

January 2024



Missing Stakes is a Big Mistake! by Madi Goff

Imagine you're gearing up to watch an exciting game of basketball. It's the WNBA finals. You sit down in front of your television with your vegan cauliflower wings (just me?). You turn on ESPN as the commentator explains, "This year we won't be keeping score in the WNBA finals. Each game will be played as usual, but no one wins or loses. Aaaaand here's the tipoff!"



Sports fans would be a little upset about this new development in the WNBA. And why is that? Sports are exciting, because, yes, you have teamwork, great plays, and vegan "wings", but what makes the game dramatic? What makes teamwork important? What's the payoff for a great play? The score! Take away the score and you take away the meaning.

Okay, but what does this have to do with the stories you share about your work? Everything! (*Please scroll down to read more.*)

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Spitfire's Trust Guide Release This Week

by Kirsten Farrell

If you are in the business of making the world a better place, then you are in the business of building and maintaining trust. In order to drive your cause



forward, your audience must see you as a trusted expert, a teammate, a friend or all of the above, but, right now, we are in shaky times for trust. Trust has been eroding for institutions as well as between neighbors. Sure, that's sad, but this is no time to hang your head. There is an imperative to create, strengthen, and repair trust with your community, audiences, and organization... but how?

On January 11th, our friends at Spitfire Communications are releasing *Replenishing Trust: Civil Society's Guide to Reversing the Trust Deficit*. Spitfire took a close look into the social science research about earning and rebuilding trust, heard from more than 25 leaders on their work related to trust building, and explored case studies to see trust building and rebuilding in action. This guide is packed with insights not only about how and why there is a trust deficit, but also how you can go about earning and maintaining trust with your constituencies.

I was lucky enough to receive an advanced copy, and I am on my third read. Using their guide, your organization can assess the level of trust your organization is operating at and make a game plan to build more, fortify, or repair damaged trust with your team, supporters, and folks peeking inside the tent. On Jan. 11, check out the guide at www.spitfirestrategies.com/trust. Trust me, it is worth the read.

Missing Stakes is a Big Mistake! (cont.)

Imagine now that you're scrolling through social media, and you come across a post from a nonprofit you follow. It's an image of a smiling schoolteacher holding an airline ticket. You have a minute, so you pause your scroll to read the text. As the story starts you meet the protagonist Leena, a joyful schoolteacher whose goal is to visit her mother across the country. *"It'd be cool to see her this month," Leena thinks as she opens her computer to search for plane tickets.* The story goes on.



Are you just dying to know if Leena visits her mom?! Nope. And why not? Because there are no story stakes! Thank goodness you've put down Leena's story and picked up this article about how *missing stakes is a huge mistake!*

Simply put, stakes are consequences, and consequences, like a scoreboard, create meaning.

They engage the audience, making them care about how your story ends.

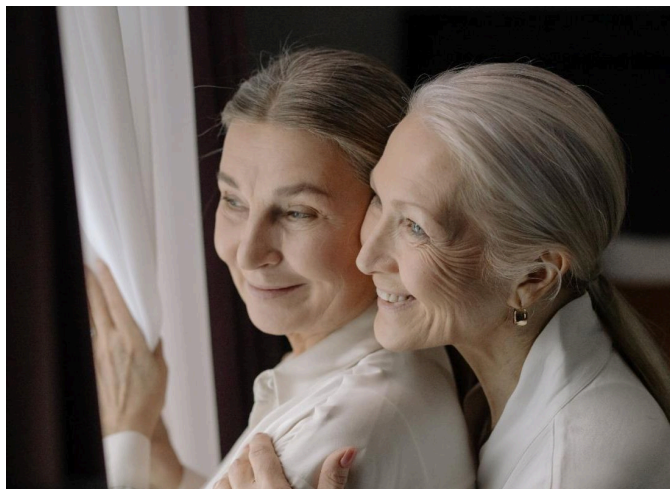
As we introduce the person the story is about and establish their goal, our audience needs to know what hangs in the balance. What is *gained* if the protagonist succeeds in getting the goal? AND what is *lost* if the protagonist fails? And if you want your audience to keep listening or keep reading, both need to be conveyed in act one. (Check out this [quick refresher](#) of the 3-act structure of dramatic narrative.)

Sometimes, when talking about the important work they do, public interest folks skip over the stakes thinking, *It's obvious. My audience gets it.* But that's not always true. Especially if your audience is less familiar with the work that your organization does. Bring your audience along for the ride by letting them know what's at stake, and make it personal.

Let's dive back into Leena's story and give it another shot. This time with stakes.

Leena pushes aside a stack of ungraded spelling tests and opens her laptop. A sticky note stuck to her keyboard reads: "flights". One word reminding her of the day's final task: buy a plane ticket to visit her mom in San Francisco. Leena smiles, genuinely excited for the trip. Her mother, Donna, is finally able to marry her girlfriend of 10 years, and Leena can't wait to walk her mother down the aisle. The date is February 12, 2004, and San Francisco just began issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Leena opens her browser and begins

Now we have a story. If Leena doesn't make it home, she won't get to walk her mother down the aisle. She'll miss her mother's historic and awesomely gay wedding. We know what's at stake. Leena's story now matters to us. In fact, if we were shown how we might help more families like Leena's, we might even take action.



So, when you tell those stories about your work, be sure to paint the picture from two angles: the best-case scenario and the worst-case scenario. Here are some questions to help you get there:

- What does success look like for the protagonist? What dreams come true if the protagonist achieves their goal? If they get what they want, what does their life look like? Paint the dream.
- What does failure look like for the protagonist? What misery is our protagonist trying to avoid? If they don't get what they want, what does their life look like? Paint the nightmare.

Notice how even the words “paint the nightmare” create emotion? That's the job of stakes! Stakes are hardworking story elements, creating emotion and meaning, and drawing an audience in. If the audience doesn't know what's at stake, it becomes far too easy for to keep scrolling in search of higher stakes and a basketball game with a proper scoreboard.

Join The Goodman Center this February for our first [storytelling workshop](#) of 2024!

About Us

This edition of *free-range thinking* was written and edited by Kirsten Farrell and Madi Goff. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

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