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Telling Stories to Build a Team

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[Full story](#). Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.

Even When "Data" is in Your Name...

The [Data Quality Campaign](#) is working to help more students graduate high school, make it through college, and find their place in America's workforce. As its name would imply, DQC's work is *all* about the numbers. But nonprofits - no matter how devoted to data - are comprised of people, people *always* have stories, and even DQC has found a way to let its people tell their stories.

[Full story](#).

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Telling Stories to Build a Team

For leaders looking to do some team-building, there is no shortage of activities to choose from, but nothing may be as powerful as simply asking colleagues to share the story of "Why I Do What I Do." This summer at [KIPP](#) Raíces Academy (KRA), a charter school in East Los Angeles, all 42 staff members shared their stories during a professional development training, and the positive effects are still being felt months later.



Chelsea Zegarski

The storytelling session was led by Chelsea Zegarski, who was being promoted to principal of KRA after serving as vice principal for 2 years. Since the new school year was bringing the first leadership transition at KRA since its founding in 2008, Zegarski believed the timing was particularly suited for internal team building.

"Our particular brand of work is difficult and time consuming," Zegarski says. "No one can do it alone. I really wanted to send the message to the staff that our humanity is essential to the work we do, and in order to function as a team we need to understand each other".

Taking her cues from a KIPP leadership training she attended over the summer, Zegarski asked her entire staff to think about experiences in their lives that had motivated them to go into the field of education. Over a two-week period just prior to the new school year, Zegarski dedicated the first two hours of staff trainings to storytelling, giving each person between 10 and 15 minutes to share a "Why I Do What I Do" story.

Zegarski knew that in order for this activity to be effective, stories had to be told with openness and honesty. To model this, she went first and made a conscious effort not to sugarcoat anything. "I chose to share some of the more painful elements in my life because that is a big part of where I draw my motivation," she says. (She also assured her staff that all the stories were for their ears only, which is why we cannot share any of the details here.)

To further ensure that her staff wouldn't hold back, Zegarski selected five of the most extroverted staff members to share their stories after her. But after the first day of storytelling, Zegarski was worried. "All of the extroverts told really personal stories," she recalls.

The following day, Zegarski carefully selected another staff member to share her story. This time, however, she chose an administrator whom she knew would be sharing a less painful personal story. "The fact that she told a story that involved less trauma, and that she was in a leadership position, helped people understand that they could share whatever had shaped them rather than just painful stuff," Zegarski says.

Though Zegarski could tell people were anxious about sharing their stories at first, she noticed a shift after several days. "There was a cycle where openness bred more openness," she says. As people got comfortable, Zegarski felt the energy in the room completely change. "People weren't worried about telling their stories, they were just fully present in the moment, present in the act of listening and connecting," she recalls.

Suzi Karnatz, the art educator at KRA, still feels the effects of the storytelling months later. "Now when I am interacting with coworkers I'll remember details of their stories and find myself acting with greater compassion towards them," she says. Still not one to sugarcoat anything, Zegarski adds, "It didn't create some kind of magical Kumbaya, but it did establish a confidence in one another that can't help but inform our interactions".

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At first glance, you definitely wouldn't expect anything too touchy-feely on DQC's site. Just consider this excerpt from the "Who We Are" page: "Parents, teachers, policymakers, and other stakeholders are too often forced to make decisions based on anecdote and hunch because they do not have access to high-quality information." English translation:

storytellers, go away - right?

But if you visit the [Our Team](#) page and follow the links to individual staff bios, you'll discover that each member of DQC's team has included "The image that represents why I work at DQC" along with a brief explanation of why the picture was chosen.

Evan Omeroso, Senior Associate, Communications and External Affairs, explained in an email, "Because data can seem like a cold subject, and because we usually work at the policy level and not directly with educators and students, we wanted to show some more fun information about our employees' personal connections to the issues. When new staffers come on board, they have the opportunity to choose their own image and write about its meaning."

Take a look at some of the pictures for yourself. ([This](#) is my favorite.) If you believe, as Rod Stewart once sang, every picture tells a story, then there are stories aplenty on DQC's site. And if the Data Quality Campaign can find a way to tell stories, you probably can, too.

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free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

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