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Public Health Reaching Across Sectors

A PARTNERSHIP OF
de Beaumont Foundation
The Aspen Institute

Strategic Storytelling For Public Health Messengers

A Research-Based Toolkit

JULY 2020

How To Use This Toolkit

This toolkit will empower you to confidently tell Strategic Stories about public health. These stories can raise awareness of public health initiatives among key audiences and inspire those audiences to take action to help achieve your goals.

We hope this toolkit will serve as a source of both inspiration and practical guidance. It includes a number of tools to help you become a more confident storyteller, including:

The Science of Storytelling, including insights from psychology and cognitive science that explain why storytelling is the most effective way to help non-experts understand and embrace a complex topic.

Strategic Storytelling Guidance to ensure that your stories aren't just inspiring but also motivational for the audiences you need to reach.

Storytelling Insights for Sector-Specific Audiences, offering tailored insights for adapting stories to leaders in housing, education, health systems, business, and other sectors.

The Public Health Story Map to help you put pen to paper and begin crafting compelling stories about your work.

Common Storytelling Challenges to help you navigate questions that are likely to arise as you start telling stories about your work.

Methodology

This toolkit synthesizes several bodies of research to offer practical lessons for public health storytelling, including:

Insights From Psychology and Cognitive Science: These lessons explain how our brains process information through stories.

In-Depth Interviews With Public Health Messengers: We conducted interviews with 15 public health practitioners from a range of large, small, urban, and rural health departments across the country. These interviews explored their challenges telling stories about their work and identified the tools, information, and resources they would need to be more effective storytellers.

Focus Groups: Four focus groups were conducted in San Jose, California, and Nashville, Tennessee with active citizens—defined in this case as those who vote regularly, meet a threshold of civic and community engagement, and share information about issues that are important to them. Participants were recruited to represent a range of demographics. These conversations explored the ideas people associate with public health and the tangible examples and stories that encourage them to support the field.

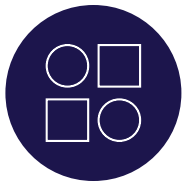
Research With Other Sectors: Research from peer discourse sessions and one-on-one interviews with leaders in business, health care, education, and the housing sector was conducted as part of a Strategic Frame Analysis® by the FrameWorks Institute. Strategic Frame Analysis® is an approach that has been shown to increase understanding of, and engagement in, conversations about public health and other scientific and social issues.

The Science Of Storytelling

Storytelling has always been one of humanity's primary forms of communication. Stories help us make sense of the world, teach us important skills, and inform our sense of right and wrong. Processing information through stories holds several evolutionary advantages. Stories help us:

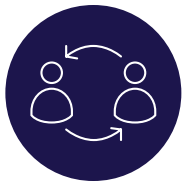
Understand cause–and–effect relationships.

Stories are shortcuts for our brains to understand why "this causes that." Understanding cause–and–effect relationships focuses our minds on the people affected by a problem, what caused it, and the people who can change it. This is important in a field like public health—where individuals can seem invisible within a complex system.



See patterns in important information.

Our brains strive to recognize patterns that help us make sense of complex information. The desire to identify patterns is why we stay engaged in compelling stories—our brains want to know what's going to happen next. And just as important, identifying patterns in what affects our health can help people understand the need for a public health approach.



Empathize with people.

There's a reason we find ourselves crying during sad movies and on edge during horror films. Our brains have "mirror neurons" that mimic the emotions of people we observe. Because of this, stories give us the power to help our audience empathize with others, including with those who would benefit from public health programs and policies.

Pay attention.

Stories engage a much larger part of our brain than other information. Different parts of our brain are responsible for processing sight, sounds, vivid imagery, emotions, etc. When we tell a story that stimulates these senses, our brains fire on more cylinders—which means we're more likely to pay attention and remember what we're hearing.

These insights help explain why storytelling is one of the most effective forms of communication and is especially well–suited for communications about public health. In the following pages, we'll share practical steps for crafting strategic stories about your work.

Strategic Storytelling Guidance

To help achieve your goals, the stories you tell have to be strategic. A strategic story is not merely interesting or inspirational—it is designed to motivate a specific audience to help you achieve your goal.

Crafting strategic stories starts with a clear understanding of your audience and your purpose. You can get started by answering a few basic questions:

What is your shared goal for collaboration?

Clearly articulate a specific goal that you are working toward together. Be vivid, and give the audience a picture of how their community or world will be safer, healthier, and more prosperous if your work is successful. In a story, you can help your audience envision your goal by describing your protagonist's aspirations. ("She hopes to live in a community where…")

Who can help you achieve that goal?

Your audience should walk away understanding their role in helping you reach an outcome. Try to keep it positive by focusing on what your audience can add. Include characters like them in your story so they can empathize with the people their actions will benefit.

What do you want your audience to know, feel, and do?

Stories can affect an audience in three ways: increasing their awareness, changing their attitude, or inspiring them to action. Plan how you want to influence your audience—what you want them to know, feel, or do after hearing your story—so that you can adjust the story accordingly.

KNOW	FEEL	DO
What do you hope your story will make them more aware of?	What emotions do you hope your story will provoke?	What actions should your story motivate them to take?

Storytelling Insights For Sector-Specific Audiences

The **Public Health Story Map** can be used to tell stories to any audience, including the general public. However, research identified specific insights that can inform stories aimed at sector-specific audiences, including housing, business, education, and health systems. Below, we've described those insights and how the Public Health Story Map can help you address them.

Share vivid success stories that link cross-sector collaborations to the concrete benefits they deliver.
Other sectors may not understand how collaboration would work. The Public Health Story Map will help you share memorable success stories that help audiences visualize how you would work together.

Illustrate how the field of public health is transforming to meet 21st-century needs.
Audiences from other sectors may have an outdated view of public health's role. Stories can help you demonstrate how public health has evolved to protect health in an interconnected world.

Leverage allies and public health professionals working in or with other sectors as messengers.
Sector-specific audiences are proud of their expertise and may not see how public health experts can add to it. The Public Health Story Map demonstrates how to bring in allies from other sectors to validate your work.

Frame collaboration as empowerment.
Other sectors can be wary of being told what to do. The Public Health Story Map will help you tell stories that demonstrate how collaboration is mutually beneficial.

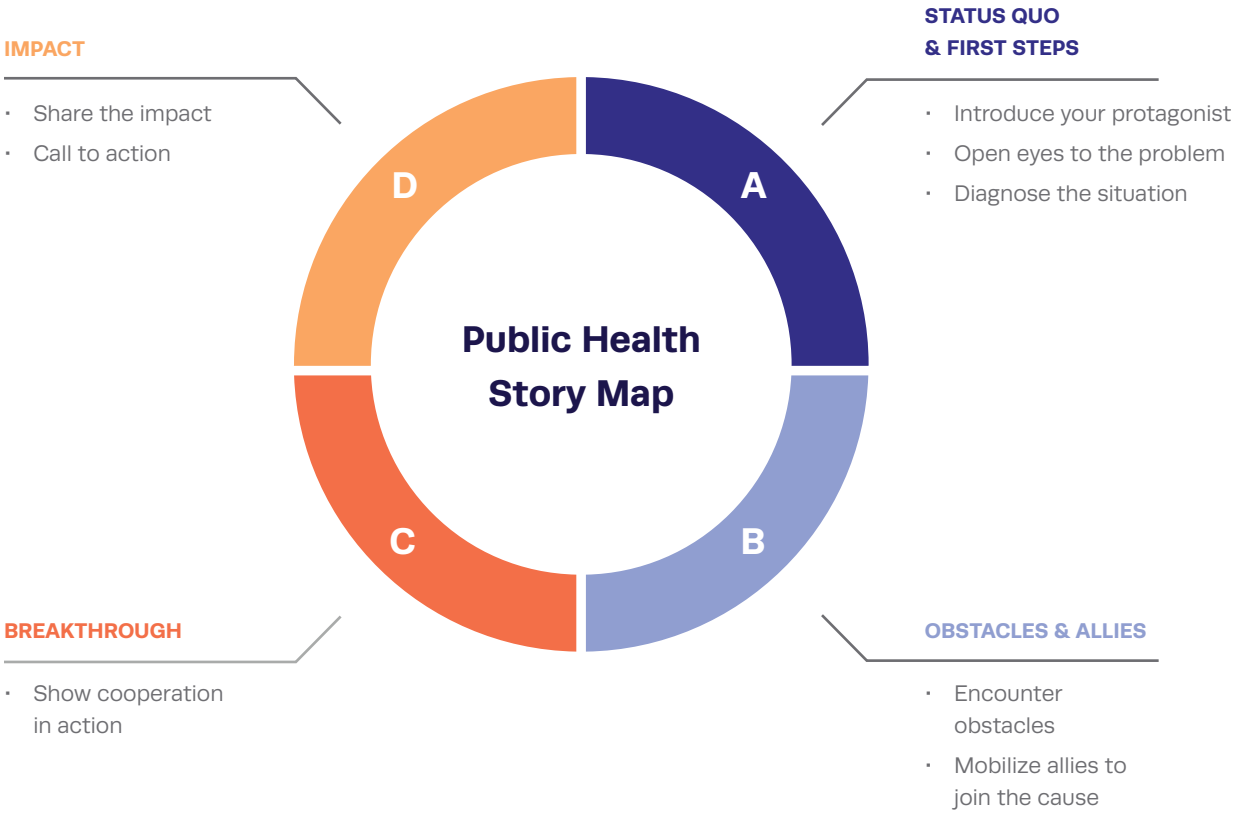
Foreground public health's data expertise.
Sector-specific audiences see the value in concrete data that helps them navigate challenges. The Public Health Story Map identifies how to incorporate data expertise into a story without making it technical or dry.

Keep it positive.
Being alarmist can demotivate other sectors from wanting to collaborate. The Public Health Story Map can help you frame challenges as opportunities and share examples of constructive actions that audiences can take to help.

The Public Health Story Map: How To Craft Strategic Stories

To help tell stories about public health, we've created the **Public Health Story Map**. It is adapted from the Hero's Journey, a tried-and-true model used to structure stories that capture people's attention and imagination. It is a "formula" based on research about storytelling across different cultures. Familiarizing yourself with the Public Health Story Map will not only help you craft stories—it will also help you identify stories by giving you clues about what elements you should be looking for.

The Public Health Story Map helps you structure your story around a narrative arc. There are eight steps that you can use to map out your story from beginning to end. Some stories may cover all the steps, and some may touch on only a few—and that's okay.



Introduce Your Protagonist

Begin by describing the main character(s) of your story. This may be you or another public health official, a local activist or community leader, or a partner from another sector. Regardless, describe them with positive, personal attributes and show that they care about their community.

Open Eyes To The Problem

What opened your protagonist's eyes to the public health problem? Recreate the moment when the character realized something needed to be done. If applicable, explain how they listened to the community or how they recognized patterns and problems affecting health.

Diagnose The Situation

Illustrate how the main character drew on the strengths of the public health field—data, evidence, and research—to understand what was happening and develop initial ideas for addressing it.

Encounter Obstacles

What challenges did your characters encounter that prevented them from solving this problem on their own?

The obstacle should be meaningful but not overwhelming. Avoid complex jargon that can make the problem seem confusing or unsolvable.

Mobilize Allies To Join the Cause

Describe the community members or organizations who have a role in addressing this problem.
If this is a story targeted to a specific sector, make sure to include individuals from those sectors here (if they are not already the main protagonist).
Putting the audience in the story as allies can help potential partners envision how they might get involved.

Show Cooperation In Action

Cooperation between sectors is motivating, but it should be action-oriented rather than bureaucratic. What actions did everyone take?
Describe their can-do attitude and how they cooperated, made decisions, and supported common goals.
If relevant, explain how public health leaders helped facilitate this cooperation.

Share The Impact

Describe how people's lives were changed for the better, being as specific as possible about the tangible benefits for everyone involved.
For the public, explain how future health problems were prevented.
For sector-specific audiences, explain how they helped achieve their own goals or saw a return on their investment.

Call To Action

Your story has inspired and informed people. Now, what can they do to advance the cause?
To create a sense of urgency, describe what will be gained by acting soon, and what will be lost if we don't.
Tell your audience exactly what they can do, and make it easy for them to act.

Common Storytelling Challenges

There are three types of stories that public health experts may find especially difficult to craft: **1) stories when there is no impact (yet)**; **2) stories about systems change**; and **3) stories of lessons learned from failure**. In this section, we've provided guidance for tackling these challenges.

Telling Stories When There Is No Impact (Yet)

What if the story you'd like to tell doesn't end with progress being made? That can actually be a positive thing. Research shows that stories with a too-happy ending can be demotivating because they make the audience feel as though the work is already done. If your story lacks signs of change, focus instead on articulating your vision and creating a sense of urgency to help realize it.

ARTICULATE YOUR VISION

Be aspirational. As you reach the end of your story, you can transition to the future tense and focus on your vision for change, or you can refer to other instances in which similar work has been successful. Describe the healthier world the protagonist is trying to shape and how life for them—and even your audience—will be better if their efforts are successful.

Be vivid. Psychological research shows that people are more motivated to work toward goals they can actually see in their mind's eye. When describing your aspirational vision, use vivid words that describe people, places, or things—and avoid abstract language or health jargon that people can't visualize.

CREATE A SENSE OF URGENCY

Describe other people taking action. Even if you haven't achieved your ultimate goal, talk about people doing something to get there and describe the positive emotions that correspond with getting involved. Is there a sense of unity, momentum, or personal fulfillment? Articulating these emotional benefits can motivate people to help you reach the finish line.

EXERCISE

Drawing your vision is a good way to generate vivid language. In the space below, draw two pictures: One of what the world looks like now and one of what the world will look like when your goals are achieved. When you're done, describe each drawing with words and note what language you find yourself using.

Draw a picture of what the world looks like now.	Draw a picture of what the world will look like when your goals are achieved.
Description:	Description:

Telling Stories About Systems Change

Public health professionals are often working to address systemic health inequalities and problems that arise within complex, bureaucratic systems. Given that, you may wonder whether you can craft a compelling story about systems change. After all, good stories are about interesting characters—and systems are about rules, policies, and norms.

The divide between the two is not as large as people often think. Systems, after all, are the results of actions by individuals over time. Those systems affect individuals—and they can be changed by individuals. To translate systems change into compelling stories, you simply have to zero in on the right characters.

Focus on a protagonist within the system.

One common misconception is that stories have to focus exclusively on the people who are benefiting from a cause. While that is effective, you can also craft a very compelling story about people who are embedded in a system or who have the power to create change. Public health professionals may serve as great protagonists, as they have a deep knowledge of the systems in play that affect health and are well-positioned to affect change.

Avoid overwhelming your audience with complexity.

Public health professionals have an understandable desire to communicate the complexity of systems change to their audiences—but this can backfire. People tend to avoid problems that seem overwhelming because they feel powerless to solve them. Boiling down complex systems to specific, solvable problems can help motivate your audience to take action and make for a more compelling story.

EXERCISE

Think of a system-level problem you are working to address. Who is one individual within that system you could select as a protagonist for your story? What specific actions could they take to begin changing the system?

Telling Stories About Lessons Learned From Failure

Stories about lessons learned from failure don't have to be demotivating. They can be important vehicles for sharing key takeaways and can speak to the way you approach problems. Other public health experts may be able to refine their work based on your insights, and external audiences will see that you are committed to refining your approach. Effective stories about failure should describe your goal, what went wrong, and what you plan to do differently.

Talk about what the goal was and why it was a worthy effort.

Even though you failed to achieve your goal, it's important to let your audience know what that goal was and why it is still worth pursuing. This will keep the audience focused on what can be achieved if you succeed and why they should continue to support the effort.

Be specific about what went wrong and when you realized it.

Demonstrating that you understand exactly what went wrong shows you learn from experience and builds confidence that the next effort will be more successful. One way to do this effectively in a story is to recreate the moment when you or your protagonist realized what went wrong. Helping your audiences understand the emotions of that moment will create empathy and get them to care more about your eventual success.

Discuss what worked.

Even though you didn't achieve your ultimate goal, discussing what did work will build confidence in elements of your approach and motivate others to replicate them. If you built a lasting partnership, talk about what worked for both sides. Showing how close you came to success creates a sense of urgency to get the job done and makes your goal seem within reach.

Be aspirational and discuss what you're going to do next.

Demonstrate that you're better positioned to succeed in the future because of what you've learned. What do you know now that you can immediately apply to your next effort? Include an aspirational vision of what you can accomplish with these newfound lessons.

EXERCISE

Identify one public health effort that didn't achieve its intended results and about which you could tell a story using the criteria above.

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