



Wilson and Associates' **Bright IDEAs** for Nonprofit Organizations

BOARD MEMBERS AS IMPACT STORYTELLERS

OUR **4 T's** OF AN EFFECTIVE BOARD MEMBER

There is an adage that board members provide their organization with the **Three Ts: Time, Talents** and **Treasure**. We'd like to offer a 4th: **'Telling**, for Storytelling.



TIME is the request for board members to give their time to participate in board meetings, committees, and/or attend events on behalf of the organization.



TALENT is the request for board members to use their unique skills and abilities in support of the mission and vision of the organization.



TREASURE is the request for board members to help the organization raise money through their own contributions and/or by securing funds and resources from external donors.



And **TELLING** is our proposal that board members should be storytelling ambassadors for their organizations, e.g., they should use their unique experiences and perspectives to tell compelling, **impactful** stories to help their organization develop relationships and secure resources.

As the "implementers" of an organization's programs and services, staff often have the ability to experience and capture impactful stories because they interact with clients and partners on a daily basis.

By nature of their role, board members are often more distanced from the work as compared to staff. As a result, board members don't always have the opportunity for the on-the-ground experiences that lend themselves to storytelling. However, that distance doesn't mean that board members can't be impactful storytellers. In fact, not only can board members **be great** storytellers: storytelling should be seen as an integral role and responsibility of effective board members.

WHAT'S A STORY?

For the purpose of this Bright IDEA brief, we're describing a story (*for storytelling*) as compelling verbal communication. The story is an opportunity to make a heart-to-heart connection with another person, using your message to engage all of their senses. The purpose of the story is to build relationships between the listener, you and your organization.



WHAT MAKES A STORY IMPACTFUL?

Think about a time when you listened to someone tell a story so interesting that you couldn't wait to hear how it ended. Maybe you held your breath. Maybe you felt your heart beating quickly or you noticed a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. Maybe you were transported to a time or place in your past. Whatever the story was, you were in **"it"**—you were away, in the story, and all of your senses were engaged. Not just your brain, but also your heart.

When a story impacts us, it's usually because it connects to our own life experiences or touches our hearts in a way that reminds us of our humanity. So often when we talk about our programs and services, we use jargon like **results-focused** and **trauma-informed**. These terms, while descriptive, are academic and clinical. They aren't words that spark our hearts. They don't immediately inspire others or draw them into our organizations.

What does spark our hearts are the stories we hear about someone coming into their power or programs that reflect the wishes of the people they aim to serve. When we tell stories to make human connections, and leave the jargon behind, we become more impactful storytellers.



HOW BOARD MEMBERS BECOME IMPACTFUL STORYTELLERS

Over the years, Wilson and Associates has engaged hundreds of board members. Many of them have shared that when asked to speak about their organizations, they didn't know what to say.

We believe that board members are an untapped storytelling resource: with support, board members can tell compelling, authentic stories that support the goals, mission and vision of their organization.

Below are 6 tips we've developed to help board members become impactful storytellers:

1

Be clear about the vision and mission of your organization.

How is your organization trying to improve the world? Why is the organization needed? Can you describe this in your own words, in a way that has meaning to you? When it has meaning to you, it will have meaning to your listener.

2

Tell the organization's origin story.

Why was the organization founded? What were the unique conditions or needs that led to the organization's creation? Are the conditions and/or needs the same today? What has evolved since it was founded? Listeners are often curious about how an organization came to be, and even more so, why it still exists.

3

Write your personal origin story.

What led you to join the board of this particular organization? Think about what was special, unique and/or impactful about the organization that led you to join. What is the organization advocating for that made you want to be a part of their superhero team? The things that activated your heart and compelled you to get involved will come through in your story. It will activate the heart of your listener, too.

4

Elevate needs and dreams.

Talk to staff, program participants, and/or clients at your organization. What do they believe are the organization's most important needs? What do they wish there were resources to accomplish? What wonderful things could be happening with more dollars? What are their dreams for the organization? The answers to these questions will create impactful stories and will help you generate treasure for the organization.

5

Tell an approved impact story.

An **"approved impact story"** is what Wilson and Associates calls a story that has been collected with the approval of the person who is the subject of the story. With an approved impact story, the subject writes their own story and gives the storyteller permission to tell their story. These stories should be strength-based and celebrate the resilience and humanity of the person the story is about. An approved impact story can be about anyone impacted by the organization: a funder, a partner, a staff member, a board member, program participant or a client.

Note: These types of stories require sensitivity and mindfulness to develop. Additionally, you should make arrangements with the subject for how long the story may be told and how it can be told (*e.g. verbally, online, print, etc.*)



Build your ethical storytelling skills.

Many resources on nonprofit storytelling recommend a story development formula that generally goes something like this:

1. Find a story about someone who was in crisis. Next,
2. Talk about how they came into your organization to get services. Next,
3. Describe how your organization has helped them get a happy ending.

There isn't anything inherently bad about sharing how your programs help people.

However, this storytelling formula can have 4 negative effects:

- It often generates stories that victimize clients.
- It creates stories that oversimplify the complexities program participants and clients face.
- It minimizes the solutions needed to address the root causes of the real challenges people face.
- It creates stories that narrowly define what success can look like for other program participants and clients.

Our greatest hope is that you are able to tell stories that elevate the power, agency, strength and dignity of your clients. To do this, there is a growing community of practice around this kind of storytelling which is known as **ethical storytelling**.

This type of storytelling centers people as the hero of their own stories and challenges organizations to be mindful of how their stories are used.

IN OTHER WORDS, IT IS **COMMUNICATIONS WITHOUT EXPLOITATION**.

To help you build this skill, we recommend www.StoryandSpirit.com and www.EthicalStorytelling.com for resources to help you tell ethical stories.

Wilson and Associates provides coaching on this, too.



Wilson and Associates Consulting
Strategic Community and Organizational Transformation

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