

■ Olivier Laval & Clément Jacquier

Abstract

This article delves into storytelling and narrative approaches in coaching and supervision, emphasizing their role in addressing power dynamics. Various examples illustrate how dominant narratives trap clients in limited self-perceptions while alternative stories reveal hidden strengths and possibilities. By weaving new narratives, supervisors enable their clients to break free from problem-saturated identities and embrace a more empowered self-image. Techniques such as externalization, symbolic modeling, and the Emergence Game are potent tools for reshaping stories and reclaiming the author's rights over one's life.

A leader in a large international group who struggles to prepare a presentation on current issues in front of an audience

Storytelling and Narrative Approaches: A Power Issue?

of decision-makers

A senior executive must respond to her company's injunction: "Tell us a story that can make us dream".

A coach-supervisor who must write an article about his profession.

What do these supervision topics have in common?

The act or art of stories: storytelling. The term is used today in marketing when a brand creates a story highlighting an evolution or strategy.

A story... The fact that "History" originates from Herodotus's book *The Inquiries* (*Historíai*) makes sense for our profession. Herodotus is considered the father of modern geopolitics, which means integrating geography, climate, and lifestyle (today, we'd speak of culture) into history. According to French geographer Philippe Subra, the term geopolitics now generally refers to the study of power dynamics in any spatial context, even on a local scale. Thus, when we address storytelling issues with our clients, aren't we also addressing power dynamics?

The Tools a Supervisor Uses to Help Tell a Story *Breaking Free from a Belief*

When our clients or supervisees come to us, they are often stuck in a problem they are experiencing, and sometimes, it can be difficult for them to break free from it.

It's as if a cloudy veil prevents them from connecting to their true identity, making them act according to the identity of the problem. Suddenly, "the person IS the problem..."

According to American psychologist Jerome Bruner, a narrative is:

- Events
- Stapled together in sequence along the timeline
- According to a dramatic plot (meaning/significance)

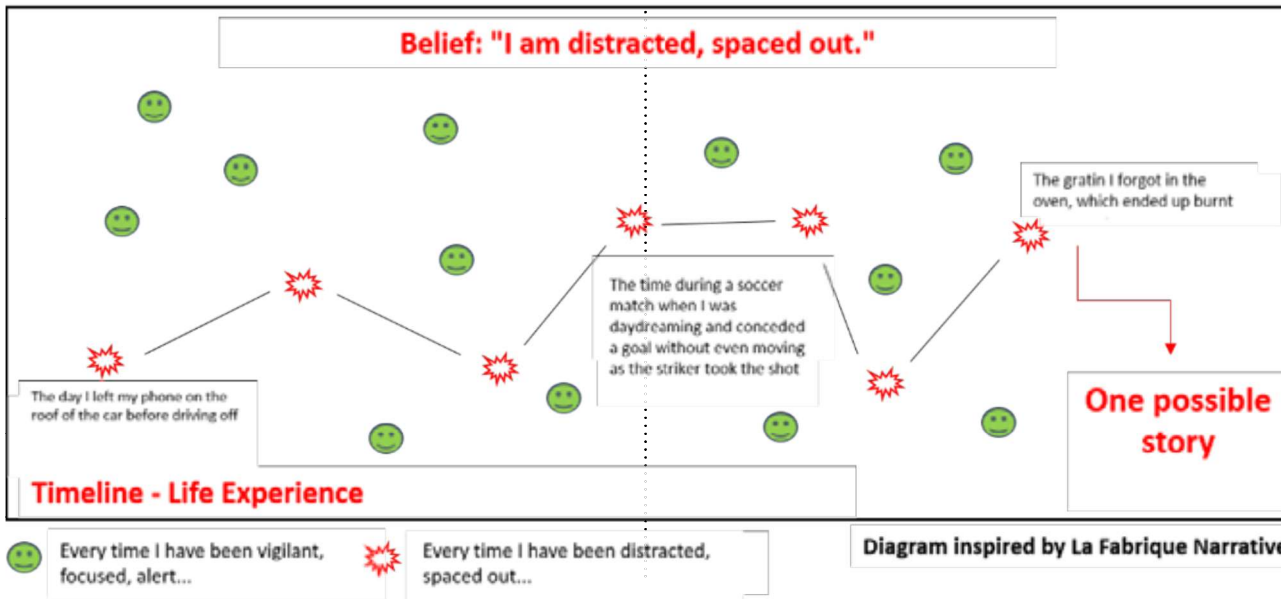
Telling or narrating is always about selecting some events and experiences while neglecting others...

Let's consider someone who believes, "I'm distracted, I'm scatterbrained." When this person tells their story, they will tend only to select experiences related to that belief.

This shows us that **telling is making something exist!** What is not told doesn't exist!

It is the power of narration: bringing our experiences to life. Without narration, other experiences that could tell a completely different story about us remain in the shadows, lost in the limbo of our memory.

However, we all have multiple stories: no one is just "shy," "outspoken," or a "follower"... It overlooks the moment when the "shy" person was the only one who stood up to the boss during a tough executive committee meeting, while everyone else kept silent. It disregards when the "follower" takes the lead in their team to manage a crisis...



The Trace That Restores Power

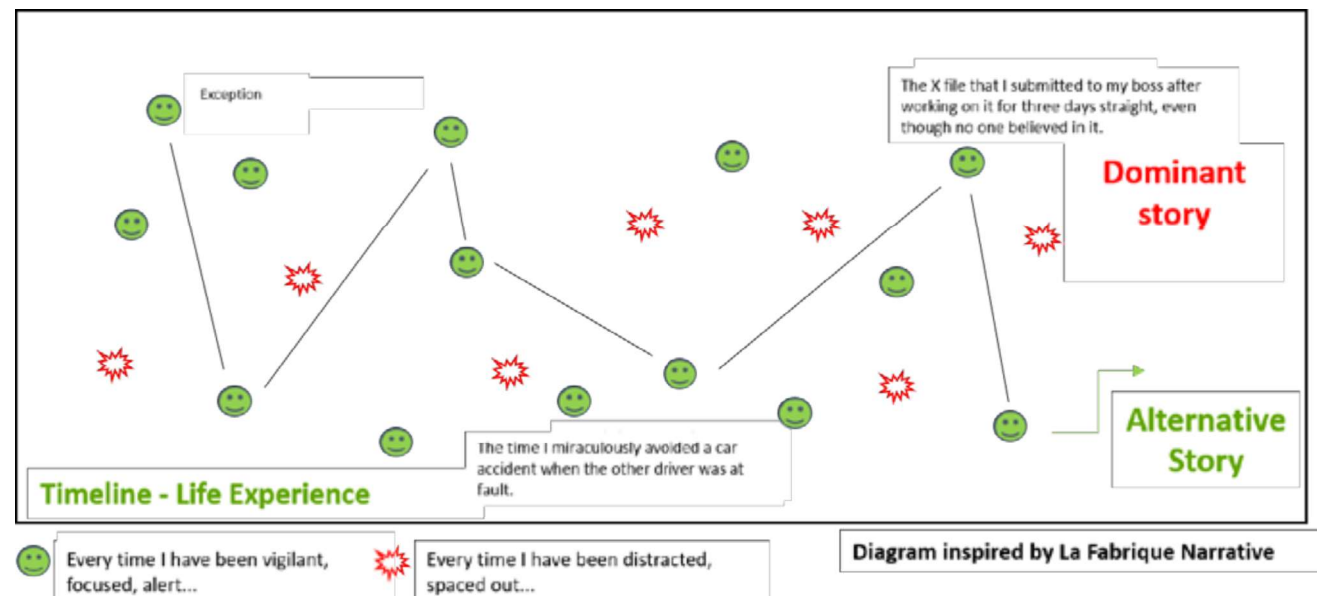
It is the core challenge for the coach-supervisor: to detect the fine traces in our client's narration that show another story is possible, to detect those fleeting moments where the person no longer acts according to the identity of the problem but expresses a moment of beauty, acting according to their own identity. To hear these fine traces and question our client about them is to start a reconstruction of their story, allowing them to step back from their problem.

In our jargon, this is what we call externalization: the person is the person, the problem is the problem, but the person is never the problem!

The person has a story of a problem: I am not shy, but I have a story of a problem with 'shyness.'

We are no longer two in the room at that moment in the session, but three: the coach, the coachee, and 'shyness.' At this point, we accompany our client to renegotiate the place of shyness in their life: how does it act, who are its allies, enemies, and modes of operation...

If a narrative can highlight only a dominant story ("I am shy"), it also has the power to weave an alternative story by emphasising other events along the timeline.



The other day, I accompanied a client who said, “I am a forgetful person.”

After discussing with him to understand better what was happening for him, I learned that he was going through a period where he was overstimulated on many fronts with high stakes in many of his projects.

We started working with Mr Forgetfulness (the name the client gave to his problem, referring to the Mr./Ms. books he loved as a child), which was not always present in his life but appeared “only” during these periods of overstimulation when he tended to say “yes” to everyone on every task to “please” others, creating a mental overload, disorganization, and thus... many forgetful moments, not knowing what he had committed to for each of these people!

Realizing this allowed him to move from “I am a forgetful person” to “I have a story of a problem with Mr. Forgetfulness when I’m in a period of overstimulation.” It was the beginning of a whole new narrative where he finally regained his author rights over his life!

We then worked on other Mr./Ms. characters who could be allies for him to “fight” against Mr. Forgetfulness. He told me how he would call upon Mr Pause and Mr NO/Ms Yes, duo, to help him in this process.

These were characters with whom he had already shared great adventures in the past, but as life went on (or rather, as his internal narration went), they had lost touch...

Externalization can be done through an imaginary character, as in the example above, but also using a projective tool. We regularly accompany leadership teams to tell us their stories, challenges, and fears via... Lego Blocks!

Building and narrating their reality in real-time and in 3D often allows them to see things differently, becoming aware that

We regularly accompany leadership teams to tell us their stories, challenges and fears using Lego.

they forgot something: a brick or a character in their story!

For example, a leader who wanted to slow down and begin his company’s succession but thought his executive team wasn’t ready. He saw that the system remained stable by removing his character from the structure along with all the links connecting him to others (employees, partners, clients...). This made him realize that the autonomy and responsibilities he had allowed his employees to develop made the system “non-dependent” on him, enabling him to finally consider his succession calmly.

Or this manager, whom I asked to build something with Legos when he arrived for a session. Once he finished his construction, I commented, “It’s funny, when you put characters in a Lego construction, you put them without legs... Now tell me, how does this represent your work problem?”

All of a sudden, I saw his face change, amazed to see that, indeed, he had been feeling completely powerless and paralyzed in the face of his professional challenges, and, at the same time, it’s no surprise he was finding it hard to move forward... without legs!

By working on his construction and the new story he wanted to build (this time with legs!), he could identify what would give him momentum and thus an action power in his context.

- Allowing a Coachee to Tell Their Story Gives Them the Power to Detach and Regain Control Over the Situation
- Trusting hands to tell the story: what if we gave hands instead of just our heads the power to narrate?

A Process That Narrates Power Relations in Space **The Emergence Game**

The Emergence Game (also named The Emergence Play) is the corporate version of the King-Queen Game designed by Dominique Vincent (body-psychotherapist and therapist supervisor), who describes it as follows:

“Before being a leadership coaching process, the King-Queen Game or the Emergence Game is a path of wisdom that dates back to ancient times. It is an integrative approach encompassing all components of human experience, beginning with listening to feelings, which are bodily and emotional experiences, continuously connected to thoughts.”

The process involves positioning oneself within one of the archetypes derived from Jung’s work:

One of the supervised coaches takes on the **King/Queen** archetype (the Self, constant integration of all archetypes within oneself and in the group / Alignment with emergence / Integration of the masculine and the feminine / Ability to clearly assess situations and make appropriate decisions).
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The others can choose to position themselves on the archetypes as follows:

- **Warrior** (Willpower, determination, courage / Authenticity / Action-taking)
- **Companion-Builder** (Logical thinking / Intelligence, honesty / Implementation and execution until completion)
- **Sage** (Ability to pause / Penetrating insight into reality as it is / Helping relationship, advice, facilitation)
- **Artist** (Imagination / Expression of emotion / Sharing)

and celebration) Or position themselves in:

- **The Unknown** / The Emerging (Mystery, emptiness, the Source / Attentive waiting, open availability / The primal place of emergence of intuitions, feelings, images, scenarios).

The Intervention Process

One of the Emergence Game processes is to create a scenario in which participants are immersed.

For example, we might announce a power vacuum and the need for supervisees to agree on new leadership. All supervised individuals can position themselves within the six archetypes in this scenario.

As recently used during a supervision session with six executives wanting to explore their relationship to leadership, each was able to develop their storytelling within the proposed scenario:

- “We need shared governance.”
- “We need to move fast, and I’m taking the lead to accelerate the process.”
- “I’m not interested in power, and I step back.”
- “I see myself in this role but don’t show it.”
- “If asked, I’ll step up.”
- “I create disorder to move things forward.”

During the debrief, the supervisor invited each coach to “tell their relationship to power” and “how what they just experienced sheds light on that relationship.”

During the process, each leader experimented:

- With their **body**, moving in the space and feeling the tension linked to the scenario
- With their **emotions**, feeling anger, fear, sadness, or joy
- With their **thoughts**, reflecting their beliefs about what is right or wrong in this kind of situation

Telling is making something exist.

The supervisor then invited each coach to explore the three doors of communication¹ (thoughts, emotions, and behavior):

- When it comes to your relationship to power, what immediate thought comes to mind?
- Tell me about situations when this happens.
- And when you think about what happened, what new insights emerge?

And what happens in your body when you think about what you think? What do you see yourself doing?

What did you see yourself doing during this experience? And when you do what you do, what do you feel as an emotion? Traveling through these three doors of communication allows the coachee to narrate their experience and introduce a different angle or another perspective.

Let’s consider the situation of the executive/leader within a large international group struggling to prepare a presentation on current issues for an audience of decision-makers. Before the Emergence Game workshop, we had an individual supervision session. I suggested he tell me the “anti-story”: “Tell me how you’re going to fail this presentation successfully.”² He then listed all the possible obstacles, whether they were real (imperatives in his schedule), difficulties (difficulty delegating part of the preparation), or beliefs (“If I don’t master 150% of the subject, I will stammer, and it will be a disaster”).

During this individual supervision session, I conducted a body exercise. I invited the executive/leader to move to another

chair and recount what he had observed about this other self, listing all the obstacles encountered. Then, moving again to a third chair, he was invited to tell the story with solutions to all the problems listed.

Throughout the Emergence Game workshop, this executive/leader found himself switching between multiple archetypes, at times embodying the Warrior’s energy to push the discussion forward, at times the Artist’s energy wanting to “stir things up,” sometimes the Sage’s energy wanting to tackle core questions about what governance means today, and at other times the Builder’s energy proposing a process for making collective decisions.

I asked him about the common thread between all these positions and movements during the debrief, and he replied: “I’m all over the place; I talk a lot... but I don’t dare say what truly drives me, which is to take the place of the King/Queen.”

I then asked him what connection he made with power, and he replied: “Instead of fully owning my leadership, ideas, and intuitions, I create a whirlwind, take up space in the group, and it’s a power that is not stated but takes up space nonetheless.”

Symbolically, I invited him to position himself in the archetype of the Emerging/Unknown and move towards the **King/Queen** archetype, looking at all the participants while owning his desire for leadership fully.

During the individual supervision that followed the workshop, this executive/leader was able to link the initial situation (“I struggle to prepare a presentation in front of decision-makers”) to the second (“I take power covertly rather than fully owning it”).

¹Paul Ware, « Types de personnalité et plan de traitement », Les Classiques en Analyse transactionnelle, Vol. 3, pp. 264-273)

²There is a crack in everything European Journal for Supervision and Coaching Volume 7-2023-Issue 1. Pages 15-20

- Allowing the body to move so the mind doesn't occupy all the space alone.
- Using symbolism to help our clients step out of their power dynamics.

And can we conclude by using the example of the coach supervisor who needs to write an article about his practices?

“Tell me what Storytelling and Narratives evoke in your practices!”

As highlighted in this article, the very process of writing this article was a power game for us:

- The power to move from “I’m not a specialist and have nothing special to share” to “I have a real practice on this issue that can interest peers.”
- The power to reconnect to moments in our past when we both knew how to tell stories, especially about professional practices.
- The power to shift from the mind to the body because it was the body that allowed us to reconnect to these lived experiences.

Remember, **“Telling is making something exist”**: we thus have a creative capacity through our narratives to shape our identity without being defined by external labels imposed upon us... to reclaim our author rights over our own lives! ■



Olivier Laval

During 15 years as an Administrative & Financial Manager and/or HR Director, Olivier Laval has accompanied teams. From 2009, he worked as an organizational coach before creating his company “Visions Croisées” in 2012 and merging with Coheliance in 2016.

Trained in didactic supervision and coach trainer for five years, he relies on everyone’s potential. He is convinced of the relevance of “opening the lid of the pot” so that each person can, at their own pace, become aware of the ingredients inside and those that need to be added so that individuals and collectives function smoothly.

While operating within a Transactional Analysis contract, he places great importance on being open to different approaches and postures.

His clients also tell him that he has the art of confrontation that makes it possible to move forward: Coheliance has invented the neologism “Tensionaute”, a posture and tools that allow coaches and leaders to identify virtuous tensions from dysfunctional ones.



Clément Jacquier

After several years of professional experience in the commercial divisions of significant groups such as Danone, Barilla, and Reckitt Benckiser, Clément Jacquier decided in 2017 to give a new direction to his professional journey to regain a sense of purpose and motivation in his actions by placing people at the centre of his activity and creating his business consulting structure, H2OM. Whether through coaching or training, he believes a strong link connects these two missions: “contributing to individual fulfilment to elevate the collective.”

A certified professional coach in the Process Communication Model and a Narrative Practitioner since 2022, he enjoys listening to his clients tell their stories. He bases his interventions on a caring and pedagogical approach, using playful and interactive experiences that enable collaborators to develop autonomy and solve challenges. His clients usually share that they feel supported, not judged, and within a framework of complete trust while appreciating the playful and teasing side that he uses to challenge them when necessary.