

STORYTELLING AS A CATALYST FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

By Liz Warren and Stephanie Luz Cordel

Storytelling is a powerful strategy to foster significant input from community members on needed changes to systems. However, all too often those who share their lived experience are not included in establishing the details of policies and practices. They become informants rather than influencers. This brief identifies three core change-functions of storytelling that highlight how to use this strategy to help people understand themselves and others as a form of civic participation with an emphasis on resident-informed systems change.



Read the *Storytelling for Resident Leaders Workbook* online at vitalysthealth.org to learn how to tell stories.

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, Vitalyst Health Foundation made an investment to support resident leaders in South Phoenix and their efforts to support an equitable transit-oriented development in their community. The goal was to enhance community engagement in the development process of a light rail extension project along Central Avenue planned to begin construction in 2019. Part of this investment included providing storytelling training to the community leaders as a tool for better understanding their stories, connecting with others, and sharing their lived experiences with municipal leadership.¹ This method was in response to recognizing how narrative approaches to engaging residents, organizing, activism, and systems change are being increasingly relied on around the world to foster awareness and to promote change.



“STORYTELLING IS DIFFERENT
THAN ‘TELLING A STORY’.
STORYTELLING IS ABOUT
CHANGE. GOOD OR BAD.
SOMETHING HAS TO CHANGE.”

Throughout this investment, Vitalyst learned how storytelling is a valuable tool to influence systems change. It has the bonus that the person learning to tell their story gains a set of skills that can be used to influence and inform any subject matter that is important to them. Literature in the field demonstrates that tackling social issues requires a systemic approach, one that considers solutions for changing policies, regulations and culture. This brief is meant to highlight the impact of stories and how they can influence the municipal and organizational leaders connected to policy, regulation, and programs as well as those most impacted by them. People are at the heart of any institution whether it’s a government entity, a non-profit organization, or regulatory body. Stories provide a tool for people to connect and better understand each other’s lived experience. When decision makers in the social sector can connect with those most impacted by particular issues and policies through storytelling, the work can be more effective.

What is Storytelling?

A story is the narrative shape given to a sequence of events to contextualize, highlight, and amplify the meaning.² A real story documents change. That can be the smallest change in consciousness all the way to the biggest life-changing transformation. Storytelling is the most fundamental and profound way in which humans preserve and share information. Stories are used to convey meaning, transmit history and tradition, entertain, instruct, to build empathy and community, and to motivate people to act.

Throughout history, stories have been used to highlight injustice and create the case for change. We are living in a time when the capacity of a single story to reach and influence millions of people has never been stronger. We need those single impactful stories. We also need the benefits that can come when many people are telling the stories of their lives and many others are hearing and valuing those stories.

1 Cordel, S. & Warren, L. (July 2018). *Storytelling for Resident Leaders Workbook*. Vitalyst Health Foundation.

2 Tell Me Something Good. (n.d.) Retrieved from irelandjournal.typepad.com/tell_me_something_good

STORYTELLING AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Storytelling as a tool for social change is the purposeful use of a specific narrative form (a story) to present the lived experience of individuals in a way that helps others perceive the reality of that experience. Stories provide windows into the impact of policies on people's lives. They can, in turn, illuminate the narratives we hold about others that inform the creation and implementation of those policies. While data and bar graphs may allow us to stay comfortably detached from the impact of a policy, a story places us in a neighborhood, in a life, with a person who is living the experience the policy circumscribes. Ultimately, storytelling is a tool that can be used to raise the consciousness of people and in turn change perceptions and actions.³

This report identifies three core change-functions of storytelling that highlight how it can be used to help people understand themselves and others, and to make decisions based on their newfound understanding.

- 1 Self-Understanding:** Stories support a stronger sense of self. They build confidence and help people value their personal life experiences, both positive and negative.
- 2 Empathy in Action:** Listening to stories is an effective way to promote empathy and greater understanding of others.
- 3 Stories Catalyze Systems Change:** Stories can ultimately influence systems as leaders gain better understanding of residents' lived experiences and apply the newfound understanding in their decisions, as well as change their practices to better engage those most impacted by their decisions.

³ Chin, K., & Rudelius-Palmer, K. (2010). Storytelling as a relational and instrumental tool for addressing racial justice. *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, 3(2), 265-281.

Important Considerations When Utilizing Storytelling as a Tool

It is important to note that while storytelling is very powerful in influencing people's perceptions when executed effectively, it results in changing the approach to the work. It should not be utilized in isolation when thinking about programs, policies, and regulations in the social sector. Here are some key points to keep in mind:

- **Storytelling is Not a Substitute for Representation.** Storytelling is a means to convey lived experience but cannot substitute for actual lived experience. It is still important to have representatives of a community take part in the decision-making process. Storytelling should be utilized in conjunction with representation so all leaders can gain insight into a particular lived experience/issue.
- **Storytelling is a Continuous Process.** Do not share stories as a one-time occasion. For maximum success, storytelling should be an ongoing process and considered as a reference point to those most impacted to provide a feedback loop. There needs to be a continuous integration of lived experience with any program, policy or investment.
- **Listeners Must be Open-Minded.** Stories shifting perceptions is only effective when the listeners are open to having their perspective shifted. If not, stories can reinforce biases and inaccurate depictions of groups of people.
- **Understanding Yourself is Important Too.** The process of implementing a story-based practice begins with your personal stories and understanding. You will be able to see your values contained in those stories understand them within the context of your family and communities. Being able to identify the values in stories is one of the keys to helping people transcend narratives that conflict or are in opposition.

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STORIES FOR SELF-UNDERSTANDING

The Impact of Telling Stories on the Teller

One core change-function that stories have is on the person who is telling a story. Figure 1 provides an overview of this internal process and outlines six typical components of what happens when an individual tells a story.

1. **Stimulus to Tell Story.** The teller has an opportunity or a need to tell a story. This impetus prompts a person to select or uncover memories of lived experiences, as well as the images associated with those memories, and give them a story structure to amplify the meaning. This is the fundamental act of the whole process of change that storytelling can initiate.
2. **The Teller Shares the Story with Listeners.** This could be in a variety of ways, from a story circle where each person is prompted to share a story on a particular theme or in the context of a one-on-one conversation.



Figure 1



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3. **Support of Listeners.** The teller receives support from listeners during and after telling the story. This often includes clarifying questions from both the teller and listener. A dialogue emerges about the story, its importance to the teller and relevance to the listener.
 4. **New Realizations.** The acts of crafting and telling the story with support from listeners results in new realizations and insights about the memories for the teller. This can take the form of reframing or recontextualizing the events of the story. Or the teller may become aware of life patterns, or social/cultural patterns, or meta-narratives that had been obscure to them before. They may be able to see the events from another point of view, and better understand the roles they and others played in the story.
 5. **Greater Self-Awareness.** Tellers come away with greater self-awareness as a result of telling their stories. Tellers realize that they are in charge of their memories and their stories, and that they can shift their relationship to them and understanding of them.
 6. **Change in Perception.** Over time, and as tellers continue to craft and tell stories, their perception of themselves and their place in their families, neighborhoods, and communities become simultaneously honed and broadened. Tellers often describe enhanced self-confidence and acceptance.

RESIDENT LEADER SPOTLIGHT

This process was particularly evident among the residents in the storytelling training. When asked about the growth they experienced through the storytelling training, resident leaders responded with a new-found ownership, confidence and value in their own stories and lived experiences:

- “[I learned there’s a] Boldness [in] telling your story. It’s yours. You own it. You lived it. You’re telling it.”
- “I’m feeling more confident in my own storytelling and being sure that I have worthy stories to share.”
- “I am finding my voice to be less shaky, but also finding more meaning in my experiences. Being able to find values in forgotten or maybe even stories I used to be embarrassed by.”

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EMPATHY IN ACTION

Impact of Hearing Stories of Lived Experience

When a person tells a story and shares their experience face to face with someone, the listener can “see” the person’s experience. And when a listener can “see,” there is then a greater likelihood that they can relate emotionally to what the person is talking about. This is empathy in action, and it is a crucial step in perceiving the impact of regulations, policies, and laws on the lives of people.

Figure 2 provides an overview of this external process and outlines five core aspects of what happens when an individual listens to a story.

- 1. Listener Hears Story.** Storytelling doesn’t exist without listeners, and listeners are equally important to the process of change that storytelling fosters. A teller can craft a story, but it doesn’t become storytelling until there is a listener.
- 2. New Information.** Even when the listeners know the tellers, they will learn things about them they didn’t know, and their understanding of the teller will expand and deepen. The growth the teller describes in the story creates a space for the listener to reflect on their own growth in similar circumstances,



Figure 2



or to think about how they might have handled the events of the story. The teller almost always grows in the estimation of the listener, both from having the courage to tell the story and from how their lives were changed by the events described.

3. Perceptions Challenged. As with any intake of new information, there is an initial cognitive dissonance that occurs in a person. If the new information is different than their perception, the person either rejects the new information or takes it in and thus has a shift in perception.⁴ If conscious or unconscious biases surface and can be reconciled within the listener, the listener's perception of the teller shifts. These perceptual shifts can be even more profound when the listener does not know the teller or has little interaction with others like them. We all have biases, prejudices, and preconceptions about others that we learn from our families, ethnic and cultural groups, and from societal meta-narratives. When listeners are open-minded, stories are effective at challenging those attitudes because they help us to relate to a person as an individual in a specific set of circumstances.

4. Greater Self/Other Awareness. When we hear a story that we can relate to, that we can identify with, told by a person that we think we are different from, something changes in our perception. We are then challenged with something like, "Well, if this person is like this, maybe I'm wrong about the other members of her group/neighborhood/gender/country/immigration status." A chink in the armor of the meta-narrative is created.

5. Change the Way You Interface with the World. Ideally, when a person has a shift in perception and awareness, they then are challenged to act differently. This change influences how a person interfaces with the world, whether it's alone or amongst people.

LISTENERS OF LIVED EXPERIENCE SPOTLIGHT

In April 2017, the resident leaders applied their story-telling tools to provide a tour to Vitalyst board members and other philanthropic leaders. The goal was to share the stories of South Phoenix resident leaders to change the negative narrative that often comes with low-income communities. Board members and organizational leaders had several insights throughout the trip as a result of the new-found understanding based on hearing the resident leaders' stories in their own communities. Here are a few:

- "For about 48 hours I found myself replaying the narrative our resident leader shared during our car tour from VHF to the restaurant. Gathering input is an obvious step in making decisions. It's unsettling how closed off South Phoenix residents and businesses are from the decision makers. Community health by zip code is adversely affected from being excluded from decision-making process."
- "It is difficult for well intended outsiders to help a community, especially from a distance. While you can help individuals, a community is only able to help itself when it comes together as a group. If the residents of South Phoenix are to be helped, we must foster their development into an engaged community."
- "Our tour reaffirmed the value of total collaboration on complex major initiatives that have significant impact on communities. To me it was important to hear one of the community leaders say outwardly that the desire to be heard and included does not mean people are anti-light rail."

⁴ Fishbein, M. (13 Sept 2016). Cognitive Dissonance: What Happens When Reality Trumps Perception. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/zero-infinity/cognitive-dissonance-3e6f63c36a>

3

STORIES CATALYZE SYSTEMS CHANGE

Leaders Apply New Understanding

Storytelling influences systems by challenging decision makers to act upon their new-found understanding.

The Danger of Default Perceptions

People operate in a society based on their default perceptions of reality. Default ways of thinking are the way in which we view the world based on our personal lived experience. These perspectives also influence the societal meta-narratives from which we learn about people based on their age, class, race, gender, location, education, and legal history. It's important to note that leaders with decision-making authority operate from their own lived experience and meta-narratives that may or may not reflect the lived experience of those most impacted by a particular policy, program or investment.

Storytelling is important to gain new information and begin to change how we do our work based on a shift in perception. That is what the last circle is about: how a newfound understanding gained from hearing stories of those most impacted can be applied to change programs and policies in the social sector. Whatever role we have in society, hearing stories that challenge our ideas about others makes it

STORYTELLING AS ONE STEP IN A COMPLEX PROCESS

Can a single story produce empathy and change someone's point of view? Yes, it can. Does that change immediately result in system's change? Usually not. It's one step in a complex process.

Imagine you are a city employee managing a multi-million dollar project with multiple partners and sources of funding. You attend a story circle and hear stories that shift your understanding of the issues and people your project is meant to serve. You return to your job intending to bring the empathy and insights you experience with you, but the momentum of your big project is too powerful. It may not be possible to operationalize what was learned immediately.

What else has to happen for you and your department to be equipped to make changes that are inline with

the insights gained from the stories? Here are some possibilities:

- Provide other members of their team with the opportunity to meet the storytellers and hear their stories.
- Look for ways to operationalize the insights from the storytellers in the existing project.
- Work within the system and with funders to determine what changes can be made to the projects goals, objectives, and timelines.
- Take the insights gained from the stories into the planning and creation of new projects. Be patient and persistent.
- Make changes to internal practices to be more inclusive of people most impacted by decisions.

harder to continue to act in support of bad, inaccurate narratives. Figure 3 provides an overview of this process and outlines four core aspects of what happens when decision makers listen to a story and apply it to their work.

1. **Listen to Stories.** Listening to stories of those most impacted by your policy, program, or investment is a catalyzing step to better understand others. This can be through story circles or informally through one-on-one conversations.
2. **Change in Perception.** A change in perception occurs as a result of listening to stories. The more exposure listeners have to stories from those that they consider other in some way, the more clarity they have about another's personal experiences. The listener's perceptions of others and their relation to them changes. Listeners often begin to question and evaluate the source of their ideas about others, and whether those ideas are valid. People can unconsciously carry inaccurate, limiting, and negative perceptions of entire groups of people. In the face of authentic, well-crafted and well-told stories these perceptions can be clarified and hearts can be opened.

Figure 3



3. Change in Work. Ideally, when a person's perceptions change, they can then change how they interface with the world. This includes having a change in how work is conceived, approached, and implemented. This may take the form of changes and revisions in policies, programs, or investments depending on the leader's sphere of influence. It is important to note that change is, of course, ongoing, multi-layered and multi-faceted. Many interests, initiatives, and constituencies must intersect empathetically for change to happen at the institutional and systemic level. It is not enough for one person in a leadership position to change. Multiple people have to be engaged and even then, the desired and necessary systemic changes happen slowly. However, every story told and heard is like a drop in a bucket, and eventually the bucket overflows and the human realities contained in the stories can no longer be ignored or denied.

4. Continuous Connection and Improvement. Hearing stories from those most impacted by an issue should not be a one-time occurrence. To be effective, there must be a consistent value placed on consulting those most impacted by policies and programs to hear their stories. Stories can provide a feedback loop to understand the impact of a particular program, policy or investment. This can be done by creating institutional practices that engage those most impacted as experts to serve in the co-creation of policies and programs.

Respecting the Storyteller

To truly be engaged in storytelling work, it's important to recognize the storyteller as the expert, the person who holds the truth and expertise as a result of their lived experience. Respecting the role of the storyteller in this process is critical. Organizational or government leaders can unintentionally exploit storytellers for their knowledge and experience, while not ensuring that the storyteller knows the impact of their stories on the project, program, policy or system. Here are some key points to keep in mind for leaders who want to involve stories in their work:

- Be sure to design storytelling and listening contexts that provide safety and respect for all.
- Think through the process you can put in place to ensure that the storytellers are consistently in the loop on the impact of their stories on the process.
- Compensate people who share their stories. If they represent those most impacted by policies and practices negative to their health, they are often unfairly compensated in places of employment.
- Be sure to inform the tellers of how you will keep them informed on the impact their stories have had.
- Think through how you will communicate to tellers and residents when the emotions and insights gained from the story cannot be acted on or implemented.
- Develop processes for those most impacted by an issue to participate and make decisions within your work.



SUGGESTIONS FOR NONPROFIT LEADERS AND FUNDERS

There are several implications that can be made as a result of understanding how storytelling can be used as a catalyst for systems change. Here are a few that are important to consider:

REASONS TO UTILIZE AND SUPPORT STORYTELLING

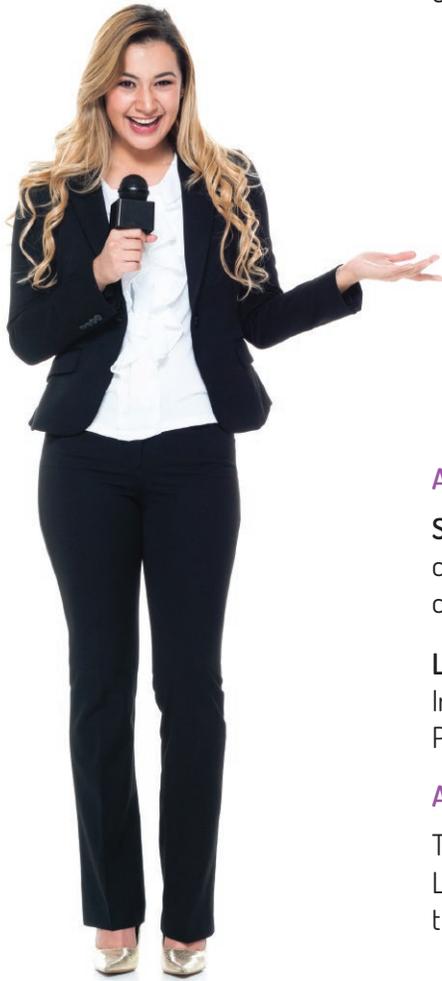
- **Storytelling Enhances Personal Voice.** Storytelling is an important investment because it catalyzes people who are part of a project, an organization or resident group. It supports their ability to make meaning of their life and the issues that are important to them. Storytelling benefits both residents and leaders.
- **Storytelling Values Expertise.** Storytelling offers an opportunity for leaders in the community to legitimize their lived experience in a formal process. It positions them to be experts. It emphasizes that people have deep knowledge about their families, neighborhoods, and communities, and they have answers to the challenges in the community. At the same time, they may lack skills, resources and networks to get those answers to people positioned to make change.

WAYS TO FUND STORYTELLING

- **Support Training.** Have people in communities trained to support fellow community members. This could be done by developing a corps of people to work with community partners to tell stories in an authentic way.
- **Support Partnerships.** Identify community partners who are rarely given the opportunity to demonstrate solutions for the challenges and their lived experience and utilize storytelling to engage them.

“I LEARNED TO CONNECT MY OWN STORY OF SELF INTO SHARED VALUES.”

Read the *Storytelling for Resident Leaders WorkBook* online at vitalysthealth.org to learn how to tell stories.



Conclusion

Storytelling can be used as an effective intervention for systems change as a result of the internal and external processes that occur when stories are shared:

- Storytelling is a tool for self-understanding that supports people's confidence in the value of their lived experience.
- Storytelling provides a practice that actively promotes empathy for others in a tangible and connected way.
- Leaders can make changes to their spheres of influence if they can apply their newfound insights as a result of storytelling to ultimately enhance programs, policies and regulations.

RESOURCES

This brief was meant as a high-level overview of how storytelling can move systems change. To go deeper into any of the topics, here are some resources to explore:

- *Storytelling and Social Change: A Guide for Activists, Organizations and Social Entrepreneurs*
<http://workingnarratives.org/project/story-guide/>
- *Center for Story-Based Strategy Tools and Resources*
<https://www.storybasedstrategy.org/tools-and-resources>
- *Transformative Storytelling for Social Change*
<https://www.transformativestory.org/>
- *Tell Me Something Good Blog*
http://irelandjournal.typepad.com/tell_me_something_good/archives.html

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stephanie Luz Cordel is the founder of All Voices Consulting and works as a collaborative consultant focused on enhancing social impact through equitable change strategies.

Liz Warren is the director of the South Mountain Community College Storytelling Institute and was recently recognized by the Arizona Humanities Council as their Public Scholar of the year.

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