

INTERNAL NARRATIVES – HELP OR HINDRANCE?

INTRODUCTION

Do you sometimes come away from a situation, thinking “I would really like to have handled that differently”, or are you finding it hard to shift an embedded pattern of behaviour?

Internal narratives are the voices in our heads about how we *should* behave in any given situation

The ability to make conscious choices (instead of ‘auto-pilot’ reactions) to what happens in both our internal and external worlds comes, in part, from knowing ourselves well. We need to know our strengths, our skills and our knowledge, as well as what triggers us into our less-than-ideal selves, and how we behave in those moments.

However, our sense of self often gets clouded by other voices that we have in our heads about ourselves. I call these other voices our internal narratives. Authors and researchers variously call these mental models, schemas, life traps, big assumptions, or our community of selves. I especially like the language of internal narratives because it reinforces the idea that they are *stories* that we tell ourselves, not truths. Similarly, the idea of a community of selves helps remind us that we are made up of many parts, some of which are helpful in any given moment, others not so. For example: We may go to a meeting about a controversial issue. One part of us may feel passionate about the issue and be determined to speak up. Another part of us is reluctant or unwilling to disagree with the rather powerful people present.

DEFINITION

Our internal narratives can be thought of as a broad pervasive theme or pattern comprising memories, emotions, cognition and bodily sensations regarding ourselves and our relationships with others. They are typically developed a long time ago, usually, but not always, in our family of origin. Originally, they were an adaptive survival response, often in the truest sense of the term – our survival or safety depended on it. However, as we grow up, our context changes, we develop a broader worldview and a broader network of relationships, yet the behaviours that we developed over years and years and which we've polished and honed to perfection have become hard-wired. They are now a highly effective way of keeping us safe or supporting our sense of who we are.

These beliefs are often subconscious (because they are running us) and they hinder our ability to change or grow as leaders. We all have them and the assumption or narrative that we are running in our heads continually, hinders or even sabotages our best efforts to change.

CATEGORIES OF NARRATIVES

Our narratives tend to fall into one of the following eight categories. Think of these descriptions as directional; it is impossible and in fact dangerous to try and categorise people into boxes. Most of us have more than one narrative and they often interact with each other.



High standards: I drive myself hard to high standards, often higher than those I have for others. I like to be perfect (or near to), I must not make mistakes. While this is often the land of the perfectionists, you can also have very high standards for yourself and not be a perfectionist.



Drive: Failure is not an option is often a driving narrative here. So too is, 'I must give everything I do 110%'. I value efficiency and getting to an outcome promptly. I like to control the process and/or the outcome.



Independence: I prefer to act autonomously as it is quicker that way and other people can't always be relied upon. I can be slow to trust fully, I don't generally show my emotions, I don't usually ask for help.



Self-Control: I like to remain in control of myself and prefer not to show my feelings or vulnerabilities. I tend to be constantly alert for how others are behaving.



Competence: My competence or expertise is very important to me. I worry about being wrong or not being seen as competent. I am concerned that I don't measure up in terms of my accomplishments.



Belonging: I want to work with others. I don't perform as well if I am not surrounded by others I can trust and on whom I can depend.



Relationships: I care deeply about the needs and feelings of others (often at the expense of my own needs). I tend to avoid difficult confrontations or being clear about how I feel in order to maintain harmony and not disrupt the relationship.



Boundaries: I don't have clear boundaries, or I have them but have trouble maintaining them under pressure.

COMPLICATING MATTERS: OUR INBORN TEMPERAMENT AND OUR THREAT RESPONSE

The way in which our narratives express themselves is complicated by our inborn temperament and our natural response to threat. We see signs of inborn temperament in infants, hence why researchers suggest that temperament is governed by our genetics; more 'nature' than 'nurture'.

Stress Response

- *Fight* – to move against the person (i.e. go on the offensive)
- *Flight* – to move away from the person (i.e. to escape, withdraw, avoid)
- *Freeze* – to stay in place, not moving or responding in any way
- *Appease* – to move towards the person (to satisfy the other person's needs)

Inborn Temperament

- Emotionally flat or intense
- Pessimistic or Optimistic
- Anxious or Confident
- Shy or Sociable
- Passive or Aggressive
- Obsessive or Distractable
- Irritable or Cheerful

You can see a list of Stress Responses above. Think of our natural response to stress as our coping mechanism.

So, we have this unique combination of our narratives, our inbuilt temperament and our coping behaviours, which is probably easiest to demonstrate with a simple example.

Imagine someone who has a narrative around relationships to the point that they constantly put the needs of others ahead of their own, their temperament is confident, optimistic and sociable and maybe their threat response is actually to flee or to run away. How this manifests to others is going to look very different to another person with the same narrative, but whose natural temperament may be to be more emotionally intense or aggressive and whose threat response is to fight.

All of this means that there are many and varied ways that these things manifest in us – which is what makes studying and attempting to explain human behaviour, let alone behavioural change, both so interesting and so challenging.

THE CHALLENGE OF OUR BRAIN STRUCTURE

To complicate matters further, our brain structure doesn't really help us in this regard. Electrical signals from our bodies, including incoming information via our five senses arrive in our brain stem, which drives our subconscious processes that keep the body alive (e.g. breathing, pumping blood, etc.). From there two signals are simultaneously transmitted to other parts of the brain.

One goes to the limbic system, which is where we hold memories of emotions, rather than our memories of the events themselves (they are stored elsewhere). A fundamental component of the limbic system is our amygdala (we actually have two). The limbic system is still dealing at a level below consciousness – it's very fast and it's automatic. Think of high speed and a low-resolution image.

The other signal goes to the neocortex, the so-called thinking brain, what we think of as unique to primates. It is still fast, but not quite as fast as the one sent to the limbic system, but it is much higher resolution. Now we are working at a conscious level.

Technically the term amygdala hijack⁴ comes from the experience that our limbic system has moved us into action before we are even aware of it. It is what makes us run away from something coiled in the grass in front of us, before we realise that it is not a snake, it is a garden hose. It is what causes us sometimes to say or think things before we have fully thought them through.

We need to bring the thinking brain online when we are triggered by our internal narratives. Once we have cognition, we have choice!

We need to create the space between our emotional response and our thinking brain (the neo-cortex) coming online, so that we have a chance of identifying what's going on.

In terms of internal narratives, this is the milli-second we need to realise that it is one of our self-stories and not reality that is at play, and therefore we have a choice to how we respond rather than simply reacting.

However, to shift our mindset and notice that it is our narratives at play, is hard work that requires time and concerted effort because narratives fight for survival. That is a result of the very human drive for consistency; we tend naturally to the known, the safe, the comfortable, and the familiar. It should then come as no surprise that we often regard these internal narratives as a kind of universal truth, when in actual fact they are a combination of our core beliefs and the behaviours that we've developed over long periods of time.

MAKING THE SHIFT

We can make the shift and change our narratives; the work of Young and Klosko^{1,2} and especially the work of Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey encapsulated in their book *Immunity to Change*³ are great references. Fundamentally the approaches include:

- **Identifying our narratives.** What are some of these narratives that we hold as truths? What are you deeply committed to that is getting in the way of your ability to achieve those goals that you seem to really have trouble with over the long term?
- **Understanding their origins.** While it can be very helpful to understand where our narratives came from, you can embark on changing them without this.
- **Making your narrative(s) explicit.** How do they play out in your current life? What are your triggers? How do you behave when you are triggered?
- **Building the case** for and against the narrative that you are focusing on.
- **Describing a healthy response.** What would be a behaviour that you would be happy to exhibit, or language that you would be comfortable using, that would help diminish this voice in your head?
- **Experiment.** Designing and executing very small forward-moving experiments over time aimed at giving you data that enables you to challenge your narratives so that you can experience the fact that they aren't 100% true, 100% of the time.

CHALLENGES

As always, there is plenty to get in the way of the efforts we make to change our behaviours, including:

- Fighting your internal narratives instead of acknowledging them and taking responsibility for them.
- Running away from experiencing your internal narratives (often adopting numbing behaviours, which sometimes end up being more toxic than the narrative itself).
- Still believing your internal narratives to be true, even when the rational evidence suggests otherwise.
- Believing that your internal narrative stands up to the evidence on a rational level but not yet believing it at an emotional level.
- Picking an internal narrative that is too hard to tackle first up, developing an unrealistic goal, and/or giving up trying too soon.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our internal narratives developed initially due to the environment in which we found ourselves, through no fault of our own. Coupled with our inborn temperament and our natural response to threat, we developed coping behaviours that were entirely adaptive. As we grew up our environment changed and those same behaviours are now maladaptive (sabotaging).

Taking a non-judgemental look at where it all originated can be a helpful starting point in the battle to change our behaviours and beliefs.

Everyone has their own set of internal narratives; we gather experiences and develop our identities continuously throughout our lives; it is part of being human.

We need to be compassionate, both to ourselves and to those who may have contributed to the 'rules' that we now have for ourselves, because the original purpose of those 'rules' was to keep us safe. Even today our internal narratives continue to try and 'help' although the context has likely changed considerably, and so their efforts can be inelegant and a hindrance at best, or a self-sabotaging pattern of behaviour at its worst.

Understanding what they are, how they developed, and their impact is the first step to regaining control and behaving in a way that gives ourselves the best chance of success, whether that be in our personal or professional lives.

I hope that this is a useful foundation to your change journey. If you would like to explore this idea further or would like support in uncovering your own narratives and how to work to mitigate them, please feel free to contact me at the email address below.

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REFERENCES:

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