



## Three Stories Leaders Must Tell

**Marshall Ganz, a veteran organizer, says leaders must tell a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now.**

"All successful leaders," writes Howard Gardner in his book, *Leading Minds*, "are successful to the extent that they tell and embody persuasive stories about where the institutions they lead should be going and how they will get there." Marshall Ganz is even more prescriptive: leaders may tell many stories, but there are three they *must* tell if they hope to create the kind of public narrative that ultimately drives movements.

Ganz speaks from a wealth of experience, having served as a civil rights organizer in Mississippi before joining Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in their historic battles. After more than 20 years of union, community and political organizing, he earned a degree in history and government from Harvard and an MPA from the Kennedy School, where he is currently a lecturer in public policy.

In his 2008 essay, "What is Public Narrative?", Ganz writes, "Public narrative is woven from three elements: a story of why I have been called, a story of self; a story of why we have been called, a story of us; and a story of the urgent challenge on which we are called to act, a story of now." (Click [here](#) to read the entire essay.)

Telling the story of self, Ganz says, is not optional. "In a role of public leadership, we really don't have a choice about telling our story of self," he writes. "If we don't author our story, others will - and they may tell our story in ways that we may not like."

The story of self is also known as the "Why I Do What I Do" story, which I wrote about in the [April 2008 edition of \*free-range thinking\*](#).



Marshall Ganz of Harvard's Kennedy School

April 2011

### Three Stories Leaders Must Tell

Stories can drive movements, but not just *any* stories.

### Wake Up Your Webinars!

Join us April 28 for our popular online class.

Join Our Mailing List

## About Us

*free-range thinking* is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Lori Matsumoto. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit [www.agoodmanonline.com](http://www.agoodmanonline.com) and [www.thegoodmancenter.com](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com).

Once leaders have told their personal stories, Ganz says, they must identify the values they have in common with the larger community, and they do this by telling "the story of us." This narrative makes it clear that the leader cannot move mountains alone, and that there is a role in the story for the listeners - a role that is consistent with their values, hopes and dreams.

The leaders' trilogy is completed by the story of now, which communicates a sense of urgency but also a sense of hope. This story usually spells out the choices that face us, risks and rewards associated with each, and a reason why inaction is no longer an option.

As examples, Ganz points to speeches by Martin Luther King, Barack Obama, and other inspirational leaders. These are well worth studying, but keep in mind that the three stories are not exclusively the province of legendary orators who speak to millions at a time.

Here in Los Angeles, an annual competition brings together nonprofit leaders who are challenged to tell compelling stories about their work in 3 minutes. Winners of the [Social Innovation Fast Pitch program](#) take home awards of up to \$10,000, so the ten finalists work very hard over several months to refine their pitches.

Margaret Martin, founder of [Harmony Project](#), was a finalist in 2009. Her entire pitch is posted on [YouTube](#), and in three minutes, she manages to touch on each of the three stories. In the first minute, she tells her story of self - why she was called to this particular work:

Hardcore LA gang-bangers walk through a street market on a Sunday morning. Tattoos, shaved heads, oversized clothing. They stopped in front of a tiny kid, playing Brahms on a tiny violin. After five or six minutes, without saying a word to one another, I watched those gang members pull out their own money and lay it gently in the little kid's case. I was earning a doctorate in Public Health at UCLA at the time, focused on what it takes to make a healthy community. That day, those gang members handed me a powerful lesson. They led me to research linking early-sustained music study with improvements in math, language, brain development and behavior - the basis for Harmony Project.



Harmony Project founder  
Margaret Martin

Martin then provides a few statistics that speak to the audience's concern about public education in Los Angeles. She doesn't tell a story, but the next portion of her speech (from 1:25-1:42) evokes common values and common sense - what Ganz calls "the story of us." Finally, Martin presents "the story of now," lending urgency to her pitch and spelling out exactly what she needs:

The budget crisis has hit our school and community college partnerships while demand continues to increase. In fact, Harmony Project students now make up more

To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 464-3956 or send an email to [andy@agoodmanonline.com](mailto:andy@agoodmanonline.com).



FOLLOW ME ON TWITTER



To subscribe to this newsletter, [click here](#). To unsubscribe, [click here](#).



**a goodman**

GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

**a goodman**

444 North Larchmont Blvd.,  
Suite 102  
Los Angeles, CA 90004  
323.464.3956

than 30% of the music department enrollment at LA City College.... We need to raise \$300,000 in increments of any size to maintain our school and community college-based programs.

The Jewish scholar Hillel once said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?" As Ganz points out, those three questions call out for a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now. Those who hope to lead today must first tell those stories.

[^ back to top](#)

---

## Wake Up Your Webinars!

***Our popular one-hour class returns on April 28th and spaces are limited, so register now.***

To save time and money, more organizations are conducting trainings and meetings online, but most of us have not been taught how to run a successful "webinar." As a result, these virtual gatherings are often boring, plagued with technical problems, and waste the time they're supposed to be saving.

So get some training! Join us on April 28th from 11a-12n PT (2-3p ET), and we'll show you:

- How to keep participants engaged from beginning to end
- The fine details of creating a good online experience
- How to use your two assets (voices and visuals) to maximum advantage
- What we learned from talk radio that makes webinars better



Tuition is just \$125 and discounts are available to organizations that register three students or more. To get additional information about ***The Webinar on Webinars*** and to register online, [click here](#).

[^ back to top](#)

[Share this newsletter with a colleague](#)



This email was sent to lori@agoodmanonline.com by [andy@agoodmanonline.com](mailto:andy@agoodmanonline.com) | [Update Profile/Email Address](#) | Instant removal with [SafeUnsubscribe<sup>a</sup>](#) | [Privacy Policy](#).

a goodman | 444 North Larchmont Blvd., Suite 102 | Los Angeles | CA | 90004