

WHAT IS A DOMINANT NARRATIVE?

A dominant narrative is an explanation or story that is told in service of the dominant social group's interests and ideologies. It usually achieves dominance through repetition, the apparent authority of the speaker (often accorded to speakers who represent the dominant social groups), and the silencing of alternative accounts. Because dominant narratives are so normalized through their repetition and authority, they have the illusion of being objective and apolitical, when in fact they are neither.

In almost any topic you explore as a leader, there will likely be dominant narratives that others – or yourself- have encountered and may believe uncritically. The difficulty in dealing with Dominant Narratives is that they are often supported by “perfectly logical explanations.” This means that simply providing your own “perfectly logical explanation” will not shift the narrative. What follows are some guidelines for helping shift a dominant narrative towards your narrative.

GUIDELINES FOR SHIFTING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE

DO

- **UNMASK**
 - Name the dominant narrative when you see it at work.
 - Point out that what you just saw on the news or heard from a friend, or the law that was just passed, was based on particular values and beliefs.
 - *“The way you are talking about the recent contract settlement sounds like you think teachers are pretty greedy and we’re only looking out for ourselves.”*
- **ELEVATE**
 - Name the values and beliefs from our new narrative that you want to see lived out in the world.
 - Connect it to places where your audience may see that happening already.
 - *“I really like it when parents come in and express their appreciation – especially when they acknowledge they don’t now how we do it – it helps me feel valued and respected”*
- **CONTRAST**
 - Lay out what might be different if your values/convictions were the ones shaping what happens in the world.
 - Be specific about how we have the choice to approach situations through a different belief system.
 - Invite a rethinking of the situation.
 - *“I guess we have to decide if we want to scapegoat teachers for the many challenges we face or accept teachers as willing and able partners in educating all kids.”*
- **DRAW ON YOUR OWN JOURNEY**

- While it's important to personalize this, it's also important to do it in a way that anyone can see themselves in it. Describing your own realizations and shifts will help others find their own way in the conversation.
- *"I can understand your reaction, there are times when I realize that I've been reacting to what others say and not putting forth my own beliefs – it gets discouraging – but I realize now I've only been making it worse."*
- **SUSTAIN YOUR EFFORTS AND CONNECT WITH OTHERS**
 - Shifting a dominant narrative does not happen quickly – it takes sustained effort, over time, with many people working at it.
- **DEMONSTRATE YOUR WORLDVIEW, DON'T JUST WRITE AND TALK ABOUT IT.**
 - Our actions say as much or more about our values and beliefs as our words.

DON'T

- **FOCUS ON CHALLENGING FACTS OR INTERPRETATIONS OF INFORMATION**
 - This will not shift the narrative. Your arguments, as convincing as they may be, will ultimately lose out to the dominant narrative.
- **ATTACK PEOPLE FOR THEIR WORLDVIEW**
 - Many people operate out of the dominant narrative, even if unconsciously. Shifting public narratives will take personal conversion and transformation. You cannot move people if you attack them.
- **NAME THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE AS "WRONG"**
 - Our assumption is that competing values & beliefs live within people. We want to provide people a chance to choose the ones they want to live out of and/or balance those competing narratives (e.g. accountability of and respect for teachers).
- **TRY TO CONVERT OR CONVINCE PEOPLE**
 - We are trying to bring out the best of what is already in people, help them find the resonance for themselves. This is, in part, an emotional journey and our usual approaches to argument and logic don't work so well in this arena.

Scenario #1

Consider the following scenario:

You are at a large staff meeting and a rather outspoken colleague says, “I can’t believe these ESP members! They get all of the same benefits of our certified members. They and take up the much more of our time in services and they are still complaining about the amount of their dues and the money they make! Why can’t they just be content with what we give them? Why don’t they just go join another union that better fits their needs?!”

- 1) How will you respond to **unmask** the dominant narrative?

- 2) What will you say to **elevate** our new narrative? What kind of **connections** can you draw your audience in?

- 3) How can you **contrast** what was said? What can be said to point out how things might be different if the new narrative was shaping education discussions?

- 4) What can you say to **draw on your own journey** with this world view? How can you draw on your own experience?

Scenario #2

Consider the following scenario:

While at a political fundraiser, your local elected representative, who you respect greatly, says, “I’m a strong labor supporter, but the hourly ESP workers in the “teachers union” are sure a different breed from the teachers. Their fight for raises and benefits are getting in the way of real educational investment in our schools. Their services cost us a lot and we could do a lot better if we used contract services. The cost of employing them keep the kids in this state from getting real benefit from better paid teachers. If we are ever going to have great schools, the union is going to have to stop being so focused on wages. Besides, all that union activity does not seem very professional to me.”

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Scenario #3

Consider the following scenario:

You are sitting at a local school board meeting with some members. A community member over hears you talking, comes over and says, “Why are you folks always asking for more from this community? Our schools already take the biggest portion of our taxes and they still don’t turn out graduates that can work or participate positively in our society. Employees at that school have more benefits and make more money than most of us here in this room. I mean you knew you were not going to get rich working at a school and it must be rough to summers have off. I’d love to be able to sit back all summer and relax.”

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Scenario #4

Consider the following scenario:

At a local community meeting, a neighbor who is discouraged about the increasing cost of property taxes says, “ They should just get rid of all those extra folks at that school. I mean the superintendent and principals have too many secretaries, kids could eat in their classroom with their teachers, and the way those buildings look, we sure aren’t getting our money’s worth out of all those folks who work there. It is clear that we just need to spend our tax dollars on learning. Maybe it should just be a charter school and run all that non learning stuff like a business.”

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Scenario #5

Consider the following scenario:

At a contract negotiations meeting with the certified employees a leader of the team who is struggling with the pace of bargaining with the district says, "You know that we need to settle our contract first. If we don't, the district will give our raise to the ESPs who are set to bargain next. I have already heard that the district approached them about entering bargaining asap. Our members put in more hours and have a lot more education and they deserve to do better in this bargain. We have to stick to our own and let the district know we want to settle, and settle fast."

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Scenario #6

You are at a membership meeting of the local Classroom Teachers Union. A rather outspoken leader says, "I can't believe these ESP members! They are complaining about how they aren't paid when we have breaks and snow-days. They could have gotten a degree just as I had to do. They choose to be an hourly worker. With this economy, they should just be glad they have a job!"

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