

# Coaching at Work

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VOL 18 ISSUE 4

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# Telling tales

**S**tories are everywhere: on TV, films, songs and throughout our newsfeeds. The author and lecturer, Robert McKee (1999) says stories are ubiquitous because they “fulfil a profound human need to grasp the patterns of living – not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience.”

In coaching we offer our clients a key service: the time and space to share their story. Being heard, truly heard, has the potential to change a life.

As Michelle Obama writes (2021), “There’s power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice. And there’s grace in being willing to know and hear others.”

The word story comes from Ancient Greek: *historía*, (learning through research, narration of what is learned), *historḗō* (inquire) and *hístōr* (witness/one who knows). When we bear witness to our client’s stories, it can create trust, build an alliance, and lead to deeper and more sustainable coaching outcomes.

*Bearing witness to our clients’ stories can create trust, build an alliance, and lead to deeper and more sustainable coaching outcomes.*

*Charlotte Housden reports*

## MY RESEARCH

During 2019-20, I ran a research project interviewing 108 people from 27 countries, all navigating change in their lives, and during these conversations the word story came up 128 times. One participant, Orla (*some participant names have been changed, at their request*) shared a story about her work: “There were always stories of partners having heart attacks when they weren’t expecting it. And people collapsing on the stairs because they’d worked too hard.” Such stories may seem normal to others, but Orla thought, “This is madness. We’re killing ourselves. Why are we doing this and for what? For money?”

During the research I applied an inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to the 75 hours of interview transcripts. I identified the themes arising in the research, initially identifying 119 codes. Then, over time, I

consolidated these to create 18 key themes. Orla’s story highlights one of these themes – the impact of leadership and organisational culture. The theme ‘Work Culture and Leadership’ came up 200 times and was fifth on the list.

As my research continued during the global pandemic, participants often recounted stories of their experiences during this time. Tim shared an account of how he and his partner started their relationship, despite only meeting once. “Long story short, she and I made a great connection, spent thousands of hours on the phone through lockdown. Now we’re a couple and I’m in her apartment in Basel right now.” ‘Values Alignment’ was a key theme in the research. It was third on the list with 208 instances.

## MAKING SENSE

Clients often use stories to make sense of their lives and understand their



*“Sharing stories can change a client’s life – for example, Walter talked about his Alcoholics Anonymous group. ‘People’s stories, they just resonated with how I was feeling inside... They built a way out of holes... worse than mine’ ”*

behaviour. John was an interviewee who often felt compelled to act, even though it made him anxious every time. “If you look at all the great myths, the great stories, whether it’s Star Wars or Lord of the Rings, it’s that moment in the story where the hero or heroine jumps and you think, ‘Oh, they’re going to die, they’re going to die.’ But they don’t. I think that’s the cycle I’m talking about.”

Sharing stories can increase our ‘Self-Awareness,’ – second highest theme with 239 instances.

Marcia’s narrative was full of metaphors: “I’m an Olympic swimmer standing in a bucket of water.” She painted a vivid story in just 10 words – that she had potential but wasn’t able to show her full range. “I’ve got the muscles. I’ve got everything. But I just keep my feet there in the bucket.” She believed she could do more. “I know I

have the strength and the capability to swim in the whole ocean. I’m just standing in the bucket and watching everything around me and that is very, very frustrating.”

Sara used her father’s story to guide a decision about work. Her parents were from China and settled in the UK in the 1970s. They came from a “very difficult background, trying to provide for us and not really speaking the language. When my father passed away it made me think about his story and how it was completely different to anyone else’s.” She felt compelled to live out her father’s desire – wanting the best for his children, wanting them to be happy.

‘Happiness’ was the top theme in the research with 248 instances among a group of just 108 interviewees.

Sara reflected on this topic. “I asked myself that question when I had to return to work: ‘Am I happy in what I’m

doing?’ I could continue doing it, but not be happy. And I thought I had to get off the treadmill, just going to work because I felt I should.”

### CHANGING LIVES

Sharing stories can change a client’s life – for example Walter talked about his Alcoholics Anonymous group. “People’s stories, they just resonated with how I was feeling inside. It’s that connection. They built a way out of holes a million times worse than mine.” These individuals have now gone on to lead successful and happy lives. Walter found it “inspiring if they could do it feeling just like I did inside. I wanted to follow that route.”

‘Mindset’ came up fourth on the list (with 202 instances) and ‘Resources’ was 12th (appearing 100 times).

Rory was the first black man to be promoted to the board of his organisation and was asked to present at a diversity event. Initially he didn’t know what to say. After some reflection he decided to just tell his own story. “I realised that... I don’t have to create anything, pretend to be anything.” Instead, he “told a series of stories...







about my experiences in life and leadership and learning and growth.” ‘Authenticity’ came in at number six, with 187 instances.

Throughout my book *Swim, Jump, Fly* (Sheridan, 2022), I share the narratives of the 108 participants because they bring ideas to life quickly and powerfully. In addition, when we hear someone else’s story, it can help normalise our own feelings as we shift in our lives. Jack agreed: “The feeling that you’re not the only one going through this... at least you’re in the same boat as somebody else, instead of stuck out on the ocean on your own.”

I asked participants how they felt sharing their stories with me during the research and there were three types of responses: 1) a feeling of catharsis/being heard; 2) feelings were normalised when an interviewee heard that others were going through the same thing; and 3) the sense that sharing their story might help others who were navigating changes in their lives.

Here is what some participants said:

- “It’s me offering something out there. Hopefully somebody will learn something from it, take something for their own

journey. Because for me, it’s about human connection and telling my story.”

- “It’s nice to feel heard and that someone’s interested. Hearing your responses, that my story is not completely different to other people’s and that this is something other people struggle with.”

- “It has been cathartic just telling somebody the whole story.”

- “A big thank you. It’s a long time since I have felt so listened-to and understood, you really helped me a lot. So many insights have been popping up since we spoke.”

“Real help, professionally or personally, consists of listening to people, of paying respectful attention to people so that they can access their own ideas first.”

Nancy Kline (2002)

## COACHING

So, how can storytelling assist in our own coaching practice? What help does storytelling bring our clients?


Here are areas that participants found useful:

**Catharsis:** “I enjoy talking, being able to explore my feelings” and “I think it’s always helpful to just get things out.”

**Processing:** “Verbalising what I’ve been thinking is quite powerful... powerful for me to hear it.”

**Perspective:** “Interesting to reflect back and say where were the different points in my life where I think I was happy? Where did it go sideways?” and “you’ve made me think, consider things from an angle I hadn’t actually considered before.”

**Self-affirmation:** “It reminds me of what I’m really proud of, what I can offer” and “Talking to you reminds me of some things that are important that I lose sight of sometimes.”

**Guided exploration:** “Getting me to be a bit introspective and to start thinking about things that, quite frankly, I don’t think about, because no one asks me the question” and “Questions... you wouldn’t normally ask yourself... It’s a different way of thinking about things than you would do yourself. Sort of directed thinking.” 

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

● **Charlotte Sheridan (née Housden)** is a chartered coaching psychologist and a chartered occupational psychologist and runs an international coaching and consulting practice.

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