

Juliana Abakah, UNICEF



Juliana Abakah is a public partnerships officer with UNICEF. She participated in a Narativ storytelling workshop in January 2019 with other team members: Letizia Dall'Asin, Maria Jain, Amanda Gunton.

Working for an international organization, opportunities for in-person team building exercises are not always available. Juliana learned that storytelling can be a tool to unite team members, even if they work across the globe.

Her key takeaways from the session include:

- Storytelling can enhance working relationships by removing preconceptions or misunderstandings
- Like storytelling, listening is an art that takes practice

Q *During your Narativ storytelling training, participants shared stories both about themselves and their grandparents. The Grandparent Exercise is used to demonstrate how everyone is capable of telling a story. You later brought the grandparent stories into your meetings at UNICEF. What was the impact?*

A For our team meetings, we choose a rotating chairperson, and in a recent meeting, one woman started the storytelling with her grandfather's story.

He was from Germany and had lived through the Nazi era, and she was crying as she told the story. Now, every time I see her, I remember the deep feelings that she had, and I've connected very well with her since then. Before then, we had been in the team together but I didn't know much about her. She's based in Germany; the rest of us are here in New York. It's different when you're in different locations. But I feel like a lot of those boundaries have shifted since that experience.



Letizia Dall'Asin

“I am now looking at colleagues differently and remembering that they’re not just a manager and colleague, a boss, they’re human being with their own history and background and priorities. So it’s definitely helped me be kinder. If we weren’t so busy all the time, ideally we would take an hour to think about who each of us are and how that impacts what we say and do.”

Q: Have any other stories changed your work dynamic or relationships since the session?

A: I’ve learned more about my own supervisor. In the beginning, I couldn’t understand her style, which seemed very strong and demanding and caused me a lot of stress. But listening to her story,

I learned she’s from Eastern Europe, where she grew up under Russian Soviet-style management, where it’s important to be in control. A leader with that background can appear to be micromanaging, but if you know the story, you can say, “OK. I hear you. I see where you’re coming from, and I will work with you.” Her story helped me to better understand the way she communicates because now I see where she’s coming from.

People like her don’t like surprises. For example, before I send an email, I need to let her know, “Hey, heads up. I have spoken with this person, and this is the decision we have come to, so in the next five minutes you will see an email that speaks to this.” That way, when it comes to her inbox, she’s not surprised.

During that session, she also told us she wanted to be a medical doctor but moved on, and now she works with children. I relate with her on a daily basis, but I didn’t know much about her roots and how she felt before then. I see her value systems, what’s important for her, what the expectations were for her, and what she chose for herself.

The storytelling session even helped me to think through a few things about myself. For example, I have a little bit of royalty in my roots that I didn’t think of before. I had to go deep to bring that out and then also to remind myself, “You have to behave in a certain way because you come from a certain route.”

The session was very powerful and impactful. I’ve been to many trainings and workshops, and it’s been over a month and I’m able to remember a lot more from that session than the meeting I had yesterday.

Why do you think you remember the storytelling session so well?

I think it’s just interest. When you are interested in something, you commit more of it to memory than, let’s say, a compulsory workshop where you

have to go, there's a boring PowerPoint presentation, and the speaker is not that engaging or the subject matter is not that interesting. The atmosphere at the workshop was relaxed. It was the same team, but the topic wasn't a work product or an obligatory work deliverable. It was more like having fun with colleagues.

I'm very interested in other people's stories. I like to know where people come from and what their stories are, because I feel like we all have similar stories. We all want to do well for ourselves and our families. Sometimes you see people acting a certain way, and it's influenced by the story in the background that we do not know. We just judge people and assume they don't understand certain things or cannot do certain things — we write them off.

The session itself was not about caring, but the messages that came out of the team-building activity led to the concepts of care and respect, through the stories we told and through the art of listening.

Q

What do you mean by the art of listening?

A

We talked about some of the impediments to listening. For example, if you have to go to the bathroom, that affects the way you listen because you have another pressure. Since then, before I go to a meeting, I make it a point to go to the bathroom first because I want now to be able to be fully present at meetings.

I also need to be mindful of trying not to think about what I'm going to say next when somebody is speaking. Often when I am speaking with somebody, I'm thinking, "What will I say next?" Because you want to make sure that what you say next sounds smart, and depending on who you're speaking with, you want to come across as somebody who came prepared for the meeting or has something interesting to say. Even when somebody's



Maria Jain

To see the richness of our common stories, the humanity of them, and how it weaves into what we do at UNICEF overall and the issues that we work with was a reminder of how we in the continuum of humanity.

speaking, I realized I am sometimes on guard. That is another major obstacle that I need to work on.

How would you characterize this session in terms of themes or message?

I would describe it as a team-building session that has a lot of eye-opening elements. If a friend came to me with problems about the group he is managing and wanted to create some cohesion within the group, I would say, "I went to this workshop that was great. It was a team-building session, but we learned a lot of different skills. We learned about



Amanda Gunton

Hearing each other's stories reminded me that we all have personal histories, that we come from families with histories. It's not about emphasizing differences, but acknowledging that shared connection to our histories was helpful.

listening, and we learned about people's backgrounds in a fun way. Why don't you give it a try?" I know that they would come out of that workshop with even bigger messages of caring and respect.

Q *How do you think you can maintain your team's new sense of cohesion and understanding going forward?*

A That's a good question because the team keeps changing. New York is a five-year duty station,

which means there's a constant revolving door. In our team meetings, those who remain need to find ways to replicate the storytelling we did at the workshop. Nothing stops us from telling grandmother stories or sister stories or parent stories or anything — pet stories. We really should find a way of doing our own version from time to time.

I love that idea. How can you apply the concept for your team internationally?

It's tricky to apply internationally. We are the Europe team, and there is also the Africa team, the Asia team, and a new Aid Modalities team. It's really a big division; we have over 60 people working together. I would like to work in storytelling in clusters, just like we did with the Europe team. Maybe Asia and Africa can do a session together, then another 10 or 15 people the next time, and then all together.

Narativ is a storytelling company and consultancy that uses the power of story to address business and communication challenges. We use our method to help businesses and organizations develop stories that connect with audience and change human behavior. For 25 years, the Narativ method of storytelling in business has delivered measurable impact and value - we have transformed teams, cultures and individuals.

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Q

A

You have to listen so that your story can evolve in a way that relates to what you're hearing.