand how the pandemic has also shifted their internal narrative, and to take intentional steps towards once again being in charge of their narrator.

While these habits can be a consequence of a fragile, more fragmented leadership narrative, they also tend to drive women to give up authorship of that same narrative. This means women often find themselves caught in an unfortunate cycle: a clear leadership narrative is a critical element for leading with authenticity, confidence, and

resiliency, but a patchy narrative leads to feelings of inadequacy, a lack of confidence, a sense of disconnect between role and purpose.

## How women can strengthen self-authorship

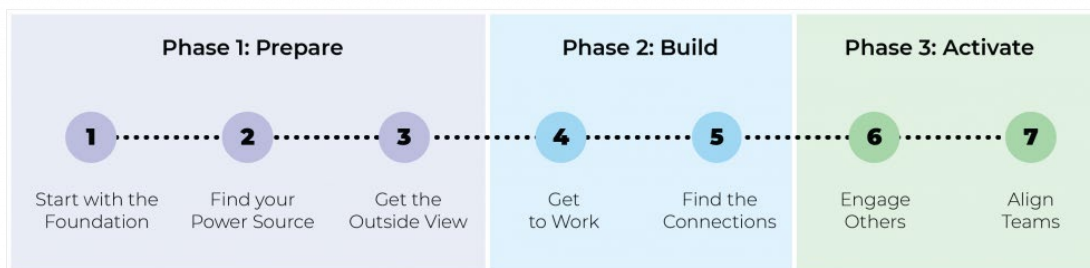
The issue is not with the stories that women tell themselves about who they are as leaders. Rather, women need to go to the *source* of what generates those stories in the first place. It's a problem that skill-building alone can't solve. The power lies not in tweaking your narrative to fit the needs of others, or creating a story that is going to resonate with the rest of the group. It's about understanding what your authentic story is and activating that narrative.

### What's the next step?

Taking back authorship of your narrative is hard work. It requires significant personal investment and a deep understanding that the value is in the process, rather than a final outcome like a written narrative on paper.

You will need to reflect on your past, challenge your deeply held beliefs about yourself and your leadership, connect new insights to what you know, and experiment with bringing your narrative alive. At times it can feel uncomfortable. It takes time, patience, and a high tolerance for ambiguity as you work through the building blocks of your leadership narrative. The process of developing your narrator muscle is best supported with a community of peers and coaches; together, they will serve as a sounding board and a source of insight as you look for patterns and themes to emerge and ultimately make sense of them.

At the start of the pandemic, we were feeling frustrated by the lack of progress in executive leadership development based on skill-building programs alone, so we turned our attention to working with executives to reengage and strengthen their narrator muscle, helping them to take back authorship of their narrative and draw upon this in their leadership. Through our work with those executives, we have focused the methodology into a series of critical phases, each with a number of steps. The outcome is truly transformational.



In **Phase 1: Prepare**, you collect the materials needed to construct your leadership narrative before you begin to build. Some of those materials will come from mining your autobiographical memories. Some will need to be imported from the outside to provide you with an outside-in perspective, helping you appreciate how others see your strengths and the value you have brought through your leadership. Other elements – your inner motives – are more deeply hidden and must be brought to the surface.

In **Phase 2: Build**, having prepared all the building materials, it is time to see how they might fit together. It is in this phase that you will be integrating the complex and sometimes conflicting data sources into a coherent, singular leadership narrative. It is here where your narrator truly gets down to work, sifting through old memories, shining a light on long forgotten events, and discovering new meaning, identifying hidden strengths and looking for the strands that connect it all. In this phase, you will seek to answer three fundamental questions that lie at the heart of your narrative: Where do I come from? What do I bring? What impact do I seek to create?

In **Phase 3: Activate**, you translate your leadership narrative to action. You will need to experiment with using your leadership narrative in different contexts, sharpening and strengthening it, making it an integral part of your role and life, and using it to engage others and mobilize them to action.

What underpins the success of the methodology is that you have the mindset and skills to see your leadership narrative as a process of ongoing reflection, restoration and renewal, rather than a final destination.

All of us, at one time or another, have felt disconnected from ourselves or out of balance, with no clear path forward. We have seen firsthand the substantial payoffs of doing the hard work of narrative – a personal story that is more grounded and anchored in your true self, a story that is less fragile and more resilient, better able to adapt and to withstand the relentless pressures of leadership and your life. And for women leaders in particular, the journey to reimagine their leadership narrative can be one of the most empowering experiences, providing the self-authoring tools to adapt and evolve their leadership story throughout their life and career.

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***Rick Lash, Ph.D.** brings over 30 years of experience working with senior leaders and their teams to accelerate learning and improve performance. He believes that by helping individuals realize their core purpose, they can transform themselves, their teams and their business. Recognized and valued for his deep expertise, thoughtfulness and engaging approach, Rick has served as an executive coach and trusted advisor for leading organizations across a range of industries in Canada, the United States and internationally. He is also a registered psychologist and publishes extensively on leadership, contributing to the Wall Street Journal, Chief Executive Magazine and the Harvard Business Review.*

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