



How to Build a Storytelling Culture in 6 Not-So-Easy Steps

Over the last 15 years, I've worked with many organizations - nonprofits, foundations, government agencies, and corporations - that have made a serious commitment to storytelling. The Environmental Defense Fund, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Nurse-Family Partnership, Encore.org, FSG, San Diego Zoo, and Bank of America are just a few such organizations that have taken deliberate steps towards building a storytelling culture (and, in the case of RWJF and Bank of America's charitable arm, have also helped their grantees become storytellers.) Not every one of these organizations has completed all six of the steps outlined below, but they are well on their way. If your organization is ready to get serious about storytelling, the pathway - while not easy - is clear. [Full Story](#). Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.

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1. Get buy-in from the top: Real cultural change won't happen if the leadership doesn't embrace it, and when I talk to organizations about building a storytelling culture, I ask for this first and foremost. The Nurse-Family Partnership is an evidence-based program that has generated reams of data verifying its positive impact on young families. Little wonder, then, that stories usually took a back seat to numbers in organizational communications. But when Dr. David Olds, NFP's founder - and a self-confessed devotee of data - began incorporating stories in his presentations, that sent a powerful message, and one look at NFP's [website](#) today will show you how much the organization has come to value storytelling.



2. Ring the bell: There has to be an explicit signal to the troops that says, "We're doing this," and it cannot be as mundane as an organization-wide email - not when your goal is real culture change. One of the first nonprofits that I helped navigate a deep dive into storytelling was the [Environmental Defense Fund](#), and they began the process at a full-staff retreat involving over 250 people from regional offices across the United States. Everyone, from the president to the receptionists - and yes, even the guys in IT - participated. EDF also published a booklet, "Staff Told Tales," to memorialize a dozen of the most powerful stories shared at the retreat.

3. Everyone plays: A storytelling culture is not just for the leaders or the people whose job title has "communications" or "marketing" in it. *Everyone* has to be involved, because you never know when someone from your team will have to answer the question, "And just what does your organization do?" Conducting a storytelling workshop for the entire staff as EDF did is a good beginning, and when I worked with the [San Diego Zoo](#), the leadership made sure that tour guides, animal-keepers, docents, and even staff from the zoo's souvenir shops participated.



4. Make it a habit: Storytelling must become part of your day-to-day operations. Insist that staff or board meetings start with stories. Include stories in written and live presentations to funders, policymakers, et. al. Your website and other public-facing communications should regularly feature stories as well. [Encore.org](#), which is helping people approaching retirement age find ways to give back rather than just kick back, is literally building a movement on stories. The organization's website, newsletters, and conferences are infused with stories.

5. Cultivate internal champions: It's easy to slip back into the old ways of doing things, especially when collecting and refining stories feels like "extra work." Leadership buy-in is an essential first step, but you also need internal champions at different levels throughout the organization to remind colleagues that stories are important, worth collecting, worth telling. When I helped [FSG](#), a consulting firm focused on large-scale social change, launch a company-wide storytelling initiative, we began with a workshop for the entire staff, but I also had a separate "train-the-trainers" workshop with selected staff so they could continue to teach the principles of storytelling to new hires.



6. Renew the commitment: Like any serious shift in culture, you have to renew your commitment from time to time, reminding yourself of the value of this new-way-of-doing-things. The more explicit the renewal, the better. [The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) conducts annual storytelling trainings for its grantees, and through its [Neighborhood Builders](#) program, Bank of America trains nonprofit executive directors and "emerging leaders" within organizations on an annual basis, too.

And if your organization has managed to take most, all or even some of these steps, we'll add a special seventh step for you:

7. Tell us about it: Helping organizations build storytelling cultures is The Goodman Center's #1 priority in 2016, and we want to learn from your experience. If you can tell us what's worked, what hasn't, and why, please send an email to andy@thegoodmancenter.com.

[^Back to top](#)

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