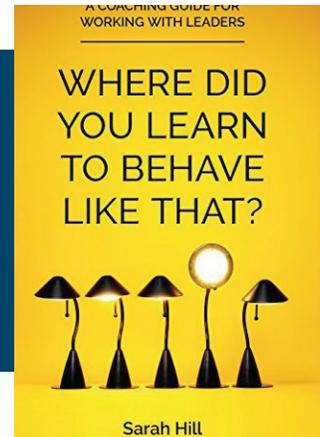


# Where Did You Learn to Behave Like That?

Excerpts from the book by Mobius friend Dr. Sarah Hill



**“Gaining command of your childhood story can be singularly the most transformative act any leader may experience in a coaching relationship.”**

## **A Coaching Guide for Working with Leaders**

Like everyone else, leaders are shaped by their formative experiences. Whether or not we are conscious of it, our earliest memories affect how we behave today, especially in our interactions with others.

These memories lie at the heart of those situations which trigger us most.

This book is a conceptual and a practical guide for how coaches can skillfully solicit the childhood story that underpins a leader’s characteristic behavior, helping them access an unprecedented depth of understanding about themselves. Gaining command of this story can be singularly the most transformative act any leader may experience in a coaching relationship.

As an example of the work coaches must do on ourselves before we can serve others in this way, I’ve woven my own childhood story (along with stories from clients and other coaches), throughout the guide. The intention was to create a unique tapestry of experience from which to learn.

Here’s an example from one CEO:

*Sometimes it’s the seemingly simple things that can catch us out as leaders. I remember one occasion presenting the strategic plan to the Board. As I was in full flow one of the members looked at their watch and, in my mind, exhibited a face of disinterest and boredom. As I sarcastically asked them if they had somewhere more important to be than engaged on the future of our organization, little did they know my childhood story had caught me out; I was about to wreak havoc in my relationship with the Board – some leader! What they didn’t know – and neither did I until later – was that I had a strong childhood story about being ignored that regularly impacted on my leadership. The little boy who felt an irrelevance in his family system with a father, who always said ‘in a minute we’ll do this’ and never did, had suddenly made an appearance in the Boardroom. Only now I had power, intellect and a sarcastic turn of phrase to punish others with.*

We have probably all seen the wide-ranging and harmful impact of leaders who have not had the opportunity to work on their childhood story, or who are unaware of its very existence and importance. The dysfunction can range from verbally lashing out at the people who are working to support them, to steamrolling or abandoning [others] just when they are needed the most. We have probably all had manifestations of such behavior in ourselves too, sometimes without noticing it fully. In these moments, the childhood story has entered the room. It takes over and does harm – often with the individual completely oblivious to the source of their behavior.

Many coaches and consultants describe how they feel unprepared to work with behavior emanating from a leader's childhood story, or they do so purely instinctively. Unless therapeutically trained, coaches may not have suitable models for doing work of this kind. This book (and the training that accompanies it) is intended to bridge that gap.

### **Challenging the stigma of therapy**

In presenting Story-work as an approach to employ in coaching, I am not setting out to compete with or critique therapy. Rather, I am offering it as a methodology coaches can use to engage leaders in deep behavioral work on the Self that potentially makes such work more palatable to a leader. There is an accepted canon that successful executive leaders do not need therapy, or at least they don't admit to needing it. People in leadership positions are in those positions because of their ostensible ability to function. When you are at the top it can be very hard to accept real help in general. "After all, what do we pay you for if you need help in doing what you've been hired for?" The notion of admitting to the need for therapy is widely stigmatized as a kind of professional death sentence.

We all know that – objectively – this is crazy, and that many people in business, Government and in public life – especially celebrities – struggle mightily with functioning in the roles they have worked so hard to achieve. But just as we have taboos about speaking openly and pointing out deep behavioral differences in people, we also have taboos about addressing the behavioral dimension of people in high office.



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The stigma of not being ‘behaviorally healthy’ can loom even larger than the penalty for acting out horrible behavioral pathologies, as many leaders unfortunately do. Only when everything completely breaks down, when a leader’s behavior becomes totally untenable, might there finally be a dramatic change. The leader will either burn-out or be thrown-out and replaced with the next one, who will bring their own pathology of hidden involuntary behavioral patterns; and so, around we go again. [See, for example Egon Zehnder’s data on CEO Firings on page 25.] This ‘throwing out the baby with the bathwater’ approach – familiar to anyone who follows Premiership football in the UK and the way managers come and go – is not a healthy way to develop and nourish any team or organization, and yet it is only too common.

To break out of this vicious circle, we need to stop oscillating between hero-adulation of leaders on the one hand, and trying to diagnose them as flawed and therefore in need of ‘repair’ on the other.

Coaching has generally been marketed as ‘everything but therapy.’ As coaches, we are working on effectiveness and efficiency, on tools and methods, on freeing the potential of the client, on un-cluttering busy minds, but rarely on the more deeply rooted behavioral short-comings of the powers that be. This ‘positioning’ of coaching is very smart because with the stigma attached to therapy, it will always be challenging to get (most) leaders to go ‘there’, even if they are in desperate need of help.

This is where childhood story work can make a real difference, because of how it provides a non-threatening way to explore deeper forces and shadows in leaders.

Story-work lowers the barrier to engage in constructively challenging – albeit potentially painful – reflections about the Self, any associated dysfunctional behavioral patterns, where these might stem from and what can be done to change those patterns. Story-work goes further than ‘normal’ coaching, but it can be distinctly different from therapy.

**“ These Stories would do harm in all manner of overt and covert ways, so long as they remained activated, yet undiscovered.”**

In Story-work – in contrast to therapeutic intervention – you do not go back into the depths of the details of events with the purpose of treating a psychological or behavioral disorder.

Story-work is about acknowledging the existence of such (dramatic and potentially traumatic) events, naming what they were, exploring these to place them in time, as well as understand the impact they had back then and may still be having now. This is followed by going to work on writing the new internal narrative in a way that counteracts old patterns of reactivity, preventing them from having such influence and power.

*Where Did You Learn to Behave Like That?* introduces practitioners to this vital and demanding work. It does so by taking the reader into the depths of Story-work. We explore what’s involved in guiding leaders in relation to the impact of their childhood stories; and how to do this in an appropriate and competent way through skilful counsel, exploration, support and challenge.

Instead of pointing out that somebody becomes dysfunctional in high stakes, or has a behavioral disorder which shows itself under stress, in this approach, it is understood and expected that under stress (i.e. in high stakes) most of us regress to a degree, show less behavioral flexibility and can even become completely blocked. In such moments leaders should be able simply to ask themselves: *“Is there any link between stressful events of the past, and my behavior under stress today?”*

And if the answer is “Yes”, as it undoubtedly will be in most cases, they can set to work on exploring this link between past and present and evaluating whether their ‘old programming’ is still serving them well today. Out of simple questions like these – with the proper guidance of an experienced Story-guide – reflections will usually emerge over time and an eventual writing of a new internal narrative will be possible. These steps have the potential to profoundly change behavior and eliminate much involuntary shadow behavior under stress. The same people who

would never entertain the notion of entering therapy, can attain practical results for their professional and private lives which would be considered ‘dream outcomes’ for any therapeutic intervention, without ever having the feeling that they were undergoing therapy. And that’s how it should be.

### Structural Dynamics: the mechanism for analyzing stories from a neutral perspective

In any human interaction, one of the four speech-acts from Kantor’s Action Propensities (Move, Follow, Oppose, Bystand) and one of the dialects from the Communication Domains work in concert with one of

the three Operating Systems, to form one of 36 vocal acts with a distinct structure, e.g.,

- **‘Move in Closed Power’ example:** *I am clear about the need to get this work completed and now need you to get on with it so that you meet the agreed deadline.*
- **‘Bystand in Open Affect’ example:** *I hesitate to say this, but I will, I notice that when the CEO expresses appreciation for us and approves our methods and outcomes, we all feel really cared for and become even more productive.*

Structural Dynamics is morally neutral in the way it names and works with these structures in

## Kantor’s theory of Structural Dynamics

Based on her work with David Kantor, Mobius Senior Expert and world-renowned systems psychologist, Sarah Hill introduces the main conceptual framework underpinning the work: the theory and practice of Kantor’s Structural Dynamics.

Used to analyze how we communicate, Kantor’s model illustrates four types of speech and behavioral propensities:

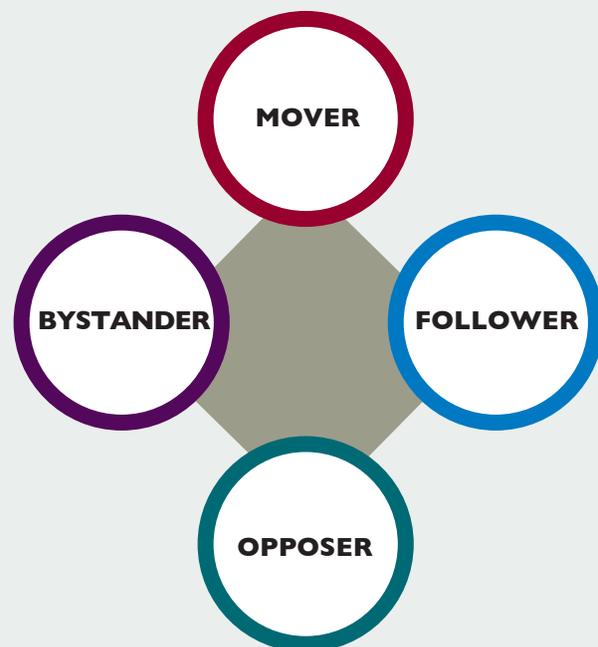
- Making a **move** or setting direction
- **Following** or validating an action
- **Opposing** or challenging what has been said or done
- **Bystanding**, as an attempt to bridge or reconcile actions

Each of us has a characteristic mindset or operating system, which we learned from our families and other systems we experienced such as school or church and which show in our interactions with others:

- **Closed** – valuing tradition, order, hierarchy
- **Open** – valuing inclusion and participation
- **Random** – valuing unconstrained creativity

We also have a "domain" of communication we prefer:

- Getting things done or the **Power** domain
- The **Affect** domain where the emphasis is on feelings and relationships
- A preference for ideas and knowledge in the **Meaning** domain.



communication. From this base, an experienced Structural Dynamics interventionist can assess what part of the action is getting stirred and surfaced from the past, and what is actually happening today.

Everyone has triggers that can put them into high stakes in an instant and without warning. Becoming aware of ones' own childhood story, and understanding it in Structural Dynamics terms is crucial in making it accessible as a conscious tool for unravelling the high stakes dramas we find ourselves in.

### **Beyond the structure, into the Story itself**

Story-guides work with both structure and Story. What's needed is a process whereby you move from structure to Story, and from Story to structure, in sequence and in parallel. This shift may be replicated many times.

Another element of Story-work is the role of the internal narrative. The Story itself might consist of a string of episodic experiences throughout childhood, often repetitively and in different permutations. Together, these episodic stories form our overall childhood story, usually containing accounts of loss, distress and unhappiness.

Childhood stories of imperfect love are characterized by impactful, emotional recollections of sometimes prevailing and painful feelings and experiences. However, over time the same Stories gradually form the foundations for an accompanying internal narrative that develops implicitly throughout adolescence and into adulthood. For example:

*"People are unreliable, don't trust too easily."*

*"No matter how hard I try to do what I'm asked, it's never good enough."*

*"I'm too fussy."*

*"It's dangerous to answer back to anyone in authority."*

We craft our internal narrative over time and mostly subconsciously, to keep our self-image coherent and consistent. [See, for example Doug Silsbee's work on identity, page 42.] The mind abhors nothing more than cognitive dissonance and will do its utmost to keep our adult 'Self' in line with our childhood experiences, and the childhood 'Self'

which emerged from them. And so the internal narrative we have constructed usually keeps us forcefully and deeply rooted in behavioral patterns of the past, which have long lost their relevance and make no sense in the adult context. Similarly, it is because of the familiarity of the internal narrative and its associated behavioral patterns that we are also easily coaxed into involuntary, almost compulsive behaviors. This is especially the case in high stakes situations because of how escalation occurs in abrupt and dramatic ways. Suddenly the behavioral range we might generally enjoy in low stakes flies out the window and we become confined to all too memorable ways of reacting.

There is a crucial difference between 'Story' and 'Narrative' at the very core of their nature. While Story is immutable, and cannot be changed in substance, the internal narrative is no such thing. The internal narrative is constructed based on and around our interpretation of the Story – which is usually implicit and based on a child's perspective. But what was constructed one way, can be deconstructed and rebuilt again, but this time based on an explicit and adult interpretation of the Story.

This is the job of Story-work and the task for coaches who have specialized in becoming Story-guides. ■



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mobius Friend Dr. Sarah Hill is a Managing Partner at Dialogix. Her work as a Dialogue and Structural Dynamics Interventionist provided the focus for her PhD research nearly twenty years ago. Since then, she has lead behavioral interventions with individuals,

teams and across whole systems. She has also been instrumental in the design and development of training in this field and is recognized internationally as an expert in childhood storywork. Please visit the Dialogix website for Sarah's new podcast series on Story-work and upcoming training dates to become a Story-guide.