

## How swapping life stories can make you a better leader



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Nigel Nicholson

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Professor Nigel Nicholson on why executives should explore their own timeline and take interest in other people's experiences

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Did you ever tell someone your life story? If so, it was most likely when you were in the first warm flush of a new romance, with you and your beloved bonding by swapping narratives. Over the years, you've no doubt given friends and family edited highlights of the steps in your life journey. But it's less likely that you'll have told one or two attentive listeners whom you scarcely know the full story: the what, why and how of your journey to now. What would it feel like to do this? Why would your audience possibly be interested?

You might be surprised on two counts. First, by the emotions you experience when doing this exercise. Second, by the positive impact your narrative has on your listeners, no matter how "ordinary" you think your story is. I see these effects regularly on the Biography Workshops I run for executives; the experience turns out to be remarkably powerful for both teller and listener.

Let's begin with the teller. Before you start talking, you'll have drawn a Life-Line that maps out your key dates, events, relationships, roles and feelings over time. The mere act of doing

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#### He teaches on the following programmes:

- ✦ The Sustainable Family Business
- ✦ High Performance People Skills for Leaders
- ✦ Proteus
- ✦ Sloan



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this can be startling – you begin to recall sequences of events half forgotten. You see the drama, the highs and the disappointments with fresh eyes and are struck by how much has changed, including feelings that seemed indelible at the time. You're also struck by how good eventually came out of what seemed like a disastrous situation, or how you slipped into negativity while scarcely aware of what you were doing.



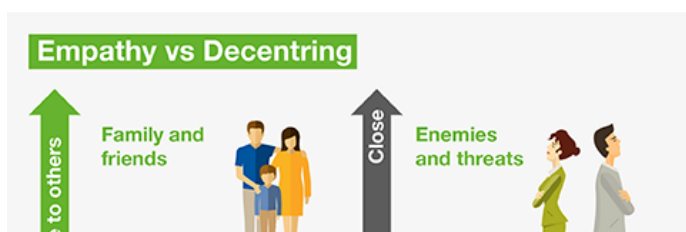
The landscape of your life is not proportional – some big things seem very distant while others continue to loom over you. Doing this exercise gives you a remarkable new perspective; part helicopter view and part re-immersion into the tangle of your past. The new perspective comes from the now and from your view of the future. It raises questions and clarifies choices.

Some of these questions are important reflections for now and the future. You may find yourself asking, 'Have I been making the same kind of mistakes repeatedly? What big decisions did I take too carelessly? What have life's troubles taught me? How might I have undervalued these people or those processes? What might I have overvalued? What have I neglected that will help me in future? What have been the constant factors – visions, driving beliefs and reliable relationships – that have helped steer my course? What choices have come from the best part of me?' These are important questions. The Life-Line exercise gives you an unparalleled opportunity to reflect and generate new plans and purposes for the next chapters of your story. In many cases, it's a tool for thinking anew about legacy, an issue that looms larger as the years pass.

Second, the listener. What effect does it have on them to hear your story? Far from being bored, judging you or failing to understand, you find people are drawn into your perspective, especially if they have similar backgrounds and experiences. This is a real eye-opener for cross-cultural insights. We often judge others and make snap judgements about their motives in ways that make us feel good about ourselves, without taking the time understand them. This exercise makes that kind of mental laziness difficult. It's hard to judge when drawn into someone else's narrative. You'll more likely feel sympathy for the hard things that happened, understand their emotions and wonder how they coped with life's challenges.

Being a listener in this context is a gift as it allows us to do one of the things that self-centred humans find so hard: 'decentring'. Self-centredness is the inevitable consequence of our strong sense of personal identity and the limitation of our vision. Yet, I find time again when coaching and consulting that we can transcend that limitation using our minds. Empathy – sharing someone else's feelings – is easy with people we love but harder with those we don't. It's especially difficult with people who we have nothing in common with. They may come from a completely different background or culture; or we may not trust or like them much. Decentring – seeing the world from another person's perspective – is unlike empathy. It's more analytical, allowing us to understand the inner and outer forces that bear down on others. It's almost easier to decentre with strangers and enemies. We can take friends and family for granted but tend to be more cautious with strangers and enemies, as the following graphic shows.

Figure: Empathy vs Decentring





Empathy is easier with people we like or respect, as we find them on the left side of the figure d. Decentring really helps as a “cooler” analytical process on the left side, but comes into its own as a really special technique on the right side of the line. It’s not easy, but there are various exercises I use that can help people decentre. The Life Line exercise is a superhighway to decentring. It is a vivid demonstration that it almost impossible for you not to develop a deeper understanding of how others really think, feel and act if you decentre.

Deep insight into other is not just therapeutic. It is essential in management and leadership. It’s a powerful tool for negotiation, alliances, managing difficult people and outmanoeuvring those who might be obstructing us. With enemies, it can replace fear and anger with a more dispassionate intelligence, making it a tool for smart and humane Machiavellianism – know thine enemy!

In summary, the Life Line provides us with two powerful benefits. One is to give us a fresh perspective on the relationship between the past and the future, and find renewal of purpose in the present. The second opens an escape hatch from our self-centred vision, giving us a deeper understanding of what it means to be another, different and remarkable human being.

## Comments

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