



NationBuilder

STORYBUILDING GUIDE

YOUR STORY IN FOUR STEPS



AUTHOR NOTE

Michael Kass

When I was 15, my neighbors got evicted. The neighborhood was starting to gentrify and the landlord had decided to increase the rent by some absurd, unreachable percentage. I wanted to help--my neighbors were like family--but felt completely powerless. The calculus, Chinese History and Latin books I spent my days immersed in had nothing in them for this situation. **How do you help those who have had everything stripped away find their footing and their voice?**

That question has, in large part, driven me over the past 20 years. Looking for answers has taken me to a career in nonprofit and consulting, working across sectors including social service, healthcare and education. The search has informed my creative life, inviting me to seek out projects that tell the stories we don't normally get to hear. It has only been in the past few years that one answer to the question has revealed itself: **you help them tell their stories.**

As a storyteller, coach and consultant, **I work with people and organizations passionate about making the world a more just and vibrant place.** It might be someone starting a community garden, a start up that's using technology to bring people together, or a small business finding its legs. **Every person, every cause, every organization and business has a story to tell and stories are the most powerful tool we have to connect to each other.** The key is finding the right story to tell to the right people at the right time. That's how we help each other find our voices. That's how we change the world.

Thanks for downloading. I hope it's super useful!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MK' or similar initials.

STORYBUILDING : OVERVIEW

Stories are the most powerful tool we have to connect to each other. They are the basic building blocks of community. Strong stories engage people on a human level and lay the foundation for deep, lasting relationships – the kinds of relationships that create movements and change the world.

Building a leadership or organizational story is about more than crafting a beginning, middle and end. The story you're building will grow from the decisions you make about why you're telling the story, whom you're telling it to, and what you want those people to do.

STEP 1

THE RAW MATERIAL

STEP 2

THE AUDIENCE

STEP 3

THE CALL TO ACTION

STEP 4

PUT IT TOGETHER



STEP 1

THE RAW MATERIAL

One of the most common challenges for leaders developing stories is the feeling that their story isn't interesting, dramatic, or compelling enough to share. The questions and exercises in this section will help you uncover the riveting stories that are hiding all around you. Often, we take our most interesting and powerful stories for granted.



HERE ARE SOME WAYS TO UNCOVER GREAT RAW MATERIALS QUICKLY

1 • PEAKS AND VALLEYS

Take five uninterrupted minutes to write a list of peak experiences, either for yourself, your team, or your organization. What have the major victories been? Setbacks? Key moments of decision that may have looked small from the outside, but have helped define your direction? **Peak experiences tend to be inflection points**, key moments of change in your story.

2 • EMOTIONAL TIMELINES

Pick a major emotion like joy, grief, belonging or love and take five uninterrupted minutes to think of times, personal or professional, that you felt that emotion. What happened? And what was the impact of that event? See if you can come up with examples from different periods of your (or your organization's) life: youth, adolescence, adulthood. Then look at the themes that start to emerge!

3 • HOST A STORY CIRCLE

If you're on the hunt for organizational stories, you can **invite team members to share stories** of memorable moments or interactions they've had. Asking people to remember moments of gratitude or connection is a great prompt. In addition to generating grist for the story mill, Story Circles also help build connections between team members.



As you start to uncover stories, you can **start a 'Story File' and fill it with anecdotes, notes and ideas**. Then when it's time to craft a story, you'll have the raw material ready to go.



STEP 2

THE AUDIENCE

Figuring out who you're speaking or writing to before putting your story together helps ensure that the story you tell connects and inspires.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

HERE ARE A FEW QUESTIONS TO ASK



WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE? DEMOGRAPHICALLY? POLITICALLY? SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY?



HOW MUCH DO THEY KNOW ABOUT YOU AND YOUR WORK?



WHAT IS THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO YOU AND YOUR WORK?



WHAT ARE THEY PASSIONATE ABOUT?



WHAT COMMUNITIES ARE THEY A PART OF?

The answers to these questions inform much more than the shape and content of the story you're building. They also help you determine the most effective format for your story. If your audience tends to skew older demographically, for example, you may want to deliver your story via traditional mail or email. **Younger audiences may respond more effectively to video or social media.**



STEP 3

THE CALL TO ACTION

At the end of a strong story, your audience will be primed and ready to jump in, excited to be a part of the journey. A strong call to action ensures that this connection doesn't go to waste!



HERE ARE THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF A STRONG CALL TO ACTION

1 • SPECIFIC

What specific action can your audience take right then and there to get involved? It might be sending a text message, signing an email list, making a contribution--**whatever it is, make sure it's specific.**

2 • ACTIONABLE

Make sure that it's do-able. Something like 'end world hunger' is specific, but not actionable.

3 • MEANINGFUL

People hate wasting their time and effort. Make sure that you're asking them to **do something that matters** and that they understand how their action fits into the larger effort!



STEP 4

PUT IT TOGETHER!

All strong stories in Western culture, whether personal, professional, or purely for entertainment, have the same basic structure. Once you know this structure, you see it everywhere from commercials to Pixar movies. Here it is:

1 • EXPOSITION

We meet the main character and find out what they want. **Even organizational stories are about people.** Who is your protagonist, what is their goal and what stands between them and their goal?

2 • CALL TO ACTION / CHALLENGE

Something happens that sets the main character out on a journey or quest. **What is the inciting incident for your protagonist?** What challenge or conflict do they face?

3 • CLIMAX

Something significant shifts for the main character. If the story is about a leader, it may be the moment when your protagonist discovers their vision or purpose. **It's the moment that the challenge is met, either successfully or unsuccessfully.** What is this key moment for your protagonist?

4 • FALLING ACTION

The events of the climax have changed things in a fundamental way for the protagonist. **The falling action shows how this change affects his or her world.**

5 • RESOLUTION


The end of the journey. What has your main character learned through the journey? Did they attain their initial goal? How did this change their situation? And, now, what's next? For them? For the organization?





AS YOU SHAPE YOUR STORY,

keep in mind that the strongest stories have three characteristics in addition to being well structured.



1 • SPECIFICITY

The details of your story will bring it to life. Appeal to the audience's senses--sight, smell, touch--in painting a picture. **Getting the right level of specificity takes some practice.** Too much and you'll overwhelm the audience with detail. Too little and they won't be able to imagine the scene.

2 • AUTHENTICITY

It can be tempting to add a little extra drama to your story by tweaking the facts. **Challenge yourself to keep your story authentic.** This may require a deeper level of vulnerability than feels comfortable, but it will be worth it!

3 • INCLUSIVITY

Make sure that your audience feels included in the story. They're not passive bystanders, they're an integral part of the journey.



NEXT STEPS

WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR STORIES

When you're comfortable with your story and ready to share it with your audience, you'll find that there are as many applications of story as there are stories. Here are a just a few of them.



MAKE YOUR FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGNS MORE EMOTIONALLY RESONANT AND EFFECTIVE.



ACKNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTIONS OF VOLUNTEERS OR FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTORS.



BUILD STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAFF AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS.



CREATE A THRIVING, VITAL COMPANY CULTURE.



CRAFT AND SHARE AN AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP STORY THAT WILL RALLY PEOPLE TO YOUR WORK.

Ultimately, stories and storytelling are much more than a tool to connect. They can form the foundation of a strong culture based on passion, authentic expression and connection. And **it all starts with a story.**



LEARN MORE

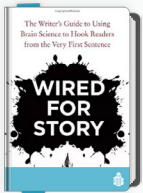


This guide is far from comprehensive. Here are some great resources to help deepen your knowledge of story and storytelling

BOOKS



STORY TELLING ANIMAL
by Jonathan Gottschall



WIRED FOR STORY
by Lisa Cron



THE STORY FACTOR
by Annette Simmons

VIDEOS



NONPROFIT ORIGIN STORY



CORPORATE TRANSFORMATION STORY



USING STORIES TO ANCHOR A PITCH

QUESTIONS ABOUT NATIONBUILDER?

Send us an email or give us a call
info@nationbuilder.com - 213-394-4623

QUESTIONS ABOUT STORY?

Contact our story coach
mkass@nationbuilder.com



