

How to Create Nonprofit Stories that Inspire

Good stories are always people stories, says Andy Goodman, a nationally recognized speaker, author, and consultant in the field of public interest communications and the director of [The Goodman Center](#). In his second interview with The Bridgespan Group he discusses how to create stories that can move people to act and points out the biggest mistakes nonprofits make when storytelling.

Read Andy Goodman's first interview: "[Why Nonprofits Need to be Storytellers](#)"

Bridgespan: What makes a good story?

Andy Goodman: First, stories always start by naming your protagonist. Who is the person I'm going to follow in this story? Who is my guide? Who will I identify with? And once I know who they are, fix them in time and space. [For example] this is a story about Carol; she's in Boston in the year 2013. She's sitting in her office minding her own business. And then something happens that throws her world out of balance. She's doing her job and then somebody walks in and says, "Carol we need to do a series of blogs about storytelling. Go find somebody, interview them, and write it up; make it happen." She's given an assignment, which is what we call the inciting incident. Now her world is out of balance and it won't be back in balance until she does what she has to do. She now has a goal: She has to go create this series.

So you start with a protagonist, you introduce her to your audience, you let them see her world in balance, and then something changes. There's an inciting incident and now this protagonist has a goal.

But don't be confused by the term "world in balance" because if you're telling the story about an addict living on the street, and one day he decides he has to get clean, living on the street is his world in balance. It's awful, it's terrible, it's chaotic, but that's the way it is. Balance doesn't always mean you're starting from a good point.

The next thing that happens, that's absolutely critical to all stories, is that our **protagonist has to run into some kind of barrier** on the way to the goal. Something has to stand in her way; there has to be some struggle for the goal because that's where the audience gets interested.

The Basic Rules of Storytelling

1. Name your protagonist.
2. Fix him or her in time and space.
3. Create an inciting incident, something that throws his or her world out of balance.
4. Describe the barriers the protagonist runs into on the way to achieving the goal.
5. Celebrate achieving the goal. Or if the goal wasn't met, share lessons learned along the way.

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How a protagonist overcomes obstacles tells us a lot about her, or tells us about the organization that's helping her, and with every new barrier, it creates more drama, more tension. This is what we call the **rising action of the story**.

The barriers, the obstacles, the surprises are critically important. This is where nonprofits tend to fall down. I joke about this when I do my workshops, often saying that the model for nonprofit storytelling is: "People were in pain. We launched this program to help them. They're better now. Give me money." That's the basic nonprofit story. Now that may be essentially what happened, but what's interesting is the stuff along the way.

Then at the end, once you've negotiated the last barrier and you get to the resolution of the story, you've **achieved the goal**, and you've seen along the way how you got there. Or you didn't get to the goal, surprise. But you learned something along the way.

This is the human experience of storytelling that's been practiced for thousands of years. And when I tell nonprofits this, when you tell a story that has all these pieces, something very deep starts vibrating in the hearts and the minds of the people you're talking to because they recognize this is a story that has it all.

How does a nonprofit leader know his or her organization has crafted the "right story"—the story that's going to achieve its goals with stakeholders?

Goodman: When you think you have a good story, try it out on internal audiences, and just say: "What do you think of this story? Does it hold your interest? Do you know what's coming? Were you surprised? Did it move you in any way?" Stories are designed to engage, surprise, move, and create an emotional response at the end that makes people want to join or give or do or change. So you can test that out.

In some cases, internal audiences may be so close to the story that you have to assemble your own informal focus group of people who don't know anything about the story and just try it out on them.

Should everyone in the organization have the same story to tell?

Goodman: I'm not a big believer that an organization can be represented by a single story. And I'm not a big believer in the elevator story. I've seen too many examples where organizations do so many different things and deliver so many different benefits that one story often doesn't capture it all.

So I give the nonprofits I work with a list of the six categories, and say "these are the buckets you need to fill with stories—at least one in each bucket." (See the sidebar "A Nonprofit's Sacred Bundle.") Armed with those stories, your executive director, a staff member, a board member, a volunteer can pull out the right story at the right time for the right person, regardless of the situation.

What are the biggest mistakes nonprofits make when creating their stories?

Goodman: One of them I alluded to earlier is the story without barriers—the "We came, we saw, we conquered" [approach to storytelling]. [In this approach] people just want to show that "we make a difference." They don't tell a story with twists or turns, surprises, or anything that suggests that it wasn't just a straight road to success.

A related problem is not doing enough homework on the story to make it feel truly authentic—not finding the details that make the protagonist really unique and the journey really interesting. Another problem happens when there is *no* protagonist in the story. Nonprofits often don't want to brag and they want to make their organizations the protagonist. As a result, there's nobody to identify with. Good stories are always people stories. And if we cannot identify with someone, we cannot get into a story. We need human beings; human beings need human beings in a story to be sort of their avatar, to let them enter the world of the story.

Also related is the mistake I call “the black box.” It's when you tell a story where you've described the problem very clearly, and on the other side of the problem the solution is very clear as to where the person's going and in the middle is his or her encounter with the organization where you work your magic. But what you've actually done is not really clear. It's like a troubled person on the street comes in contact with a nonprofit, works with them for six months, and thanks to the loving care of its staff, she is now a healthy person. But what the nonprofit actually did and how it did it is not really clear.

When is it time to create a new story?

Goodman: You need a new story when the current one doesn't illicit the response that you want or doesn't communicate the point any longer. When I ask a person to write a story, the first thing I ask him or her to do is write down the point he or she wants the story to convey about the organization's work: a single declarative sentence.

Then, when you tell the story, you ask people at the end: “If there's one thing you take away from this story, what would it be?” If it's not the point you intended, then you probably need to go back and adjust because you have not delivered your message.

Sidebar: A Nonprofit's “Sacred Bundle”

When Andy Goodman works with nonprofits, he teaches them six categories of stories that he feels every nonprofit should collect; it's what he calls a nonprofit's “sacred bundle.” Below he defines the categories and helps you think about how to approach developing stories to fill your own bundle.

The nature of our challenge story: This story describes the problem that you are trying to address with your programs/services. “Too often, we express this as a number,” warns Goodman. “One student drops out every 26 seconds; there's been a 17 percent increase in X,” he adds, “but people don't respond to numbers the same way they respond to stories.” If nonprofits want those outside of their organizations to understand what they're doing, they need to tell them a story about people, families, and communities, which illustrate the challenge.

The creation story: This is the “how we started” story. “It's primarily for internal use,” Goodman says, “but I think everybody who works in an organization should know it.” This story shares who started the organization, why it was started, and when it was started.

The emblematic success story: Are you having an impact? This story, primarily for external use, is the story that says “yes” but also that your organization makes a difference in a particular way that's unique.

“Particularly, in the nonprofit world, there's so much overlap in what organizations do that if I'm an environmental organization, and I'm fighting global warming, and we're making progress, well great,” Goodman says. “But why should I give my money to you as opposed to the

Environmental Defense Fund or Union of Concerned Scientists, or World Wildlife?” This story shares your unique approach and why it works.

The values story: These are the stories through which your organization shows how it lives into its core values. Many organizations have the same set of core values-collaboration, integrity, respect, etc.-so to be unique you need to describe how your organization specifically lives into those values and expresses those values.

The striving to improve story: This story is for internal use and says “sometimes we fall short, sometimes we outright fail, but we always learn from our mistakes and do better next time,” Goodman says. These stories are healthy for internal culture—they are the stories that you can use to show empathy. “You can throw your arm around someone’s shoulder and say, ‘you know, it happens, we’re humans,’” says Goodman.

The where we are going story: This is a story that says if your organization does its job right, this is what it will look like in five to 10 years. “But all too often we will sort of confine this to numbers: If we do our job right, there will be 10 percent less of this; 17,000 people will experience that,” says Goodman. “Again those are numbers, and they don’t get people’s blood racing.”

“But if you can give them a vision, actually take them into that world and say ‘Let me take you into Boston, in the year 2020’ and walk around the streets and show you how it’s different because of your nonprofits’ work—now you have something that people can feel,” adds Goodman. (For an example of this see the Anti-Defamation League video “[Imagine a World without Hate](#).”)