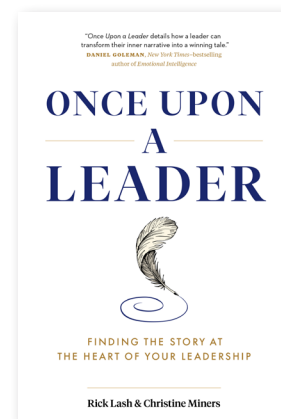


Once Upon a Leader

Finding the Story at the Heart of your Leadership

by **Rick Lash and Christine Miners**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

There are moments in just about every leadership journey when the path forward suddenly feels unclear. Struck by uncertainty and a lack of confidence, your sense of self—and your clarity of purpose—is out of balance. It's as if you have ceased to be the hero in your own story. During periods of disruption and transition like these, you need a rewrite.

Executive coaches and leadership experts Rick Lash and Christine Miners wrote *Once Upon a Leader: Finding the Story at the Heart of Your Leadership* as a transformative guide to leadership development that illuminates how your internal narrator acts as the operating system of your mind. Through engaging stories, research-backed insights, and techniques, you'll gain the tools to re-engage and update the story you tell yourself so that you can operate at a higher, more effective level.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to find your internal narrator.
- The role your narrator plays in leadership effectiveness.
- How your narrator becomes an insufficient partner in your leadership over time.
- The materials and steps you need to find and refine your narrative.
- How to help your internal narrator become a more mature version of itself.

Introduction

This book is divided into two parts, starting with an introduction to your internal narrator, the role it plays in leadership effectiveness, and how your internal narrator becomes an insufficient partner in your leadership over time or during periods of disruption and transition. In the second part, you will go to work on your own leadership narrative.

We will lay out the materials and steps—the recipe—you need to find and refine your narrative so you can, in your own way and on your own time, help your internal narrator to become a more mature version of itself. A narrator that is more intentional, experienced, and credentialed. We have seen firsthand the substantial payoffs—a personal story that is more grounded and anchored in your true self, a story that is less fragile and more resilient, better able to adapt and to withstand the relentless pressures of leadership and your life. Your narrator will earn the right to be your author.

Part 1: Meet Your Narrator

A Leader Is Born

A growing body of research suggests that many leaders develop a core narrative that defines who they are as leaders. The core narrative serves as a system that leaders use to not only convey how they see themselves as leaders, but also as a key source of personal motivation, drive, and action that they continually draw upon to guide their decisions and make meaning of what they do. The research identified four themes that emerged consistently in the leaders' narratives—being born leaders, overcoming struggle and hardship, finding a cause, and learning from experience.

As a senior leader, what holds you back is often not a lack of skills or knowledge, but a fragmented and patchy leadership narrative that is frozen in time—one you rarely go back to see if it needs revision.

The Home Of Your Narrator

Becoming conscious and deliberate authors by intentionally reconstructing our story using the well of autobiographical memories available to us is the most essential task we can undertake in our lives, especially in times of struggle and change when our narrator is most vulnerable and we risk losing our sense of self. It is core to what makes us human.

Throughout adulthood, our internal narrator continues to generate stories. But, more often than not, those stories are

a product of a narrator whose active development peaked in the early stage of our lives and is in need of an upgrade. As a result, the narratives it produces are often overly simplistic or merely inadequate for the complex demands of adult life. This is particularly true whenever we face a major career change, experience personal trauma, or must navigate difficult challenges.

Our narrator is operating like a younger version of ourselves that has not benefited from our more mature life experiences and evolving values. If we can teach executives like ourselves how to re-engage and upgrade our narrator, we can become better equipped to make meaning of ourselves in the new and ever-changing context within which we find ourselves, be it at work or in other aspects of our lives.

Why We Give Up Authorship

Existential psychology identifies death, meaninglessness, choice, and isolation as the four ultimate anxieties that all human beings must deal with as a fact of being alive. It claims that much of our narrative-construction work is conducted unconsciously to help us cope with these four existential anxieties. Our need for protective narratives can find fertile ground in organizational life.

Allowing your organization to write your narrative has short-term benefits, but it also can come at a significant cost. Organizations are generally poor caretakers of your leadership narrative. And we know that the connection between your leadership narrative and your core narrative is at the heart of leadership excellence in every regard. In other words, taking back authorship of your leadership narrative is one of the most important exercises you can undertake.

Reinvestment On The Road To Personal Transformation

Your brain has limited capacity to process information. Your short-term working memory can handle only a few bits of information at a time. But with learning and experience, we acquire new memories and two things start to happen that help get around these limitations and reduce complexity: chunking and automating.

When it comes to developing your leadership narrative, it is not about developing new skills or capabilities to become an expert. Instead, you are rewiring memories that are intimately connected with your core sense of self and your

identity as a leader. It is a personal journey of transformation. You have to be willing to deliberately reinvest your spare thinking capacity—to engage your narrator once again—to build your leadership narrative.

Your narrator serves as your composer, and you strengthen it through reinvestment. It is an ongoing cycle—the more you reinvest into your leadership narrative, the more your narrative will help you reduce the complexity of challenges you face as an executive, creating the spare capacity to continually reinvest to grow and evolve your narrative.

What House, M.d. Can Teach Us About Leadership Narrative

As a scriptwriter best known for her work on the network television show *House M.D.*, Pamela is responsible for crafting storylines that are not only engaging but believable. Her career success hinges on her ability to propel the television show's characters through compelling and unexpected growth opportunities.

In a lot of ways, rehabilitating your narrator and authoring your own leadership narrative is like writing a screenplay—but rather than assigning a story to fictional characters, you're reframing your own past in a way that makes you the hero in your future.

If the writer of the episode does their job well, they don't just have believable and entertaining dialogue, but they've taken disparate elements from their lives, melded them together, and embedded them into the storylines of the fictional characters—and the audience is none-the-wiser. Rather, all the viewer sees is a seamless story—one that flows, entertains, and captivates their attention. One they have no trouble believing.

Are You Ready?

Deep work is the heat needed to distill the essence of what will become your leadership narrative. Deep work is precisely the kind of mental activity needed for your narrator to do its work—deliberately reinvesting your spare capacity to build your leadership narrative. You will be reflecting on your past, challenging your deeply held beliefs about yourself and your leadership, connecting new insights to what you know, experimenting with bringing your narrative alive, at times feeling uncomfortable and seeking support from others as you progress on your journey. It takes time, patience, and a high tolerance for ambiguity as you work through the building blocks of your leadership narrative. Deep work provides the gentle heat to create the reduction

you need, allowing you to skim off the impurities to gain access to your core leadership narrative.

Part 2: Finding Your Story

There is no final destination on the journey of leadership narrative. Rather, the process is more important than the end product, and it is important that you have the mindset and skills to see your leadership narrative as a process of ongoing reflection, restoration, and renewal.

To do this, you need to have the tools to do the following:

- Productively reflect on your own past and build deeper insights into what motivates you. You need to be able to wade through your feelings, identify what gives you energy, separate yourself from your limiting thoughts and behaviors, and distill your personal story down to a number of key ingredients.
- See the pivotal elements of your story through a fresh set of eyes and rearrange them in a way that suits you better. You need to be able to view your skills, experiences, and backstory from a different angle and reframe your memories in a way that gives you authorship and agency.
- Leverage the insights of others to strengthen your personal story. Seeing yourself from the outside in can help you see yourself in a new light.
- Maintain control of your narrative—even when it meets real life. You need to be able to respond to challenging life events by modifying and adapting your leadership narrative in a way that keeps you on the right track.

Phase 1: Prepare

Collect the materials needed to construct your leadership narrative before you begin to build. Some of those materials will come from mining your autobiographical memories. Some will need to be imported from the outside to provide you with an outside-in perspective, helping you appreciate how others see your strengths and the value you have brought through your leadership. Other elements—your inner motives—are more deeply hidden and must be brought to the surface.

This phase teaches how to:

- Start with the foundation
- Find your power source
- Get the outside view

Phase 2: Build

Having prepared all the building materials, it is time to see how they might fit together. It is in this phase that you will be integrating the complex and sometimes conflicting data sources into a coherent, singular leadership narrative. The analogy of building a house breaks down a bit, however. There is no clear blueprint to guide you. Rather, the blueprint starts to emerge from the assembled materials. It is here where your narrator truly gets down to work, sifting through old memories, shining a light on long-forgotten events, and discovering new meaning, identifying hidden strengths and looking for the strands that connect it all. Patience is key, but the elements of what will become your leadership narrative start to emerge. In this phase, you will seek to answer three fundamental questions that lie at the heart of your narrative: Where do I come from? What do I bring? What impact do I seek to create?

This phase teaches how to:

- Get to work
- Find the connections

Phase 3: Activate

Overall, it is the process of developing your leadership narrative that is transforming. Developing your leadership narrative is not like writing a speech, although you may use elements of it when creating a presentation. It is not writing an essay, although you may choose to include parts of it in your communications. Rather, the process of building your leadership narrative is subtler and harder to get your arms around. Like other executives who have embarked on a challenging but deeply rewarding journey, you will find that the

end product is more profound than a concrete product. Like them, you will find yourself using your leadership narrative when you suddenly unearth renewed conviction to express your views at the executive table. You will find yourself using it when making difficult decisions that defy clear answers. And you will find yourself using it when you are at a crossroads and need the courage to choose a different path.

This phase teaches how to:

- Engage others
- Align teams

Conclusion

As you edit and upgrade your internal narrator, you'll develop a personal story that is more grounded and anchored in your true self: one that is less fragile, more resilient, and able to withstand the relentless pressures of leadership—and life.



Valued for his deep expertise and thoughtful, creative approach, **Rick Lash** has contributed to the Harvard Business Review, the Ivey Business Journal, Chief Executive magazine, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, and the Globe and Mail's Leadership Lab series.



Valued for her depth of expertise, practical approach, and authentic style, **Christine Miners** is a sought-after advisor, facilitator, and speaker.

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