

Greg Morgan

**REWRITING**

**LEADERSHIP**

**WITH**

**NARRATIVE**

**INTELLIGENCE**

How Leaders Can Thrive in Complex,  
Confusing and Contradictory Times

# **REWRITING LEADERSHIP WITH NARRATIVE INTELLIGENCE**

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# REWRITING LEADERSHIP WITH NARRATIVE INTELLIGENCE: HOW LEADERS CAN THRIVE IN COMPLEX, CONFUSING AND CONTRADICTIONARY TIMES

BY

**GREG MORGAN**

*Allora Leadership and Coaching, Australia*



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## About the Author

Greg Morgan, PhD, is an Executive Partner at Allora Leadership and Coaching. During more than 30 years of leadership positions in education and the corporate sector, Greg cultivated an interest in strengthening his practice by distilling and implementing insights from global leadership research. After completing a PhD in leadership he continued researching and synthesising understandings from a range of disciplines, culminating in his concept of *leading with narrative intelligence*. Greg offers consulting services in personalized, action-oriented leadership development, to clients across a range of sectors.

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# Foreword

The underlying premise of Greg Morgan's book, *Rewriting Leadership with Narrative Intelligence*, is that in life we consistently think in narratives of our own creation, which we assume to be "true." We understand our life as a web of relationships within which we scrutinise the data upon which our narratives are based, and, as a result of such interrogation, we shape and/or reshape their meaning. In this reshaping process we tend to check for additional data by seeking "knowledge," when what might help more, Morgan claims, is to seek "meaning." The book draws on a number of disciplines to build a case for "narrative thinking," which is designated as an "intelligence." More importantly, Greg argues that the most effective leaders can build shared narratives and cultures of narrative intelligence. He highlights some ethical dimensions – including moral courage and authenticity – involved when leading with narrative intelligence, but cautions that our narratives can, too easily, be used unethically.

Another premise of this book, he says, is that many leadership development courses and books seem – whether intentionally or not – to suggest that leadership development is a somewhat procedural process of following a logical sequence of steps; and that such an approach may fail to recognise that a precondition of engaging people in pursuing shared goals and/or developing their leadership capacity is for them to dwell in the same narrative and such a process doesn't have to be left to chance. The most effective leaders know how to cultivate a genuine, shared narrative in which people are in strong accord.

Leadership, he argues, is a learnable, deeply embodied skill that sits within influence relationships. Effective leaders understand that people make meaning by thinking narratively: constantly creating stories they believe to be true. They use *narrative intelligence*, aligned with their goals and wellbeing, to reshape stories about themselves and others. This book explores the fundamental human propensity for *thinking narratively*: what it means and how to engage that ability to better serve our intentions and needs. Our moment-to-moment experiences occur within *narratives* which we create and believe to be true. With a rich understanding of what it means to think "narratively," we become more aware of the meaning we create and narrate to ourselves in an ongoing commentary. With *narrative intelligence*, leaders gain insight into the narratives they create about themselves and others. They learn how to refine them to better serve their intentions, and learn also how to affect the narratives that others shape about them as leaders. In this way narratives are constantly in flux.

The danger of a fixed narrative is that it inevitably calcifies, and Morgan claims that we can “shoehorn” our experiences into it, forcing any meaning we make to be consistent with the narrative, rather than modifying the narrative as a new understanding emerges. This forcing of meaning undermines the reciprocity between experience and meaning, with an uncritical acceptance of current narratives possibly resulting in, “sinking into a false certainty” (p. 38).

When focusing on the special perspective of his book for our understanding of leadership, as narrative intelligence, Greg points out that while other leadership texts might focus on the “what” and the “how” of leadership, his focus is on nurturing a culture of leading with narrative intelligence – a focus on the “who” of leadership. And the “who” comes from within, drawing on a leader’s life experiences, personal vision, and mental models. The “who” is largely shaped by the narrative leaders construct to make sense of what is happening around them, especially their sense of self-efficacy and agency to influence future directions. Importantly, Greg says, successful leadership seems to be wrapped up in *action* and leaders will be evaluated for what they do and achieve. Redirecting the effectiveness of leadership begins with the *meaning* leaders make about what is happening, including the meaning of their actions. It ends with the outcomes they achieve and the ethics of actions taken along the way. Essential to this “redirecting” process, is an appreciation of the fact that we live in an era of Big Data where numbers are “crunched” like never before. When we want to find deep, underlying trends, and patterns in life and relationships we should turn to this new source of knowledge. Greg, however, cautions that our increasing fixation with this type of information – despite its usefulness in many applications – diminishes the importance of human inference and judgment. He says that his book offers a new paradigm for making sense of what is unfolding around us, and offers a deeply human perspective on generating the sorts of outcomes we seek. He argues that humans act more from deep, personal truths than from objectively testable truths, and these truths are created by drawing on fragments of data from lived experience. The data selected and the data overlooked, are determined by core values and other mental models and the meaning of an experience is then constructed in the medium of a narrative.

Greg defines a narrative as an ordering of events and thoughts in a coherent sequence that provides causal connections between them, typically involving a beginning, a middle, and an end, and usually involving a challenge or trial for a protagonist, the response to which can involve moral perspectives. Narratives offer vicarious experience in learning around human values and moral qualities, such as loyalty, empathy, prudence, catharsis, and redemption.

Where a story is the chronological sequence of events sitting behind a narrative, *storytelling* involves the act of *narrating*: selecting which events will be included, which perspectives will be presented from, how they will be interpreted, and the order in which they are conveyed. Rather than following a chronologically *sequential* path a narrative follows more of a *consequential* path. A narratively intelligent leader can reflect on how well-aligned a narrative is to what he/she aspires to, and the dataset on which it is based: is this the “best” narrative based on the available data? Is there a more helpful narrative? Is there key data missing?

What data about me am I generating to others – what narrative are they shaping about me from that data? Narratively intelligent leaders refine their own narratives to be closely aligned with what they aspire to. They do this by having a rich understanding of the narrative they must live out in order to realise their aspirations and vision, and then restructuring their narrative to better reflect this. Leading with narrative intelligence includes a moral dimension of people engaged together in a reciprocal relationship of influence, irrespective of power or status.

Greg identifies the pinnacle of narratively intelligent leadership as the capacity to generate shared, ethical narratives featuring a communal sense of “us.” This involves channelling a sense of responsibility for outcomes, a sense of accountability for personal contributions, and engaging the discretionary energy which people bring to their roles. In its highest expression, narratively intelligent leaders nurture a *culture* of narrative intelligence and they understand that it is not the events and developments of the day to which we respond as we navigate through life that are centrally important: it is the *meaning* we shape about those experiences.

While Greg states that his book is purposefully an academic book, which the publisher requested, I find that the technique of finishing chapters/sections with *reflective questions* and *Implications for practice*, is very explanatory and useful as it focuses the reader on the nitty gritty of leadership as narrative intelligence. He explains:

Emerald has asked me to write an academic book, so while I’ve written it in a scholarly style, drawing on research and theory, my real interest is the applicability of what I write about for people’s practice, particularly their practice of *leadership*. The “plan” – all being well – is for this current book to be a foundation for a follow-up book aimed at the general market. My hope is that that book will be far more “action-oriented”; the type of book that practising and aspiring leaders might buy at an airport bookstore.

The reflective questions and, especially the implications for practice sections provided this reader with key insights into ways in which leadership practitioners can apply the theoretical and scholarly concepts discussed throughout the book. Two implications for practice, in dot-point form, are provided as examples:

Some of the most critical work of leading with narrative intelligence is engaging people in a shared narrative about what is currently happening; co-shaping a shared vision; clarifying and articulating the mental models embedded in the shared vision, along with the commensurate behaviours; designing and implementing supportive systemic structures; and implementing the four disciplines of execution with rigour. (Morgan, 2018, p. 213)

Perhaps the most significant thing we have confirmed for ourselves is that, although actions are important, the thinking that influences and shapes what we do is far more critical. Changing

our thinking is the first thing we have to do both individually and collectively, because without that change we cannot possibly change what we really do on a day-to-day basis. Regardless of what new “method” or latest technique is attempted, the mind/brain will always choose to reduce such practices to fit entrenched assumptions and beliefs. To really restructure anything means to restructure our thinking and shift deep connections in our psyche. (Caine & Caine, 1997, p. vi, in Morgan, 2018, p. 214)

Leaders, Morgan claims, can nurture a culture of narrative intelligence by seizing every opportunity to make their thinking visible through the conversations in which they engage, and by articulating attributes of emerging shared narratives aligned with the shared vision. Every conversation can be a significant step in building accord between people about the shared vision, key mental models, and the systemic structures in place. Successfully engaging colleagues in a culture of narrative intelligence requires more than *telling* people what they should think and value. It requires cultivating an environment in which people are in accord: in which they are genuinely of one heart and one mind. Rich dialogue can support people in reconciling their personal narrative and actions with their personal vision and core values, as well as with any shared vision or shared narrative. Narratively intelligent leaders nurturing a culture of narrative intelligence should engage in active coaching of colleagues. *Narrative coaching* encourages the coach to enter a space of reflection and inquiry into the ethics and complexities of a shared narrative and a culture of narrative intelligence. It seems especially suited to leading with narrative intelligence given that narrative intelligence conceives of leadership as a reciprocal flow of trust and influence between colleagues, irrespective of their seniority or status.

As a summary of my response to this theoretical, scholarly yet practical work on leadership, I fully support and endorse the rich dialogue followed by Greg as well as his clear exposition of the central influence of narrative intelligence and narrative culture in growing and supporting influence relationships and influential leadership. As a long-time student and practitioner of leadership in a variety of systems and organisational settings, I greatly appreciate Greg’s scholarly contribution to our conceptual and practical understanding of the dynamics of the interpersonal and relationship dimensions of leadership. This is a significant development in leadership conceptual thinking and its implications for leaders at all levels are very real. Well done, Greg!

Patrick Duignan  
Professor Emeritus  
Australian Catholic University,  
Sydney, Australia

# Acknowledgements

This book is a milestone on the path of my continuing, unfolding thinking about leadership – particularly about the role of *narratives* in leadership.

I primarily acknowledge the contributions of my wife, Lucy. During many a long walk or car trip, and over countless glasses of wine, your coaching and direct contributions have sharpened and deepened my thinking about leading with narrative intelligence. You are my muse – my inspiration, nourisher of my spirit and breather of divine air into my imagination. I thank you for your amazing insight, intellectual challenge and wisdom. This is truly as much your work as it is mine.

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To the eminent leadership scholar, Professor Patrick Duignan: my sincere thanks, Patrick, for your support, encouragement and Foreword.

I also acknowledge the professional and friendly team at Emerald. I particularly acknowledge Pete Baker and Katy Mathers for your support which has made this project so seamless.

And then there are my family, friends and colleagues who indulge me and challenge me in my thinking. You have been very kind for accommodating my meandering thinking and conversations on narratives and how they feature in our thinking and in how they shape our lives.

West Launceston,  
Tasmania  
November 2018



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# Praise for *Rewriting Leadership with Narrative Intelligence*

‘Many people live in a fixed narrative. Few people see themselves as the creators of their own culture. Leaders are rare people who learn to create genuine, shared narratives. In such networks people flourish and expectations are exceeded. This is a landmark book that explains how to do what many people cannot imagine doing.’

**Professor Robert E. Quinn**, Center for Positive Organizations, Ross School of Business, University of Michigan; Author of *The Economics of Higher Purpose*

‘This is a book of sweeping scope. For anyone interested in fresh approaches to leadership, this is a powerful resource. Morgan artfully synthesises research and practice with a blend of compelling examples and stories. These provide the depth and breadth to provoke leadership self-reflection. We construct ourselves and others through the stories we have created, been told, and tell. All of us are deliciously self-delusional. We need mirrors like this book to take us to the deep personal truths from which we lead. As Morgan promises, he sits us in the director’s chair of our own life. Reading this will provide you with a stimulating balance of nods, ahas and ouches.’

**Dr John Edwards**, Researcher and Co-author of *Schools That Deliver*; International Co-ordinator: [schools-that-deliver.com](http://schools-that-deliver.com)

‘Comprehensive, insightful and thought-provoking; *Rewriting Leadership with Narrative Intelligence* offers both leaders and leadership scholars a truly innovative way of approaching the work of leadership. In it, Greg Morgan highlights the power of how we make meaning in ways that motivate us towards action (or not!), as well as challenging leaders to reflect on the appropriateness and ethics of their habitual narratives. Enhanced by apt reflective prompts as well as activities to try, this book provides a welcome antidote to tired recipes for leadership which ignore its co-created, contextually sensitive nature.’

**Professor Donna Ladkin**, Graduate School of Leadership and Change, Antioch University; Author of *Mastering the Ethical Dimension of Organizations: A Self-Reflective Guide to Developing Ethical Astuteness, and Rethinking Leadership: A New Look at Old Leadership Questions*

‘Each semester I walk into my leadership courses and somewhere in that semester the question arises: “Why do certain leaders lead so well, whilst others lead with such harmful outcomes?” The same question arises when I facilitate leadership workshops for Public leaders, and for Corporate leaders. I always respond with the same answer: “It is the narratives that leaders play in their minds about what it means to be a leader that shapes and drives their leadership actions and behaviour. Good narratives forged in their formative years shape great leaders. False and harmful narratives that embody dysfunctional leadership ideals forge less than ideal leaders.” That said, I have always wondered how we might unpack what exactly narrative typology looks like and if there is any way to alter false and harmful narratives for the good of the leader and those she or he leads? Dr Morgan’s book is a ray of bright hope that opens the window on the mindset of leaders and the power of narratives to shape leadership, and in turn to shape followership. This book is a must-read for all involved in the study and practice of leadership.’

**Rob Elkington**, PhD, Adjunct Professor, University of Ontario Institute of Technology; Co-Author of *Visionary Leadership in a Turbulent World: Thriving in the New VUCA Context and Exceptional Leadership by Design: How Design in Great Organizations Produces Great Leadership*

‘There is no shortage of books on leadership...

*Rewriting Leadership with Narrative Intelligence* adds something really different and useful to this field. What kinds of stories do we tell ourselves and how helpful are they to the way we lead, communicate and relate to others?

Dr Greg Morgan has written at once a scholarly, practical and profound exploration of these stories, how they impact us and how we can best manage and leverage them to be more effective leaders in this complex work world which we now live. I recommend it highly.’

**John Campbell**, Founding Director, Growth Coaching International, Sydney, Australia; Bend, Oregon, USA

‘Greg Morgan’s new book is a challenge on many levels to the “data orthodoxy” of contemporary leadership practice. The senses

of narrative and their appropriateness to leadership are cogently and compellingly laid out and supported. This, though, is no argument for the abandonment of data – instead it is an explanation of how meaningful data amidst the richness of narrative can illuminate and lead us onto deeper learning and greater, *real* effectiveness in leadership. This very readable book has an important place today and for the future.’

**Malcolm Elliott**, President, Australian Primary Principals Association

‘As a scholar of narrative thinking, values and meaning making, I am deeply impressed by Greg Morgan’s writing. He uses the term “narrative intelligence” to grasp what is at stake for those striving to improve and humanize our world. A lot of books on leadership focus on the organizational “what” and “how” of leadership. Morgan takes a different, and important, stance in highlighting the “who” of leadership. By developing their narrative intelligence, leaders find practical wisdom from which they can co-create a reality of sustainability, well-being and success in their organization. I have a deep wish for leaders everywhere to learn from the insights about the practice of contemporary leadership outlined in this groundbreaking book.’

**Professor Reinhard Stelter**, University of Copenhagen; Author of *The Art of Dialogue in Coaching: Towards Transformative Exchange and A Guide to Third Generation Coaching*

‘Greg Morgan’s beautifully written manuscript embodies a resonating personal and collective truth that guides us down a deep and interconnected journey to illuminate the bonds between narrative intelligence, leadership influence and the execution of leadership intentions. It is an inspiring and motivating book that commands your presence and opens up possibilities for leading real change.’

**Madeleine van der Steege**, Award-Winning Entrepreneur, Editor & Author of *Visionary Leadership in a VUCA World* and *Exceptional Leadership by Design*; Adjunct Professor, Webster University, The Netherlands