

THE APPLICATION OF NARRATIVE ANALYSIS IN EXECUTIVE COACHING

Ferenc Leuko

Phd candidate

PTE

ABSTRACT

The paper is focused on how narrative analysis can enrich executive coaching. It provides a brief review of the main directions of narrative psychology and narrative content analysis. Research was carried out to demonstrate how narrative analysis can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the organizational setting in order to amplify the effectiveness of executive coaching.

Key words: executive coaching, narrative psychology, narrative analysis, feedback

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF NARRATIVE PSYCHOLOGY

The narrative approach is deeply rooted in the science of psychology. Sarbin was one of the pioneers who adopted the method of working with stories as a way of understanding human behavior. Sarbin argues that the “narrative is the central root metaphor – the fundamental metaphoric strategy – by which humans interpret the world” [1]. Bruner developed the theory of narrative construction of reality. According to his theory the perception of reality (or reality itself) is a construction of the human mind via narratives. The narrative reality is the psychological reality that is a prism through which we see the world. Narratives constitute the story based on narrative causality, a mode of linking the chain of events together by presuming and assigning intentional motives to the characters. Bruner focused on analyzing how individuals create the meaning of events, and how those interpretations serve the individuals to make sense of their experiences [2].

Gergen & Gergen researched how the narrative construction reflects the individual’s effort to construct a coherent and authentic story from diverging experiences. The narrative in their view also serves as a basis of future aspiration and action. As they connect the main thematic events of the self narratives on a time axis horizontally and examine the evaluation of the events on the vertical axis, they distinguish progressive, regressive and stability narratives, based on how the evaluation of events develops in time from the narrator’s perspective [3].

MacAdams - who built his theory on Erickson’s concept of identity development - argues that identity integrates life experiences by shaping and constantly reshaping the life narrative. Identity is an integrated and evolving story of the self, which provides the individual with a sense of unity and purpose in life.

The narrative represents one's reconstructed past, perceived present, and imagined future [4]. The level of complexity and integrity are the two major dimensions which indicate the maturity of the identity [5].

Pennebaker was the first to research how the use of language and the recovery from trauma are linked. He discovered that changes in the narratives may indicate changes in the psychological state or in the state of health, in responding to crises and in opportunities of growth [6]. Pennebaker also developed LIWC, a computerized text analysis program that outputs the percentage of words in a given text that fall into one or more of over 80 linguistic, psychological, and topical categories. The application of this program strengthened the links between linguistic patterns and personality or psychological state by more detailed results [7].

Laszlo researched how national identity is reflected in national narratives such as famous novels, oral memories of historic events, and the narratives of history in the official school text books. [8]. Laszlo applied the methodology of qualitative analysis based on thematic analysis, and also a quantitative approach – narrative categorical content analysis – for which a software application NarrCat was also developed [9]. Laszlo focused on key psychological factors encoded in the narratives of national identity that explain attitudes derived from national identity.

THE METHODOLOGY OF NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The existing methods of narrative analysis can be divided into two major directions. The first direction is qualitative analysis, which is focused on themes and patterns emerging from the stories, involving the application of a manual process of coding. The qualitative approach is able to identify the key elements of narratives with no or very little limitation of preconceptions, but it involves a subjective decision of the coders, and the coding process is quite time consuming. The second type of method is quantitative analysis, which is focused on pre-established categories – categories with psychological meaning, linguistic categories, or topical categories – and computer based analysis software tools are applied. The quantitative approach is time efficient and it is possible to analyze an unlimited amount of texts, and using standardized categories enables researchers to establish benchmarks and compare longitudinal research samples or samples from different sources quite precisely. The quantitative methodology is unable to identify unexpected (previously not established and computerized) items in the narrative, but is able to discover patterns of the programmed categories in such depth that would be impossible to follow in the narratives for a human mind. In this paper two research examples are presented where qualitative and quantitative methods were combined to expand and deepen the research.

EXECUTIVE COACHING CASE STUDY

As part of a CEO coaching, narrative analysis was applied at a small Startup organization. The focus of the coaching was to help the CEO to identify the organization's strengths and growth opportunities, explore future options, to develop clear goals for the organization's development as well as action strategies of self-development. The aim of the research was to identify themes and patterns emerging from the narratives in order to provide additional feedback to the CEO about the real, important and current issues occurring in the organization from an independent source. The entire team of 12 people were involved in the research, and 67% of all staff members - 8 people - completed the online survey. The survey consisted of three open ended questions, three stories about the organization: a general, a success, and a failure story.

At first a thematic analysis was carried out. All stories were analyzed and a headline was captured in each story as the most important message of the story. As a next step of analysis, themes were established based on grouping the headlines. Groups were created based on highlighting the key words and their context, and collecting the similar meanings into a theme. General stories reflected three important themes: "Hard work", "Dynamism" and "Great team", and success stories copied these themes as well. Failure stories brought two new themes into the picture: "Process" and "Leadership". This analysis provides one perspective to observe current strengths and growth opportunities: hard work, dynamism and great team are the strengths that are generally present to the staff and enable the company to accomplish results, and certain aspects of "processes" and "leadership" are key barriers leading the failures, On the other hand these are the growth opportunities, as improving on those areas could lead to better performance.

As a second analysis method "word count" was applied. The software output "list of frequent words" was manually processed: the pronouns and articles that had no relevance to the research focus were sorted out, all the other frequent words – mentioned more than once in the narratives – were listed.

The frequent words mentioned in the general stories were:

- work, great, team, fun, employees, open minded, growing, specialist, know, customer, solution

The frequent words mentioned in the success stories were:

- great, new, project, team, all, everybody, marketing, rebranding, repositioning, pilot, start, opportunities

The frequent words mentioned in the failure stories were:

- project, ready, time, delay, employee, development, overtime, stress, busy, kick-off, presentation, meeting, focus, responsibilities, deadlines, promises, task, team, CEO

The word count method established another independent perspective to identify key occurrences in the organization. Marketing and product development related areas and team have clear emphasis in success stories. Internal processes, leadership, and project organization related issues have clear emphasis in failure stories. The results were very much aligned with the previous results of the thematic analysis.

As a third approach a quantitative analysis of the narratives was carried out, applying LIWC (Linguistic Word Count) software tool [7]. LIWC results (Table 1) were summarized in the key areas that can be linked to organizational aspects. The relatively low ratio of negations indicates a healthy level of facing reality, a lower tendency of denial. The relatively high ratio of the LIWC category “social expressions” informs of the importance of team spirit in the organization. The higher level of positive emotions suggests a generally good atmosphere and optimism. The lower level of negative emotions indicates a low level of motivational problems and burn-out in the team.

Table 1
. Sample of the LIWC results

Segment	Word Count	Negate	Social	Positive emotion	Negative emotion
1.00	57.00	0.00	5,21	5,26	0.00
2.00	88.00	0.00	5,17	7,95	0.00
3.00	117.00	1.71	9,17	4,27	2.56
4.00	97.00	0.00	13.40	7,22	0.00
5.00	62.00	1.61	4.84	3,23	0.00
6.00	52.00	0.00	5.77	5.77	0.00
7.00	80.00	1,25	15.00	1,25	0.00
8.00	87.00	0.00	11.49	4.60	0.00

APPLICATIONS AND LINKS TO EXECUTIVE COACHING

The debriefing of all these results was integrated into the CEO coaching process. Narrative analysis provided insightful feedback to the CEO with regard to the organization’s current state, validated a few important assumptions, and also created awareness of a few important blind spots. The feedback helped the CEO identify key action steps as well.

The results of this research were presented and debriefed as part of the feedback component of the coaching process. The CEO of the organization found the new perspectives quite valuable to expand his awareness. He agreed with the key findings of the research. He identified team spirit and innovation as core drivers of future success, and decided to design an action plan to maintain them at the

present high level. He also identified leadership structure as a weakness of the organization and designed an action plan to change leadership structure and to develop two team leaders internally. In terms of self-development goal, improving in delegation was identified. This research provided an additional source of data and perspectives for the CEO to understand the present context more insightfully. And it also provided fuel to translate talk into action, supporting learning and change along the entire coaching process.

CONCLUSIONS

Narrative analysis methodology is applicable as a source of feedback in the coaching process. Narratives are able to reveal real, current and important themes and patterns, and they represent the reality of the organization in a very direct and unfiltered format. The narrative method can provide an additional angle to understanding the organizational context in the process of executive coaching or team coaching by bringing unexpected topics and perspectives into the discussion as well. Narratives also provide valuable information on what really matters, as they carry the spontaneous energy of the responding staff members. Themes repeatedly emerging in the stories give emphasis to examining those aspects more carefully as they draw more attention from the organization. Narrative research may also supplement other surveys and scale based questionnaires in order to provide stories behind the numerical data.

Narrative research is a new and promising direction to be further discovered. Narrative surveys and narrative analysis may be used as feedback in the coaching process solely to validate or challenge assumptions and deepen organizational awareness. Narrative methodology also has a potential for executive development, team development, organizational and cultural change projects as part of research combined with other existing tools.

REFERENCES

- [1] SARBIN, T. R. : **Narrative Psychology. The storied Nature of Human Conduct.** New York, Praeger, 1986, pp. 3-22.
- [2] BRUNER, J.: The Narrative Construction of Reality. **Critical Inquiry**, 18(1), 1991, pp. 1-21.
- [3] GERGEN, K. – Gergen, M.: Narrative and the Self as Relationship. In: L. Berkowitz (ed.), **Advances in experimental social psychology.** San Diego, Academic Press, 1988, pp. 17-56.
- [4] MCADAMS, D.: The psychology of life stories. **Review of General Psychology**, 2, 2001, pp. 100–122.
- [5] MCADAMS, D. - McLean: Narrative Identity Current Directions in Psychological Science. **Review of General Psychology**, 22(3), 2013, pp. 233-238.
- [6] PENNEBAKER, J.: Telling Stories: The Health Benefits of Narrative. **Literature and Medicine**, 19(1), 2000, pp. 3-18 .| 10.1353/lm.2000.0011
- [7] PENNEBAKER, J.: **The Secret Life of Pronouns.** New York, Bloomsbury, 2011.
- [8] LASZLO, J.: **The Science of Stories.** London, Routledge, 2008.
- [9] LASZLO, J.: **Historical Tales and National Identity: An introduction to narrative social psychology.** Budapest, Akademia, 2014.