



Framing Success Stories

The “V.I.P.” Approach



Talking about impact

For nonprofits, sharing information about positive impact isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. Knowing that the work is making a difference helps to keep staff and members motivated. Hearing about a project's momentum can inspire more people to join the effort. And when nonprofits are known for catalyzing and driving change, they have more credibility with the decision-makers who they need to influence – and the supporters they need to attract.

This resource is designed to help nonprofits identify and share more effective success stories – and to avoid ways of talking about impact that are underpowered or unproductive.

Framing impact

THE SHAPE OF THE STORY MATTERS

Because every NGO needs to talk about its impact, it's important to keep in mind that some ways of talking about success can fall flat or undermine other goals. If evidence of impact is shared only through numbers – without narrative – the communication is likely to have little effect.

Yet, not any story will do. Stories that reinforce negative stereotypes about marginalized communities and populations slow the journey toward equity. Stories that position the nonprofit as a superhero, leaping long-standing social obstacles in a single bound, usually come off as too self-congratulatory. Feel-good stories that revolve around a nonprofit “rescuing” people who are experiencing challenges may spark warm responses, but offer only a little-picture view of social problems that we need to tackle in bigger-picture ways.

When we learn to reshape our stories, we can help to shift mindsets in ways that bring structures and systems into view – while highlighting our role in changing them.

Every nonprofit needs to share its impact. The way those stories are framed makes a difference.

Story elements

THE INGREDIENTS THAT MAKE A STORY A STORY

Stories, as compared to other ways of organizing and sharing ideas, are more memorable and compelling. The first step to getting better at sharing your impact is to make sure that you're taking advantage of the power of story. It's critical to keep in mind that for something to count as a *story*, it must depict a change over time.

Numbers need narrative. Many communicators dress up their data in with slick fonts, attractive colors, and other graphic design elements – only to find that it doesn't make a splash. To dress your impact data to impress, wrap it into a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.

The basic elements of a true story are already familiar to you: setting, characters, and plot. To arrange these ingredients to tell a success story, follow this outline:

- **Setting:** There was an important problem to be solved.
- **Characters:** The right group came together.
- **Action:** The group put in effort, using its mix of skills and know-how.
- **Outcome:** Things changed for the better!
- **Moral:** We can learn from this.

The sections that follow show how this outline can be used to create success stories on three winning themes: *Victory*, *Ingenuity*, and *Progress*.

Meet the VIPs

THREE THEMES FOR NGO SUCCESS STORIES

Your impact stories will have more impact if you build them around one of three winning themes: Victory, Ingenuity, or Progress.

- **Victory:** Together, we stopped a problem from causing harm.
- **Ingenuity:** Together, we solved a puzzle that unlocked new possibilities.
- **Progress:** Together, we moved forward toward an important goal.

The “Victory” theme is helpful for showing off successes that involve a clear positive outcome – a definitive change with compelling evidence behind it. By shaping the story to focus on the triumph of an organization over a social problem or condition, the story arc leads people to understand the underlying factors at play. Don’t take this theme as advice to tell the story of victory over an opponent. Oppositional framing can lead people to assume that your work is just “politics as usual,” then dismiss it as partisan posturing.

The “Ingenuity” theme can work well when the win is highly technical, or when you worry that the fix might seem inconsequential to people who don’t know the issue well. By focusing on the puzzle or dilemma your organization was solving, you draw audiences into the plot and help the success make sense in context.

The “Progress” theme is helpful for highlighting incremental progress toward a longer-term goal. By lifting up both what has been accomplished and what is left to be done, you remind people that major change takes sustained effort and support.

By relying on these themes, it’s less likely that your organization will fall into the trap of telling stories that reinforce negative stereotypes, anti-government sentiment, or other unproductive ideas.

If you aren't sure which theme works best for a particular story, don't overthink it; just get started. The next section, which explains how to integrate the story elements and these themes, might provide the inspiration you need!

VIP Story Arcs

Once you've decided on a theme, it's time to elaborate on it and turn it into a story. The outlines below can help you decide what to include and what can be left out. We don't recommend repeating them word-for-word; they are intended to illustrate the points that should be put into your own words, with details from the situation you're talking about.

VICTORY

- **Setting:** There was a situation that wasn't in line with our shared values.
- **Characters:** A group of us came together.
- **Action:** We each contributed different skills and expertise to tackle the problem.
- **Outcome:** The problem was solved!
- **Moral:** We can learn from this! With teamwork and solidarity, we can make a real difference.

INGENUITY

- **Setting:** There was a tricky situation that was hard to figure out.
- **Characters:** A group of us came together. We took a fresh look at the situation. We came up with new ideas, and we borrowed some good ideas from elsewhere.
- **Action:** We gave the new approach a try. (Optional: It didn't work right away, so we made adjustments.)
- **Outcome:** It worked!
- **Moral:** We can learn from this! With ingenuity, we can make a difference, even on problems that seem unsolvable.

PROGRESS

- **Setting:** Conditions were changing – but the way things were handled hadn't caught up.
- **Characters:** A group of us came together.
- **Action:** We updated things. We got rid of what wasn't serving us anymore. We embraced more modern, forward-thinking ideas.
- **Outcome:** It worked better!
- **Moral:** We can learn from this! By making changes together today, we create a better tomorrow.

Putting It All Together

SHAPING AND SHARING STORIES

Begin by articulating your story in a single sentence, using the story arc for the theme. Taking this step forces you to decide on the change you will depict and how to word it.

If your organization was instrumental in the adoption of a new policy on student discipline, your story sentence on the theme of Victory might be, "Together, we pushed schools to stop suspending students and adopt more effective approaches to unwanted behavior." Or, you could talk about the same win in terms of Ingenuity: "Together, we figured out how to move schools away from suspending students and toward more effective approaches to conflicts and unwanted behaviors."

Here are three more examples:

Victory: Adoption of a more equitable formula for funding school districts.

"Together, we ensured that schools in every community are funded more fairly."

Ingenuity: Unique student identifier system

"Together, we figured out a new way to know how well schools are serving students."

Progress: Improved student advising system.

“Together, we replaced one-size-fits-all student guidance with a more personalized approach.”

With the basic story arc in mind, flesh out the various story elements, following the outline. Each section of the outline may take a sentence or two. An example is provided on the next page.

Add details that are unusual or surprising when you can. Find turns of phrase and images that help the story come to life for the reader.

When you have a draft of your story, ask others in your organization to review it before sharing it externally. Others may notice opportunities for sharing the credit more broadly, or offer other ideas that improve the story. And once the story is polished, be sure to share it across the organization— to remind colleagues of their impact, and to equip them to share with others.

While working with this outline and themes should make it easier to generate stories, it still takes time and effort. That makes it important to make the most of each story you create. You can do this by translating a single story into multiple formats. One story can live out multiple lives as a slide in a presentation, a short piece of content on your website, a guest blog post, and a featured narrative in your annual report. You can point to each of those iterations through social media, multiple times. Over time, it’s a good idea to create at least a dozen posts that point to the same content.

In the mission-driven sector, we all share a need to explain why our work matters and illustrate that it makes a difference. Doing this work well takes effort and energy. We hope that this resource amplifies the yield of that energy, shining a brighter light on the critical work you do.

Sample Success Story: Innovative Cohort

Story Arc: Ingenuity.

“Together, we figured out a way to spark change across a huge system.”

For our communities to thrive, we need to ensure that all young people are able to pursue and attain career training or a degree after high school. When our systems can provide widespread post-secondary education, we collectively benefit not only from a skilled workforce and increased tax revenue, but from the broader community wellbeing that arises when people have meaningful work that sustains their families.

Yet, high quality education or training after high school is expensive. Too often, class schedules and requirements are designed in ways that don't work for students who need to maintain employment while enrolled or meet family responsibilities. These design flaws have a deeper impact on students of color, who are less likely to receive effective career and college counseling as high school students, less likely to have family or friends who can help them figure out their options, and more likely to be sent the message that they don't quite fit in on campus.

It's hard to tackle this issue campus-by-campus because there are more than 5,000 colleges and universities across the country, not to mention thousands more vocational schools that train people for technical trades. That's why a coalition of “intermediary organizations” - nonprofits that work with networks of these higher education institutions - came together to generate and test ideas that could make a positive difference across a huge post-secondary education system.

Each organization in the coalition works with higher education campuses in a different way. One focuses on helping community colleges become stronger “bridges” between high schools and four-year colleges. Another trains college faculty and staff to gather and analyze information about problems students are facing, then design new programs or practices to address the issues. Some of the organizations have proven ways to help colleges be more welcoming and responsive to students from different communities that face discrimination, including rural students, immigrant students, and US-born students who are Black, Indigenous, or Latinx.

By coming together to share ideas, learn together, and make changes in their own ways of working, this coalition has realized that a few key intermediaries can influence an entire system for the better. Together, they already have partnerships with three-fourths of the higher education institutions in the nation. As they continue to collaborate and learn, each will improve their own approach and collectively, they will develop new strategies to ensure that our post-secondary system works for the diverse set of students who will take up the work and leadership we need for the future.

Acknowledgments

This publication was created for Intermediaries for Scale, an initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It is adapted and revised from a publication created with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of project sponsors.

FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit research organization that helps mission-driven organizations build public will for progressive change. We do this through research, training, and strategic partnerships.