

A Field Guide to Leadership Stories

Features to listen for and consider in storytelling

As we—the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and other funders and practitioners of leadership development for social change—align with a broader and more inclusive narrative about leadership, our goal is to recognize and fund the practice of diverse kinds of leadership.

To realize that goal, it is important that we become more aware of how different narratives show up in the stories we hear and tell. We need to get better at listening for and telling stories that illustrate the full complexity of leadership, rather than being confined to—or privileging—one kind of story and the narrative that underpins it.

To hone our own and others’ awareness, we have drafted this brief “field guide” to leadership-related stories. It remains a work in progress, and we welcome feedback and suggestions.

As you think about stories you’re hearing and telling, ask yourself:

- How much of the full spectrum of kinds of leadership is shown by the stories we’re telling and hearing?
- How might we be limiting ourselves, others, and the stories we tell by falling into familiar, dominant tropes?
- What other stories do we need to tell?
- Do we have multiple kinds of stories to tell about leadership? If not, how might the types of leadership we fund be limited by beliefs and narratives about what leadership is or what types matter?
- Are we telling stories in ways that are true to how the person or group practicing leadership would describe their approach?
- Who is the right person to tell each story?

The table below is designed to help us all identify features of the stories we hear and tell, examine our practices, and broaden the scope of the stories we are listening for, amplifying, and telling.

As you consider and use this “field guide,” please keep in mind that there are not simply two narratives—or two kinds of stories—about leadership. There are multiple narratives and many kinds of stories. The intent of this tool is to help us recognize the common features of the most dominant narrative as they appear in stories, as well as the potential features of a much broader realm of possibilities long overshadowed by that dominant narrative.

Please also note that individual leadership and related stories remain relevant and valuable. Our intention is to continue to honor these kinds of leadership and these stories for what they are, while also broadening the kinds of leadership we recognize, support, and tell stories about. We are not suggesting that all leadership stories be retold (let alone misrepresented or “greenwashed”) to sound more collective or otherwise more reflective of a broader, more inclusive narrative.

Story features to listen and watch for

	In the dominant narrative <i>Check for bias toward hearing and telling this limited and limiting story.</i>	In a broader, more inclusive narrative <i>Listen for, fund, and tell stories about more leadership of these kinds.</i>
Protagonist(s)	Individual hero or heroes, typically idealized and elevated as exceptional; members of broader team or community rarely mentioned or honored, even when their roles are crucial.	Collective and/or individual; broader team and community honored as a locus of leadership and power, even if an individual is also recognized; collaboration understood and celebrated as a trait of leadership.
Story arc	Toward individual triumph and recognition; emphasis on individual(s) overcoming the odds; emphasis on grit and “bootstrap.”	Toward collective and/or individual solutions, resolutions, or successes; emphasis on shared strengths and on impact in communities and systems.
Implicit definition of leadership	A fixed set of individual characteristics; “leadership” as a noun.	Widely variable array of collective and individual practices; “leadership” as a relational verb.
Focus	Personal call, challenges, and journey; often ahistorical and lacking context.	Collective and/or personal journeys; emphasis on how personal journey is shaped by community, context, conditions, and/or culture.
Qualities highlighted	Individual; often focused on positional power, expertise, and academic/institutional qualifications.	Collective and/or individual strengths, understandings, and wisdom; lived experience, professional experience, and/or academic accomplishment.

Types of action that yield success	Individual action grounded in individual qualities.	Collective and/or individual action grounded in shared or individual qualities.
Types of decision-making	Individual/executive; top-down; by one on behalf of others.	Collective and/or individual; bottom-up; cooperative; by those affected.
Role of community	Having needs and difficulties (which can be met/overcome by one or more “heroes”).	Having needs and difficulties as well as strengths, power, and wisdom.