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Rewriting Your Story for Breakthrough Performance

"That's my story and I'm sticking to it." This simple line has become the modern day equivalent of a wink and a nod—good for a quick laugh or a speedy exit when faced with an inconvenient situation. The quip is harmless in most situations, but it can be a dangerous attitude for healthcare executives when attempting to lead their organizations.

Executives who hold their story as an irrefutable truth are unlikely to be adept at leading their organization through shifting business climates or open to innovative ideas and approaches that might improve performance.

Researchers in the field of narrative psychology have developed a better understanding of the correlation between our stories and our behaviors and have shown how changes in our narrative tales can produce changes in our actions.

Because we are the creators of our stories, we usually "write" them in the first person. This is useful in assembling the life story that you share with others, but a self-centered attitude can be counterproductive when leading others, especially in times of stress or conflict.

Successful leadership requires taking a larger perspective of a situation to uncover new pathways for breakthrough and action. This objectivity, however, is nearly impossible when you are both the author and main character in the story.

When told in the first person, a story's fictional elements may be difficult to grasp. Our stories should be "rewritten" in the third person to gain the objectivity needed to see new possibilities that might not be apparent otherwise.



A narrative tool that can be used by healthcare executives involves reframing a situation from one of breakdown to one of breakthrough. It starts by being subjective about a situation and then rewriting your story to remove yourself, examining the story from the third-person perspective. Finally, reframe the breakdown by rewriting the shoulds in your story into coulds to uncover new pathways for action.

Recently, a health system president expressed frustration with the number of

"physician deals" in his organization. He had hired a new vice president of marketing and spent a lot of time acclimating him to the organization but was disappointed in the results. After several months of teaching and explaining, the results were still poor. The president was reluctant to fire him as he had lobbied hard to hire this individual in the first place.

But by rewriting his story in the third person, the president realized two important things: he had never managed a marketing function before, and several important initiatives were slipping. Instead of saying, "The vice president of marketing should be producing results after four months on the job" and "I should be focusing my time on our new initiatives," the president reframed them by saying, "The vice president of marketing could produce results" and "I could focus my time on our growth initiative."

The president also realized that his COO had once managed a marketing function and was better equipped to direct and assess the vice president of marketing and his progress. Additionally, this would free the president to focus on the organization's new initiatives for expansion. He was now able to see a new path—write a new story—and act upon it.

By turning your leadership mind to generating ideas for what you could do to help him do what he could do, new pathways for action become apparent.

Source: Adapted from an article by Michael O'Brien, PhD, founder & CEO, the O'Brien Group, Cincinnati. Visit www.obriengroup.us.