

the narrative lab

probe • sense • respond



Company Profile



About us



The Narrative Lab (TNL) is a company which through the use of narrative, **surfaces** and **influences** the mindsets, perceptions and belief systems that govern the patterns of behaviour in your team and organisation.

We pride ourselves on our ability to tackle the intractable and **adaptive challenges** that companies face and to provide contextually relevant **interventions** to address these problems.

We are convinced of the fact that the global economy today is, and will continue to be, built on the power of networks and connectedness. Our connectedness in this fast paced world is dependent on on the strength and quality of our **conversations**. We believe that an organisation's results are determined through webs of human

commitments, and in turn these commitments are born in webs of human conversations.

In fact, **conversation is the way work gets done!**

We use narrative and conversation as tools because stories convey context, emotion and content, and it is through conversation that stories are created and shared. Narrative therefore allows us to **gain insight into root causes** for complex behaviours and to make sense of problems as well as provide a **mechanism for effective response**.

TNL does not offer "one-size-fits-all" solutions; we firmly believe in the importance of context and therefore seek to fully understand the context that each client find themselves in. Similarly, our business does not fit within the usual business paradigms, and we exist in the **space between** hardcore consulting and softer approaches to humans and organisations. We are uncomfortable calling ourselves "consultants". There are too many hangups associated with the way consultants operate. We prefer to refer to ourselves as **conversation agents, advisors and partners**.

TNL has been operating since 2006. Collectively we have close on two decades of experience in the fields of narrative and adaptive challenges, both locally and internationally. We are the South African training partner for the **Cognitive Edge (Singapore)** accreditation course. We also have strategic partnerships with the **University of Stellenbosch Business School** as well as the **University of Pretoria's Department of Mining Engineering**.

The Narrative Lab is a **Level 4 compliant Broad-Based Black Empowerment contributor**. We are committed to transformation in South Africa and actively search for opportunities to redress the painful history of our beautiful country.

Our mining clients react violently to this statement. The way works get done in their mines is by extracting ore out of the ground. "Conversation is not that important in our workflow!" they tell us.

Really?

We ask them how dependent the volume of ore extraction is on the relationship between supervisors, miners and crew members?

Answer: very important.

Right, the quality of relationship is influenced by the quality of conversation underground. Not warm-and-fuzzy conversation, but the way we converse about work.

This is true in an industrial setting, but is even more true in corporate work settings.



Our story

A little more than 5 years ago, two people with incredibly diverse backgrounds met at a community experiment. One had roots in meteorology and a solid career as a 'Big 5' consulting house consultant. The other had dabbled in psychology, education, human resources and theology.

What could they possibly have in common?

Sonja had been a part of pioneering work within IBM that explored the relationship between complexity sciences and consulting. A significant component of this work was utilising narrative as a diagnostic tool for understanding complex organisational challenges. Aiden had qualified as a narrative therapist, but did not want to practise as such. He was always more interested in how groups and organisations understand their story and in finding ways to reframe that story to yield a more humane workplace, greater team cohesion and organisational effectiveness.

Well, it was at that fateful dinner in 2006 that Sonja and Aiden met and began to explore the notions of complexity and narrative, and how combining the theory of complexity and the practice of narrative could lead to innovative solutions for adaptive challenges.

Our frameworks

TNL's service offering is based on two core frameworks or philosophies that guide most of what we do.

Narrative and conversation

Besides the traditional application of storytelling in organisations, we also draw deeply on our ability to gather stories and metaphors relating to various problems facing the organisation. These anecdotes and narratives are used to understand the problem, providing the organisation with a language to describe it, which is then used in turn to educate, motivate and shift mindsets towards sustainable change.

We also believe that in the new economy, conversation is the way that business gets done. We are therefore passionate about assisting organisations to develop and nurture conversation cultures.



Complexity

We are a team of accredited practitioners of the Cognitive Edge methodology, based on the Cynefin Sense-Making Framework, a model used to analyse and strategise solutions to complex or adaptive problems. Hence, we assist leaders and decision makers in addressing their challenges in contextually relevant ways. With an eclectic understanding of the nature of human systems, 'Complexity' is a body of knowledge that provides insight in terms of how staff interact, how customers behave and why some problems are so persistent and resilient to traditional interventions.

We also apply complexity thinking to strategy in our adaptive management process, which facilitates the development of adaptive strategies in our ever-adapting world.

What we do

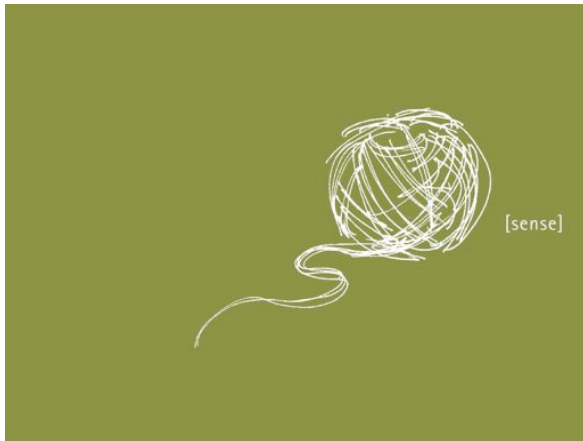
Our projects typically have three components:

1. Diagnostic & Discovery

We **gather** a body of narrative material (or stories) about an organisational challenge from **individuals** and **groups of people** and use those stories to **identify patterns** of thought, belief and perceptions that govern action and behaviour. We gather narrative through a mixture of **face-to-face** and **virtual methods**. This means we scale projects to touch thousands of people and gather just as many stories. We then apply analytical tools that surface the depth and richness of qualitative material while leveraging the scale of quantitative methods.



2. Intervention



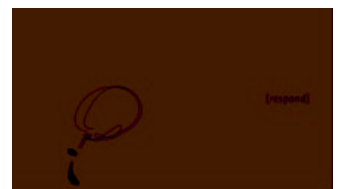
Based on the insights generated from the narrative material, we then work with our clients to design **evidence-led interventions** for shifting the problematic patterns. We are especially interested in using these interventions to :

- **dampen the negative patterns** that reinforce the adaptive challenge;
- **amplifying the positive patterns** that represent opportunities for change; and
- **exploring the unknown problems** as deeply as possible.

Sometimes the interventions fall within our skill pool, other times not, and if they don't, we partner with organisations who are able to implement solutions that can shift the patterns in a desired direction.

3. Monitoring

In order to understand the **impact and effectiveness** of interventions we use narrative as a vehicle for assessing and monitoring the shifts in patterns. We are then able to assess the impact over time. Again, we combine the **depth of narrative** with the **scale of statistics** to quantify possible impact, while always staying in touch with the **"story behind the numbers"**.



Areas of speciality

Our offerings typically fall into one of three broad categories:

Needs-based project design & consulting

Drawing on our varied backgrounds, we assist clients in designing sense-making projects that tackle significant challenges that have evaded solution. These problems have typically had several solutions and significant budget thrown at them, but resurface in a different form.

With our knowledge and application of narrative and complexity techniques, we co-design projects that will uncover the true nature of the problem as well as provide patterns on which probes can be implemented to shift the problem towards a more manageable issue.

Packaged Solutions

Through multiple needs-based projects as outline above, we have packaged the processes into specific offerings to tackle problems such as:

- Safety (focused in mining and construction contexts)
- Perception Audits
- Monitoring and Evaluation (Impact measurement)
- Change Management
- Wisdom Continuity (knowledge transfer)
- Narrative Analytics (research)
- Organisational Culture Change
- Team Effectiveness
- Strategic Adaptive Management
- Ethics Management

Training Solutions

We are the only approved accreditation partners for Cognitive Edge in South Africa and host annual public and in-house accreditation courses. In addition, we offer training courses in 'Strategic Conversations' and 'Creating a Conversation Culture'.

Particular Expertise

- Narrative Change Management
- Narrative Culture Audits and Climate Surveys
- Narrative Approaches to Health & Safety
- Corporate Histories
- Complex Strategy Development
- Narrative Induction Programmes
- Narrative Exit Interviews
- Narrative-based Employee Life Cycle Management
- Enneagram Personality Workshops
- Knowledge Management Strategy
- Knowledge Management

Some of what we've done

Nature of Project	Client	Details
Safety Story	Total SA (in partnership with TribalFish)	Developing & delivering a Safety Story for World Safety Day 2011
Safety Story	Anglo American Thermal Coal (Greenside Colliery)	Developing & delivering a Safety Story as a component of a Narrative Safety Analytics process
Narrative Safety Analytics	Anglo American Thermal Coal (Greenside Colliery)	Utilising narrative as a safety culture diagnostic and intervention tool
Narrative Team Dynamics	Nedbank Business Banking	Facilitating a narrative-based team process for the HR division
Narrative Research, Monitoring & Evaluation	Sasol Inzalo Foundation	Providing research support in the monitoring & evaluation of education projects
Narrative Research	Water Research Commission	Conducting narrative research into the nature of volunteerism at the Hartebeespoort Dam
Narrative Research	Water Research Commission	Conducting narrative research into the nature of volunteerism cycles within local catchments
Narrative Change Management	SA Taxi Finance	Developing a Culture Story as a component of a values change initiative
Adaptive Strategy, Sensemaking	South African National Parks	Utilising narrative and complexity-based principles to develop a contextual performance management strategy for SANParks scientists
Narrative Change Management	Department of Home Affairs (in partnership with PricewaterhouseCoopers)	Developing & delivering a Change Story for the national Turn-Around Strategy
Story of Us (Corporate History)	Anglo Zimele	Compiling the corporate history of Anglo American's enterprise development division
Narrative Research	Anglo American: Safety & Sustainable Development	Capturing best-practice safety stories from multi-national mining operations
Team Dynamics	Heartbeat (NGO)	Using the Enneagram as a team development framework
Culture Audit	Vodacom	Conducted a culture audit, using narrative techniques, to understand the knowledge sharing culture
Strategy	Anglo American: Alumni Association	Developed a strategy for the Alumni based on narrative research
Narrative Research	Deloitte	Conducted narrative research into the state of mine safety in South Africa
Strategy	Anglo American: Technical Division	Used complexity principles in developing a water strategy

The team

Founding members:



Sonja Blignaut

With a deep knowledge of complexity theory and practice, Sonja specialises in constructing processes that make sense of complex problems focusing on the use of **Complex Adaptive Systems** techniques to solve **intractable** problems in business. Sonja was the South African representative of IBM's Cynefin Centre for many years. Sonja holds a Bachelors Degree in **Meteorology**. Her project **experience** includes marketing projects, culture audits, knowledge management design and implementation. Sonja has worked for, among others, Vodacom, Harmony, ABSA, PricewaterhouseCoopers, South African Revenue Services, Nestle, Deloitte, Goldfields, Anglo American.



Aiden Choles

Passionate about organisational health, Aiden specialises in the use of narrative to understand culture. He specialises in the use of **Business Narrative** as a **diagnostic** and **intervention** tool. Aiden has traversed industries and established careers in Secondary Education, Human Resources and Change Management and has a Bachelors degree in **psychology** and a **Masters** degree in **Narrative**. Aiden has worked for, amongst others, Anglo American, Rand Merchant Bank, Old Mutual, Nedbank, BoE Private Clients, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte, Harmony and Vodacom.

The rest of the team:



Natasha Govender - Consultant and Project Manager

Natasha is an experience facilitator and has considerable operational and strategic human resources experience in the private and public sectors.



Jeff Cele - Consultant

Jeff is a facilitator and project assistant. He is well versed in designing and facilitating a diverse range of curriculum and content, including HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness, leadership, mentorship, and character development.



Chrislia van Tonder - Project Administrator and Magic Maker

Chrislia has a background in financial management, and is the administrative glue that keeps this company together.



Nicholaas Herholdt - Associate Consultant

Nicolaas is an experienced management consultant and is comfortable wearing a tie. He has 14 years experience in the mining industry, and has an MBA from UCT.



Buntu Tembani - Associate Storyteller

Buntu is a performing artist who has performed internationally. He has starred on numerous TV programmes and is a talented musician.

Contact details

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Keywords

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