

Story of Now: How to Make a Compelling and Strategic Ask

A conversation organised by the Leading Change Network between Dominique Cantwell and Jacob Xavier.

Dominique Cantwell

Hi, I'm Dominique Cantwell. I'm a nonprofit leader in the arts and cultural sector. I'm a board facilitator, and I've been a teaching fellow for Harvard leadership storytelling and action public narrative course for the last two years.

Jacob Xavier

Hi, I'm Jacob Xavier. I've been an educator all my life and specifically a data and project manager in New York City schools for the past seven years. Outside of schools I love training people in Argentine Tango and coaching people in public narrative and that's how we met Dominique and I. So tell us, Dominique, how did you get into public narrative?

Dominique Cantwell

Tango, I love that. Well, I personally engaged in public narrative long before I knew what it meant, actually, when I was a teenager. The California Library Association invited me to lobby on their behalf in the state capitol. I remember being so nervous but the wonderful librarian that I went with, I wish I could remember her name, she told me to share my story, my connection with the libraries and education, and then connect it to the need statewide. We've definitely got something restored and actually has been a storyteller and a case maker ever since though, really, it wasn't until I took Marshall Ganz's Harvard course that I was able to articulate the philosophy and the pedagogy behind what it turns out I've been practising for 20 years.

Jacob Xavier

Dominique, I didn't know all of that. Well, you've started early me I got into public narrative just a few years ago, by way of Marshall at the Kennedy School. During my first semester of the MBA programme, I took the semester long course and public narrative and suddenly found a philosophy of leadership that just completely utilised my emotional self that wanted to connect and get to know people and then even after the Kennedy School, I've been able to continue in public narrative alongside you, Dominique, and many others to work with LCN and to coach other nonprofit professionals. On that note, we did a training for LCN and in December didn't we?

Dominique Cantwell

Yeah, the Leading Change Network. Yeah.

Jacob Xavier

Yes and so right now they have this great series of skills sessions that build on one another and you and I got to partner for the story of now back in December.

Dominique Cantwell

Kind of a dream team.

Jacob Xavier

I mean, yes, yes. I thought we could talk a little bit about why about the now, the story of now, specifically, and why that is such an important part of storytelling.

Dominique Cantwell

Yeah, the story of now it's kind of like the climax with a really good plot.

Jacob Xavier

What do you mean by that?

Dominique Cantwell

So, well, the story of now is really where strategy meets story, it builds on the stories of self and us in a public narrative. It's kind of the piece that leverages the resources and whatever room that you're in, and makes the current challenge that you're addressing into a story moment.

Jacob Xavier

I guess that's where urgency really comes into play. Hope that comes with a clear pathway to action, plus an actual call to action, which we call the ask.

Dominique Cantwell

So for the purposes of the conversation, say more about that. Why do we stress urgency in this context? I mean, if we're making a compelling case for something important, won't, people already just want to act?

Jacob Xavier

Well definitely. That's why we as leaders have to give people a path, a pathway to action. Yes, once we realise that there is something broken in the world, that there is the possibility of a better world, we also have to show people the initial steps that they have to take on that path to a better world, and inspire people and emotionally engage with people to take us collectively towards that future.

Dominique Cantwell

Yeah, you bring up a good point, actually, this craft really is fundamentally a leadership practice.

Jacob Xavier

Yes and the story of now it doesn't stand alone on its own. It's the third part of a compelling narrative. In the first part, story of self, we get to know you, the leader, your religions, and why you're the leader we want to follow. In the second part, the story of us, we hear examples of how we have gathered our collective power and then finally, in the third part, the story of now, we want to hear about what matters most to you urgently, and how we can help. Essentially what is the issue and what is the strategic path to action?

Dominique Cantwell

I think sometimes people can get stuck on issues, you know, just weighed down by the enormity of everything that needs fixing. Again, though, I think that's where where leadership becomes so crucial. It's not enough to identify all that's wrong with the world, a good leader compels us to do something about it. It actually enables our agency to take those first steps.

Jacob Xavier

I love that part enables our agency. Yes, the ask isn't just about fixing the whole problem necessarily. If we could all sign a petition and solve the climate crisis, boom, it's done and we would knock it out in a day. No, but it's about taking a first few steps forward in the right direction, together as a group.

Dominique Cantwell

I think that's a really good example but I mean, this tool isn't just for the big issue, though, right?

Jacob Xavier

No, it definitely scales. For example, I work in a school I work with data in a school in New York and on their own, the numbers mean little, but when leaders explain these numbers, and they paint a picture for the teachers, for the administrators, and even for the families and parents, a picture of genuine urgency, for example, what is the night where when we look at graduation readiness into two quarters or two semesters, what is the dream scenario, maybe looking at high school graduation, or even future college admissions? Looking at this data, what do we do

right now to achieve that better future? And what will be the consequences of not doing anything? The consequences of being paralyzed by fear or by apathy, and not doing anything at all?

Dominique Cantwell

Good point. It's funny, I think sometimes it's, it's something that's actually pretty intuitive for a lot of people I know that was my experience. Even I find it comes up naturally, when I'm doing things with my teenagers were admittedly, the stakes are probably a little lower than in campaigns or with organizations where I've employed it more intentionally. In both instances, though, I tend to really gravitate to balancing the nightmare and the dream that you mentioned.

Jacob Xavier

It's balancing these things is where strategy plays a key role. For example, how do we go about creating the ask that is collective that involves everyone and doesn't just shut people down?

Dominique Cantwell

That's probably why we call it a craft. Yeah, there is this balance, like urgency. For example, it surfaces the feeling of anger or distress or upset at an issue less than the fire to do something about it. Like whatever it is that you care most about whether it's climate change, immigration, Women's Rights, Equity, violence, education in your case, like this is where you're going to put that issue front and center in the story of now we need to know why we need to act right now on this thing. It's like what I tell my students, not one of the other important issues of the millions, they have our inbox and one ????. Right, it's this thing right now. So a good ask, helps us tap into that feeling and hope, I think is ??? what we're going for in a story of now.

Jacob Xavier

This sounds like it really is the intersection between organizing and public narrative, we need to know what we, those of us right here in this room, or at this protest march or at the street corner, we need to know what we can actually do about all of this, about this urgency about this crisis. So this has to be the Ask has to be collective and specific and measurable and achievable and visible and it has to draw on the resources in the group there right now. I'm missing something. Am I not?

Dominique Cantwell

Relevant?

Jacob Xavier

Yes, yes. I feel like we buried the lead there but yes, through all of this public narrative story of

now leadership itself, all of this is relevant, and it has to be rooted in our values.

Dominique Cantwell

Yeah, I feel like that piece really can't be emphasized enough. People act because something's meaningful right, not because it's easy and without their values, it's almost impossible to get that sense of meaning, or, or even urgency and help, we have to know that this is something we collectively care about in order to take it on like that collective piece is so essential.

Jacob Xavier

Right, like what is it that we collectively care about? Because it's easy to disagree on the issues on the surface but when you tap deeper into the values, that's when that's where commonality starts to appear. A good ask speaks to that commonality. So for example, maybe we disagree about gun control but we all do, hold safety as a value. Let's start there, especially safety of our children in schools. We agree on that.

Dominique Cantwell

Yeah, that's true. I mean, especially in large organizations or movements, it's unlikely that everyone's going to feel the same way about all of the issues. You know, I know that when I worked in politics, I saw this a lot among political parties. So it really is crucial that leaders bring people together around their values instead, essentially, what do we hold most dear and how can we create change that addresses that? I mean, I think that's why we see caucuses within parties, right? Who are my people? What do you care? And how does bringing this back to the story of now? We create a path of action together.

Jacob Xavier

Yes, I want to keep going back to the elements of the story of self and the story of us to illustrate these points but in my mind, that really demonstrates how relational all of this is, as a leader, I have to be a part of the us and collectively we have to act now. If I could solve the world's problems on my own, I'd be done before lunch, but the world doesn't quite work that way.

Dominique Cantwell

Right? I'll have the kale salad and world peace to go. But seriously, I mean, the more of this work that I do the easier that the public narrative, and especially the ask becomes, like, I find that the two most powerful words I know are join me.

Jacob Xavier

Well, Dominic, I for one, I'm thrilled that you joined me today. I'm always so amazed by the people I've met in the LCN network.

Dominique Cantwell

I clearly I have never met a more committed empathetic powerhouse group of people.

Jacob Xavier

Changemakers.

Dominique Cantwell

Yeah, changemakers. No more powerful changemakers than that at LCN and, actually, I encourage anybody who's listening who wants to know more to check out the Resource Centre on their website, it contains so much more depth and breadth and we can probably cover in the few minutes we have right here. It really gets to the building blocks at the foundation of both public narrative and organizing.

Jacob Xavier

So these resources, do you have to be a member or can non member still take these skills sessions and access the resource center?

Dominique Cantwell

Ah, you know, I think so but membership is only \$100 for individuals and at least in my experience has been really well worth it. The classes and workshops that I've been a part of, were just phenomenal.

Jacob Xavier

Plus, there are videos, manuals, pretty much everything a budding leader might need to kick off a movement.

Dominique Cantwell

Exactly. Well, Jacob, this has been great. I know that there is another round of field sessions coming up in a couple of months. Will I see you there?

Jacob Xavier

Yes, you will. You can count on it. Awesome.