Post Traumatic Growth Exercise

Adapted from the Harvard Business Review Psychology

 *An Exercise to Help Your Team Overcome the Trauma pf the Pandemic*

By Lisa Zigarmi and David Larson

September 1, 2020

**Introduction**

Covid-19 has changed the way we work, with many people facing disturbed routines, upended identities, and a loss of financial security. One strategy for growing from this trauma comes out of storytelling for posttraumatic growth.

This strategy, which can be done on teams with high psychological safety, encourage growth by helping people acknowledge the grief and loss caused by adversity, analyze its effect and meaning, and internalize a positive resolution that activates self-transformation. In the end, participants come up with a two-word narrative compass that serves to instill new insights and meaning.

How we cope with this trauma will define our inner lives, our businesses, our communities, and our world. As organizations and employees resume operations, how do we collectively brave a changing work environment? As an organizational psychologists and business consultants, we suggest that the surest and fastest way to return to productive, high performance work is through storytelling and story-listening designed to activate post-traumatic growth.

**What Is Post-Traumatic Growth?**

While many people are aware of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), fewer are familiar with Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG). PTG has been [defined as](https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012119-044932) “the transformative positive change that can occur as a result of a struggle with great adversity.” PTG is not the opposite of PTSD; it’s the experience of growth that follows from struggle in the aftermath of trauma.

[Research shows](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=BHEABAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=related:ayBjy1_gwE-WRM:scholar.google.com/&ots=o4DPFg6yIq&sig=66zUA0lmEbgFYkaa3fkLMZCPYwo#v=onepage&q&f=false) that people who make meaning out of trauma report:

* An increased sense of their own strength and capacities to prevail.
* Improved relationships with others, including a greater sense of belonging.
* A greater sense of compassion.
* And an increased sense of purpose and appreciation for life.

Trauma, of course, is not good. Yet it can initiate growth and positive change as survivors struggle and make meaning of the aftermath. Specifically, studies reveal a wide variety of individuals, including [women with breast cancer](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28743174/), people suffering from [protracted grief](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/16506070701339713?scroll=top&needAccess=true), [firefighters](https://aps.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajpy.12032), and [trauma workers](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886916303117#bbb0185) benefit from social support, or work with small groups of people with the same illness or struggle. The formats vary, but the data shows that small group support facilitates increased PTG. One common technique involves storytelling.

We propose that workers struggling with various types of pandemic-related trauma should identify the self-defining stories they are creating about work during Covid-19. Narrative scholars describe PTG as “[a process through which individuals story themselves in new ways](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20447204?seq=1).” These stories [encourage growth](https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012119-044932) by helping an individual acknowledge the grief and loss caused by adversity, analyze its effect and meaning, and internalize a positive resolution that activates self-transformation.

To collectively move forward from the pervasive sense of anxiety, uncertainty, and anguish caused by the pandemic, distress must be explicitly acknowledged. Disrupted workers can use a storytelling exercise to restore wellbeing and re-assert the sense of purpose as they continue work in a transforming world.

**Storytelling for Post-Traumatic Growth: A Blueprint**

We designed the following questions to help people validate their experience and move forward constructively. They can be used with ad-hoc groups or teams at every level within or across organizations.

1. What is the greatest loss you experienced during Covid-19?
2. What is the greatest gain you experienced during Covid-19?
3. What are you learning about yourself during Covid-19? (Post COVID- What did you learn about yourself during COVID?)
4. What would it look like if you applied your learnings going forward?
5. What two words or short phrases will remind you of how to apply what you’re learning?

When we share stories based on questions like these, we express authenticity and receptivity to trust and vulnerability. As [research shows](https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012119-044932), sharing and listening to stories as “attentive companions” for one another can encourage growth. It works as a reciprocal process that drives meaning-making for the tellers and prompts appreciation and new possibilities for the listeners.

After running this exercise with cohorts from the world’s largest multinational technology company, participants reported leaving the sessions feeling more hope, clarity, alignment, and connection to others. Here’s a blueprint for how it works.

**Time:** 60 -120 minutes

**Setting:** Tele meeting or in-person with appropriate social distance

**Group Size:** 4–6

**Setting:**We believe this exercise can be done in teams where there is high [psychological safety](https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2019/05/13/how-leaders-can-create-fearless-teams/#43d4d65f549e), or in groups of strangers where anonymity provides safety. In both cases, confidentiality and voluntary participation are prerequisites.

If these conditions cannot be met, we recommend that interested participants do this in pairs where trust already exists.

**Facilitators:**For this exercise the facilitator could be a colleague, manager, or organizational leader. The facilitator’s role is to actively listen, withhold judgement, ensure each person receives respectful attention from the group, and manage the exercise steps in sequence. The facilitator is not a storytelling participant; they model attentive companionship by demonstrating the behaviors above.

The facilitator convenes the session by assuring participants that everything shared is confidential. Group members may or may not know one another, nor is it necessary to be members of the same team. The only requirement is for participants to be interested in growth.

**Step 1: Explain the Exercise**

The facilitator explains that the storytelling exercise is designed to turn pain into power as we endure the consequences of the pandemic. Individuals working apart or returning to the workplace will share stories that capture their experience, identify what they’ve learned, and create inner guidance to claim their strengths and future purpose.

Participant stories should be central to the self, drawn from daily experience of struggle, happiness, or reflection, rather than events centered on partners, kids, bosses, or rehashing of general media headlines. Some stories may generate emotional responses, which is normal and accepted. Some individuals may be comfortable with openness and vulnerability, others less so, but every contribution should be heard and honored.

**Step 2: Acknowledge the Impact**

Participants are given two personal story prompts and five minutes to note their stories on paper. These questions explore each person’s central experiences during Covid-19. Next, participants will tell their stories to the group in the order that feels most comfortable to the individual. They can start with either loss or gain.

*Please tell an anecdote or story for each prompt below:*

*1. What is/was the greatest loss/challenge you’ve experienced during Covid-19?*

*2. What is/was the greatest gain you’ve experienced during Covid-19?*

**Step 3: Envision the Future**

Participants will be given another 5-10 minutes to write down answers to the second set of prompts, followed by sharing with the group what they have learned and how they would like these insights to impact their work.

*3. What are/did you learning/learn about yourself during Covid-19?*

*4. What would it look like if you applied your learnings going forward?*

**Step 4: Create a Narrative Compass**

A narrative compass works as a reminder of an individual’s story, focusing their energy on what they are learning and how to integrate new self-knowledge into daily work. A compass is empowering because an individual chooses *how*to move forward with a sense of purpose and optimism, in line with the organization’s objectives.

A compass is created by choosing two words that compress an individual’s story into a succinct guide to instill new insights and meaning. The two words will target each person’s future intentions and purpose as revealed in their story. It may be easier to call the compass to mind if the words are alliterative. For instance, a compass might be “kind and consistent,” “focused and fearless,” or “loosen up and let go.”

For this step, the facilitator asks participants to review their notes, consider the group discussion, and spend 10-15 minutes answering the following question:

*5. What two words or short phrases will remind you how to apply what you’re learning?*

**Step 5: Discuss Your Compass**

In closing, the facilitator asks group members if any are willing to name their compass and explain what it means for them. Some group members may not feel comfortable sharing, and this is not a requirement. The facilitator may also ask how the storytelling exercise has brought new ideas or awareness to how participants may adapt as their work and organizational culture is continually reshaped by Covid-19.

Here are two examples from recent sessions we facilitated that illustrate participants discovering how they want to grow by telling their stories. All names are pseudonyms and other details have been anonymized.

**Exercise Example 1:**

Casey is a computer programmer who has adjusted to working from home and likes the new arrangement. Here’s how he worked through each of the five steps:

1. Casey tells the group his greatest gain through Covid-19 is time and freedom. He no longer has to commute to the office, and he avoids office chit-chat that makes him uncomfortable. He has increased freedom to complete his tasks on his terms with fewer interruptions.
2. Casey’s greatest initial loss was the change to his regimented days. Rebuilding a settled routine was difficult and came with a new intrusion: tele meetings. The electronic format puts him at an even greater disadvantage, since reading non-verbal cues is more difficult than meeting face-to-face. He becomes defensive when decisions about work products he made on his own are questioned by others, even when he sees the merit in the critical feedback.
3. Casey realizes he is learning the power of connection. Before the pandemic, daily contact at the office meant he integrated adjustments and refinements to his programming seamlessly. He was able to incorporate changes daily because informal communication plus routine meetings kept the team aligned. On his own, he doesn’t reach out or check in unless required, producing frustration when he discovers he is out-of-step.
4. Casey tells the group that if he applied what he is learning, he would take the initiative to check with team members frequently and informally to solicit ideas and feedback before he makes ad-hoc decisions. He will have to relax some of his tightly controlled routine to make space for impromptu, messy conversations where other ideas are discussed and evaluated.
5. Compressing this story into a narrative compass, Casey chooses “open and willing.” This compass reminds him that he produces better work when he is open to new ideas and that his willingness to be more collaborative provides concrete benefits for himself and the department.

**Exercise Example 2:**

Blair manages a creative team. She now works from home, which she shares with her husband and two school-age children.

1. Blair shares her greatest loss to be room for strategic planning. With little time to herself, the reflective space required to maintain proactive leadership has disappeared.
2. On the flip side, Blair has gained a deep view into the lives of her team. Zoom calls allow her to see people in context, in their homes with pets, kids, and complications. She has found connections are deepening despite the separation, as greater authenticity builds more trust.
3. Blair is learning good leadership depends on strategic planning. She is looking at her schedule with new eyes, eliminating non-essential tasks across the board. Although work-from-home places many competing demands on her, some former in-office tasks and processes can be shortened or deleted.
4. To show up for her team the way she would like to, Blair understands she must ruthlessly prioritize to build in time for strategic planning. She must also maintain or increase time with team members to leverage the benefits of deeper trust.
5. Condensing the two biggest lessons she is learning, Blair chooses “engage and eliminate” as her narrative compass. The words remind her that to continue growth for herself and the team she must create the space to engage often while supplying strategy for the team’s future goals.

**How to Use a Narrative Compass**

Once you have your narrative compass, it can be integrated into daily routines without taking much time. There is no right or wrong way to apply it, but here are three ideas to try:

**The five-minute commute**. Working from home means many people no longer drive to the office. Replace the traditional commute with a 5-minute mental transition every morning. Set aside time to imagine how your day will unfold if you apply your compass as you perform your tasks. For instance, if your compass is “confident and compassionate,” imagine how you will speak up for yourself in a Zoom meeting while also listening to and acknowledging the ideas of others.

**After-action reset.**Integrating new thoughts and attitudes inevitably takes practice. When situations arise that do not turn out as intended, don’t judge or criticize yourself or others. Instead, take a few minutes at the end of the day to review what could have gone better and imagine how applying your compass in the future may produce an outcome more in keeping with your intention. This helps re-frame a rough day as part of the learning process in reaching your goal.

**Notice and share.**Make a weekly appointment with a trusted colleague or friend to discuss how your narrative compass is impacting your work and sense of empowerment. When you share your observations, start with neutral sentences like, “I noticed…”, or “I’m recognizing…” Where is the compass making a difference? How can you further refine or improve? There is a big difference between honest self-evaluation and judgmental self-condemnation. Make sure your colleague holds you to the former.

Your compass settings may need to change periodically as your story evolves. The exercise can be repeated and the compass reset to align with new time frames, such as at the beginning of a new quarter, or when changing circumstances cause distress.

Organizational leaders support their employees by understanding that individual wellbeing enables productivity at work. [Studies show](https://www.amazon.com/Awakening-Compassion-Work-Elevates-Organizations/dp/1626564450) that in organizations where employees are treated with care and compassion as they face significant challenges feel more job satisfaction and commitment and experience less burnout and absenteeism.

Storytelling offers an effective path to wellbeing through post-traumatic growth. Exercises like the one offered here can be conducted anywhere, within or across organizations and hierarchical structures. Researcher David Boje [describes storytelling as](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/507a/3d3fd7b49b41f70d1537dd73a2b76364a103.pdf) a human beings’ “preferred sense-making currency.” Simply put, stories give context and order to events, contributing to purpose and productivity.

By leveraging our capacity for storytelling and story-listening, it’s possible to learn from the stories of trauma and activate growth through the duration of Covid-19 and afterwards, creating new possibilities for workers and organizations.