3 Tips for Telling Stories That Move People to Action

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Heard any good social-change stories lately?

Did they move you to action? Did they make you think different about the meaning of justice? "For purposes of advocacy, a story is only as good as the impact it has on how audiences understand an issue or get involved," says Susan Nall Bales, the founder and executive director of the FrameWorks Institute, a research group that helps nonprofits communicate about social problems. "It's an empirical question whether a story moves audiences to support policies or engage with an issue."

Ms. Bales's team of cognitive and social scientists conducts research on how to frame stories about social issues and trains advocates to create change based on that research. Last month, the group won it a $1 million MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.
Here are a few of the organization's findings, which include some unconventional ideas.

Data are more powerful when woven into a story.
The United States puts more people in prison than any other country. Black men have a 32-percent chance of spending time behind bars at some point in their lives compared to a 6-percent chance for white men. During 2010, 18 of every 1,000 men in the U.S. were in prison.
What does that tell you?
Depending on your beliefs, it might indicate that we put too many people in prison or that men commit lots of crimes or that our criminal-justice system is keeping us safe. It may tell you that black men are more than five times more criminal than white men or that our criminal-justice system has a racial bias.

The data alone don't tell you anything.
Given only data, the audience is more likely to mold that information to fit their beliefs than allow it to change their minds.
But when you combine facts and values in a narrative, you're more likely to change public opinion and policy.
That's the conclusion of a 2013 FrameWorks Institute paper on "Framing and Facts" in criminal-justice issues.
"Advocates use a lot of numbers, expecting that those facts will lead to a breakthrough," Ms. Bales says. "It's by embedding the facts into a narrative that gives the data a value. And you need to test the data and the values to get the right story."

Be careful when using vivid examples.
How big a problem is homelessness? And what should we do about it?
Your view depends partly on the kinds of stories you hear.
If you hear a clinical case study of a man who is laid off, gets addicted to drugs, and loses his home, you might have one idea of how common homelessness is. But if you hear that same

man's story told with vivid details and a strong emotional appeal, you're more likely to think the incidence of homelessness is higher.

Homeless advocates might take that to mean they should tell vivid stories to make their audience grasp the problem and take action. Not so fast, say the folks at FrameWorks. Yes, such stories increase the salience of the issue in the public's mind, but there may be a cost.

A dramatic account of one homeless man's experience may lead listeners to empathize with him, or it may also lead them to think his homelessness is his own fault rather than the result, in part, of bad housing policy and other problems in the economy.

This conundrum about personal stories also works the other way, says FrameWorks. If you highlight the story of a man who works his way out of homelessness, then you risk suggesting that anyone who works hard enough can do the same and that people who don't succeed have themselves to blame.

Stories of exemplary individuals should be used only with caution. Before using such a story, FrameWorks says, ask yourself if it would be likely to distort the reality of your issue, to focus on individual rather than social responsibility, or to activate stereotypes in your audience.

Tell success stories about groups of people.
Let's say the man crawls his way out of homelessness, perhaps with the help of a social-service organization. On the surface, it's a perfectly nice success story.

But what is the audience likely to do with that story?

FrameWorks research says people might say, "Good for him!" and leave it at that.

That's why the group recommends against telling "episodic" stories, or stories that zoom in on a particular individual or event. Instead, tell "thematic" stories, ones that zoom out to show a whole issue in context.

Episodic stories tend to de-politicize an issue, while thematic ones highlight the social and political nature of problems like homelessness. The notion of "episodic" and "thematic" frames was pioneered by Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder in their 1989 book *News That Matters*.

To help people understand social problems and inspire them to take action, you might tell another kind of success story. It's one that tells of a community of people — homeless people, their advocates, neighbors, and local legislators — who work together to create sensible public policy to reduce homelessness. Such a story could include shared values that people can unite around; it may put the social problem in context; and it may show the importance of teamwork, so your audience feels capable of making a difference.

By telling success stories about collective triumph, you will prompt your audience to action rather than just sympathy.

To learn more, visit the FrameWorks new page of storytelling resources.

Paul VanDeCarr writes once each month about some of the best nonprofit storytelling and what others can learn from it. Readers can submit examples for consideration in this feature via this online form or e-mail Mr. VanDeCarr at paul@workingnarratives.org.

Mr. VanDeCarr is the managing director of Working Narratives, an organization that collaborates with advocates, artists, policy groups, media-makers and others to "change the story" on the big social justice issues of our time. He is also the author of "Storytelling and Social Change: A Strategy Guide for Grantmakers" and is working on a second edition to be released this year for nonprofits, advocates, and storytellers.