



Storytelling

Telling stories is a vital part of human connection. We tell funny work stories to our friends to make them laugh. We tell tragic stories to those closest to us so they can understand us at a deeper level. We tell stories when we want to heal others' hurt, to give them hope when they are shrouded in darkness. We remember stories that spoke to us, sometimes even the smallest details, that moved us or tugged something in our souls deep down.

Stories are incredibly powerful. They connect you to others and help form deeper emotional bounds to the world around us. Telling stories is an important tool for organizers, and those wanting to swing public discourse.

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True or False: If people know, then they will act, because knowledge leads to action

Think of the times you learned about something in the world that needed to be changed. What was the first one that came to mind? Did you take concrete actions towards fixing the problem? Why or why not?

This statement is typically *false*. Why would this be the case? Information is power, but information doesn't lead to action... So what calls someone to action?

Hearing the information that “we need to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions reductions by 45% by 2030 in order to stop runaway climate catastrophe,” is important but not motivating. What does this fact provide us other than knowing we have to do something, but not necessarily what to do? For many, this is an incredibly terrifying and debilitating statistic. All this does is drive us further away from action because it inhibits us with grief, fear and hopelessness. Facts can be made powerful if used in conjunction with our sensory details and emotions, community values, and a call to action. In other words, facts need a story behind them to motivate action.

“Through public narrative, social movement leaders – and participants – can move to action by mobilizing sources of motivation, constructing new shared individual and collective identities, and finding the courage to act.” - Ganz, M. (2010) pp.527

This storytelling model has three pieces: a Story of Self, a Story of Us, and a Story of Now. Put together, these pieces will make up the bulk of how you communicate with new volunteers, potential allies, decision makers and your community. A Story of Self communicates your values on an issue in a compelling way; a Story of Us situates those values within a community; a Story of Now connects those values and community problems with clear calls to action. By crafting a narrative with these pieces, you bridge the gap between individuals and issues, and create shared values and purpose. To understand more about shared purpose, use [the Shared Purpose Guide](#).

When will you use storytelling?

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| ❖ Recruiting new volunteers | ❖ One on one meetings |
| ❖ Talking to your friends and family | ❖ Relational meetings |
| ❖ Letters to the editor | ❖ Networking |
| ❖ Letter writing tactics | ❖ Community meetings |
| ❖ Public speeches | ❖ Cultivating shared purpose |

We tell stories in organizing to communicate our values and to motivate people to take action. Storytelling is so powerful because you can use it for so many different things on your organizing journey. As you learn and grow you will find you might have multiple stories to pull out of your pocket depending on the people you talk to and for that specific occasion. Be open to adapting your story over time as you change and your community changes.

1. Story of Self

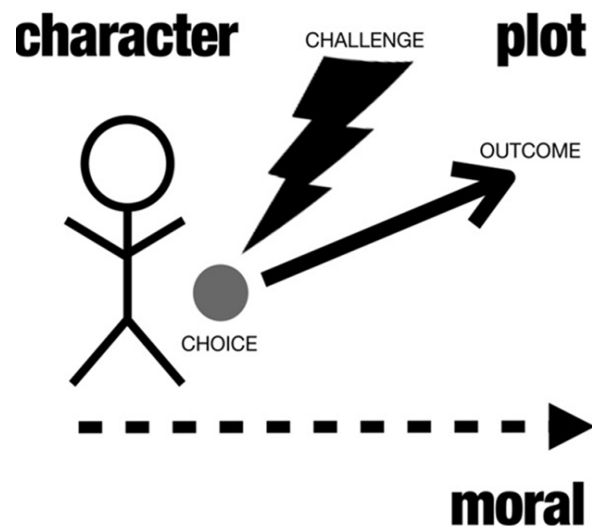
“The key to motivation is understanding that values inspire action through emotion” -

[Marshall Ganz page 29](#)

Finding a Story of Self can be difficult. Start by asking yourself why you are here at this moment. When were you called to action? Was there a specific moment, and can you describe that moment? What choice did you make to take action? You can think about why you joined the green team: what made you come to your first meeting? What called you to action or who?

1.1 Plot

An integral part of compelling stories is plot. Any good book will have a specific plot, and this is different than a boring list of activities or a description. The key difference between listing activities and a story is a challenge that has to be overcome.



When you are met with a challenge you have to make a choice, and there will be an outcome based on your choice. This, in turn, drives toward the underlying value you are trying to portray, or the moral of the story. Because humans are complex, we have many different challenges, choices and outcomes in life, and deciding on which one to tell is difficult. Make sure to always tie it to your values. For examples, if you want to stop climate change but tell a compelling story about selling your car

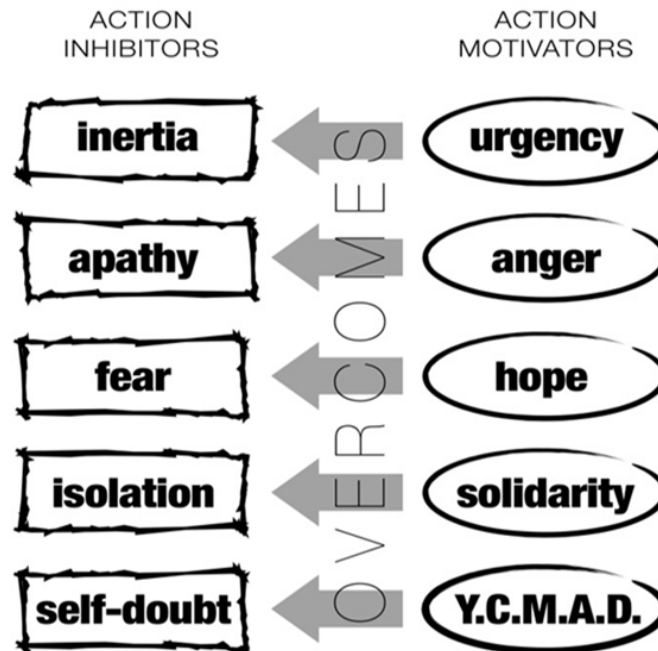
because you wanted to reduce your carbon footprint, how does this tie into stopping climate change? In crafting a narrative, ensure that you are picking and choosing challenging moments that you can somehow lead back to your values. You can not assume the connection between selling your car and stopping climate change will be done by your audience, you will have to connect the dots for them succinctly. Further discussion on how to do this will be in the Story of Us and Story of Now sections below.

1.2 Emotions

Storytelling is powerful because of its ability to go beyond reason and connect with emotions. Emotions are powerful catalysts for taking action, and effective storytellers tap into this vital energy, evoking motivating emotions like urgency and hope to counter paralyzing emotions like fear.

When using emotions in stories it's vital that motivating emotions are used. Many young people talk about a huge sense of climate grief due to all the stories and the inability to feel like they can take action. This is what you want to steer away from in your stories. Emotional states like apathy, fear and isolation can be discussed in a story, perhaps to relate to your audience, but emphasize positive emotions or how you overcame the negative ones.

Use “action motivators” (see below) to counteract the inhibiting emotions displayed in stories. You should be leaving someone feeling energized to take action, not afraid. Take from the list below and use it as a guide in crafting your stories.



(YCMAD = You Can Make A Difference)

“We are not rational beings who sometimes feel; we are emotional beings who sometimes think.” -Brene Brown

1.3 Imagery

Effective stories evoke images that can be experienced with the senses, making something “real” for the listener in a particular way that articulating facts and theoretical concepts cannot achieve. Imagery is a storyteller's use of vivid and descriptive language that evokes the five senses.

To make imagery effective:

- ❖ Make it personal.
 - Ask yourself: Why is this story yours and not someone else's?
- ❖ Make it specific.
 - You paint a picture when it isn't generic.
 - Example: the solidarity you felt at your first protest when you felt multiple shoulders and hands brushing against you as you marched, packed in like sardines. Ask yourself: What signs spoke to you? What did they say? What were people wearing?
- ❖ Use sensory details.
 - Some examples:

- I could taste the smoke on my tongue...
- I felt the tears rolling down my cheeks...
- The individual grains of sand between my toes...

Thinking back on your challenge, choice and outcome, what senses come to mind? You want to *show* your audience and not just *tell* them.

1.4 Quick Recap

A good story has:

- ❖ Has a challenge, choice, and outcome
- ❖ Speaks about a character(s)
- ❖ Speaks emotionally about experience rather than only facts
- ❖ Uses motivating emotions
- ❖ Uses sensory details and imagery
- ❖ Helps others connect to you and to be moved to action

2. Story of Us

A Story of Us expresses a shared purpose with those you wish to call to action. This means your Story of Us should change depending on your audience. We are all part of many “Us’s”, and can be as specific or general as you’d like. A good example of this is found in the “Importance of Community” in the [Shared Purpose](#) guide. If you haven’t yet curated a list of the “Us’s” or communities you are involved in, feel free to do so now.

What communities are you a part of? What communities do you want to work within to change? Which community are you telling this story to? [Find out more about how to identify different communities here.](#)

The elements of the Story of Us should be similar to your Story of Self, with emotional motivators and challenge-choice-outcome to overcome. The key difference is the character is no longer yourself, but is now the community you want to take action. The choices are ones the community universally faces. Telling a story of us is usually very common, we do it more often than we think. When you reminisce about memories with your friends, or winning a soccer game, or a family vacation, these are all everyday examples.

Choose who your ‘us’ is based on your audience. If you’re talking to a business community, your story of us that unifies who you are speaking to would be different than talking to a group of environmental activists. You can alter it to the audience you want to move to action.

Think about your specific community, whether this is your school or city. Ask yourself a few questions to begin brainstorming collective stories:

- ❖ What values do you share with this community?
- ❖ What experiences have had the greatest impact on this community? What challenges has it faced?
- ❖ What change does this community hope for and why?

3. Story of Now

A Story of Now articulates urgency for the challenge threatening the communities shared values that demand immediate action. You should be envisioning both the future if they fail to act now, and the future if everyone acts now. Ending on the latter will invoke hope as opposed to fear.. You should be answering, “what can we do right now to make the change we want?” This final story will reflect the shared purpose or values expressed within the stories of Self and Us. You should be ending this story with a hard ask. For more details on a hard ask, see the [Recruitment Guide](#). Lastly, a Story of Now makes the bridge from story, why we should act, to strategy, how we can act.



“The hope resides not somewhere in a distant future but in the sense of possibility in a pathway to action, telling a good story of now requires the courage of imagination or, as Walter Brueggemann named it, a prophetic imagination, in which you call attention to both the pain of the world and also to the possibility for a better future.” - [Marshall Ganz page 31](#)

Hard Ask - When you ask someone to make a commitment - to attend an event, or take on a new role - it’s important to make a **“hard ask”** - a clear and direct ask that results in a commitment to a specific action.

Example:

<u>Soft ask:</u> We have a canvas to get more signatures for the climate emergency motion on Wednesday.	This ask needs to be more compelling with urgency, and have a direct ask, as this is not direct enough. It's informing them about the event but not asking them to come. Make sure to give some context as to why the event matters.	<u>Hard Ask:</u> We're trying to reach our goal of collecting 1000 signatures on our climate emergency petition to deliver to the city before the motion comes forward next month. We need every person here to sign or else it might not pass. This is the first step to our city taking meaningful steps to reduce their GHG emissions and can only be done with your help.
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Expanding on the Story of Now to not just include a hard ask, but to call people to action with hope for the future is hard to do. Marshall Ganz explains this succinctly in the excerpt below,

"In Washington DC, August 23, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King told a story of what he called the "fierce urgency of now". Although we call his vision of what America could be, his dream, we often forget that action was urgent because of the "nightmare" of racial oppression, and result of white America's failure to make good on its "promissory note" to African Americans. This debt, he argued, could no longer be postponed. If we did not act now, we could never realize the dream.

In a story of now, story and strategy overlap because a key element in hope is a strategy - a credible vision of how to get from here to there. And a key element in strategy is a source of hope - a sense of possibility. The "choice" we offer must be more than "we must all choose to be better people" or "choose to do any of this list of 53 things" (which makes each of them trivial) or "go to X website and click". A meaningful choice requires action we can take now, action we can take together and an outcome we could achieve.

The "character" in a Story of Now is you, the people in the room with you, and the broader community whom you hope to engage in action." - [Marshall Ganz page 96](#)

4. Exercises and Worksheets

4.1 Individual Exercise

→ USE WITH: [Storytelling Exercises and Worksheets](#)

Purpose:

- ❖ To better understand the different types of stories (Self, Us, Now).
- ❖ To envision the strengths and weaknesses in other stories.

Time: Approx. 15 minutes

4.2 Team Exercise

→ USE WITH: [Storytelling Exercises and Worksheets](#)

Purpose:

- ❖ To practice and share our stories with your team.
- ❖ To connect with shared values of your team.
- ❖ To be coached and workshop your stories.

Time: Approx. 1 hour

5. References

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5.2 Acknowledgements

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