

Use the Four Core Stories when you want to think broadly about your role as a storytelling leader, to begin building the identity of your team and organization, and to create engagement around your most critical leadership tasks.



For this exercise, you will need:

- A quiet place and some time to reflect
- A method of capturing your stories, such as a word processor, a diary, or a note-taking application, such as Evernote

“Which stories should I tell?”

This was the question of a leader from a global luxury products organization based in Copenhagen.

Yes. That is the question.

He didn’t ask, “How can I tell better stories?” or even “What dramatic details should I include in my stories?” His question was about selection rather than construction or content, and that’s where we must begin.

A central conviction of *Circle of the 9 Muses* is that the storytelling leader is purposeful and strategic about selecting and sharing stories, even if he or she doesn’t tell the story particularly well. Start with getting the right story at the right time for the right reason. Sure, your style of delivery has an impact, which I will talk about later, but for leaders I maintain that style is secondary. I always see people breathe a sigh of relief in my programs when I tell them, “This is not a lesson in presentation skills or becoming a better public speaker.” You can stumble and stutter your way through an adequately delivered story, but if it is the right story, it can change your world.

A lot of storytelling is spontaneous. It happens in the hallways, over coffee, and at lunch. It is fluid and responsive to what is happening in the moment. But it becomes an act of influence when it is intentional, deliberate, and preconsidered. The strategic leader is always on the

lookout for the narrative assets—the especially valuable stories—that are so important they need to be shared with constituents over and over. These are the core stories of your leadership.

Many frameworks suggest that there are certain categories of organizational stories. In her book *The Story Factor*, my friend Annette Simmons poses an influential framework that says leaders tell six primary kinds of stories in organizations.¹ Another colleague, Paul Smith, is a former Procter & Gamble researcher who wrote a book where he laid out 21 unique story types that leaders should be mindful of.²

So, which is right? Are there six kinds of stories? Are there 21?

There are probably a million types of stories that leaders in organizations can tell. But a review of story frameworks reveals common elements that are broadly comprehensive to the tasks of leadership—whether you are the chief executive officer (CEO) of a multinational organization, or you lead a team in a rural school district or small community organization.

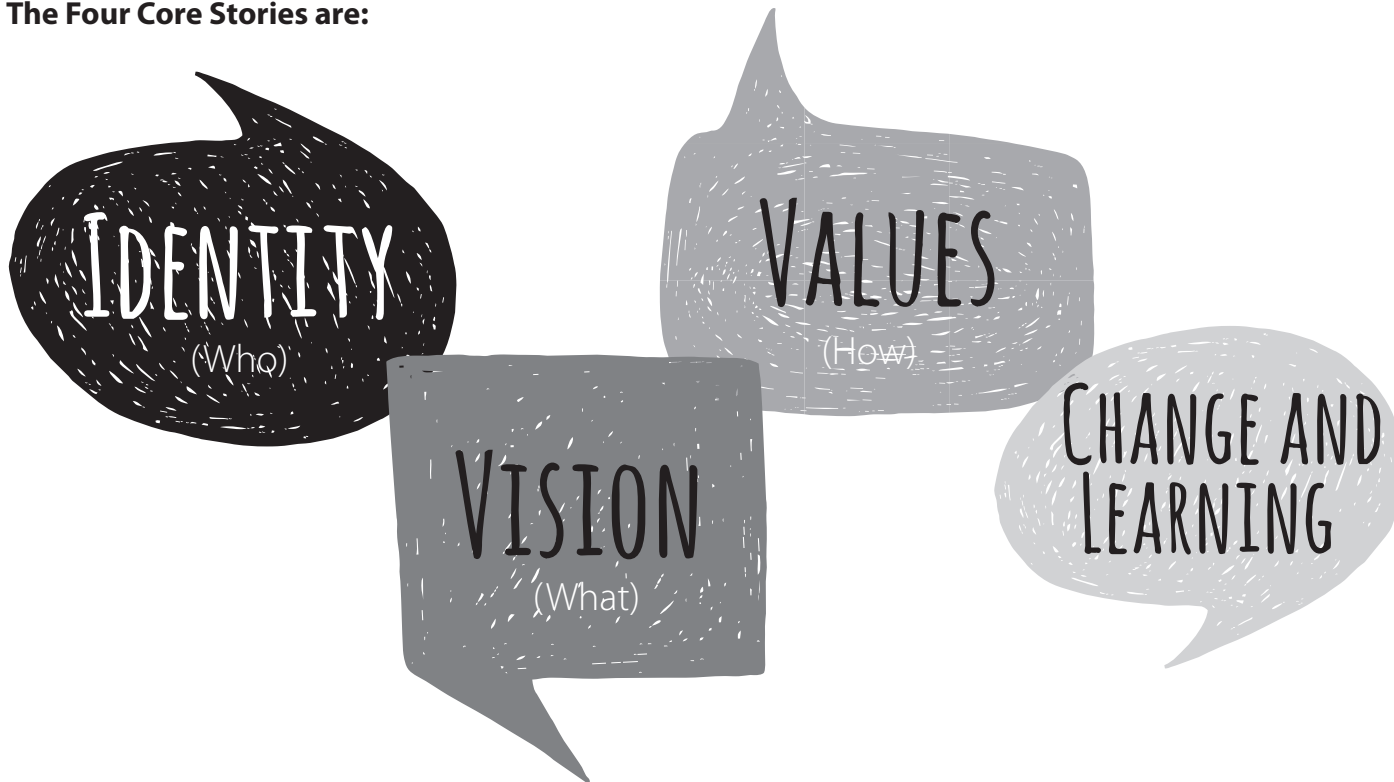
These are the *Four Core Stories* of your work. And as a leader, you are the curator of your team’s or organization’s identity. Think about the curator of a museum. The

1. *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*, 2nd ed., Basic Books, 2006

2. *Lead with a Story: A Guide to Crafting Business Narratives That Captivate, Convince, and Inspire*, AMACOM, 2012

curator's role is to make decisions about which images to hang on the wall and what stories to present to the public (e.g., Cubism in Italy). Likewise, as a leader your role is to constantly be on the lookout for these stories, collect new ones, and find opportunities to tell them over and over so that you can be purposeful about shaping your organizational system.

The Four Core Stories are:



Identity Stories

“What does it mean to be us?” This is the sacred center of storytelling. It’s a question we answer in America every time we sing the story that is “The Star-Spangled Banner” or during a Passover Seder when the youngest child present invokes the *Haggadah*—the story of the exodus from Egypt—by saying, “Why is this night different from all other nights?”

One critical subset of the identity story is the *origin* story. When did your organization (or your team, your project, or your career) start? What was true at the beginning of the organization that is still true today? These stories hold unique power! The DNA of your identity is in there, and when you tell these stories, you refocus your colleagues on what’s important in ways that are nearly impossible to argue with.

One of the great origin/identity stories comes from General Electric (GE). Here is how it articulates that story. (I know this because I was the copywriter for its website!)

The year was 1876, America’s centennial. It was also the year that Thomas Alva Edison opened a laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey. Out of that laboratory was to come perhaps the greatest invention of the age—a successful incandescent electric lamp. (A light bulb!) After a merger in 1892, he called his new organization General Electric. Today, that same spirit of innovation and discovery is still a part of everything we do.

Note the last sentence of the story. The teller of the story is being very explicit in saying, “This story says something that is still vital and true about us.” Does this story get repeated within GE as a way of reinforcing its culture of innovation? You’d better believe it does.

Origin stories don’t just happen at the beginning of the organization. Every time you start a new project or a new team, you have a new origin story. People have origin stories, too. Your parents probably told you their origin stories (although they probably didn’t call them that), and if you have kids, you have probably passed on your sense of identity by telling your origin stories.

Of course, the identity is not only encoded in the origin. It also shows up in actions every day. Some of those actions are remarkable, and demonstrate *who we are when we are at our best*. Those, too, are important stories of identity.

Here's a wonderful story of identity that I heard just recently from a leader in a speech at a manufacturing organization I partnered with:

The other day I was standing on the corner downtown waiting for the light to walk across the street, and I noticed that the guy standing next to me had one of his shoelaces untied. I said "Sir, your shoelace is untied. I don't want you to get hurt."

The man thanked me, and then he said, "You must work for [the manufacturing company] here in town." And I said, "Yes, I do. How did you know that?" And the man said, "Everyone knows that your group talks about safety all the time." And that was a very proud moment for me as a leader. Throughout the streets of Copenhagen, we are known as people of safety.

The significant thing about this story is that it was a small moment—mundane, really—and yet this leader was mindful enough to recognize its importance. He thought to himself, *I should capture that story and I should share it with the organization. It makes an important statement about who we are.* Simply by telling the story, he creates the vision and boundaries of identity and establishes a vision for how the organization's values should spill out into public awareness. We create our reality through the words we speak. This is the heart of leadership storytelling.

In a few pages, you will find space to write down some of your identity and origin stories. You can start reflecting on them now. What stories reflect the identity of your organization? Your team or function? Your individual leadership? (And how about your family? Your childhood?) What are the origins of your organization, your team, and you? What was true at the beginning that is still true today? What are the events, conversations, and turning points—big or small—that say something about who you are?

Vision Stories

"Where are we going?" Your answer to that question is central to your leadership. Typically the answer comes in the form of a vision statement, which isn't so bad. But to truly invite people into your vision, do you know what would work even better? That's right. A story.

Stephen Denning was an executive at the World Bank in the early days of the knowledge management movement. As he shares in his classic management book *The Springboard*, he initially had a hard time gaining traction in this new idea of knowledge management within the World Bank, until one day when he changed his presentation and instead told a story. Here's how he presents that story in *The Springboard*:³

3. Stephen Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (Routledge, 2000).

In June 1995, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia logged on to the website of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, and got an answer to a question on how to treat malaria. . . . This was in Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world. But the most important part of this picture for us in the World Bank is this: the World Bank, isn't in the picture. The World Bank doesn't have its know-how accessible to all the millions of people who made decisions about poverty. But just imagine if it had. Think what an organization it could become.

Notice how Denning's vision for the World Bank is articulated in the form of a story about someone else! (Again, notice how the end of the story makes an explicit link to the listener and says, "Here's something I would like to draw out from the story.")

Sometimes to cast your vision for your desired future, you may need to reach to your past. Identify a time when you or your team were at your very best and exemplified the traits that need to be called forth again. I worked with one retailing organization where an executive told a story of how a few years earlier one of his teams responded to a community after a catastrophic flood. "That's who we are," he said at the conclusion of his story. "We are people of commitment and compassion. Those are the very same qualities we need to bring forth—again, here, today—to meet the challenges in front of us."

A *future* story is another type of vision story. In a future story, you simply articulate your desired future: What are customers doing? What innovations have you achieved? What rewards are you enjoying? How does it feel? A key aspect of the future story is to tell it in present-tense language—as if the desired future had already been achieved and is currently the reality. Check out the Future Story Spine (Chapter 9) or Creative Tension Pictures (Chapter 14) for two helpful processes for defining this future story.



Values Stories

Almost every organization has a statement of values. And I've seen more than a few organizations where that values statement was a source of cynicism rather than vitality. That's the result when people perceive a disconnect between the espoused values and the actual values.

So your organization espouses a value for "quality"? For "excellence"? Are "people your greatest asset"? To keep the words from ringing hollow, bring them to life in a story. What does "quality" look like at *this* organization? What is unique about "customer service" at *this* organization? In what unique ways does "innovation" come to life at *this* organization?

These are the *how* stories of your work. When you tell these stories, you establish the behavioral boundaries for

how people in the organization accomplish the mission. And at their best, the stories will have the effect of liberating behavior for innovation, rather than constraining behavior.

Zappos, the online shoe retailer, has quickly created legendary levels of customer passion by telling stories that go viral. (It captures these in its annual *Zappos Culture Book*, which customers may order for free from its website.) For example, if you do a Web search for “Zappos 10-hour customer service call,” you’ll encounter dozens of links, some relaying this now-famous viral story.

On December 8, 2012, a customer service representative took a call that clocked in at a record-setting 10 hours and 29 minutes! The customer called to order a pair of Ugg boots, but in the conversation the service rep discovered that the customer was about to relocate to the Las Vegas area, where Zappos is located. They spent 10 hours exploring neighborhoods and other details of life in Vegas. At the end of the call, the customer purchased the pair of Ugg boots.

“Sometimes people just need to call and talk,” said a Zappos representative. “We don’t judge. We just want to help.” Zappos doesn’t view the incident as bad news. It confirmed that the employee was following protocol, and that this was just another experience in being dedicated to customers.

Values stories are most fascinating when the corporate value is put to the test, when those ideals clash with the organization’s need for expediency. You can sense that tension in the Zappos story, and it is inherently dramatic: How much did the organization invest in those 10 labor hours compared to the profit margin from a single pair of shoes? But the fact that the story pushes the value of *customer service* out into that gray area is what makes it so compelling. And you can be sure that the story’s viral spread has ensured a return that is infinitely greater than the value of that single pair of shoes. (Indeed, this is intentional on the part of Zappos. It loves the press it gets from these “crazy” customer service stories. Wouldn’t you?)

Here’s another one that I heard from a story program participant at a food-manufacturing company in London:

There was a report that one of our batches of product had been tampered with in a way that could make kids sick. I was shocked! I couldn’t see how that was possible! And I was even more shocked when I got a call from Scotland Yard—and they told me they were treating this as an investigation into terrorism! So Scotland Yard came in and audited all of our processes, both for hiring and for manufacturing. They concluded there was no way a terrorist threat could have come from inside [the company].

Later we discovered that there had been no tampering at all. But I will never forget what the detectives said. They said, “[The company’s] processes are so sound, they cannot be compromised by a terrorist.” Isn’t that an amazing endorsement? One of our values here is quality. I’ve always known our quality standards were high. And now that has even been acknowledged by Scotland Yard.

One significant thing about the above story was that most of the other leaders in the large organization did not know about it. They were surprised that something so significant had taken place. One of the leaders reflected, “Why are we surprised? If we don’t take opportunities to stop and share these stories with one another, there’s all kinds of extraordinary events that we will never know about.”

A big part of leadership is keeping an ear to the ground and listening for these stories of your values in action. Remember, you are the curator of identity. When you find these stories, share them! When you do, you create vivid but fluid boundaries for behavior all across the organization.

Stories of Change and Learning

I work with a lot of groups where I challenge them to identify stories of change and learning. It doesn’t always go well. In some organizational cultures, it’s a real risk to reveal something you did that failed. (Even if it is not a cultural risk, for some people who have carefully cultivated a specific image of themselves, it can be an unacceptable personal risk.) Sure, it’s a risk to appear vulnerable. But if you wish to create a culture of learning and continual improvement, share these stories with a spirit of transparency, humility, and authenticity.

The Coca-Cola Company has a *brand archivist* (or *company storyteller*) who once told me this story of organizational learning:

Back in the 1980s before we introduced New Coke [in an infamously failed product launch], we tested it endlessly with focus groups. Consumers were unanimous: New Coke tasted better. So why did it fail in the marketplace? Because we never asked the crucial question: *What if we got rid of Coca-Cola and replaced it with New Coke?* That would have revealed the deep, emotional connection people have about our brand. We thought they wanted better flavor. We discovered they want to maintain their emotional connection to our brand! It was a mistake that taught us not ignore the incredible brand loyalty we have cultivated for more than 100 years.

A key element of the change and learning story is the wisdom that is drawn out at the end. “I tried something. It didn’t work. Now we have valuable knowledge that we didn’t have before.” The story is redemptive in that it turns the screwup into a source of valuable knowledge for other leaders.

Of course, you can always tell the story about someone else’s failure! This is a story that my colleague Dick Richardson and I both tell as part of our work at the Apollo Leadership Development Experience—a program of The Conference Board that is hosted at Johnson Space Center in Houston and Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida:

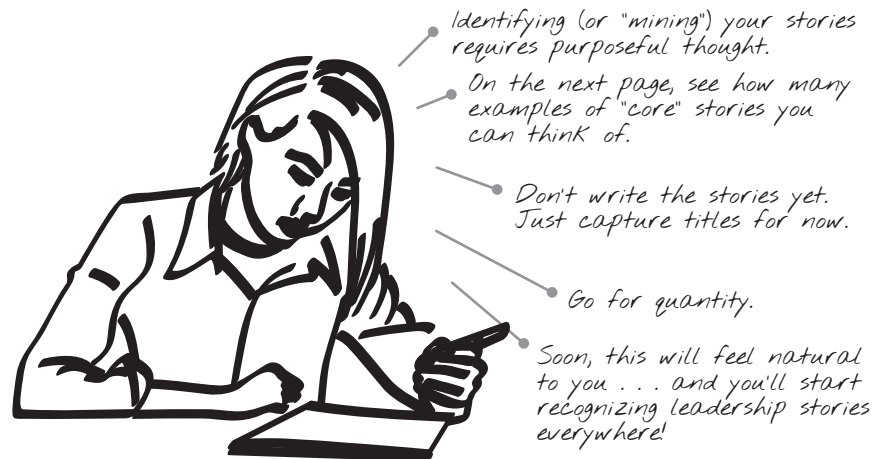
Wernher von Braun, the legendary leader of the rocket program at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) during the 1950s and 1960s, was at a launch of a Mercury-Redstone rocket. He watched in horror as one test rocket (which did not contain a human pilot) lifted off, then veered off course and had to be detonated. Later as he was about to launch an investigation to find out what had gone wrong, a low-level maintenance guy came into von Braun's office and said "Sir, I think I may have had something to do with that." The maintenance guy explained that before the launch he went around the rocket with a wrench "just tightening things up." It turned out the guy tightened up the gimbals, which are the hinges that allow the rocket thrusters to shift ever so slightly side to side. It was a small action, but it was enough to alter the rocket's navigation. Von Braun said to the guy, "I'm calling a meeting of the entire team and I want you sitting in the front row." So you can imagine this guy was now thinking, *I'm going to my public execution!*

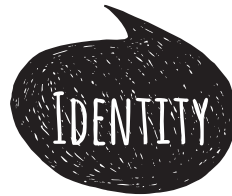
So the whole organization showed up, and von Braun called this poor guy up to the stage. He reached under the podium . . . and pulled out a bottle of champagne and handed it to the guy! He thanked the guy for bringing the problem forward, for not covering his butt, and von Braun said, "This is the only way we will be able to innovate." And that's true in our organizations, too. Without permission to fail, there will never be innovation.

What Are Your Core Stories?

Later in this book, you will have many opportunities to identify, craft, tell, and draw meaning from your Four Core Stories.

For now, just spend a few minutes warming up your storytelling engine by identifying some of your core stories. You don't need to construct formal stories out of them. Just write down some brief memories, giving each one a title. For example: "The time I challenged the client in Philly," "The day our team threw out the production guidelines and improvised," "Adopting our third child," and so on. See how many you can think of. Consider stories at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Go for quantity!





Think of Some Stories of *Identity*

- How did you or your team/project/organization begin? (Keep in mind that every new team or project is a new origin story.)
- What was true and valuable at the beginning that is still central to who you are today?
- Think of a time that you or your team/project/organization was operating at its best. What happened?

In my organization:

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In my team:

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In my own life or personal leadership:

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Now Think of Some Future *Vision* Stories

- What was a time when you saw the desired future action achieved in another organization? In another industry?
- When did someone display an action or characteristic that is now needed all across the organization?
- Tell a future story: Imagine that you have achieved your future. What are customers saying? How is your company different? What kind of innovation have you produced? What have you learned? How does the world look different? How does it feel?

In my organization:

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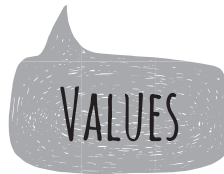
In my team:

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In my own life or personal leadership:

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Think of Some *Values* Stories

- What was a time when you (or someone else) lived or embodied what is most important to you?
- If you have a statement of values for your organization or team, take a fresh look at them. This is a high-leverage starting point for your storytelling. What are some times when you saw each of the values being lived in especially remarkable ways?

In my organization:

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In my team:

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In my own life or personal leadership:

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Ready to Tackle Some Stories of *Change and Learning*?

- When was a time that you or the team/organization blew it?
- When was a time that you changed thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors to accomplish something that was hard?
- When did you do something that didn't work . . . and now you are doing something differently and getting better results?

In my organization:

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In my team:

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In my own life or personal leadership:

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Three More Cores!

In an influential white paper, Annette Simmons proposed six stories that leaders should tell that, she says, “encompass the heart of all business communication.” In different ways, the Four Cores in this chapter overlap with her framework. But she also advocates some others,⁴ which I find myself turning to frequently in my own work. Here are three more cores, courtesy of Annette, to consider in your leadership.

Who I am.

Establish your personal character or competence by telling stories that illuminate who you are and why people should follow you. (You might have noticed I used the introduction of this book to do precisely that by telling just a few stories about my work and my experiences in the story realm.)

- Who are you? What makes you special? What qualities and experiences do you have that earn you the right to influence?
- What were the moments when you really exercised or tested your character or competence?

Why I'm here.

Michael Margolis, president of Story University, asks: “What are you most curious about? What riddle you are trying to solve? Why is that so personal for you? That’s your core story.”

Let people know why you are personally bought in to the work so that your passion can help awaken their passion.

- Was there a moment when you knew you wanted to be a part of this organization/project/team? When did you choose this job? What was going on when you chose it?
- What do you get out of this work besides money? Why do you go the extra mile? How was that conviction borne?
- Do you perhaps have some painful experience from your past that informs the work you do now? Are there personal reasons you feel urgency? What happened that brought you here?

I know what you are thinking.

Give voice to the secret suspicions or reluctance to change that your audience holds. Tell a story that frames their objection as completely rational and

understandable—and then tell another story that establishes an alternative position. Once you earn trust by validating your audience, listeners are more likely to come along with you to explore the other side of the issue.

- What are the points of pain or resistance among your audience? (If you don’t know, how can you find out?)
- When was a time you or someone else felt the same way? What happened to move you/them to a different position? How did you get from there to here?

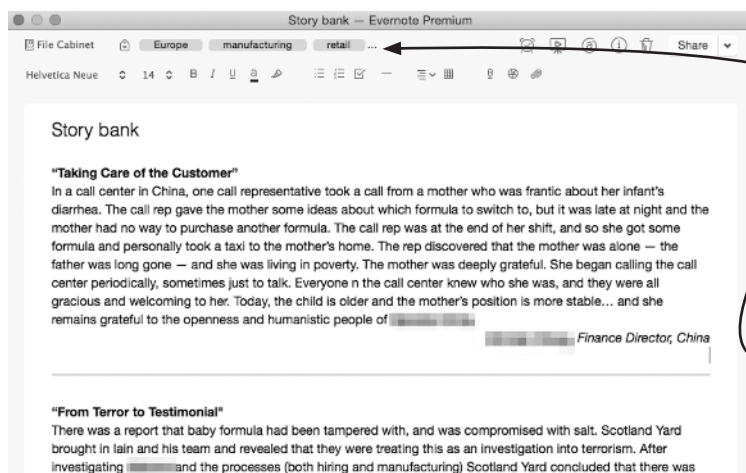
4. Simmons, A. *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Find, Develop, and Deliver Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact* (United States: AMACOM, 2007).

Where Do I Go Next?

The Four Core Stories is a simple construct that connects to the heart of your leadership. It will serve as a foundation for other activities and processes presented in this book.

So what's next?

- *Tell it!* Pick just one of the stories you identified, and find an occasion to share it. You could do this at the beginning of a team meeting, as part of your next presentation, or simply as an e-mail you send out to colleagues with the subject line "A story I wanted to share with you."
- *Find more!* The core stories are happening all around you. Stay alert! I was in a team meeting recently where I was moved by the ways we exposed our assumptions and mental models. I thought to myself, *This would be a good story to tell others!* I even said that out loud to the team, which had the effect of creating a nice moment of self-awareness and reflection. As you exercise this story awareness, it will quickly become a habit.
- *Capture it!* One might approach the search for these core stories in the same way that a miner might pan a stream with dreams of striking gold. You might carry



Using a tablet computer such as an iPad and note-taking software you can begin to build a "story bank" of the core narrative assets of your organization and leadership.

I use a note-taking app on the iPad called Evernote to quickly capture great stories when I come across them.

At the top, note how I "tagged" the stories with identifiers such as the industry ("retail" and "manufacturing") as well as location ("Europe") so that I can quickly search and find stories that match my context

a story journal around with you so that you are ready to capture stories when you discover them. My preference is to use my iPad and the app Evernote, which allows me to capture the story in any form (written or voice recorded) and then tag it for future search. (That is, based on my particular interests I might label it a “trust” story, “innovation,” or “learning,” along with the industry, such as “retail,” “manufacturing,” or “pharma.” Thus, I can do a search for “innovation in retail” and retrieve several targeted stories.)

- *Improve it!* After you have identified a core story you would like to tell, head over to Chapter 4, “Capturing Fire,” and begin applying some structural and stylistic elements to make it positively gripping.
- Use the Four Cores as a framework for *story mining*, that is, for digging up the great stories that your team members know. A great place to start is Chapter 11, “Fractal Narratives.”
- This book offers several models for taking your *vision* stories to the next step. Look at the “Future Story Spine” (Chapter 9), “Creative Tension Pictures” (Chapter 14), or “Strategy Is a Story” (Chapter 15).

- If you wish to lead your team through an exercise on the Four Core Stories, you may download a four-page worksheet from www.DavidHutchens.com. It will help you present the Four Cores and then help your team members identify, craft, and tell their core stories.

