

The Narrative Coach Approach: Helping your clients get faster, more sustainable results

How can I work with people's stories?

Narrative coaching is a unique in that as much as possible we work only in the present moment and only with the material in clients' stories. What this means for you is a coach is that rather than asking lots of questions to help you understand the client situation, you can use your time and energy to help your client be aware of their own experience. We use a variety of tools to help clients get in touch with their inner world, which for many of them is very valuable in itself. In addition, we then bring that inner world into the room so that clients can gain new perspectives on how who they are and how they live. This enables clients to connect their inner and outer worlds in ways that are often difficult for them to do on their own. For example, the coach senses some sadness in a client's story, invites her to notice if that is true for her and, if so, to explore what this story is surfacing about how she really feels about her current situation. We believe that people need new experiences for themselves not more explanations from their coaches. Narrative coaching provides the safe space for that to happen.

We can do this because their stories reflect how they see the world, themselves and others. Their stories point to what they are seeking from coaching—often in ways they are not aware of—and they also contain the seeds of their own resolution. We work in the present moment because ultimately change is only possible in the present. Bringing clients' awareness of their inner world into the moment helps them to catalyze change. To do this, we are interested not only in the content of their stories, but also in their experience of telling them in the moment. We like to think of it as slowing down their narration almost to frame by frame, so they can make their invisible narrative processes visible—so they can then be adapted. Much of the work in narrative coaching is at the intersection of reality and story—and helping our clients recognize what is really true and what needs to be done as result.

How can I help clients be successful without goals?

People come to coaching because they want to achieve certain outcomes in their life or work. Unfortunately, many of them (and many coaches) believe that the shortest path to achieve what they want is to set a goal up front and define the steps to reach it. Narrative coaching takes a different point of view by focusing more on clarity than certainty and moving more toward the unknown more than the known. We help clients to articulate their intention and use our narrative coaching tools, like Vectors of Change, to guide their daily choices. We do this for many reasons, including: life is too complex and uncertain for many of the goals people set, and most clients don't know what they really want until much later in the process.

For example, a client wants to lose weight, but realizes that this goal is more a cultural construct than her true desire. Her intention, instead, is to continue developing her inner autonomy and resilience. When people focus too much on the external actions related to a goal they often lose touch with themselves and what is true for them and about their situation. Narrative coaching is designed to keep people connected with themselves, their environment and their desired outcome as they move forward in coaching. In so doing, they can be more adaptive and attain better scaffolding to support their progress. We create structures for success in the end once the client has become clear about what matters to them and they want to bring into their life. They are more likely to sustain their changes because they have already experienced it in the coaching session.

How can I effectively apply mindfulness in coaching?

One of the cornerstones of narrative coaching is its emphasis on developing greater mindfulness in both the coach and the client. This enables them both to be more aware of themselves, each other, and what is unfolding in the conversation. In narrative coaching, there are a number of unique ways in which we use mindfulness. For example, we can help a client learn how to more closely notice his inner world, move into a more mature and proactive state when he is triggered, and be more resilient and resourceful in responding to others and opportunities. One of the greatest gifts for our clients in working this way is that they learn new ways of relating to others by observing and interacting with their coach.

Another way in which we use mindfulness comes from our work with attachment theory. For example, we can create a safe haven in our sessions so people are more open to learning. This enables them to develop a stronger sense of a secure base so they can more fully explore and experiment with new possibilities. This is essential if clients are to break-through old habits and move toward new ways of being and acting in their world. One way we do that in narrative coaching is to make the most of what are called “moments of meeting” in which both people rise to the occasion in a difficult moment to make the changes that are called for. It uses a tool we call Mindfulness in Motion so that our clients (and us too) can do more than just cope, but can extend their mindfulness into how they connect with others, create new options and offer new contributions.

How can I help clients deal with the broader issues they face?

Narrative coaching is unique in that it not only deals with clients’ personal stories, but also with the larger narratives in which they operate. For example, how does an organization’s culture affect the client’s leadership style, how do the gender dynamics in a community affect the stories that people tell about a nonprofit leader. One of the challenges for many of our clients is that they return to environments that may or may not be supportive of their new stories. That is why narrative coaching we focus on creating powerful experiences for people in sessions so that people have the opportunity to practice new mindsets and behaviors in the supported safety of the coaching container. We want them to feel what it is like to enact a new story so they can have more clarity and confidence as they move out into the world.

It is also why narrative coaching we tend to focus on one thing at a time so that we can help our clients to create the structures of success, such as nudges, they will need when they go home or back to work. If we don't do this, many of the gains they made in coaching will fade. In addition, in the course of working with people's personal stories we help them become aware of the larger narratives that shape how those stories are formed, told and lived. For example, we help our clients place their current dilemmas in the context of their stage of life, their cultural background, the unconscious biases about gender, etc. This equips clients with a much deeper understanding of and stronger preparation for bringing their new story to life.

How is narrative coaching different than other coaching philosophies?

The narrative coaching model is built around the human process of change rather than as a structure for a conversation. What this means is that narrative coaches come alongside the client and uses the model to understand where they are in their change journey and what they most need as a result. This includes both the inner and outer aspects of change. As a result, we focus on helping clients get to the crux of their issue and address it in order to move forward. For example, a client realizes that the change he needs to make is very clear in his mind, but he has hesitated putting it into action. Therefore, our primary focus in the session would be on creating experiments so he has the felt experience of what it would be like to communicate in the desired new way.

Another important feature of the narrative coach approach is that the four phases in the model not only correspond to the four phases of change, they also mirror the four phases of a story and the four phases of development. Therefore, people are developing themselves and moving through their transitions as their story evolves in the session. For example, the client is developing a greater sense of agency as he explores more practice stories about his career, which mirrors the progress he is making in terms of changing how he looks for a new role. The pragmatic nature of this work is reinforced by our observation that the resolution to a client's issue is already present in the conversation. This means that as a coach you can focus on your presence and awareness rather than striving to make things happen.