



Strategically Framing ‘Success Stories’

Many nonprofit organizations use success stories to highlight the impact of their organization. Focusing on *solutions beyond problems* is an effective framing strategy – it combats compassion fatigue and increases the public’s sense of collective efficacy. However, if the success story is highly episodic, focusing on single events and the psychology of individuals, then it does little to help the public understand the broader issue, and it can contribute to the thinking that only exceptional individuals can or should be involved in civic efforts. On the other hand, when thematic storytelling provides a compelling, memorable way for people to think about broader contexts and collective action, it can help the public more accurately attribute responsibility for social problems and think more productively about meaningful solutions.

The story that needs to be told about change and improvement can be told in a way that connects to the American public’s model of community problem-solving. But it requires a kind of reversal of the usual elements that have guided the case study or advocacy profile in the past. Rather than starting with the hero, the new story starts with the solution to a problem. Rather than focusing in tightly on one personality, the new story includes more of the men and women that did the work. Rather than stressing the uniqueness of the individual, the new story explains how an ordinary person came to do extraordinary things and where they learned to lead.

The contrasting examples below are fictitious and admittedly a bit tongue-in-cheek. That said – how might you, as a strategic framer, apply the thematic story elements to ‘widen the lens’ on a success story your organization tells?

Episodic – The Triumphant Individual

Horace Daley is a hero, recognized by the Child Advocacy Network of Greater Narnia for his leadership of the Citizens Clout project that organized churches and small business owners in a poor section of town to lobby the mayor for badly needed essential services. When tragedy struck his family, and his wife was left to die without emergency aid, Horace Daley began to organize. He established a network, a phone tree and fathers’ brigades, and saw that every community member raised their voice to the city’s elected and appointed leadership. Postcards appeared magically in barber shops and grocery stores, all hand addressed to the power elite. Elderly people who had never registered to vote joined the voter rolls. A brilliant orator and respected father of two young sons, Horace had the community’s respect. His message: citizens can get the clout to change the community. His tireless advocacy on the community’s behalf has made change a reality for poor families in Narnia in the form of cleaner parks, more available social services and a ready ear in city hall. “We need a hundred more Horace Daleys,” said the Board chairman of the Child Advocacy Network in making the award Tuesday.

Thematic – The Benevolent, Active Community

STORY ELEMENT: *A serious problem needed to be addressed.*

The Narnia Park section of Houston had been ignored for more than twenty years by the city’s main agencies, making it virtually unlivable for families.

STORY ELEMENT: *Establish size and scope of problem, contextualize.*

Like many other urban centers, Narnia Park rarely saw a policeman arrest a drug dealer, a landlord hauled in for negligence or public endangerment, or a liquor license turned down by the licensing board. There was little punishment for politicians who neglected Narnia Park, since voter turnout was low and it was hardly breaking news that troubles plagued Narnia Park.

STORY ELEMENT: A solution was found, or progress was made.

While Narnia Park is hardly perfect today, children can play in its public parks where once only gangs roamed. And even in small ways – the presence of an ambulance, the sign of a cop on an afternoon beat – Narnia Park has changed for the better.

STORY ELEMENT: A group of people came together.

This is the result of a group of ordinary citizens who, five years ago, had had enough and decided to make a difference. This is their story, the story of Citizens Clout, told through the lens of a leader who brought them together.

STORY ELEMENT: It took teamwork. It took lots of different people and skills.

Barbara Reynolds remembers the long hours of organizing her first tenants meeting to set standards for group spaces. "There was so much cynicism. We had to find a way to let people see the landlords could be held accountable." Jimmy Jones organized fathers at the local filling stations. First he asked them to...then he closed in on them to.... And every night, after she put her three kids to bed, Mae Pines called two moms on her phone tree to....

STORY ELEMENT: Introduce the leader as catalyst, team organizer, an emblem of the community, not an exception.

But most people say it was Horace Daley who really got the ball rolling for Citizens Clout. He wasn't always a leader, just an ordinary dad with young sons and a 10-hour a day job.

STORY ELEMENT: Establish motivation, how s/he connected to the problem; a turning point is reached.

Daley had lost his wife when the local ambulance service took two hours to respond to her medical emergency. They got lost, according to the driver. "They wouldn't have gotten lost if they responded to more calls," says Pines. For Daley, it was the last straw. "I pay taxes and so do my neighbors, but we were being shut out of community life, erased from the rolls of basic human services. I wasn't going to let it go any further."

STORY ELEMENT: Demonstrate how leadership was learned.

Daley works each day as a teller at Narnia Central Bank. A graduate of Narnia High, he played basketball under the legendary Coach Billy Mitchell. "He always taught us to go for the goal, and not to get distracted. I think what I did for Citizens Clout was to become the coach we all needed."

STORY ELEMENT: Show the leader as an ear and a voice.

Daley spent time in each of the major churches listening to the people who were trying to organize the first tenants strike. Then he worked with three volunteer ministers to develop a "Declaration of Decency," a kind of proclamation of people's rights. When it was read in 22 churches on June 2, it found its way to the mayor's desk as well. "Suddenly we were not crying in the wilderness any more," says Daley.

STORY ELEMENT: Problems got solved.

When at last it came, change came quickly. One Sunday in July, the Greater Narnia municipal garbage truck showed up to join Citizens Clout leaders in a park clean up. Then the mayor held an informal meeting with a group of Narnia landlords. It was Daley's idea to have the 22 local ministers supply the benedictions. The next week three liquor licenses pending in the area were withdrawn. Has it made a difference? Narnia old-timer Ben Littleton says he can walk to the grocery now without being scared of the streets.

STORY ELEMENT: Problems stayed solved.

Today, where once there was an abandoned cannery, children read in a daycare center staffed by teachers-in-training from Greater Narnia's community college. Things are looking up for Narnia, and the data proves it....Next on the agenda, say the leaders of Citizens Clout: an after-school arts program and a fresh food co-op.

STORY ELEMENT: We can learn from this.

Daley thinks more communities could make the rebound Narnia did if they had more regular access to the local power structure. "Our problem wasn't lack of concern. We were plenty concerned," says Ben Littleton. "It was clout," says Daley. "People couldn't get anyone to pay attention so they gave up. When they rediscovered their power as voters, things changed. Now our parishioners lunch with the mayor just about every month, and when they don't, they send him nice, long letters."