

Constructing a Vision in a Small Group A Narrative Analysis of a Forensics Team

Ryan Lauth
Miami University

Abstract

In an effort to replace many of the forensics programs that are lost every year to budget cuts and coaching changes, many in the forensics community are making an effort to build new teams. Through the observation of team meetings and interactions I have used small group theory to analyze the vision the new team at Miami University has constructed. Hopefully, other coaches can use this information to develop a unifying vision that can foster team growth.

Despite the long and impressive competitive success at Miami University, the turnover in the coaching staff has also resulted in a high turnover on the team. When I arrived two years ago we had three returning members on a fifteen member squad. Only one of those three lasted throughout the entire year, leaving the team with a national tournament group of ten with only one member with more than that year's experience. She was in her second year of competition. At the next years national tournament we again had ten members; however, four of them were returning members.

In an effort to motivate members to return and to create a more cohesive unit I decided to observe the team during our regular team meetings and at tournaments with small group theory in mind. What I discovered is that the team lacked a driving vision because the narratives being told were keeping a cohesive vision from developing. This observation has been vital in developing a new vision for the team and can probably be developed at other programs as well. Therefore, a simple explanation of narrative theory and group vision will be given. Next, I will further explain the narratives at Miami University in order to show the cyclical nature of narrative and vision and to show how vision can be constructed so that other programs can use this evidence to foster their own growth.

Narrative

The most common elements taken from Fisher's narrative paradigm in order to find out if a story is of good reason are coherence (probability) and fidelity (Fisher, 1984). Coherence refers to the internal structure and validity of a story or narrative. Essentially, to find out if a story has good reason it should be turned in on itself to see if it would actually be possible. Fidelity can be determined by evaluating the story based on how it rings true. Simply put, the

narrative passes the skeptical view of a listener because the listener simply believes it. For example, the story of King Kong has coherence because it makes sense based on its internal storyline; however, it does not have the ring of truth because the existence of a monstrous giant gorilla does not sound believable.

It is quite easy for a narrative to carry with it the weight of good reasons and because of this, the narratives told in a small group can quickly reshape the overall group climate. I found this to be the case with the team at Miami and unfortunately this often led to the destruction of the team vision I wanted to create. However, it also allowed the coaching staff to tell our own stories that eventually contributed to a new team vision.

A Unifying Vision

A forensics team like any other small group needs a vision for the future to foster team commitment and growth. In his book *Visionary Leadership* Burt Nanus appropriately writes, "There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward long range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision that is widely shared" (Nanus, 1995). This vision dictates not only the goal of a group but also the key for strategy. A vision that is capable of driving a forensics team or any other small group must effectively meet five criteria. The vision must be attractive, credible, achievable, worthwhile, and widely shared.

In order to be attractive the vision must appeal to the members of the group. For example, to many forensics programs a national championship would be attractive and to others consistently winning the small school division at a regional tournament would be attractive.

The vision must also be credible. If the vision is constantly established by a member of the group who lacks ethos, the vision likely will not be shared. A new novice would likely be unable to convince a team with established seniors and juniors that the team can win a national championship if any of the established members disagree.

It is also important that the vision is achievable. A small budget team that wants to win the NFA open division will soon have to face the mathematical reality of their situation, causing the team vision to collapse. In order to be a strong driving force a group must have a vision of the future that is possible.

The vision of the future must also be worthwhile. For many teams a top ten placing in the open division of NFA is possible. However, it may not be worthwhile for some students if they feel like their grades will suffer as a result. The vision must result in an outcome that is worth the cost that will be put in to achieving it.

Finally, the vision must be widely shared. The vision must be clear enough that each individual in the group has nearly the same expectations for the group as each other member. If certain members of the group do not share the vision the system will not be able to function as a whole and the vision will not come to fruition.

An Analysis of the Miami University Team

The narratives told by members in a small group shape the vision that is developed by the group. For example, if one member of an office group tells a story about how pointless group meetings are, the group will not share a vision that group meetings will help in the pursuit of their goals, thereby shaping the group vision in a negative way. In the same regards a forensics team tells stories that shape the vision of the team.

Finding an effective team vision was difficult at Miami because so many students were new to the activity. At the team meeting following her first trip to Bradley one student told the team a narrative about how everyone in finals was so good that she could never get to that level without hurting her grades. She is an incredibly talented student so the vision was credible to the rest of the team but the vision she set forth was unattractive and her narrative clearly indicated that the pursuit of excellence in the activity would not be a worthwhile goal. She was simply so new to the activity that she did not realize how talented she actually was. Later after a lot of convincing she put in a little work and broke at NFA.

Another story that was told by returnees on the team to new members was one from the previous semester about one of our more competitively successful students. The story points out how the entire team had to sit at awards for over an hour just so one member of the team could receive a bunch of awards. This story perpetuated a vision of the team where excellence can only come to a select few who have extensive high school experience and the rest of the students are wasting their time. This story was detrimental to the team because it kept them from putting in the work that would get them to the next level competitively. Unfortunately, this resulted in less success and more frustration, further solidifying the idea that success is limited to only a select few. A few members of the team quit when they decided that they would never be able to be competitive enough. It may be a stretch to say that all of these stem from one narrative; however, that one narrative

was matched with many others just like it. Because the individual students did not see their own success as a possibility they did not accept that vision for themselves. They also assumed that the only way to be nationally competitive as a team was to rely on the one or two members of the team who were competitively successful.

Fortunately, another narrative was told that helped to counter the previous one. Two students who were new to the team and never competed in high school began to work hard at the beginning of the year before they heard all of the stories about how they would not be good enough. They began to find competitive success and started telling stories in meetings about how the coaching they received and the hard work they did equaled results at tournaments. This new narrative helped to foster a more positive vision. Other members of the team began to see their work as being more worthwhile after that and they began to work harder. The results added credibility to the narrative and to the advice given by the coaches. The team also began to see how, with hard work, they could each be successful. They signed up for more coaching times, redrafted speeches, and attended more tournaments.

The new vision began to shape the way stories were told on the team as well. After the team began to buy into the vision, the stories about how the team had to wait around at awards began to die off because those were seen as the days before hard work. One specific narrative that was told over and over was about an awards ceremony where one student was filling in for another girl who had to leave early. The replacement girl at the awards ceremony was in three finals herself and was the top novice four times resulting in seven awards. The girl she stepped in for to receive her awards was in five finals and won pentathlon. She was running back and forth for the entire awards ceremony and accumulated tons of awards at her seat, never really sitting down because she always had to run back up for another award. The best part was that this was at the awards for a swing tournament where they did both awards ceremonies back to back so in the matter of an hour she received over twenty awards. This narrative has been excellent in dispelling the myth that only a select few can be successful. It also brings to light the idea that competitive success can be fun and that enjoyment makes the hard work worthwhile.

One student on the team who had won a ton the year before constantly downplayed his enjoyment of winning awards because he did not want the team to feel left out. He told stories about how he did not even want to get his awards and this kept the team from seeing the value in winning. Because he held so much credibility with the team his vision of the future seemed dark for everyone else. The new stories from the next year were incredibly helpful at fighting

against the perceived notion that only one person can win.

One other story told on the team was about how much fun one student had developing a poetry program. The piece was not very successful competitively however, it was fun to put together and to perform. The student helped to create a vision of a team that can be successful but doesn't have to be to have fun. This story impacted the developing vision for the team because it meant that hard work did not always equal competitive success but it showed that the hard work was still worthwhile.

The narratives told to one another shaped the group's vision and that vision eventually changed the narratives. This process is important to consider because a vision can change if enough reasonable stories contradict it. Coaches need to listen to the stories being told so that they can foster a positive learning environment.

Implications for coaches

Because of the fluid nature of narratives and team vision a coach must make structural choices to shape the narratives and can use narratives of his or her own to adapt the vision of the team.

Structurally, coaches must make choices that are based on narratives that they have heard and on the vision they want to create. One time to utilize this line of thinking is when scheduling tournaments. If the team seems to be overly confident and they think that they do not need to work hard it might be a good idea to schedule hard tournaments so students can tell stories about how much better everyone else was. Similarly, if a team is telling stories about how silly the activity is because people only follow certain formulas and no one is very good, it might be a good time to take them to a big tournament with amazing competitors. On the other hand, if the team is young or struggling to find confidence it would probably be good to take them to easier tournaments. This is what Miami University did in order to reinstate the idea that everyone can be successful. The story about the girl with so many trophies came from the choice to send the team to a small tournament where the students had better chances to break.

In a more fluid sense, it is also vital to keep listening to the stories being told because if one student is the common source of harmful stories that one student should be spoken to about it. Similarly, if the entire team is developing a vision that is not conducive to the educational goals of the activity it may be helpful to hold fewer meetings or to control the dialogue at meetings so that the sentiment does not grow. In the same way, when certain students seem to have the right vision more team events should be created to help communicate that vision to everyone on the team. The stories that happen through team bonding can be some of the most powerful, however, they can also be damaging if the

entire team follows a negative trend or one bad apple.

It is also possible to add stories to the group to help foster the best climate for an effective vision. I found that it was helpful to tell stories of my past experiences at group meetings so that the team who had very little experience could hear from someone with a great deal more. For example, when some students exclaimed that the team could not win Division One with a team as young as they are I told them about how my team did just that with a team that was less talented as a whole than they were at that moment. This likely had less of an impact than if a senior on the team would have said it but it did help to lessen the stories about how it could not be done. More importantly it gave those students who wanted to reach higher the thought that their vision is actually reachable.

Perhaps the best use of narrative from the coaching staff did not come from us but from the alumni we brought in to talk to the team. Two of our previous alums from a few years ago came to a meeting and told stories about what things were like when they were on the team. This was incredibly helpful. The stories that had been told about how no one could find success without previous experience were dispelled because two national champions with no high school experience were telling them stories. The narrative that competitive success had to hurt grades was countered because a Rhodes Scholar and pentathlon national champion was telling stories about how she used to work on speeches, have fun with her friends, and she still uses the skills today. Obviously, not every school has alumni like those just sitting around but most have someone who can come in who is not a coach. Having alumni come in will add to the credibility of the narrative and the vision for the future.

There are many ways in which the vision of a group can influence its actions and likewise the narratives told shape the vision. It is vital for forensics programs to establish a vision that can be shared by the team and just as importantly the narratives told by the team should be carefully monitored. Of course the team will tell stories when coaches are not around; however, by closely observing a team coaches can adapt to the stories they do hear and hopefully foster a climate that can bring a beneficial vision to fruition.

Ways the Forensics Community Can Change To Help New Team Growth

1. A ratings system for tournaments could help new coaches to develop a vision for their team. A new coach with new students or with second year students with little experience might benefit by knowing what tournaments will be the most competitive. It seems as though this type of knowledge is only gained by word of mouth and specu-

lation. It can be damaging to a team vision if a coach sends a team to a tournament that he or she expects will offer qual only to have the team crushed. Similarly, if students can see that they did well at a medium level tournament they could better judge their own development. One proposition for this system could be a one through five ratings system that is simply another number on the calendar of events. A five could represent a very difficult tournament like a Norton or HFO type of tournament. A three could be a medium difficulty tournament like the Ball State Aquarius tournament and a one could represent one of the less competitive small tournaments. This type of system would of course only represent the anticipated level of difficulty but could help coaches to plan their season. I see it as being most helpful for newly developing programs.

2. An award could be given at NFA or AFA to the team(s) that score the most points and are from a program in either its first or second year of existence. (or is back after a two or more year break in competition) This could help teams to see that a vision of excellence can become reality. It could also help programs when they need to show administrators that the team is growing.
3. We can have important Forensics alumni talk to students at tournaments to describe how worthwhile the activity is. We hear about successful alumni all the time but few of us ever seem to see them again. It would be good for students, especially at new programs, to hear about how the tools from this activity can be utilized in all walks of life.

References

- Billings, A. (2002). Assessing forensics in the 21st century: Ten questions individual events programs must address. *National Forensic Journal*, 20(1), 30-37.
- Dyer, S. Evaluating scarcity beyond the forensic experience: Alumni perspectives. Retrieved November 28, 2007 from http://www.sbuniv.edu/academics/Faculty/Scholarly_Activity/2003Scholarly/Dyer.pdf.
- Fisher, W. (1984). Narration as human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 51, 1-22.
- Holm, T. & Miller, J. (2004). Working within forensics systems. *National Forensic Journal*. 22(2), 23-37.
- Mcmillan, J. & Todd-Mancillas, W. M. (1991). An assessment of the value of individual events in forensics competition from students' perspectives. *National Forensic Journal*. 9, 1-17.
- Nanus, B. (1995). *Visionary leadership*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Paine, R. & Stanley, J. (2003). The yearning for pleasure: Significance of having fun in forensics. *National Forensic Journal*, 21(2), 36-59.

Sevier, R. (2006). Anatomy of a successful team. *University Business*, 23-24.