# Narrative Empathy

## Idea In Short

Facts rarely move a room the way a story does. When a colleague describes a customer's bad week in concrete detail, listeners stop evaluating and start imagining. Researchers who study narrative have found that character-driven stories engage the brain's social systems, shift hormones tied to trust, and can change what people choose to do. For leaders, narrative empathy is both a skill and a responsibility: it lets you understand people through their stories, and it lets you share understanding with others. This article explains how stories build empathy, what the research shows, where the approach can mislead, and how to use it to listen and to lead.

A hospital operations director reviews a report that shows long waits in the emergency department. The numbers are clear, and the room responds politely. Then a nurse describes a night when an elderly man waited six hours alone while his wife, who had dementia, sat at home unsupervised. The room goes quiet. A month later, the hospital has a new triage process for patients who are caregivers.

## What narrative empathy is

Narrative empathy is the habit of understanding other people through the stories they tell and the stories told about them. A story gives context, sequence, and feeling, and these are exactly what data summaries leave out.

Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist who has studied stories for years, explains the mechanism in a Greater Good Science Center article. Stories are an effective way for social creatures to transmit information and values, and he describes a state called transportation, in which evolutionarily old parts of the brain simulate the emotions of a character and the viewer begins to feel those emotions too.1

For a manager, the lesson is that a person who knows your customer's story is better placed

to serve that customer than one who knows only the customer's segment.

## What the research found

Zak's team tested the idea by showing participants a short film about a father and his young son who was dying of cancer. In a paper for the Dana Foundation, he reports that the narrative with a dramatic arc increased both cortisol and oxytocin, that the change in oxytocin correlated with participants' feelings of empathy for the boy and his father, and that heightened empathy motivated people to give money to a stranger.2

In a Harvard Business Review essay reprinted by the University of California, Berkeley, Zak adds that oxytocin acts as a signal that it is safe to approach others, that it is produced when we are trusted or shown kindness, and that it motivates cooperation by enhancing empathy.3

Not every story had this effect. The studies found that the version with tension and a character the viewer cared about worked, while a flatter version did not. Structure matters as much as subject.

## Why stories build understanding

Stories work because they present people as people. A statistic about caregivers describes a group. A story about one caregiver invites the listener to take that person's seat and to feel how the choices look from there.

A Berkeley feature on the science of story adds that tales shape beliefs and behavior, often below conscious awareness, and that our bodies tend to release oxytocin as we watch fictional characters interact.4

In an interview, Zak says that when brain activity is measured as people interact with each other and as they interact with a highly immersive story, the activation looks almost identical.5

This is worth noting for managers who want to develop empathy in their teams. Reading and listening to well-told stories of customers and colleagues may be a practical training method, and it costs little.

## Listening for stories at work

The skill begins with listening. When you ask someone about their work, invite narrative: "Tell me about the last time this process went wrong." The answers carry details that surveys miss, such as who was involved, what they tried, and how they felt.

Look for the turning points. Most stories contain a moment when something changed, such as a decision, a delay, or a kindness. These moments often reveal the real needs and constraints.

Resist the urge to fix the problem too early. Let the person finish, and repeat back what you heard in their own words. People know when they have been understood, and the exchange builds the trust that makes later work easier.

## Telling stories that carry understanding

Once you have a story, you can share it. A change leader might open a meeting with a short account of one customer's experience before presenting the plan. A manager might describe a colleague's good judgment in a hard moment to show what the team values.

Keep the story specific and honest. Use real details, avoid inflating the drama, and include the parts that do not flatter the organization. Listeners can tell when a story has been polished into a sales pitch, and trust falls when they do.

Get permission. Stories about real people belong to them. Ask whether you may share the story, how to describe them, and whether any details should be changed to protect privacy.

## The limits and risks

Narrative has a dark side. The Berkeley feature on the science of story also notes that stories are not only instruments of connection and entertainment but also of control. A skilled teller can steer an audience toward a conclusion without letting it examine the facts.

The risk shows up in business as well. A vivid anecdote can outweigh a hundred quiet cases, and leaders can end up designing for the memorable story and not the typical one. Ask whether the story is representative, and look at the data alongside it.

Stories can also reinforce stereotypes. If the only stories a team hears about a group come from a single perspective, empathy narrows. Seek varied voices, and let people tell their own stories instead of relying on others' summaries.

## A practice for teams

Start a regular story round. At the opening of a weekly meeting, one member shares a short account from a customer, a colleague, or a supplier, chosen for what it shows about real needs. Rotate the role so everyone contributes.

After each story, ask three questions. What did this person want? What got in the way? What would have helped? The questions turn feeling into insight and keep the discussion from sliding into sympathy alone.

Record the stories and the actions they prompted. A simple log shows over time how listening changed decisions, and it gives new team members a window into the people the work serves.

## When stories and data meet

The best decisions use both. Data shows how common a problem is, and stories show what it is like. When a metric moves, ask for the stories behind it. When a story moves you, ask for the numbers.

Pairing the two also protects against error. A story that cannot be found in the data may be an outlier. A trend that no story explains may be an artifact of measurement. Each form of evidence checks the other.

Teach the habit by example. When you present a plan, show one chart and one story, and say how each shaped your thinking.

## A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical software company that is losing small business customers. The analytics team reports that churn spikes after the third month. The customer success lead interviews ten departed customers and asks each to describe their last week of using the

product.

Five of the ten tell a similar story: they could not figure out how to invite a bookkeeper to view reports, and they gave up after asking support twice. The team adds a simple sharing feature and a short guide. Churn after month three drops by a third. The case is invented, but it shows how stories can reveal what the numbers only hint at.

## Cautions

Do not use stories to avoid hard facts. A moving account can still be unrepresentative, and a decision that rests on it alone may serve a few people at the expense of many.

Avoid exploiting emotion. If you tell a story to win an argument and not to help others understand, you treat listeners as targets. Be open about your purpose.

Finally, remember the people in the stories. Telling a painful experience can cost the teller, and retelling can turn a person into a symbol. Honor the teller's wishes, and give credit.

- 1How stories change the brain
- 2Why inspiring stories make us react: the neuroscience of narrative
- 3Why your brain loves good storytelling
- 4The science of the story
- 5Why do our brains demand a narrative?

## Summary

Narrative empathy means understanding other people by attending to their stories, and helping others understand through the stories you tell. Research suggests that character-driven narratives with a clear arc raise neurochemical signals linked to empathy and can predict whether listeners help. The same power can distort or manipulate, so leaders should check stories against facts, seek out the voices that rarely get heard, and avoid using emotion to bypass judgment. Collect one customer or employee story this week, retell it to your team without editing the hard parts, and ask what it changes about the next decision you make together.