

Telling Stories Effectively—and Responsibly

"When I was in the Senate, it was stories—probably more than all the factual information—that really moved you to want to act."

– Fmr. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, *Washington Post*

Over the years, countless state and federal policy initiatives have been named for men, women and children whose stories motivated policymakers to act. Here are a few:

- AMBER Alerts (public notices of missing children, adopted by Congress)
- Ryan White Care Act (a federally-funded program for people with HIV/AIDS)
- Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (modified laws around equal pay for men and women)
- The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (hate crimes legislation adopted by Congress)

However, a story alone won't produce powerful legislation (or if it does, it may not be good legislation). Stories should be grounded in data and used carefully. In fact, research has shown that choosing the wrong story or providing it without context can backfire. Here are a few cautionary lessons:

- **People often overestimate how well a single story represents a larger issue.** Once a story is heard and believed, data alone won't change it. The story that President Reagan told about the "Welfare queen"—intended to emphasize fraud and abuse of social services—was not based in fact, but became a racist narrative that many voters accept and continue to tell.
- **Choosing the most extreme stories can distort how people view the larger issue.** Research from the FrameWorks Institute found that when stories about child abuse and neglect focus on just extreme cases abuse, audience often overestimate cases of abuse and underestimate the severity of neglect. Sensationalizing can actually harm your cause.
- **Stories of "superheroes" can shift burden to everyone else.** Telling the story of someone who surpasses all expectations and excels where no one else has—especially in communities that are stereotyped—can make an audience shift blame to everyone else (an audience may ask, "If she can do it, why can't everyone else?")

Tips to Avoid These Pitfalls

- **Tell solutions stories that can't be seen as a triumph for the “up-by-the-bootstraps” mentality.** Rather than tell a story about the most exceptional person who defies all obstacles, try finding a typical (and relatable) person and telling their story exceptionally well.
- **Balance the stories of individuals and the system.** Telling stories about policies and programs can be pretty boring, but often those are what we need to talk about. Find ways to tie together the stories of process with compelling individuals. Be explicit about how the person or group of people relate to policies.
- **Use data to provide a clear context for any individual.** Be honest and transparent about how representative your story is. And always be explicit about what the data mean (contrary to the cliché, data do not speak for themselves).
- **Capitalize on the notion of “full” and “empty” spaces in your story.** When telling a story, it is important to let your audience fill in some blanks with their own experiences; this will help them to connect more deeply with your story. For example, if you talk about a kitchen without describing it, they will fill in the story with something like their own kitchen (this is empty space they're filling). If you describe the kitchen in great detail, you are completing the image for them (that is full space). You can use empty and full spaces strategically to engage an audience in your story while also dispelling stereotypes or unhelpful pre-existing beliefs. Use empty spaces to allow your audience to insert themselves into your story and use full spaces to avoid faulty assumptions or reinforcing stigma or stereotypes.
- **Reflect on what the story means to you while you tell it.** One of the clearest ways to connect with your audience and make sure that the story is accomplishing what you hope is to pause and reflect on what the story means to you (or, if you were present in the story, how you felt). If an audience trusts you, they'll take your cues about what a story means and how to feel.