

A THREE-PART ESSAY SERIES

Protective Stories *at Work*

Interpretation, identity, feedback, power, and the communication ecologies organizations create.

Marcy Fetzer, PhD

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Protective Stories at Work

Workplace life requires continual interpretation. We interpret a supervisor's silence, a colleague's question, an employee's hesitation, a disappointing decision, and the feedback offered during a performance conversation. Because we rarely know the full meaning of an interaction, we construct stories that help us understand what happened.

These stories may protect dignity, competence, authority, belonging, or a coherent sense of who we are. They may help us recognize genuine harm or find language for an experience that has been difficult to explain. They may contain important truth while still remaining incomplete.

Over time, the stories people repeat begin doing more than interpreting experience. They shape how people listen, respond, evaluate one another, and anticipate what future communication will accomplish. A private interpretation can become a reputation. A reputation can become an expectation. An expectation can become part of the communication ecology others must inhabit.

This series examines protective stories from three positions within organizational life. The first considers what happens when a leader's fixed interpretation becomes another person's working condition. The second explores how professional identity can make developmental feedback feel like accusation. The final essay examines how individual interpretations travel through relationships, meetings, evaluations, and informal networks until they become part of what an organization learns to expect.

Protective stories become organizationally consequential when they shape repeated responses, determine whose knowledge is credible, and narrow the possibility that people or relationships can become something different.

Written for leaders, employees, coaches, human resources professionals, and anyone interested in the everyday communication through which organizational life takes shape.

PROTECTIVE STORIES AT WORK · PART I

When a Fixed Story Has Power

How a leader's interpretation can become another person's working condition

MARCY FETZER, PHD

A woman I once coached found herself working inside a story she had not written. Her supervisor had formed an early impression of her as overly direct, abrasive, and potentially threatening. She was confident, capable, and willing to question decisions - qualities that might have been interpreted as professional strength in another setting. In this relationship, however, they appeared to unsettle him.

Once his interpretation took hold, almost everything she did seemed to confirm it. When she advocated for an idea, he appeared to experience her as challenging his authority. When she asked a question, he heard criticism. When she tried to soften her approach, the change did not seem to alter his underlying judgment. Even restraint could be interpreted suspiciously, as though she were simply becoming more careful about concealing the person he had already decided she was.

She had become the villain in a story capable of absorbing nearly any evidence. Once a protective narrative becomes sufficiently complete, it begins assigning meaning to every new interaction in ways that preserve itself. Evidence that might otherwise challenge the story is reclassified as manipulation, inconsistency, impression management, or temporary good behavior. The person is no longer encountered with curiosity because the interpretation has already determined what each behavior means.

When perception becomes an environment

Her supervisor may genuinely have felt threatened. He may have experienced her communication style as difficult, or he may have carried earlier experiences that made confidence, disagreement, or directness feel dangerous to his authority. Protective stories do not always begin as conscious distortions. They often begin as attempts to make sense of discomfort, uncertainty, or perceived injury.

Something happens, and we feel exposed, challenged, disregarded, or unsettled. Because the full meaning of the experience is not immediately available, we construct an explanation that makes it more coherent. That explanation may contain truth, but it may also contain assumption, memory, fear, identity, and the need to protect something we have not yet learned to name. In this sense, protective stories are forms of sensemaking: they help people create a plausible account of an ambiguous or disruptive experience, even when that account remains incomplete.¹

The problem in this situation was not simply that her supervisor had formed an interpretation. Organizational life requires interpretation. The problem was that his interpretation hardened into a judgment about her character, and his organizational authority gave that judgment consequences.

He was not merely a colleague who privately disliked her. He had influence over her work, reputation, opportunities, and continued sense of security. His story could shape what others were told about her, how her conduct was framed, how much scrutiny she received, and whether her contributions were treated as

evidence of value or evidence of danger. What began as one person's interpretation was becoming part of the environment she had to inhabit.

I think of this kind of environment as a **communication ecology**. Communication ecologies develop through recurring patterns of communication and response that teach people what can be questioned, whose interpretations will be treated as credible, how disagreement will be received, and whether speaking can meaningfully influence what happens next. A single judgment does not create an ecology, but when that judgment repeatedly shapes attention, opportunity, response, and consequence, it begins to function as part of the informal structure governing organizational life.²

Communication ecologies are coauthored, but they are not shaped equally. Everyone can reinforce, resist, or interrupt a communicative pattern, yet titles, credibility, access, decision rights, and economic security give some responses greater organizational force. When someone with formal power assigns another person the role of villain, the person being judged may be forced to live inside that interpretation long before it has been examined fairly.

Perceived victimization and actual vulnerability

This situation contains an uncomfortable complexity. Her supervisor may have experienced himself as the potential victim of her confidence, ambition, or style. From within his own story, he may have believed that he was protecting his leadership, his team, or the organization from someone he considered disruptive. His sense of threat, however, did not make their positions equivalent. He possessed the authority to act on his interpretation, while she carried the burden of surviving it.

As the relationship deteriorated, she experienced behavior that felt indirect, punitive, and at times passive-aggressive. She came to believe that he wanted her to leave but lacked a clear or defensible reason to remove her. The result was not an explicit conflict that could easily be named and addressed. Instead, she encountered a pattern of strained responses, selective criticism, diminished trust, and treatment that left her continually trying to determine what was happening.

Ambiguity can become its own form of pressure. When mistreatment is direct, a person may at least be able to point to it. When it is intermittent or delivered through tone, exclusion, scrutiny, delay, and implication, the person experiencing it must repeatedly ask whether the pattern is real, whether others can see it, and whether naming it will make the situation worse.

She was no longer simply doing her job. She was monitoring the communication ecology surrounding her. She had to consider how each question might be interpreted, how carefully a concern needed to be phrased, whether confidence would be read as aggression, and whether disagreement would be taken as proof of the character judgment she was trying to overcome.

Her supervisor's perceived vulnerability was helping create her actual vulnerability. Examining protective stories must therefore never become a method for treating all accounts as equally distorted or all participants as equally responsible. A protective story held by a person with little organizational power

may influence a relationship. A protective story held by someone who controls evaluation, access, opportunity, or belonging can reorganize another person's working life.

Pressure often makes these asymmetries more visible. It reveals who can define the problem, whose interpretation is treated as authoritative, whose directness is considered leadership, and whose candor is interpreted as disloyalty. Because communicative risk is unequal, greater power carries greater responsibility for the conditions under which others must participate.³

Interrupting the story without accepting it

Our coaching did not begin with the assumption that she had nothing to learn. We examined her communication honestly and considered how her style might affect others. Directness can have consequences that differ from intention. Confidence can occupy more conversational space than a person recognizes, and a commitment to accuracy can sometimes arrive without the relational care another person needs in order to receive it.

She considered what belonged to her, but examining her contribution was different from accepting his complete interpretation of her character. She could refine her communication without agreeing that she was dangerous. She could become more attentive to impact without assuming responsibility for every reaction he had. She could ask what her style made difficult while resisting the conclusion that the entire situation originated in a defect within her.

One practice she began using was **metatalk**: communication about what appeared to be happening within the communication itself. Rather than arguing directly against his opinion of her, she tried to make the pattern discussable without claiming certainty about his motives.

“I have the sense that my questions sometimes land as challenges to your authority. That is not what I am trying to create, but I recognize that my intention does not determine the entire experience. I want to understand what you are hearing and find a way for me to raise questions responsibly without our relationship becoming adversarial.”

Metatalk allowed her to acknowledge impact without accepting a totalizing account of who she was. By naming the pattern without turning the observation into an accusation, she created a pause between interpretation and repetition. That pause gave both people an opportunity to choose a different response.⁴

She persisted in communicating respect without becoming submissive. She clarified her intentions but did not rely on intention alone. She adjusted behaviors that were reasonably hers to adjust, continued

producing strong work, and tried to remain direct enough to be truthful while careful enough to keep communication possible.

Over time, her supervisor began to encounter evidence that did not fit his original narrative. Her competence did not have to diminish his. Her questions did not always conceal opposition, and her directness could support the work rather than threaten his position. Gradually, his interpretation of her softened, trust became more possible, and the relationship changed.

The repair did not occur through one decisive conversation. It developed as different responses accumulated and began to create different expectations. In ecological terms, the relationship was not simply repaired; it was gradually relearned. A question that once predicted defensiveness could begin to predict inquiry, and an interaction that once reinforced suspicion could begin to provide evidence that another pattern was possible.⁵

A repaired relationship can still contain injustice

There is something hopeful in this outcome, but there is also something deeply unfair. She had to carry much of the work required to alter a story created by someone with greater power. She had to regulate her fear while protecting his sense of safety, remain patient while being misinterpreted, and communicate with unusual care because ordinary imperfection could be taken as confirmation of an existing judgment. She was required to become exceptionally skillful in order to receive what should have been ordinary fairness.

Her perseverance deserves recognition, but it should not be used to suggest that people can always communicate their way out of unequal treatment. Some supervisors do not revise their stories. Some communication ecologies punish metatalk, and some leaders interpret an attempt to name the pattern as further evidence of insubordination. In other situations, continued engagement may expose an employee to greater retaliation, exhaustion, or harm.

Direct conversation is therefore not always the responsible next step. Sometimes stewardship requires mediation, documentation, independent review, formal accountability, a change in reporting structure, or separation. When harassment, retaliation, ongoing harm, or serious power asymmetry is present, dialogue should not be imposed on the person with less protection.

Repair may require participation from both people, but the burden of initiating and sustaining it should not fall primarily on the person whose safety or standing has already been compromised. Communication Ecology Stewardship does not assume that more dialogue is always better or that relational skill can replace accountability, structural protection, or formal remedy.⁶

How fixed stories recruit evidence

This experience changed how I think about fixed stories. A fixed story is more than an unfavorable opinion; it is an interpretive structure that organizes attention. Once someone has been assigned a role,

observers begin noticing evidence that supports the assignment and overlooking evidence that complicates it.

The confident employee becomes arrogant. The careful employee becomes calculating. The quiet employee becomes disengaged, while the emotional employee becomes unstable. If the person remains composed, that composure may be interpreted as coldness. The story can make nearly every available behavior incriminating because it has already determined what kind of person is producing the behavior.

Fixed stories can also recruit allies. A leader may share concerns with colleagues, describe the employee through a particular frame, or seek confirmation from people who were not present for the original interactions. Others may then begin encountering the employee through a reputation that arrives before the person does.

At that point, the story no longer belongs to one individual. It has entered the communication ecology and begun influencing who is trusted, whose explanations are believed, how ambiguity is resolved, and which interpretations are allowed to travel. People may withhold information, hold preparatory conversations, seek protective witnesses, or respond to the person not only on the basis of what she does, but on the basis of the role the story has assigned her.

This is why people with authority carry a particular responsibility for the stories they tell about others. Their interpretations travel farther and acquire more institutional weight. A leader's uncertainty may be heard as judgment, and a private concern may become another person's public identity.

Leaders do not need to ignore difficult behavior or withhold legitimate feedback. Stewardship does not require endless ambiguity or the abandonment of discernment. It requires enough humility to distinguish observation from interpretation, impact from identity, and a recurring behavior from a totalizing account of who someone is.

Accountability without totalization

The alternative to fixed stories is not the refusal to make judgments. Some behavior is harmful, and some people misuse power, deceive others, undermine colleagues, or repeatedly avoid accountability. Complexity must not become a reason to tolerate injury.

The challenge is to hold people responsible without allowing the explanation of their behavior to become more complete than the evidence supports. We can identify damaging conduct without reducing the person entirely to that conduct. We can establish boundaries without claiming perfect knowledge of another person's motives, and we can protect people from harm without requiring a permanent villain to make that protection legitimate.

It is possible to say, "This behavior had a damaging effect," without concluding, "This person exists to cause damage." It is also possible to say, "I do not feel safe in this interaction," without assuming that every action the other person takes is designed to threaten me. Accountability becomes more credible, not less, when it remains precise.

This distinction allows curiosity and responsibility to remain in the same conversation. It makes room for harm to be named clearly while preserving the possibility that a person may be more complex than the role the story has assigned.

Who is being asked to disprove the story?

Whenever someone has been cast as the villain, we should ask who is carrying the burden of proving that the story is incomplete. Is the leader examining the fear, identity, or threatened authority that shaped the interpretation? Are colleagues testing the story rather than merely confirming it? Is the organization protecting a fair process, or is the person with the least power being asked to demonstrate repeatedly and flawlessly that she is worthy of being seen differently?

The woman I coached helped transform a damaged relationship. Her skill, endurance, and willingness to remain in a difficult process created an opening that had not existed before. Yet the deepest lesson is not simply that she persevered successfully. It is that she should not have had to work so hard to become more real than the story told about her.

A humane communication ecology does not require people to achieve perfection before an unfair judgment can be reconsidered. It creates room for interpretations to remain provisional, for authority to question its own certainty, and for people to be more complex than the roles workplace stories assign them. The person confined by the story should not have to become extraordinary in order to receive ordinary fairness.

Questions to Carry Forward

1. Whose behavior have I begun interpreting through a story that no longer permits contradiction?
2. What fear, identity, authority, or sense of innocence might that story be protecting?
3. Have I distinguished what I directly observed from what I inferred about motive or character?
4. Whose interpretation carries the greatest organizational force in this situation?
5. Who is carrying the emotional and communicative burden of repair?
6. What safeguards are needed so that dialogue does not become another obligation placed on the less powerful?
7. What would it look like for the person with greater authority to assume greater responsibility for revising the ecology?

Endnotes

1. Sensemaking scholarship examines how people develop plausible interpretations that allow them to act amid ambiguity or disruption. Protective narratives may perform this meaning-making function while still remaining partial or self-protective. See Karl E. Weick, Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, and David Obstfeld, "Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking," *Organization Science* 16, no. 4 (2005): 409-421; and Sally Maitlis and Marlys Christianson, "Sensemaking in Organizations," *Academy of Management Annals* 8, no. 1 (2014): 57-125. [return](#)
2. Leadership Communication Ecology describes organizations as living communication ecologies formed through recurring patterns of communication and response. These patterns become expectations about what is safe, valued, credible, and consequential, shaping participation and organizational possibility. See Marcy Fetzer, *Leadership Communication Ecology: How Conversations Shape Organizations* (2026), 1-6. [Read the white paper.](#) [return](#)
3. Communication Ecology Stewardship proposes that pressure makes normally taken-for-granted conditions of power, credibility, agency, and communicative risk more visible. Because authority, access, security, and decision rights give some responses greater force, unequal influence creates unequal responsibility. See Marcy Fetzer, *Communication Ecology Stewardship* (2026), 5-7. [Read White Paper II.](#) [return](#)
4. Metatalk makes the interaction itself discussable and interrupts automatic communication scripts. By naming tone, defensiveness, avoidance, or imbalance without converting the observation into an accusation, it creates a pause in which another response becomes possible. See Fetzer, *Communication Ecology Stewardship*, 9-10. [return](#)
5. Ecological renewal occurs when repaired responses become stable enough to revise what people expect from future communication. One constructive interaction may begin repair, but durable change requires a different pattern to recur, including during inconvenience, urgency, or threat. See Fetzer, *Communication Ecology Stewardship*, 8-11. [return](#)
6. The stewardship framework establishes important limits: safety and justice may need to precede dialogue, and repair cannot be declared unilaterally. When harassment, retaliation, legal exposure, or continuing harm is present, independent review, structural intervention, separation, or formal remedy may be necessary. See Fetzer, *Communication Ecology Stewardship*, 13. [return](#)

When Improvement Feels Like Accusation

How professional identity shapes the way feedback is heard - and whether learning remains possible

MARCY FETZER, PHD

I have participated in performance conversations that were intended to support improvement but quickly became conversations about identity, fairness, and belonging. A manager might raise a concern about missed commitments, difficulty collaborating, resistance to direction, or communication that others experienced as dismissive. The concern might be supported by several examples and accompanied by an offer of help. Yet almost as soon as the feedback was introduced, the employee began constructing another explanation of what was happening.

The manager was targeting them. Colleagues had misunderstood the situation. Expectations had never been clear. Other employees behaved similarly without being corrected. The conversation was not really about performance; it was evidence that leadership had already decided who the employee was.

Some of these concerns may have been legitimate. Performance conversations do not occur outside power, history, relationships, or organizational politics. Feedback can be vague, inconsistent, poorly delivered, or influenced by assumptions the employee cannot see. An employee should be able to ask for evidence, question an interpretation, identify unequal standards, and challenge a process that does not feel fair.

Yet I have also watched every part of the feedback become absorbed into a protective story before it could be examined. A specific example became proof of bias. A request for reflection became an accusation. An attempt to clarify expectations became evidence that the organization was building a case. What might have become a conversation about growth became a struggle to protect professional identity.

Feedback rarely feels like information alone

Performance feedback may be expressed in the language of behavior, but it is often received through a much more personal question: What does this say about who I am?

A person who sees themselves as dependable may experience a concern about follow-through as an accusation that they are irresponsible. Someone who values collaboration may hear feedback about interpersonal impact as evidence that others fundamentally misunderstand them. A respected professional may experience the suggestion that they need to change as a threat to the competence and credibility they have spent years developing.

This is one reason performance conversations can become emotionally charged even when the words appear measured. The employee is not only considering whether a particular behavior should change. They may also be trying to preserve dignity, professional identity, security, and a coherent understanding of themselves.

A protective story can restore that coherence. It may say, “I am a good employee, so this feedback must be unfair,” or, “I have succeeded for years, so the problem must be this manager.” The story reduces uncertainty by placing the explanation outside the self. The desire to preserve dignity is understandable. The difficulty begins when dignity appears to require rejecting every possibility that the feedback might contain useful information.

The feedback may still be flawed

Openness to feedback should never mean unquestioning acceptance of another person's judgment. Managers are not neutral observers. Their feedback can be shaped by limited information, personality differences, cultural expectations, uneven relationships, or bias. The same behavior may be described as decisive in one employee and abrasive in another. Standards may be applied inconsistently, and employees may receive criticism for expectations that were never clearly communicated.

A responsible performance process must therefore allow the employee to ask how the conclusion was reached. What behavior was observed? When did it occur? What effect did it have? Was the expectation clear beforehand? Is the same standard being applied to others? What would improvement look like in observable terms?

These questions do not represent resistance when they are asked in good faith. They are part of making feedback fair, specific, and useful. At the same time, flaws in the process do not automatically make every observation false. A manager may communicate a concern poorly and still be noticing something important. An employee may be held to an inconsistent standard and still have a behavior worth examining.

Two realities can be present in the same conversation: the feedback process may need improvement, and the employee may also need to change. When the conversation becomes organized around proving that only one of those realities can be true, learning becomes difficult for everyone.

When the story decides too quickly

Protective stories often form before people have had time to examine the experience fully. The discomfort of the feedback becomes evidence of its unfairness. The employee's first interpretation begins determining what every example, question, and response is allowed to mean.

The manager's attempt to explain becomes defensiveness. A request for a follow-up conversation becomes pressure. Documentation becomes proof that termination has already been decided. Even an offer of coaching may be interpreted as an attempt to correct a person whom leadership has already judged.

Any of those interpretations could be accurate. The concern is not that employees should ignore warning signs or trust a process that has become unsafe. The concern is that once a protective story becomes complete, contradictory evidence may no longer be able to enter.

The employee is no longer asking, "What might be true here?" The conversation has narrowed to, "How do I prove that their story about me is wrong?" That shift matters because feedback is rarely useful when it must either be accepted entirely or defeated entirely. Development requires a more spacious question: What can I learn from this without surrendering my judgment about what is fair?

How defensiveness becomes an ecology

A difficult performance conversation does not end when the meeting ends. Each person carries an interpretation of what happened into the next interaction.

The employee may leave feeling accused and become more guarded. They may stop asking questions, withhold unfinished work, avoid the manager, or begin documenting every exchange. The manager may interpret those responses as further evidence that the employee cannot accept responsibility or engage constructively.

The manager then becomes more formal. Expectations are communicated in writing. Human resources is invited into later conversations. Discretion narrows, and follow-up becomes more frequent. The employee experiences this change as confirmation: “They are trying to remove me.” The manager experiences the employee's reaction as confirmation of a different story: “This person cannot receive feedback.”

Each person's attempt at protection becomes evidence for the other person's interpretation. The relationship begins teaching both of them what to expect. Feedback predicts accusation. Questions predict defensiveness. Documentation predicts danger. Every later exchange enters an environment already shaped by what came before.

This is how a performance conversation becomes part of a communication ecology. The ecology is not the meeting itself. It is the pattern of response and expectation that the meeting begins or reinforces. Through repetition, that pattern can make honest conversation increasingly difficult. Leadership Communication Ecology describes this recursive process: people respond partly from what earlier interactions have taught them to anticipate, and those responses help create the conditions of the next exchange.¹

Separating two important questions

One of the most useful moves in a difficult performance conversation is to separate two questions that often become entangled:

Was the feedback fair, specific, and responsibly delivered?

Does any part of the feedback contain information I need to understand?

Employees should not have to declare the process fair before they can examine the information. They can challenge vague examples, identify inconsistency, request greater clarity, or seek a second perspective while still considering whether a pattern deserves attention.

Managers should not assume that a strong emotional response proves the feedback was wrong or that it was delivered badly. Neither should they treat defensiveness as proof that every concern is valid. A person

may need time to recover from surprise or embarrassment before becoming able to reflect. Keeping the two questions separate allows fairness and learning to remain possible at the same time.

What openness can look like

Openness to feedback does not require immediate agreement. It may begin with the willingness to slow the first interpretation and ask for enough detail to understand what is being described.

“I am having a strong reaction because this does not match how I understand my work. I want to take some time to consider it. Could you help me understand the specific pattern you are seeing and the effect it is having?”

That response protects dignity without closing inquiry. It allows the employee to remain an active interpreter rather than becoming either compliant or combative.

The employee can then consider which parts of the feedback are accurate, which remain uncertain, and which appear unsupported. They can ask what change would look like behaviorally and how progress will be evaluated. They can also name concerns about fairness without using those concerns to dismiss every opportunity for growth.

The manager has responsibilities as well. Feedback should be grounded in observable behavior rather than assumptions about personality or motive. Expectations should be clear, and examples should be timely enough to be understood. The conversation should leave room for the employee's knowledge, including information that might change the manager's interpretation.

A performance conversation should not merely permit the employee to speak. The employee's communication should have a realistic opportunity to affect how the situation is understood. That distinction reflects the idea of communicative agency: participation matters when it can enter interpretation, learning, and action, not merely when time has been provided to talk.²

Improvement requires dignity and discomfort

A constructive workplace should protect people from humiliation, retaliation, and careless judgment. It cannot protect everyone from every form of discomfort.

Learning often asks us to consider that our impact may differ from our intention, that our strengths may have costs, or that a pattern we barely notice has become difficult for other people. Those realizations can be painful without being unjust.

Communication Ecology Stewardship distinguishes protecting dignity from protecting people against all discomfort. A healthy ecology makes uncertainty discussable and accountability possible while preserving fair boundaries and meaningful participation.³

This balance is important. Too little protection can make feedback threatening and unsafe. Too much protection of identity can make honest feedback impossible. The goal is not comfort. It is a conversation in which a person can remain respected while considering the possibility of change.

What the conversation teaches

Every performance conversation teaches something beyond the performance issue itself. It teaches whether mistakes can be acknowledged without humiliation, whether managers can be influenced, whether employees can question feedback without being labeled resistant, and whether responsibility can be discussed without reducing someone to a defect.

A poorly handled conversation may teach employees to hide uncertainty, avoid risk, or wait until problems can no longer be ignored. A thoughtful conversation can teach that accountability and dignity are compatible.

The most important question may not be whether the employee agreed during the meeting. It may be what both people learned about how difficult information will be handled in the future. Openness to feedback does not require surrendering judgment. It requires remaining capable of examining information before defensiveness decides what the information is allowed to mean.⁴

Questions to Carry Forward

1. What part of my identity feels threatened by this feedback?
2. What behavior was actually observed, and what interpretation has been added to it?
3. Can I question the fairness of the process without dismissing every possible insight?
4. What evidence would help me understand whether the concern reflects a recurring pattern?
5. Has the manager created enough clarity and dignity for reflection to remain possible?
6. What response am I giving now, and what might that response teach both of us to expect next time?

Endnotes

1. Leadership Communication Ecology describes organizational life as shaped through recurring patterns of communication and response. These patterns become expectations about what can be said, how contributions will be received, and whether communication can influence collective understanding and action. See Marcy Fetzer, *Leadership Communication Ecology: How Conversations Shape Organizations* (2026), 1-5. [Read the white paper.](#) [return](#)
2. The framework distinguishes expression from communicative agency. An employee may be allowed to respond while having little opportunity for their information to change how a performance issue is understood. See Fetzer, *Leadership Communication Ecology*, 3-4. [return](#)
3. Communication Ecology Stewardship identifies cultivation, protection, repair, and renewal as responsibilities for sustaining meaningful participation. Protection preserves dignity and fair boundaries but does not remove all discomfort from organizational life. See Marcy Fetzer, *Communication Ecology Stewardship* (2026), 7-9. [Read White Paper II.](#) [return](#)
4. The application of protective stories to performance feedback is a scholar-practitioner extension of the communication ecology framework. It is offered as a way to examine patterns, not as a diagnostic category or a reason to dismiss legitimate concerns about bias, retaliation, or unfair treatment. [return](#)

When Stories Become the Ecology

How interpretations become organizational expectations - and how stewardship keeps possibility open

MARCY FETZER, PHD

A workplace story rarely remains inside one person for long. A supervisor shares a concern about an employee with another leader. An employee describes a discouraging interaction to a trusted colleague. A team develops a shared explanation for why another department is difficult to work with. Human resources receives an account shaped by several conversations that occurred before anyone entered the formal meeting.

Each person may be seeking something reasonable: perspective, advice, protection, preparation, or help making sense of an uncertain situation. Yet as stories travel, they begin affecting how other people interpret what they have not experienced for themselves.

An employee arrives in a new role already described as difficult. A manager inherits a team known for resisting change. One department is considered territorial; another is thought to be out of touch. Before the next conversation begins, participants have already been given an explanation of who the other people are and what their behavior is likely to mean. The story has begun arriving before the person.

From interpretation to expectation

Organizations need interpretation. No one could function if every meeting, decision, or silence had to be understood from the beginning. People use previous experience to anticipate what is likely to happen and to decide how they should participate.

The problem is not that stories exist. The problem begins when interpretations become so settled that new information can no longer change them.

“She is difficult” is no longer a description of a particular interaction. It becomes an expectation carried into every interaction. “Leadership does not listen” becomes the explanation for every delayed decision. “Employees resist change” becomes a reason to limit their involvement before the change has been discussed.

Once a story becomes an expectation, people respond not only to what is happening but also to what they have been taught to anticipate. The employee described as difficult may receive shorter explanations and less patience. Sensing distrust, the employee becomes more guarded and forceful. The response is then used as additional evidence that the original description was accurate.

Leaders who expect resistance may announce decisions late and allow little room for participation. Employees respond negatively because they were excluded. Leadership interprets the negative response as proof that involvement would have been unproductive. The story is no longer merely explaining organizational life. It is helping create it.

The ordinary places stories live

Protective stories are not limited to major disputes. They live in the ordinary language of organizational life. They appear when a manager says, “You know how she is,” before asking another leader to work with an employee. They appear when colleagues warn a newcomer never to question a particular executive. They appear when a department explains that another group “only cares about rules” or that senior leaders “have already decided.”

They also appear in subtler forms: who is copied on an email, who receives the benefit of the doubt, who is asked to explain, and whose silence is interpreted as thoughtful rather than disengaged.

These judgments may have histories behind them. Some may reflect repeated experience. A colleague may genuinely have behaved unreliably. An executive may have punished difficult questions. A department may repeatedly have failed to consider the operational consequences of its decisions.

Stewardship does not require people to forget those histories or pretend that every interpretation is equally fair. It asks whether the history has become the only meaning available. The ecological question is not simply, “Is the story true?” It is also, “What is the story now teaching people to notice, expect, and reproduce?”

The ecology remembers

Communication ecologies develop through repetition. People learn how organizational life works from what repeatedly happens after someone asks a question, offers an idea, admits a mistake, challenges an assumption, or identifies harm.

Over time, the lesson may remain even after the original event has faded from memory. Employees may no longer remember why a meeting became highly scripted, why a department stopped sharing early drafts, or why everyone avoids raising certain subjects with a leader. They simply know how things are done.

Stories can become part of this organizational memory. They travel through warnings, jokes, performance discussions, onboarding conversations, and informal advice. New employees may inherit conclusions without inheriting the events from which those conclusions emerged.

A new manager is told that the team lacks initiative and begins leading with greater control. The team experiences the control as evidence that the manager does not trust them and becomes less willing to act independently. The manager then sees the reduced initiative as confirmation of the inherited story. The new manager did not create the original ecology, but the inherited story taught them how to reproduce it.

Leadership Communication Ecology explains that repeated responses become informal structures governing participation. People learn whose knowledge is credible, which questions can travel, and whether speaking can make a difference. Stories become ecological when they begin shaping those expectations across relationships and over time.¹

Stories protect more than people

A protective story may defend an individual's identity, but it can also protect a team, a profession, or a leadership system.

A department may tell a story about being underappreciated because the story preserves the value of its work. Leaders may describe employees as resistant because that explanation protects confidence in the change itself. Employees may describe leaders as uncaring because the story gives coherence to repeated disappointment.

These stories can contain truth while also protecting assumptions from examination. If employees are resistant, leaders do not have to ask whether the change was poorly designed or communicated. If leaders do not care, employees do not have to consider whether competing responsibilities or missing information shaped the decision. If another department is incompetent, a team does not have to examine its own contribution to a failing relationship.

Protective stories reduce uncertainty, but they may also reduce curiosity. They tell people where responsibility belongs before the larger pattern has been examined.

Unequal power still matters

Saying that stories are coauthored does not mean that everyone shapes the ecology equally. A leader's interpretation may influence performance ratings, assignments, promotion, access, and employment. An employee's interpretation may affect trust and cooperation, but it usually does not carry the same formal force. A senior leader can establish a reputation through one public comment that colleagues may be unable to undo through months of different experience.

This difference must remain visible. Otherwise, the language of shared responsibility can become a way of asking the person with less power to repair conditions created by someone with more power.

At the same time, unequal responsibility does not erase everyone else's participation. Colleagues can interrupt ridicule rather than joining it. Human resources professionals can ask for observations rather than accepting total judgments. Employees can seek allies who help them think more clearly rather than merely confirm what they already believe.

Communication ecologies are coauthored, but authority, credibility, security, access, and decision rights give some responses greater organizational force. Communication Ecology Stewardship therefore places greater responsibility on people whose interpretations and responses shape the conditions others must inhabit.²

Holding stories more responsibly

The alternative to protective stories is not storylessness. Human beings will continue interpreting workplace experience. The task is to hold our interpretations with enough discipline that reality can still surprise us.

This begins by separating observation from conclusion. “She interrupted me three times during the meeting” is different from “She does not respect me.” “The manager did not respond for four days” is different from “The manager wants my idea to disappear.” The conclusion may ultimately be supported, but naming the distance between the event and its meaning preserves room for inquiry.

It also requires separating behavior from identity. A person can behave defensively without becoming “a defensive person.” A colleague can miss commitments without being reduced to unreliability. A leader can cause harm without every future action being assigned a harmful motive.

Precision does not weaken accountability. It strengthens it by identifying what must actually change. Responsible storytelling also asks us to notice when we are recruiting an audience. Are we seeking perspective, or are we building agreement around a conclusion? Are we giving others enough context to think independently, or are we assigning roles before they meet the people involved?

A trustworthy colleague does not dismiss our experience, but neither do they assume that loyalty requires adopting every interpretation. They help us stay close to what occurred, what remains uncertain, what harm needs acknowledgment, and what response would create greater clarity.

Stewarding the ecology

Stewardship asks a practical question: What pattern is this response helping the organization learn?

A response can cultivate curiosity by asking one more question before reaching a conclusion. It can protect dignity by addressing a behavior without humiliating the person. It can repair a damaged pattern by acknowledging impact, changing behavior, and following through. It can renew the ecology when these different responses recur long enough to change what people expect.

Metatalk can help when a story has begun controlling the interaction. A participant might say, “I notice that we are interpreting each new issue through the belief that this team will resist us. I wonder what that expectation is causing us to do before they have had a chance to respond.”

Another might say, “I have started assuming that your questions mean you oppose the decision. I may be responding to that assumption rather than to what you are actually asking.” These statements do not settle the issue. They make the pattern visible so that people can decide whether to continue reproducing it.

Communication Ecology Stewardship describes repair as an interruption of an automatic response and renewal as the accumulation of new responses into changed expectations. One different conversation may

create an opening, but the ecology changes only when the new pattern becomes credible through repetition.³

Creating evidence for another story

People rarely release protective stories because someone tells them their interpretation is wrong. They revise them when experience provides credible evidence that another understanding is possible.

A leader who has developed a reputation for defensiveness may begin asking questions before explaining. A team described as resistant may be invited into the work early enough to influence it. An employee seen as unreliable may agree to specific commitments and meet them consistently. A department thought to be procedural may explain the purpose behind its requirements and help solve the problem rather than merely enforce the rule.

None of these moments erases the past. They begin creating a new history of response. The strongest evidence appears when the changed behavior survives inconvenience. Curiosity matters most when the answer may delay a decision. Accountability matters most when acknowledging harm may reduce someone's authority. Openness matters most when feedback is difficult to hear.

An ecology is renewed through the same ordinary process by which it was formed: conversation by conversation, response by response, expectation by expectation.⁴

The stories future communication will inherit

Every organization carries stories about who can be trusted, what leaders value, how feedback works, where ideas disappear, and what happens when someone makes a mistake. Some of those stories protect important truth. Others preserve patterns that no longer serve the organization.

We do not have to eliminate interpretation in order to care for the ecology. We need enough humility to let our interpretations remain revisable, enough courage to name harm precisely, and enough discipline to keep accountability from becoming a permanent identity.

The question is not whether we will tell stories about organizational life. We will. The question is what those stories make possible for the people who must communicate inside them. An ecology begins to change when people repeatedly encounter evidence that they are more than the roles earlier stories assigned them.

Questions to Carry Forward

1. What stories about people, teams, or leaders have become accepted without continuing examination?
2. Which of those stories are grounded in recurring evidence, and which have been inherited from others?
3. How are our expectations shaping the responses we receive?
4. Whose interpretation is most likely to become an organizational reputation?
5. Are we seeking perspective from colleagues, or recruiting them into certainty?
6. What behavior needs accountability without becoming a permanent identity?
7. What new response could begin creating credible evidence for another story?

Endnotes

1. Leadership Communication Ecology proposes that recurring communication-response patterns become expectations that shape participation, credibility, learning, and organizational possibility. What appears to be stable culture may reflect the accumulated residue of ordinary responses. See Marcy Fetzer, *Leadership Communication Ecology: How Conversations Shape Organizations* (2026), 2-10. [Read the white paper.](#) [return](#)
2. Communication Ecology Stewardship defines stewardship as cultivating, protecting, repairing, and renewing the communicative conditions through which people interpret, learn, coordinate, and act together. It also emphasizes that unequal power creates unequal influence and responsibility. See Marcy Fetzer, *Communication Ecology Stewardship* (2026), 6-8. [Read White Paper II.](#) [return](#)
3. The stewardship framework identifies metatalk, the intention-response loop, and other repair practices as ways of interrupting automatic patterns. Repair becomes ecological only when changed responses recur and begin altering what people expect. See Fetzer, *Communication Ecology Stewardship*, 9-11. [return](#)
4. Communication Ecology Stewardship describes renewal as the accumulation of repaired responses into new expectations. Change becomes credible when constructive responses persist under inconvenience, urgency, and pressure rather than appearing only in ideal conditions. See Fetzer, *Communication Ecology Stewardship*, 8-12. [return](#)

PROTECTIVE STORIES AT WORK

What stories are future conversations being asked to inherit?

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encounter evidence that they are more than the roles
earlier stories assigned them.

Explore Leadership Communication Ecology, Communication Ecology
Stewardship, and additional essays on communication, leadership, learning,
and organizational possibility.

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