

Narrative coaching in a professional community after a suicide

By Pierre Blanc-Sahnoun



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Abstract

This article describes the application of narrative practice in a context of doing professional coaching work – in this case, with employees of a company where a colleague had committed suicide. Through using externalising conversations, outsider-witness practices, and some questions drawn from narrative community practice, the author outlines an approach which helped support stronger workplace relations in a context of heightened workplace tension.

Keywords: narrative coaching, corporate consulting, death and dying, suicide, grief, externalising conversations, outsider-witness conversations

On Thursday, 12th April 2007, upon returning from work, Jean-Louis Marquis parked in front of his home and took his hunting rifle from the trunk of his Peugeot 407 company car, then sat in the driver's seat and fired a bullet into his mouth. His wife called his employer the next day to inform him. Jean-Louis had worked for a long-established, family-run public works company in the Landes region, which had been taken over two years before by a major American group with subsidiaries in many countries. He had been employed by the company for twenty five years as a Technical Sales Representative for the Pyrénées Atlantiques, and had been called to the head office in Paris the next week for a 'job review' meeting with the head office HRD (Human Resources Department).

When the receptionist heard the news, she felt faint. Her colleagues, when they saw her collapse, ran to help and, upon hearing the news, in the words of the Site Director, they became 'hysterical'. The union representative called everyone into the large meeting room, stood on a table, and gave a speech in which the company's responsibility was clearly called into question. The site went on strike and the employees walked throughout the premises pouring out complaints against the new Group owners, who, in their mind, had only shown disregard and created hardships since the takeover.

On 15th April, the corporate HRD from Paris made an emergency on-site visit, along with the Director of Operations. He called the thirty employees together and explained that the Group was in no way responsible for this tragedy as Jean-Louis Marquis had been suffering from what he coined as a 'heavy alcohol problem' for many years. The meeting to which Jean-Louis had been called did not at all involve his termination, but was intended to discuss a 'humane and informal' way to solve this problem with him, he added.

After the funeral, at which the widow refused to have any company representative present (a few colleagues and friends came on a personal basis), the atmosphere was explosive. Business was at its slowest; the threat of strikes continued to grow, and morale was low. The Site Director sent a memo to Head Office in which he indicated:

- that the production objectives would not be achieved for the current quarter,
- that the employee situation was unstable,
- and that the April 15 visit had somewhat worsened the situation.

In conclusion, he asked for the urgent implementation of psychological support in order to show the employees that the company cared about the impact of their colleague's suicide on their lives, and in order to have business resume in normal conditions.

Traditional vs. narrative approaches to psychological crisis support

Traditional practices of psychological crisis support often consist of having people 'work through' a trauma in order to make them able to 'move beyond it'. To this end, consultants will ask people to describe once, or more than once, what they had lived through and to express their trauma-related emotions, situated metaphorically 'inside' the person. These emotions must 'come out', according to psychological theory, or risk blocking the 'grieving process' and preventing the individual from 'moving forward' beyond the traumatic story. (I am putting in quotation marks anything that I believe belongs to traditional psychological metaphors and the stories they create in victims of attack or trauma.)

Personally, in my interventions, I try to apply Michael White and David Epston's ideas on the narrative and social construction of identity (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990), especially the understanding that the repeated recounting of a trauma can create more harm than good to the extent it 'thickens' the traumatised version of the individual depicted as a 'victim' (White, workshop notes, Paris, 2006). With its focus on having emotions 'come out', traditional support practices can ignore the ways in which people resist trauma, thereby reducing its impact or effect. Such efforts to organise the expression of resistance give the trauma a meaning to make it understandable, and communities can create solidarity networks to support these initiatives.

These ideas, present in France since 2004, are obviously not yet very widespread generally, let alone in crisis situations that have occurred in companies. In the traditional discourse of corporate power, the suicide of an employee is presented to the world as the result of an individual pathology or of 'personal problems', and the corporate culture and its contribution to the existence of these problems are never brought into question, except in the form of union protests.

On medical and corporate models

The Site Director's request was met favourably by the Human Resources Department, which asked its usual coaching firm to find a local practitioner to intervene urgently on site, with the requirement that this individual be a certified clinical psychologist.

The firm contacted me on April 20 as a coaching professional located in the south-west. I offered to help but, as I am not a clinical psychologist, I did not fulfil the requirements. I therefore provided a few names, but questioned the company's requirement for a 'clinician', which meant to me that, in the mind of Management, the community needed 'healthcare' in a situation where it was 'victim' to a 'pathology' (its violent reaction to the suicide and ensuing events). The fact they required such an expert in 'dysfunctions' could be seen, therefore, as if they had perceived the reaction, at best, as an emotional breakdown or, at worst, as a collective psychological problem. In the frame of the dominant business culture, this story could potentially be told out of context in a form that presented a number of advantages:

- Clearing the company vis-à-vis the American head office by demonstrating that Jean-Louis Marquis' suicide and all the commotion that followed resulted from a set of pathological processes located in the subsidiary and had nothing to do with the acquisition and integration policy implemented in France.
- Suggesting that the employees had been traumatised by their colleague's suicide and not by some of the same factors that may have played a part in the suicide: perceived isolation, indifference, the failure to take into account local specifics, the absence of respect, confusing and contradictory instructions sent down from head office.
- Focusing the attention of the employees themselves on the fact that they could not 'digest' the suicide and that their anger and grief constituted pathological and abnormal reactions; they therefore needed help.
- Isolating each person in his/her own emotional reactions and preventing any form of solidarity within the community, as well as any collective reflection, that would have sought to place this event in the more general context of the corporate culture and what this culture required of employees to consider them as being 'acceptable'.

None of the clinical psychologists who had been contacted agreed to co-operate. I was the last candidate available and willing to take on this mission and was therefore considered satisfactory.

Before attending the site, I called the local Director and the Head Accountant, who was also acting as the HR correspondent. The former clearly informed me that the intervention was at his express request and he wanted to understand exactly how I was going to proceed in order to ensure that my intervention 'would not do more harm than good'. The latter seemed reassured to learn that I was not a clinical psychologist, but an HR consultant and expressed some reservation about what a 'shrink' is supposed to do: 'At least you won't have us lying on a couch!' he said.

When I entered the company's landscaped offices, I was faced with many curious stares. Everyone obviously had ideas about who I was and what I was there to do. At first, the atmosphere seemed studious and efficient, with everyone working. I said to the person closest to me that I was there to see Mr. Sanchez, the Site Director. 'Have a seat. I'll inform him', she said. Then, picking up her telephone: 'Mr. Sanchez? The psychologist is here'. My meeting with Raoul Sanchez lasted approximately two hours, during which he presented the Group to me at length, as well as its European subsidiary and the site in the Landes region. I questioned him on the reasons he personally attributed to Jean-Louis Marquis' suicide:

'Don't believe what people are saying: it has nothing to do with the fact he was called in.'

'How do you know?'

'I spoke with him two days before. He was convinced the Group was going to fire him. I tried to reassure him.'

'Why did you want to reassure him?'

'Because I was afraid he was going to do something really stupid. He had already mentioned it to colleagues of his.'

'What did you say to reassure him?'

'Well, that work, any work problem, does not justify killing yourself. See, it didn't work. It didn't prevent anything.'

'Why did you ask for a psychological intervention?'

'For the employees, to help them through the grieving process.'

'Do you feel they need help?'

'Yes, I think they may feel guilty ...'

Noting that Raoul Sanchez was unsure of how to inform the employees of my task, I suggested a small improvised meeting be organised during which I would talk to them about it. Not everyone could be gathered together, as some sales representatives were on the road, but approximately fifteen people were available. In this meeting, I:

- Introduced myself and my firm,
- Indicated that I was not a clinical psychologist, but a corporate consultant with a narrative orientation,
- Told them that the term 'psychological support' was not appropriate to describe my work,

- Suggested that, when faced with the suicide of one of its members, their community had probably been subject to multiple feelings and ideas, some of them perhaps contradictory,
- Proposed individual conversations for those who would agree to one. This conversation would be entirely confidential, which I guaranteed in front of their Director. Its topic would be the meaning they gave to their colleague's act and how they personally responded to it,
- Said that these meetings would be followed by a general meeting of the community based on the topic of Jean-Louis Marquis' suicide and what it meant to them,
- Ended by repeating that none of the above was mandatory for anyone.

There were no reactions or questions and the employees left the room in silence. I thought that they needed to talk between themselves about what I had said and about this process which was completely new to them (and new in France). In retrospect, I could have proposed small group conversation about what was meaningful in what they had just heard and what it was about it that made it meaningful, but I had no opportunity to extend the meeting with such an exercise and a retelling.

The next day, I received a request for a conference call with the French subsidiary directors in Paris. After the usual greetings, they told me that I had 'made a good impression', but criticised the fact that I had organised this employee meeting on my own initiative without asking for their permission. They told me they wanted my help to be strictly limited to individual support as a meeting risked, in their terms, 'degenerating into a Group denigration' and 'causing a psychodrama'.

My initial concern on hearing this was that I not make myself an accomplice in a normalising process, appointed and used as an instrument, like a sedative or a tool used by Management to control the community. This resulted in a few reflections about how the client's dominant story about management can enrol the coach:

- The dominant story can remind him that he is an employee who is supposed to provide a measured, contractually-approved service,
- It can place him in the role of a subordinate,
- The effect of this can be that he is continuously asked to give reports.

I explained what a narrative community meeting was, in particular that it allowed a community to use its own resources to react to a trauma, negotiate through its various meanings, and create a collective story of healing. I suggested that the people in Head Office (themselves, in fact) come to the site to be outsider witnesses to the stories to be told, which would be a way of honouring the deceased employee as well as their colleagues' responses. Their answer was not favourable. The Management Committee said that it was a very bad idea and believed that, if they attended, there was every chance the situation would get out of hand.

Approximately half the employees asked for individual meetings, all of whom were women. I was surprised by this state of affairs and said so to these women, who explained (I am summarising their responses):

- That in French culture, in particular in the country regions, there is a stereotype for what a male should do that prohibits 'real men' from confiding their feelings to a third party (especially a counsellor); they are supposed to work through them on their own or give no importance to them,

- That their male colleagues were also Jean-Louis Marquis' closest workmates and they believed that they were being sent a shrink to 'calm them down' and had no desire to calm down or be calmed; that their anger served as a tribute to Jean-Louis and a symbol of their wish to bluntly confront the company.

During the individual meetings with these employees, I followed an enquiry that drew on narrative questions, including work on collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008; White, 2003):

- When were you informed of Jean-Louis Marquis' suicide? Could you tell me exactly what happened, what you thought and felt, the opinions you had on this subject?
- How has this suicide affected you? Your relations with your colleagues? Maybe your morale or self-image? What you think about this company? Your view of work or life in general?
- Do you think the impact is mostly negative or is there something positive? Or a bit of both?
- What experiences or ideas have allowed you to put things into perspective, to reduce the effects of this suicide on the various areas you spoke about?
- Did anyone in particular help you by his/her presence, teachings, words, or ideas to deal with the impact of this suicide on your life?
- Would you mind telling me a bit more about these experiences and your ideas on suicide and death – in particular, how you acquired them or whether they correspond to the culture of your family or a community (religious, ethnic ...) to which you belong?

These meetings were very rich and considered useful by the employees. Only one person asked for a second meeting. Here are a few things I learned during these conversations:

- Jean-Louis Marquis' suicide caused a feeling of anger and injustice closely tied to the feeling of anger and injustice that was already present and had grown over months in relation to the manner in which the American group had treated this small country-based subsidiary since the takeover.
- This had been regarded as 'disdainful', 'haughty', 'disrespectful of individuals, the company, and the culture' ('They hate the French'), and 'focused on a desire to squash any local specificity and destroy methods that had been developed over twenty five years'.
- This specifically took the form of 'an authoritarian imposition of non-negotiated objectives considered as unrealistic', as well as an obligation to change the information system and switch everything over to the Group's ERP (enterprise resource planning) system with no consultation or training, which was seen as 'brutal' and 'arbitrary'.
- In general, the meeting to which Jean-Louis Marquis was called was considered a pre-termination meeting tied to his age and lack of flexibility (not to mention his lack of enthusiasm) in adapting to the 'new regime'.
- This political analysis took most of the meeting time, the individuals significantly identifying the feeling of deep injustice linked to the suicide of their colleague, a colleague who they sometimes liked only moderately. However, even among those who did not particularly like him, this story of anger and injustice was very strong.
- In terms of what had helped them to overcome the impact of this suicide, this anger had been identified as a powerful healing tool (remember that this same anger had been described by Management as a pathological symptom requiring the support of a clinical psychologist to 'cure' it).

- Most importantly, each of these individuals, with few exceptions, had a history of a suicide or suicide attempt within their family, a child, a neighbour, or themselves, and had developed skills, ideas, and stories that had allowed them to cope with this history, to give it a meaning, and to render it multi-storied.

Finally, the overall impression I had was that the suicide had not been experienced as a trauma as such (except for a single person who had worked directly with Jean-Louis), but that people tied it to a set of actions, based on exclusion and the domination of the Group's culture in relation to a minority culture that felt rejected, with the suicide 'story' justifying and reinforcing this story of exclusion. Considered provocative and giving further weight to this dominating story, the visit by the Parisian managers was interpreted as being an attempt to 'clear themselves' by 'spitting on the memory of our colleague'. Jean-Louis Marquis was described as a 'good drinker who knew how to party', but not an alcoholic (although it is true that in the south-west of France, the definitions of alcoholism are a little culturally distinct in comparison to Paris).

I returned to Management in Paris with the idea that they attend the community meeting and listen to these people's desire to be recognised for who they were, to honour their anger and sadness at not being recognised, and see it as a testimony to their will to be useful and contribute. I also suggested that, once they heard these stories, they organise an audit to deal with all the subjects related to the integration of the subsidiary with the employees and accept their reaction to their colleague's suicide not as a threat but as an occasion to express their will to be seen in another light.

Management again refused to participate, this time arguing that the closest of Jean-Louis Marquis' colleagues (those who had not attended the meetings) had let them know they would not be welcome. During this meeting and through the questions asked, and also from several identical organisational structures I had worked with, I perceived that French Management was stuck between its provincial subsidiaries, with their regional specificities, and a very demanding European Management that filtered information to and from Head Office in the USA and constituted a sort of normalising entity, constantly demanding charts with figures, reports, and forecasts, then 'sending back' instructions with no discernible relationship to the data provided. The mission of the French Management was to explain these instructions, which it did not always understand, and have them applied in the field. The fact that an employee needs to understand instructions in order to execute them was not part of the Group's dominant culture, which was based on compliance and self-discipline.

Interested in this situation and the effects it could have on their lives, I suggested I meet with management in order to prepare their visit as outsider witnesses and talk of the meaning they gave to this hierarchical authority system and the means they adopted to achieve their objectives and maintain a certain logic in their vision of their work. I surmised that one of the resistance strategies they had commonly used had consisted in telling European Management a story where all was well, in order, and under control, so as to be left alone. The integration of this subsidiary was supposed to have been managed and supported without a hitch. Jean-Louis Marquis' suicide therefore had to be seen as a desperate and isolated act by a depressed man suffering from a serious alcohol problem, and the angry reaction of the site employees as a post-traumatic syndrome for which adequate measures had been taken in a timely manner.

However, as no representative from French Management wished to be present, I suggested the site employees participate in a definitional ceremony organised with two clear understandings:

- Employees would be free to speak, if they so desired, or remain silent; the very fact of their attendance already constituting a tribute to the memory of their colleague,
- The objective of the meeting was to talk about Jean-Louis Marquis, not their own 'trauma', or the company specifically.

Drawing on the outsider-witness/definitional ceremony map (White, 2007), I proposed the following points to employees for their thoughts:

- What image of him remained with them?
- Tell a story to illustrate this image and share it.
- Describe where the speaker was today, what ideas he/she had in relation to this colleague's suicide, and how these ideas potentially affected his/her professional activities and personal life.
- What he/she learned as a lesson or adopted as a resolution for the future.

This ceremony was very powerful, friendly, funny, and moving, with many stories and an atmosphere of respect. Those who did not speak were active and influential through their reactions. The company was 'reasonably' held responsible, with more bitterness than hatred, and the meeting never 'got out of hand' at any time. No order was imposed in terms of speakers, and they followed one another and found impetus in each other's words. At the end, the discussion was more general and focused on how to decide what initiatives should be taken so that such an event could never occur again and so that their colleague 'would not have died for nothing'. Having stated that it could not expect anything from its parent company, the community decided to come closer together, to be more attentive to signs of distress in its members, and to meet periodically for a drink to celebrate a new contract or achievement, or just simply to enjoy being together, thereby taking the initiative for the recognition and protection it was not receiving from its Management.

At the time, I was not aware of narrative documentation techniques (texts, books, songs, and so on) used to reinforce the impact of new community life stories and I did not think of bringing with me a 'reflective team', external to the company, nor to ask Jean-Louis Marquis' family to attend as witnesses or write some stories and have them read. Barbara Myerhoff has established that an audience provides opportunities for being seen and in one's own terms, garnering witnesses to one's worth, vitality and being (Myerhoff, 1982; see also White, 2007), which significantly contributes to the reconstruction of a collective or personal identity. I could have more strongly encouraged Management representatives to attend, or documented this meeting and had Management react to these documents. Even if, from the perspective of this community, the approach we took allowed for a 'renewal of the meaning of living together', outside re-narrations could have reinforced this feeling of the meaning of being together.

- However, I offered my own outsider witness reflection, that focused on:
- What had caught my attention: the moment they had moved from a series of testimonies to a general conversation.
- The image that came to me of what was important to them: a shared responsibility in terms of taking care of each other like a family where everyone protects each other.
- The resonance of this image to my own life: my role as a parent.
- And what I had learned for the future: an awareness of the ability of communities to be responsible for their own destiny.

A short while later, Management informed me of its satisfaction based on their own categories of intention: there had been no social ‘explosion’ and the performance level had gone back to normal. It finally approved the idea of an organisational audit, but, instead of assigning it to an outside firm, it had sent someone from the Human Resources Department for two days, which concluded ... that no problems existed.

In conclusion, for me, the benefits of this approach were:

- It demonstrated how narrative ideas can be applied to coaching in a crisis situation in a specific community like a private company.
- It highlighted the limitations of my intervention in terms of process (absence of outsider witnesses and documentation) and the fact that it did not allow the Management to re-establish meaningful contact with its subsidiary based on the idea of belonging to a same national or global community.
- It showed how a community can be able to produce by itself the recognition it needs.
- It demonstrated the different demands that a practitioner must manage when working in a company, and what impact a system that follows contradictory storylines can potentially have on practitioners, in particular by seeking to create solidarity between the practitioner and certain elements in the system (in saying this, I am aware of certain personal solidarity feelings with the people on the site).
- It raised the issue of how a practitioner can respond to these effects by referring to a professional practice based on adopting a decentred position, accepting all points of view, but also the idea of systematically giving a floor to minority voices and transposing their words into appropriate forms of documentation.
- People in the corporate world are not aware that they form communities with specific identity and culture, based on shared stories. The organisation charts tell a poor story about what it is like to work together. Narrative gives an opportunity of rich story development on this topic. But not all companies are ready to take this chance, especially in the French culture where ‘solidarity’ and ‘community’ are immediately connoted with social *revendication*: protesting or attempting to reclaim what people see as rightfully theirs.

On a personal note, I have found narrative practice to offer a lot to my work as a professional coach. I am interested in hearing from others using narrative ideas in these contexts, and think that narratives’ twin values of social justice on the one hand, but not standing in moral judgement on the other, can suggest some ways to bridge what can be quite difficult gaps between corporate and community culture – as well as help people bring forward a sense of their personal values and commitments in their working lives.

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