Accessing Stories

Our recommendation is that you focus on activities to access stories that are as simple as possible. Your focus is on the people and their stories. You don't want to impose limitation on the people by giving them an activity that is too complex. Their attempt to understand the complexity would get in the way of getting to the stories.

Following are 4 sample activities for accessing stories. Each works as a stand-alone activity that accesses stories within the group of participants present. They can also be used in combination with each other to offer a robust storytelling session. If you do offer a session like this, the added benefit is hearing and exploring stories through four different but related lenses.

Activity 1: Transfer In

In a physical meeting, have a deck of Genuine Contact Way Developing Leadership cards, placed face down card by card in a circle, and invite people to choose a card.

Alternately, have people go to dalarinternational.com/developing-leadership-cards and choose a card from the deck. They are to print the card and bring it with them to the meeting. If it is a virtual meeting, have it available in their browser if it's an online meeting. This pre-work will peak their curiosity. It is important to give NO further instructions when choosing a card.

For the activity, the room is set up in one or multiple circles of chairs each seating no more than 20 people with no tables in between. With smaller groups, this means only one circle, keeping the whole team or organization together. If there are more than 20 people, multiple circles are needed. More than 20 per circle takes too much time. The down side of multiple circles is that not everyone gets to hear something about everyone else who is involved. However, they do get to know up to nineteen others better. If using multiple circles to accommodate larger groups, keep as much distance between the circles as possible within the space so that groups don't distract each other.

This storytelling activity takes place at the very beginning of the meeting, before anything else has occurred apart from a brief welcome. To begin, the facilitator asks a question for reflection. Getting the question right is the most difficult part of this activity. The question must be related to the purpose of the meeting while simultaneously not going too far into the topic. The question ideally puts the person into starting to align with the primary purpose of the meeting.

For example, if the meeting is about team building, the question could be "What does this card convey to you about your contributions to a team?"; if the meeting is about strategic planning the question could be "What does this card convey to you about skills needed in strategic planning?"; or if the meeting is about launching a new project the question could be "What does this card convey to you about launching this project?". Ask the participants to "Please take

two minutes in silent reflection to gather your thoughts. You can write notes if you prefer to do so."

Once the two minutes have passed, continue with "Now meet in pairs for ten minutes to have a conversation with each other about the insights you are having. In ten minutes time you will be called back into the bigger circle. Your job then will be to introduce your partner by conveying to the group insights that your partner shared. Of course, if there is something you don't want your partner to share with the bigger group, you must say so while you are in pairs. Otherwise, anything you have mentioned could show up in the way your partner introduces you."

Once the ten minutes have passed and you have called the participants back into the circle, the facilitator begins the process by repeating the instructions of what is expected and then turns to the person to one side to begin 'by introducing your partner and sharing some of the insights of your partner'.

The story sharing based on the card goes around the circle, one person at a time.

Activity 2: Hopes & Fears

After an appropriate opening of the story sharing gathering, such as using the Transfer In activity, the facilitator announces that this next activity is to identify the hopes and the fears that the participants have for the story sharing event.

People are asked to meet in small groups of no more than eight people. It is best to allow the people to self-select the group they want to participate with.

The small group is tasked with recording the hopes and fears expressed in the group onto paper, giving 20 minutes for the task. They are instructed that upon their return to the whole group, someone from their small group is to present the hopes and fears to the whole group. Identification of who expressed the hope or the fear is not done. Rather, the presentation is a capture of the small group's sharing.

Once all of the hopes and fears are shared, the facilitator asks whether there are any insights that anyone wants to share about the hopes and fears.

The facilitator asks that the participants do their best to help the hopes become reality. The facilitator acknowledges that what is feared could happen and that if a person is experiencing his/her fear happening, that the person should ask for a pause in the story telling to acknowledge the fear.

While the Hopes & Fears activity offers a complete storytelling activity, we offer 2 variations here for your consideration.

Variation 1: At the end of the story sharing gathering, it is valuable to come back to the hopes and fears while the group is still together. Assuming that there is a process by which participants can say some closing words at the gathering, the instruction could be given that if

they want to say something about how their hopes and fears showed up during the story sharing, to please do so. This is invitational, an exercise of drawing awareness back to the hopes and fears, it is not required.

Variation 2: When people are asked to go into small groups to share their hopes and fears, they record those hopes and fears for their small group only. They are asked to examine all of the hopes and fears that they have expressed and then as a small group sort out what the deeper hopes are under the expressed hopes, and what the deeper fears are under the expressed fears. The small group, upon return to the whole group, is to have a presenter to present only what was discerned as the deeper hopes and deeper fears.

It is common for a small group to discern only one or two deeper hopes and fears from what was originally a longer list. This variation takes additional discernment, causing people to go more deeply into what is going on within them. Sometimes, that is exactly what we want to have people do so that they can approach the story sharing from this awareness.

Activity 3: Storyline

Seating starts out in a circle or concentric circles to give the feeling of being in something together. Following welcome and possibly some other activities such as Transfer In and Hopes and Fears, the facilitator, using a visual of the Story Line, orients participants to the Story Line.

Pointing to the line on the left, indicate that stories of the past go here. Pointing to the circle, indicate that this is the present gathering and it is influenced by stores of the past. Pointing to the line on the right, indicate that there are also stories of the future regarding possible futures as a result of this gathering.

Three stacks of printer sized paper should be available, each of a different color. Designate one color representing ‘glads’, another representing ‘sads’ and the third representing ‘mads’.

Ask the people to meet in self-selected small groups of no more than eight people. The instructions are to include to listen to each other without judging what the person is saying, asking questions for clarification only.

Each group is to take smaller stacks of the three colors of paper. The group is asked to share stories with each other of the past, and to note the story headline down on the paper, choosing whether the story being shared is one that is about something the people are mad about, glad about, or sad about. One headline per page.

This story sharing in small groups can be done in 20 minutes if that is all the time that is available, but it is best to give at least an hour.

The small groups then return to the whole group, bringing their papers along with them. Seating configuration is again the circle if possible.

Each group shares the highlights from their group. This can be done via one person being the presenter from the group, or with all group members sharing what was important to them. In conflicted or challenged situations, it is best to go with a presenter so that people don't feel so vulnerable.

As the sharing takes place, the papers are laid out in the space on the floor in the center of the circle. The different colors of paper provide the visual of how many are sad, mad or glad stories. The first group lays out their pages, and then the facilitator asks that the pages on the floor be grouped together in themes, if anyone is noticing themes emerging. The balance of the groups, when presenting, lay down the papers with the intention of adding to emergent themes in how the papers are grouped together.

When all groups have presented, the facilitator invites people to reflect about what they have noticed about the story sharing to this point. The facilitator records the comments. These recorded comments become part of documentation of the event, if there is a plan for having documentation.

Attention now goes back to the papers on the floor, with a request to name the themes that have emerged. The facilitator records these themes, possibly writing the themes right onto the Story Line diagram. These themes also become part of the documentation of the event, if there is a plan to have documentation.

At this point, the papers are gathered up, taking care to keep all papers within their thematic groupings. A count gets made of how many of the stories were sad, mad and glad. The themes and the tallies are information that people experience as valuable, and as part of feeling heard. The highlights get recorded in the documentation within their theme. Additional notation includes whether the story was sad, mad or glad...and the tallies are noted in the documentation.

The facilitator, using the Story Line framework, acknowledges that stories of the past have been shared. The attention is now on possible stories for the future. In most instances, the present relates to the present gathering of story sharing, and so the facilitator is able to ask for people to consider what the stories of the future might be as a result of this gathering.

Again, people meet in small groups. They are to share stories of possibilities and then to write highlights on pieces of paper (single color will do). Twenty minutes is usually enough time. Participants return to the whole group, preferably seating is configured in a circle. Again, each group shares highlights, places the papers on the floor space within the circle, and is invited to move papers around for emergent themes to come together. The themes are recorded as the possible stories of the future from the group. Papers are collected up so that the facilitator can document the highlights along with the themes. The facilitator leads a reflection circle, inviting participants to speak up about any insights or other sharing that they want to do to reflect at the end of the story sharing activity.

Activity 4: One-to-One Story Sharing

This could be called an interview. A great way to allow for story sharing is to have a simple interview form.

Use a quantitative question first, related to the theme of the story sharing. For example, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 as high, how do you rate this team in terms of innovation? Then ask three simple questions that elicit story sharing

1. Why did you rate it this way?
2. Do you have any suggestions?
3. Is there anything else you want to say?