



Community-Centric Grantmaking - Class 4

Storytelling

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Estimated time to complete: 45 minutes

Class Objectives

- Foster a balanced relationship between funders and grantees, as well as between grantees and those they serve.
- Establish a learning-oriented environment making learning a central focus of your organization's culture.
- Practice respectful storytelling by prioritizing the perspectives of those impacted and avoiding the exploitation of organizations.
- Communicate effectively with a variety of stakeholders, including board members, donors, staff, community leaders, and grantees.
- Promote collaboration and partnerships within the community, recognizing the collective benefit of working together.

Module 1: Exploring Our Why: Understanding the Purpose Behind Our Work

Action Activity: Reflect on why you are involved in philanthropy and to explore the deeper motivations that drive our role in the community.

Outcomes:

- Participants have an opportunity to reflect on their personal reasons for engaging in leadership and philanthropy.
- Gain a shared understanding of individual motivations within a larger context.

Materials:

- Paper and pen for personal reflection.



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Action Activity Process:

1. Individual Reflection:

Begin by taking a few minutes to quietly reflect on the question: **“Why are you involved in philanthropy?”**

Write down your thoughts, considering the following prompts:

- What inspired you to get involved in this work?
- How do you feel when you think about the impact you can make?
- What values or beliefs drive your participation?
- What do you hope to achieve through your work in the community?

2. Deep Reflection:

Once you've written down your thoughts, spend a few minutes revisiting your reasons. Can you dig deeper into your initial response? Consider why you feel strongly about these reasons. This deeper inquiry can often help clarify your core motivations.

3. Share and Listen:

After completing your reflection, consider sharing your thoughts with a trusted colleague or peer. Here's how the process works:

- Step 1: Share your reasons for being involved in philanthropy.
- Step 2: The other person listens attentively and asks, "Why?" This question is repeated several times to encourage a deeper exploration of your motivations.
- Step 3: After the exchange, switch roles.

This repeated asking and listening helps surface deeper insights about the motivations behind our actions, and often uncovers more profound or hidden reasons.

4. Group Reflection:

If you're doing this with a group, spend some time reflecting as a group. What themes or patterns emerged in your individual reflections? How do these insights influence how you view your role in philanthropy going forward?

Endnote:

Understanding our "why" is essential to grounding our work in philanthropy. This reflection will help to align personal values with community-focused actions, fostering a shared purpose and deeper connections within the work we do.



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Respectful Storytelling

- Put people first. Build bridges across the community.
- Empower the people you serve. Respect the voice of the human impacted and avoid exploitation of nonprofit organizations.
- Be transparent.
- Avoid stereotypes.
- Focus on solutions.
- Nothing for me without me

Module 2: Principles of Respectful Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful tool that can connect your organization with the community you serve. However, it's important to tell stories in a way that honors the dignity and humanity of the people involved. It's essential to be transparent about your intentions and methods, ensuring that your storytelling is aligned with the values of respect and understanding.

Here are some guidelines for responsible and thoughtful storytelling:

Put people first:

Nonprofits often work with individuals and communities that are facing significant challenges. Always prioritize the privacy and dignity of those you serve. Before sharing anyone's story, ask for their consent, and respect their wishes if they choose not to participate. It's important to remember that individuals should have control over how their stories are shared.

Empower the people you serve:

Your role as a nonprofit is to empower the communities you work with. Whenever possible, give individuals the chance to share their personal experiences and perspectives. Encourage participation in storytelling efforts and make space for community members to share their voice and contribute to how their story is told.



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Be transparent:

Honesty is key. Always be clear about why you are telling a particular story and how it will be used. If using photos, videos, or any personal details, make sure that individuals are informed and have provided their consent. Consider using free or low-cost stock images that reflect your message without compromising privacy.

Avoid reinforcing stereotypes:

Be mindful of how you portray individuals and communities. It's important to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes or presenting people in a way that might perpetuate harmful views. Always portray individuals with respect and complexity, acknowledging both challenges and strengths.

Focus on solutions:

Instead of positioning your organization as the sole "rescuer," frame your storytelling around collaboration and community-driven solutions. Highlight the collective efforts to address challenges, showing how your organization is working alongside the community to create lasting positive change.

Module 3: The Science Behind Storytelling

As Philipp Humm writes in "Storytelling and the Brain: Understanding the Neuroscience Behind Our Love for Stories," storytelling has the power to affect our emotions and trigger specific responses in our brains. By carefully crafting a narrative, you can engage the brain's chemical responses, such as the release of cortisol, dopamine, and oxytocin. These chemicals help drive emotional engagement and connection, making your stories more memorable and impactful.

Crafting a Story that Lands

Cortisol: stress chemical that is released and tells us to "listen up; there's something to learn." May be it is a character that we connect with who is struggling with something.

Dopamine: pleasure reward chemical when we understand what a character's goal is; makes us really feel something

Oxytocin: the key to evoking empathy; what is released when a family member holds their child / it is released when audiences hear about a moment that shows investment, mutual trust



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The key elements that trigger the release of these chemicals in the brain, helping your audience connect more deeply with your story are below.

Main Ingredients for Effective Stories:

Character-driven narratives:

A strong, relatable protagonist (or main character) is essential. The audience needs someone to root for, someone whose journey they can connect with. This connection creates a deeper emotional investment.

Clear traits:

The protagonist should have well-defined characteristics, qualities, or values. When the audience understands the traits of the character, it becomes easier to empathize with their journey.

A compelling need:

The character's desire or goal should be clear. What does the character need, and why is it important? This creates a sense of purpose and motivates the audience to invest emotionally in the character's journey.

An obstacle:

No story is complete without challenges. An obstacle that stands in the way of the protagonist's goal adds tension, creating suspense and keeping the audience engaged.

Emotional arc:

The character's emotional journey is essential. Great stories move from one emotional state to another, such as from sadness to joy or from fear to hope. This transition helps create a lasting emotional impact on the audience.



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Pain to pleasure:

Effective stories often show the character moving from pain, fear, or sadness to moments of relief, joy, or fulfillment. This arc not only engages emotions but also mirrors the way people process and overcome challenges in real life.

Joy to MORE joy:

Positive stories that lead to continued happiness or success create an uplifting and satisfying emotional response. This positive reinforcement can make your story feel rewarding and inspiring.

Sensory Language

Using sensory details in your storytelling engages the audience on a deeper level, making the story more vivid and immersive. Describing sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste in moments of change or emotional shifts helps the audience “feel” the experience.

- **Sight:** Describe visual details to set the scene or highlight key moments.
- **Smell:** Use smells to evoke memory or set an atmosphere.
- **Hearing:** Sound can intensify emotions, such as the sounds of a celebration or the quiet of a challenging moment.
- **Touch:** Describing tactile sensations can make the story feel more immediate and relatable.
- **Taste:** Taste can evoke powerful memories or sensations that add depth to the experience.

By including these sensory elements at key moments of change, you draw the audience in and make the story resonate more powerfully.

Module 3: Storytelling Case Studies

Case Study 1: Wytheville, VA – Frankie

Story of Rural America – Wytheville, VA: Frankie

This case study focuses on Frankie, a man from a rural community in Wytheville, VA. His journey highlights themes of resilience and overcoming obstacles.



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Key Insights:

- **Character-driven narrative:** Frankie's personal story provides a relatable figure, creating an emotional connection.
- **Clear traits and needs:** Frankie's journey of personal growth is built around the need for community support and resources.
- **Obstacles and transformation:** The obstacles he faces and his eventual success drive the emotional arc from struggle to triumph.

Case Study 2: Abilene, Texas – Functional Zero

Community Solutions – Abilene, Texas: Functional Zero Case Study

This case study tells the story of how Abilene, Texas, reached "functional zero" in addressing homelessness through a community-driven effort.

Key Insights:

- **Collaborative approach:** This case emphasizes the power of collective action in tackling systemic issues.
- **Focus on solutions:** The story moves from identifying the problem of homelessness to describing the solutions being implemented.
- **Impact and outcomes:** This case study highlights measurable changes that stem from a community-wide effort, showing the importance of working together to make meaningful change.

Conclusion

In this unit, we've explored the importance of storytelling in philanthropy and how to tell stories that honor the dignity and humanity of the people you serve. By prioritizing consent, empowering communities, maintaining transparency, and focusing on solutions, we can share impactful stories without perpetuating stereotypes or harming the individuals we aim to support. Remember, the stories we tell shape how others perceive our work and our communities. By approaching storytelling with care and respect, we can build trust, inspire action, and create lasting, positive change.