

Ethical Storytelling

Stories are a powerful way to demonstrate impact and help people connect to your cause. But how we tell stories matters. Ethical storytelling means using language and approaches that honor the dignity, agency, and humanity of the people and communities at the center of those stories. Use this guide to strengthen how you center the subjects of your stories and involve them as active, respected partners in the process.

Before you tell the story, consider:

- 1. Who has a story worth telling?**
Expand ideas around whose experiences bring your mission and values to life. Powerful stories can come from staff, board members, volunteers, and community members—not only clients.
- 2. Which stories really matter?**
Look beyond the obvious stories of whole-scale transformation. Small moments can be just as meaningful and capture the essence of your work.
- 3. Whose story is it?**
Develop a process where subjects have control over what is shared and the story reflects how this person sees themselves and their experience.
- 4. Do we have consent?**
Consent is essential, especially for stories told on behalf of others. Make sure you have buy-in around where, how, why, and how long a story is used by your organization.
- 5. Who has power and agency?**
Consider who or what is being centered in the story and recognize the role of inequitable structures and systems. Avoid positioning your organization as the hero.
- 6. Are we leading with assets or deficits?**
Asset framing defines communities by their aspirations and contributions, rather than their challenges. Deficit frames can reinforce stigma and falsely associate hardship with identity.
- 7. What is our language teaching others?**
Language is not neutral. It can build bridges and create understanding, or reinforce biases and stereotypes. Be sure your stories don't perpetuate harmful narratives.
- 8. Are we protecting the storyteller?**
Be intentional about supporting the emotional safety of the person sharing their experience—before, during, and after they tell the story.

The final check: Would we tell the story this way if the subject was sitting across from us?

- ☐ We have consent to tell the story.
- ☐ The storyteller helped determine what is shared.
- ☐ The storyteller has appropriate control over how the story is used.
- ☐ The subject has power and agency in the story.
- ☐ We recognize the role of inequitable systems in our descriptions.
- ☐ Our language centers dignity rather than reinforcing stigma or stereotypes.
- ☐ We recognize the subjects of our stories as whole people, emphasizing aspirations and growth—not simply hardship.
- ☐ We worked to protect the storyteller's emotional safety.
- ☐ The subject would be proud of how their story is being presented.

Look for the double bottom line: A strong story moves audiences to action and lifts up the people you serve.

Developed by Cause Communications in partnership with Michael Kass. For additional resources on ethical storytelling, visit www.ethicalstorytelling.com and explore the work of Traban Shorters.