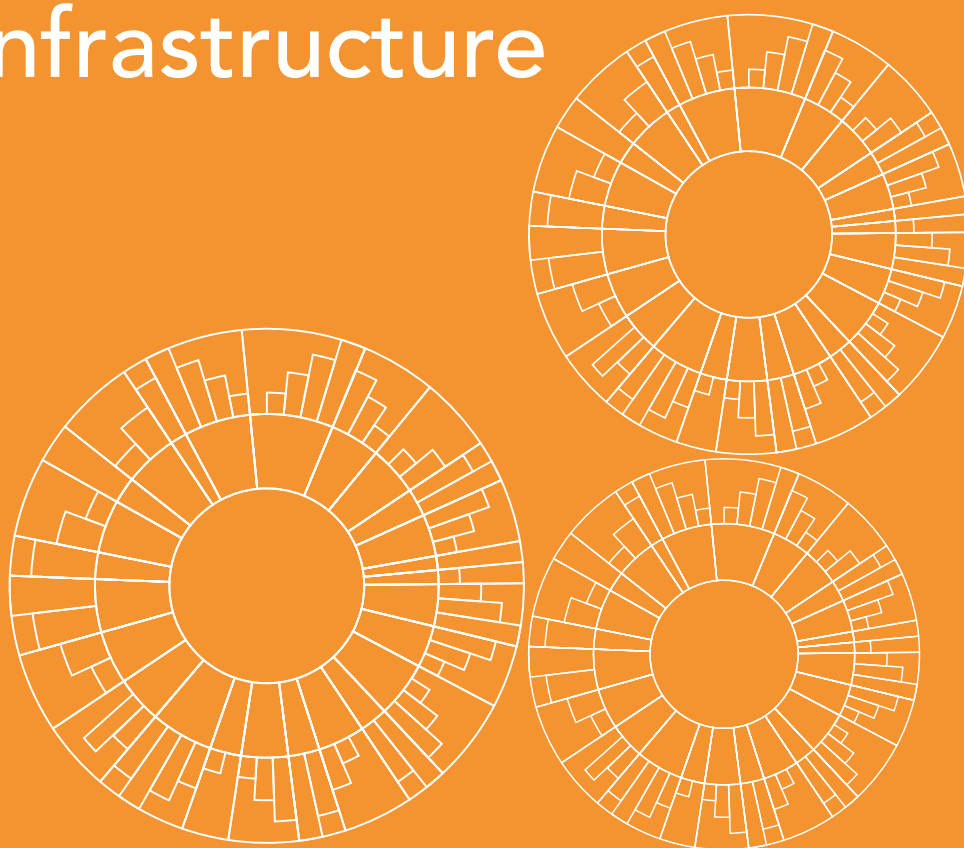# Embedding
PROJECT

Shaping Your Organisation's Narrative Infrastructure

A GUIDE

Jess Schulschenk
Stephanie Bertels

Shaping Your Organisation's Narrative Infrastructure

Prepared by Jess Schulschenk and Stephanie Bertels

Embedding
P R O J E C T

Contents

Embedding
P R O J E C T

Introduction

Stories matter, they have an enormous influence on decision-making in organisations. How often do you stop to reflect on the collection of stories that get told in your organisation and whether you might need to shift them to better embed sustainability?

This guide builds on our work on *Storytelling for Sustainability* and is based on four years of research and over 100 interviews in twenty different global companies exploring the impact of organisational narratives and how change agents helped to shift them to better support strategic decision-making aligned with sustainability. As with all of our resources, the ideas and guidance presented here have been piloted with several of our partner companies and we welcome your feedback to keep improving them.

What is storytelling and why does it matter?

When people in organisations communicate, they often do it through stories[1]. Stories reinforce and give life to an organisation's identity and values and they are often invoked to justify decision-making. As a result, stories can both guide and constrain how an organisation sets its strategy and how organisational members work to deliver on it.

When you are working towards embedding sustainability into your organisation's strategy, you will need to pay attention to the stories and metaphors that guide the decisions that are considered to be legitimate within day-to-day organisational life. As you try to help your organisation to embed sustainability in its business practices, you may be able to leverage and redeploy existing stories. You may also find that you bump up against established stories that undermine your efforts. In these cases, you may need to reshape established stories or share new ones that better align with the organisation's shift towards sustainability.

This collection of stories is what we refer to as your organisation's narrative infrastructure. In this guide, we help you to reflect on how to shift your organisation's narrative infrastructure. When exploring this topic, you may find it helpful to read our guide on *Storytelling for Sustainability* that explores how to construct a compelling story[2].

Key terms

NARRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE is the collection of ideas, stories, and metaphors that shapes what is considered to be important in an organisation. The people working in your organization draw on its narrative infrastructure to make judgments about routine decisions quickly and efficiently. While narrative infrastructure speeds up routine decision-making, it also constrains the range of organisational responses.

An organisation's narrative infrastructure is made up of a handful of dominant *organisational narratives.* These can be thought of as the 'big stories' that express the identity, purpose, and/or strategy of the organisation.

SUPPORTING STORIES provide specific examples of events and experiences that give meaning to one or more organisational narratives. These are the 'little stories', examples, and metaphors that are invoked in the moment to justify or explain. Successful supporting stories are often a combination of personal reflections and key supporting data. They can enable the telling of a significant sequence of events or signal which values are important to the organisation.

In this guide, we help you understand and shape your organisation's narrative infrastructure in four key steps:

Understand your organisation's current narrative infrastructure

↓

Assess what should be amplified and what needs to shift

↓

Introduce a new organisational narrative

↓

Support your organisation as it shifts the stories it tells
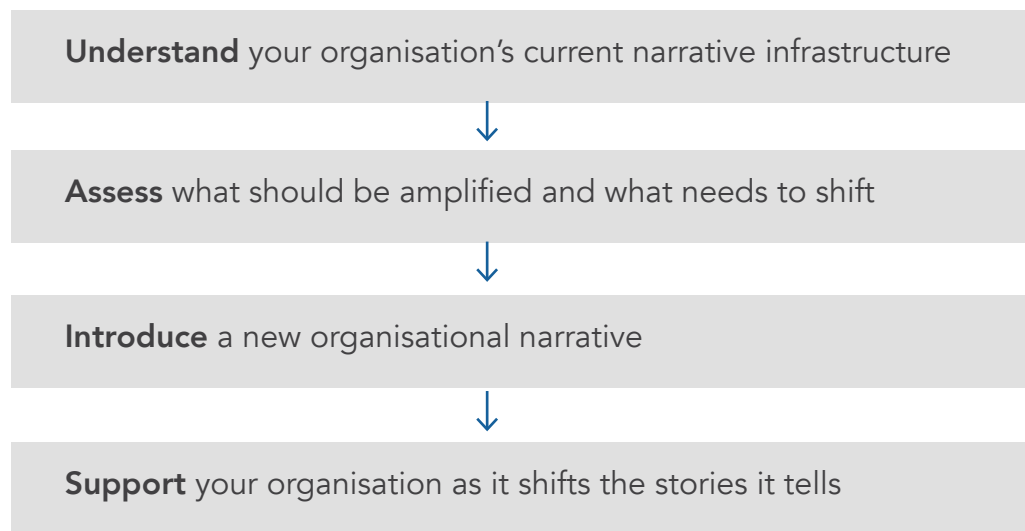
Figure 1: Key steps in shifting an organisation's narrative infrastructure.

| UNDERSTAND | ASSESS | INTRODUCE | SUPPORT |

Understand your organisation's current narrative infrastructure

Before thinking about shifting your organisation's narrative infrastructure, you will first need to take some time to understand the dominant narratives that inform decision-making in your company.

Most companies tend to have about three to five dominant organisational narratives. These organisational narratives may have been crafted by and shared by leaders, but they may also be shaped by the broader organisational community including employees or those external to the organisation.

It is important to consider both the formal organisational narratives contained in marketing materials, websites, and corporate reports, as well as the more informal narratives that are shared in the corridors or in private conversations.

You will want to reflect on potential inconsistencies between these formal and informal narratives and how these play out in your organisation. Similarly, it is important to consider narratives in which the organisation is painted in a positive light, as well as those that are more critical. Critical narratives may be uncomfortable to explore, but they can have a significant influence on decision-making.

Exercise: Understand your organisation's narrative infrastructure

Use the following questions to help you to identify the core organisational narratives that define and drive decision-making in your organisation, as well as any critical or inconsistent narratives that may become important in later steps.

Embedding
P R O J E C T

UNDERSTAND ASSESS INTRODUCE SUPPORT

Reflect on the content in your website and key company reports. What key formal narratives are advanced here that shape decision-making in your company? For example, 'we are innovative' or 'we put health and safety above all'.

Next, consider the narratives that may be shared informally, such as in conversations between colleagues. For instance, what are the narratives that current employees would share with a new employee to help them understand how and why strategic decisions are made in the organisation? For example, 'this is a caring company', or 'it's all about quarterly financial targets here', or even 'we say we care about diversity, but we don't really'.

Embedding
PROJECT

UNDERSTAND   ASSESS   INTRODUCE   SUPPORT

Next, think about some specific supporting stories that are often repeated in your organisation as a way to give expression to these dominant narratives. For instance, a story often shared by colleagues about how a now successful product was designed by a team of in house engineers who turned a waste stream into a new product offering may speak to a dominant organisational narrative of being resourceful. List some of these key supporting stories here:

You can use the template at the end of this guide to start to fill out these existing organisational narratives (ON1, ON2, ON3) and supporting stories you have identified (SS1 – SS5).

Figure 2: Start to fill out your existing organisational narratives and supporting stories.

UNDERSTAND ASSESS INTRODUCE SUPPORT

Assess what should be amplified and what needs to shift

Reflecting on the organisational narratives and supporting stories you have just identified, what should be amplified and what may need to change? Which narratives are already serving your agenda well, and which might be redeployed?

If some are holding your organisation back, it may be necessary to support the organisation to let go of stories that prohibit sustainability from being acted on as a strategic imperative.

For example, a company may need to reconsider a narrative of 'profit as priority at all costs' to improve its health and safety performance.

The next exercise will help you assess what you can leverage from the existing narrative infrastructure and what might need to be suppressed or replaced.

Embedding
P R O J E C T

UNDERSTAND | ASSESS | INTRODUCE | SUPPORT

Exercise: Assessing existing narratives

Reflect on your answers to the first worksheet when working through the following questions:

Amplify: Can existing narratives be amplified or redeployed?

Try to think about ways to strengthen the existing narratives in your organisation that support your sustainability efforts. Are there existing narratives that can be proactively amplified or redeployed to support the desired shift? Are there any explicit narratives that don't appear to be strongly understood or that would benefit from reinforcement through intentional storytelling?

Embedding
PROJECT

UNDERSTAND ASSESS INTRODUCE SUPPORT

Also, are there any implicit narratives that are broadly supported and may benefit from more explicit articulation and enrichment? Is there an existing narrative that could be expanded, re-interpreted or redeployed?

Deconstruct: Should existing narrative infrastructure be suppressed?

Are there any narratives you have identified that are not supporting your efforts to embed sustainability? Try to put your finger on what's not working.

For example, reframing a dominant narrative on quarterly financial returns can be productively reframed around intergenerational wealth creation. Sometimes, it may be only one aspect of the narrative, it may be a particular story, or even aspects of which choices are emphasised within the stories.

UNDERSTAND   ASSESS   INTRODUCE   SUPPORT

Connect: Can existing narratives be bridged? Should new narrative infrastructure be created and connected?

You may be able to identify gaps in your current narrative infrastructure and as a result, there may be opportunities to introduce new supporting stories that strategically bridge between existing narratives or bridge to a new organisational narrative (discussed in the next section). Think here about the ways in which existing and new narrative infrastructure might be connected. For example, connecting two existing narratives on quality and partnerships can help to show how collaborating on sustainability efforts can improve the quality of your product offering.

Consider the possible adaptations to your existing narrative infrastructure as shown in the image below, and which changes you would make to your organisation's narrative infrastructure, as captured in the template at the end of this guide.
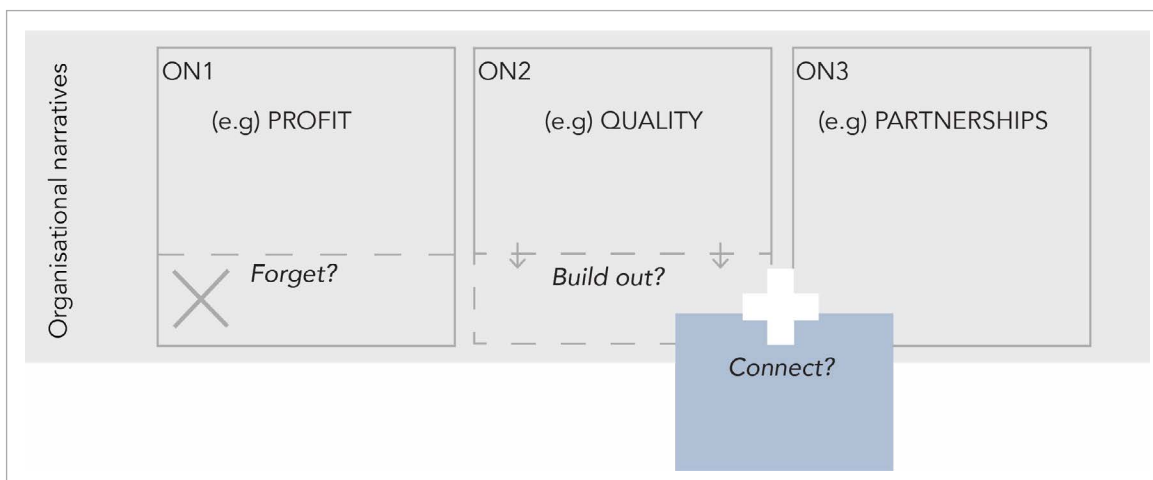

Figure 3: Consider the possible adaptations to your existing narrative infrastructure.

| UNDERSTAND | ASSESS | INTRODUCE | SUPPORT |

Introduce a new organisational narrative

If you find that amplifying, connecting or deconstructing existing narratives is not sufficient, you may need to consider introducing a new organisational narrative.

Exercise: Exploring the creation of a new organisational narrative

We suggest that you start by exploring your motivations for introducing a new organisational narrative. You may want to consider whether existing narratives are problematic, conflicting, or simply insufficient. Is a new narrative being triggered by internal or external events, or a combination of both? Write down why you are trying to shape a new organisational narrative in the space below.

Embedding
PROJECT

UNDERSTAND > ASSESS > INTRODUCE > SUPPORT >

Next, think about what this new organisational narrative could be and describe it in the space below. Also think about how this emerging narrative connects with existing narratives. For example, an existing narrative around financial stewardship for clients combined with new information relating to climate change and stranded assets could be built into a potential new narrative around responsible or resilient financial stewardship.

Consider involving others in this step. A participatory co-creation process with key influencers in your organisation will strengthen the understanding of and commitment to a new organisational narrative. As you describe the emerging narrative, remember the following pointers:

Organisational narratives

- Express the identity, purpose, and strategy of the organisation;
- Honestly capture the essence of people's day-to-day experiences;
- Should be in language that everyone in the organisation understands, and in time, can explain easily to others.

Embedding
P R O J E C T

UNDERSTAND ASSESS INTRODUCE SUPPORT

The next step is to develop this further by articulating supporting (or 'little') stories that give expression to the new organisational narrative. Supporting stories help to explore, discuss, and better understand the new organisational narrative so that it can be integrated into the company's strategy and strategic decision-making processes. You can use existing supporting stories or create new ones.

Are you able to connect any of the existing supporting stories with the new organisational narrative? Create links between these stories (SS1 – SS5) and your new organisational narrative (ON4) in the template at the end of the guide, as illustrated in Figure 4.
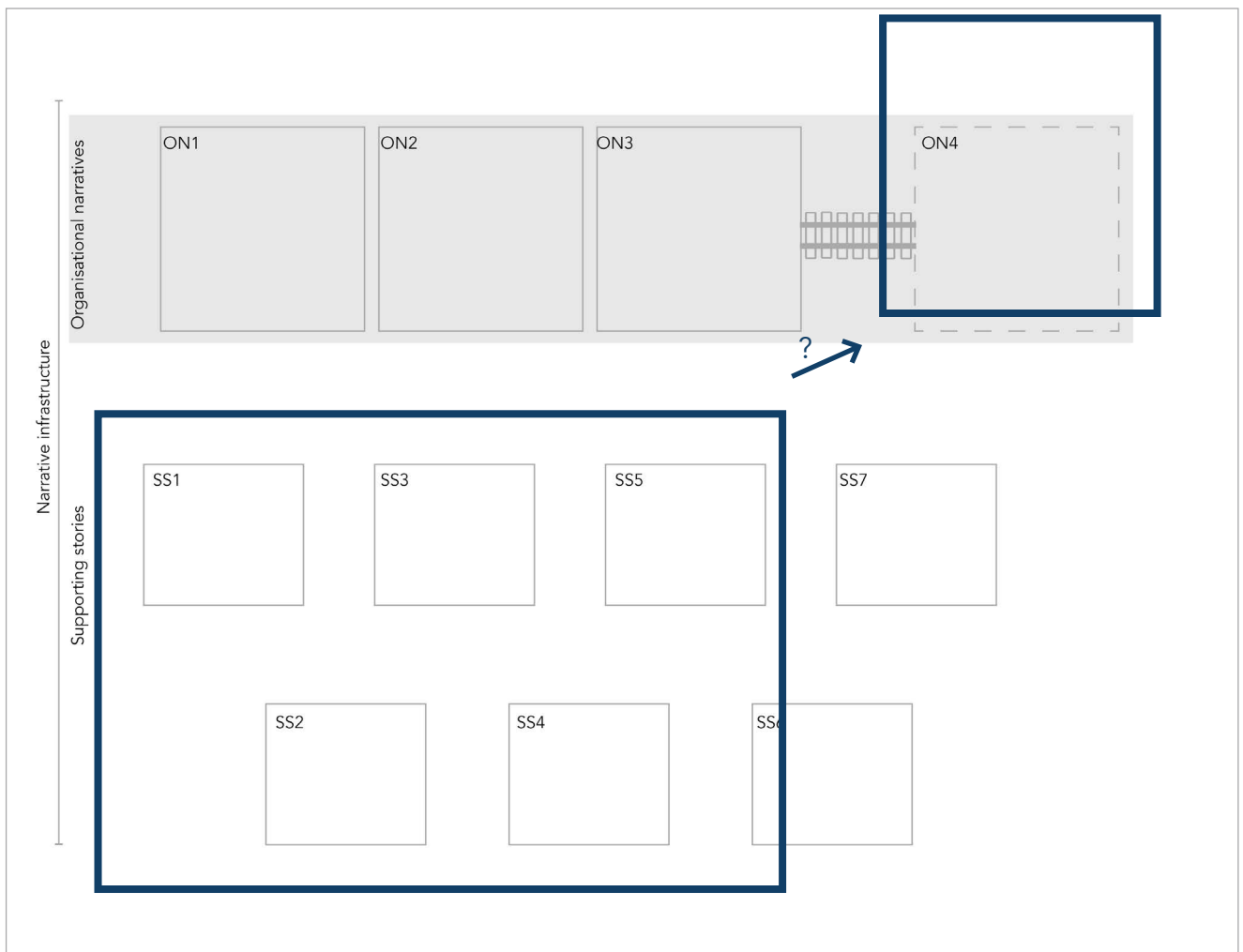
Figure 4: Are you able to create links between the stories in SS1-SS5, and your new organisational narrative (ON4)?

Next, try to identify new supporting stories that bring your new organisational narrative to life. For each supporting story try to capture its essence in only one sentence. Remember to consider both formal and informal sources when trying to gather these narratives.

You can capture these new stories in blocks SS6 and SS7 in the template at the end of this guide, as illustrated in Figure 5.
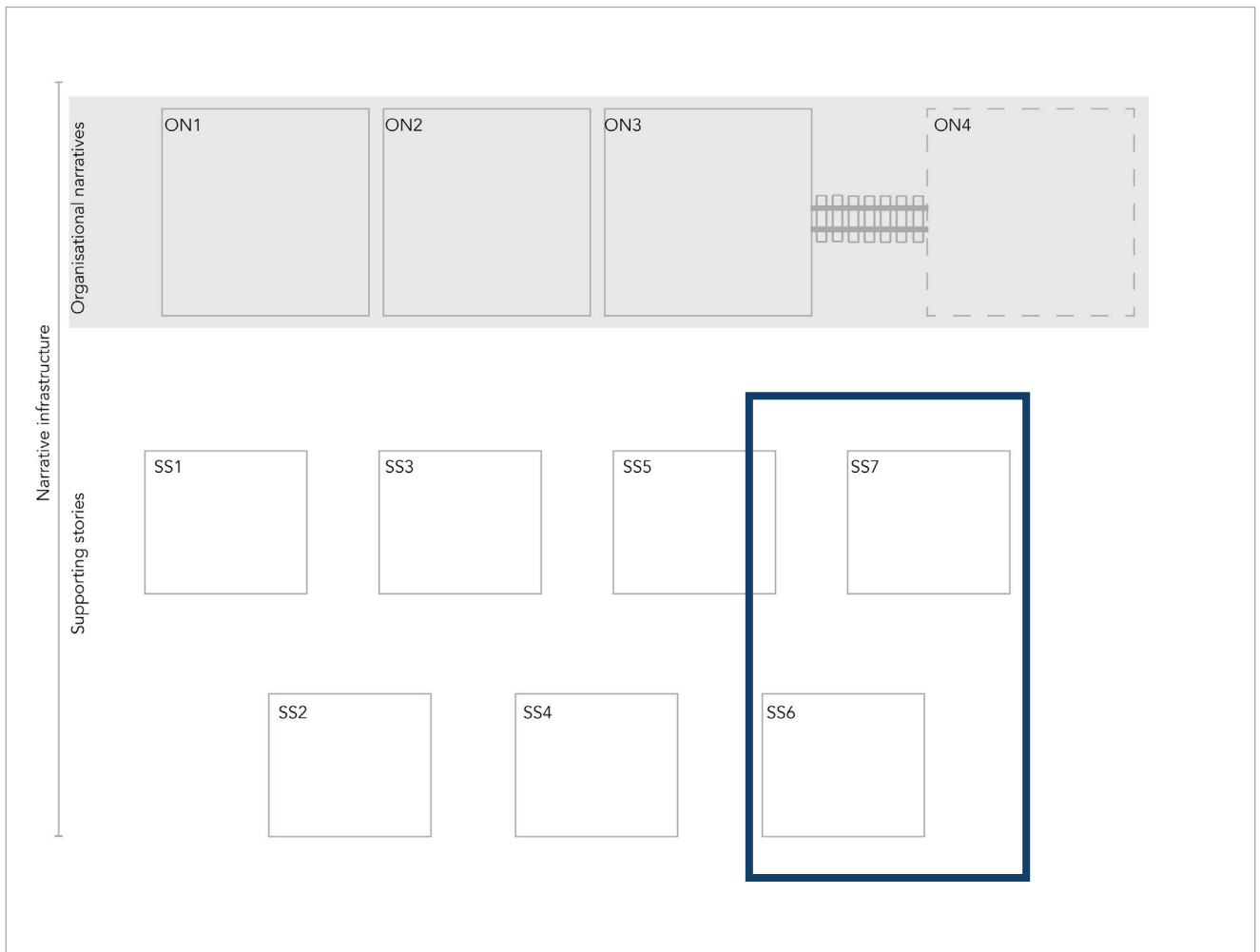

Figure 5: Blocks SS6 and SS7 will be used for new supporting stories.

UNDERSTAND   ASSESS   INTRODUCE   SUPPORT

Support your organisation as it shifts the stories it tells

Once you have mapped out the desired shifts in your narrative infrastructure, the final step is to plan how you will accomplish that shift by considering how you might make use of written, oral, and visual media and by thinking about the resources and people you may need to enlist along the way.

Exercise: Supporting a shift in narrative infrastructure

A key component of shifting narrative infrastructure will involve capturing and crafting new supporting stories or deliberately reframing existing supporting stories. Our *Storytelling for Sustainability Guide* provides more detail and examples of how to capture and craft stories.

Building organisational members' understanding and ownership of new narratives and new supporting stories takes sustained engagement over time. The next page details some mechanisms to support in shifting your narrative infrastructure.

Embedding
PROJECT

UNDERSTAND ASSESS INTRODUCE SUPPORT

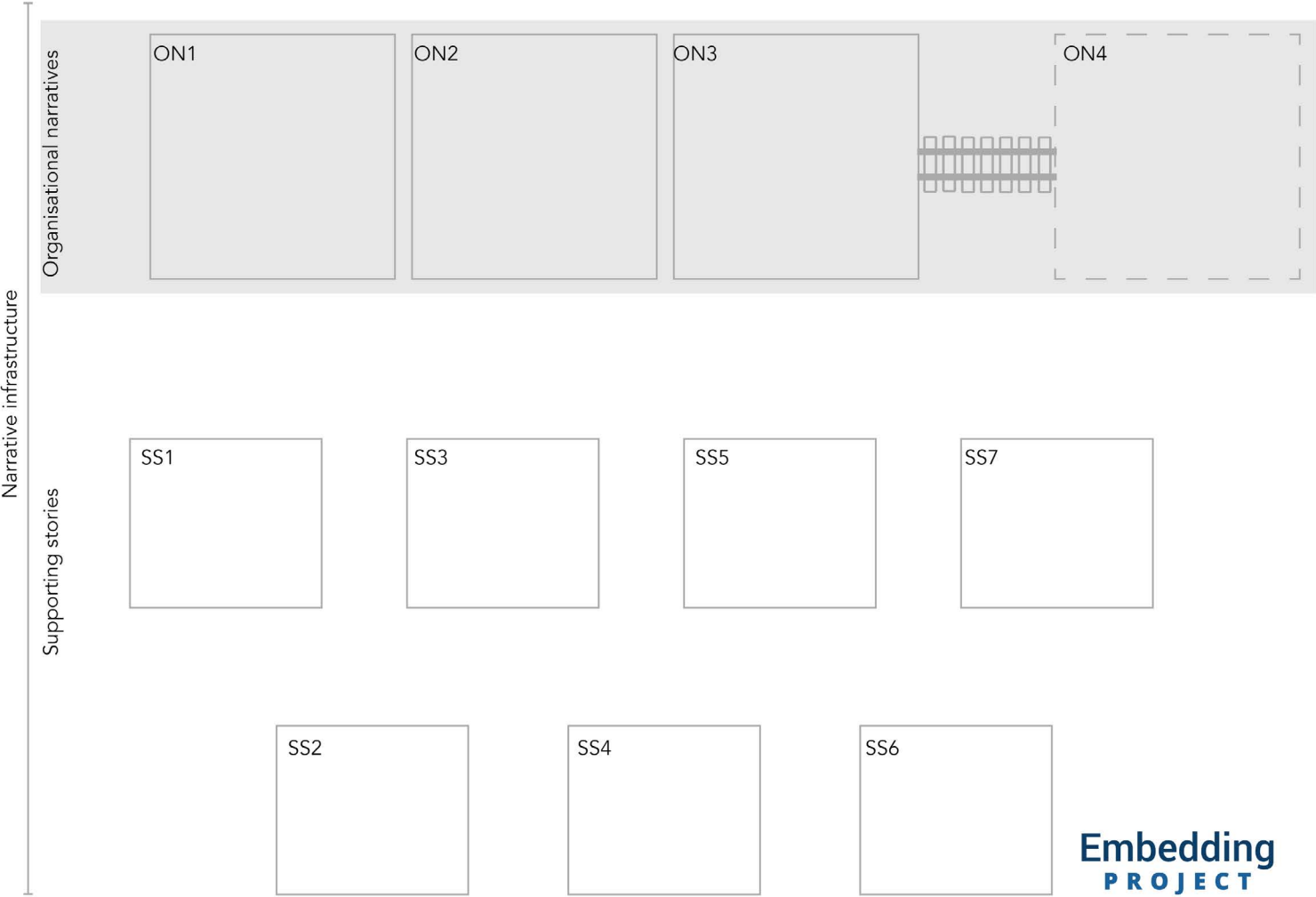## Mechanisms to support shifting your narrative infrastructure:

- Develop conversational competencies: the work to shape narratives is mostly conversational and to be successful requires the development of listening and dialogue skills.
- Include the key messages and supporting stories you want to amplify in formal communication channels, such as company magazines and reports.
- Use short videos for internal audiences to formalise and share some of the most compelling supporting stories. We have found that internal audiences benefit from stories that are shared with authenticity that invite them to be part of the change movement, as opposed to glossy marketing materials.
- Help executive leaders to feel comfortable telling these new stories in internal and external platforms.
- Encourage managers to share supporting stories during meetings or other daily talks. Then invite employees to share their experiences as well.
- Make an online platform available where employees can read and comment on the new stories and also share some of their own.
- Set aside dedicated time for employees and leaders to discuss and debate the shifting narrative infrastructure and supporting stories in facilitated workshops.

Embedding
PROJECT

Narrative Infrastructure Template

You may benefit from using the template on the next page to explore the exercises within this guide to capture your organisation's narrative infrastructure.

Are you working to shift the stories that get told in your organisation?
Reach out to us. We would love to hear from you!

Embedding
P R O J E C T

Your company: _____

Narrative infrastructure

Organisational narratives

| ON1 | ON2 | ON3 | ON4 |

Supporting stories

| SS1 | SS3 | SS5 | SS7 |

| SS2 | SS4 | SS6 |

Embedding
P R O J E C T

Endnotes

[1]Boyce, M. E. (1996). Organisational story and storytelling: a critical review. *Journal of organisational change management*, *9(5)*, 5-26. DOI:10.1108/09534819610128760.

[2]Amlani, A., Bertels, S., and Hadler, T. (2016). *Storytelling for Sustainability.* Embedding Project. DOI:10.6084/m9.figshare.3439517.v1.

Embedding
P R O J E C T

Acknowledgements

Embedding PROJECT