

HEALTHCARE-NOW!

Frequent Challenges in Telling Your Healthcare Story

Difficulty Choosing a Story

Challenge: Some people struggle to find a particular story that captures why they care about healthcare reform, or they feel the stories they have aren't powerful enough to motivate others.

Solution: Identifying one or more stories we want to tell can take time and self-reflection. There are a few steps that may help you:

First step - review your experiences with the healthcare system over the different phases of your life: What has your insurance coverage been like over the years? What sort of care have you had to receive, and what were those experiences like? Next, think of the healthcare experiences of those who have been closest to you during different periods of your life, such as family, friends, and neighbors. Unfortunately, cost barrier to care are extremely common even for those well into the middle-class.

Second step - think about when you were first inspired to take action on healthcare, whether that was getting involved with organizing or fighting back within the healthcare system. What was happening during that period of your life? Who were the people you met that led to your involvement, and what stories did they have to

tell? Why did this cause resonate with you personally at that time?

Third step - think about where your values come from, which have led you to become passionate about healthcare. Some very effective stories are not directly about an experience with the healthcare system, but are vivid stories about where we come from - our families, our communities, or other experiences that shaped us into the person who felt compelled to take action on Medicare for All. These stories still must involve a choice and an outcome that vividly teach a moral that inspires others to take action, but our moral calling comes from many different places, inside and outside of the healthcare system.

Final step - remember that the power of our story comes from our vulnerability, not from our having faced an extreme challenge. Many people feel that their stories are not as powerful as those who have faced extreme adversity at the hands of the healthcare system. While such stories are extremely important, our ability to inspire others to action doesn't stem from the challenges we've faced, it stems from making ourselves vulnerable - being open about the feelings and emotions we have about healthcare and why we have them.

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Overly Factual/Impersonal Account of Story

Challenge: The complexity of the challenges we've faced and the choices we've made are important to our story as we experienced it, but we sometimes attempt to cover too many elements of our story, which can turn into a mostly factual listing of events.

Solution: Pare down the events of the story to those most relevant to the choice we are modeling. Zoom in on one or two concrete moments in a particular time and place so the listener can really feel what it was like to experience them - including details of the setting, why those events were important to us, what their meaning was, how we felt when we experienced them, and what our hopes and fears were. Always sacrifice the "completeness" of the story in favor of adding to the richness, meaning, and feeling of the story.

Our Politics Guide Our Choice Instead of Our Values

Challenge: We often experience our politics or ideologies as identities much more so than our values, so it is tempting to depict the choice in our story as stemming from our politics (e.g. as progressives, leftists, Green Party activists, Democrats, activists, radicals, conservatives, etc).

Solution: Our sense of morality and the way that we "feel" our morals is uniquely tied to our values,

which don't correlate with any political party, ideology, or orientation. Even if our audience is politically homogenous, it's important to show the basic values we hold through the choices we make and our personal history. Successful social movements are able to position themselves at the core of very basic social values, and to expose the incompatibility of a social or economic policy with those values, which are shared by almost everyone in the country, not just by those of a particular political ideology.

Story Strays Form Our Personal Experience into Moralizing, General Statements

Challenge: At any point in our story (challenge, choice, outcome) it is easy to drift away from our personal experiences and to start moralizing about the general failures of the healthcare system, the general right to healthcare we should all have, etc. For healthcare providers, we may make general statements about the barriers our patients face instead of telling a story of a particular patient to exemplify those barriers.

Solution: The power of our story comes from our listeners' ability to empathize with the challenge we (or someone close to us) faced. Our story will let them "feel" the immorality of the healthcare system, as opposed to "understanding" that it is immoral through our general descriptions. Our most powerful story stays grounded in our personal experience throughout the challenge, choice, and outcome.

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No "Outcome" in the Story

Challenge: Sometimes we end our story with the "choice" we made, or end with general comments about our beliefs or the moral of the story instead of describing the outcome of making the choice we made.

Solution: Your audience may be wondering whether it's a hopeless cause, whether they can make any difference, whether they have the skills to become a leader, whether they might strain relationships with friends and family if they get involved in politics, whether telling their story would be too painful, whether they're going to face resistance and pushback from others, and many other concerns.

We close our story by giving an honest assessment of what happened when we decided to become a leader. Like all the elements of our story, we'll have to pick the outcome or outcomes that were most important to us: this can be something we actually accomplished through our leadership if we've been doing it for a while, or it can be more personal: how we've been received by others, whether we've been able to reach even one other person, or how taking action has let us cope with and understand ourselves. Maybe taking action has made us feel less isolated, or given us a supportive community, or maybe it gave us hope. An honest assessment of the difficulties and challenges of taking leadership are also appropriate here.

Like the "challenge" and "choice" elements of the story, the outcome is best expressed by digging deep into one experience or event - which takes place at a particular time, in a particular place, with nameable people - that exemplifies the outcome you are trying to convey to others.

Choice Isn't a "Leadership" Choice

Challenge: Sometimes the "choice" in our story will be important and meaningful, but it may not model what we are calling on others to do. For example, we might have chosen to fight back against a health insurance company that denied us coverage, but the goal of our story is to call on others to organize.

Solution: Select a "choice" point that models what we are asking others to do. This requires thinking about what we're calling on others to do in our story. It's also ok if our choice does not immediately follow the challenge in our personal history - it's very common for months or even years to have passed until we were ready to take on a leadership role, and it's ok to acknowledge this in our story.

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No Vivid Description of a Particular Moment in Challenge, Choice, or Outcome

Challenge: We sometimes describe our challenge or our choice in general terms, instead of picking one particular moment (at a specific time, in a specific place, with nameable people present) to bring the challenge we faced or the choice we made to life.

Solution: Pick a particular moment that's a good example of the broader challenge we faced or representative of a series of choices we made, and paint a vivid picture of that moment - including how we felt about it at the time, what was said out loud if appropriate, and what was going through our mind when we were faced with the challenge or made the choice.

With only two minutes, you may not have the opportunity to provide vivid descriptions of multiple different moments, so you will have to carefully choose the moment or moments where you want to "dig in" and let your listeners fully experience those moments and what they felt like.

Difficulty Telling a Story That Raises Traumatic Memories

Challenge: Sometimes our story can involve deeply traumatic moments in our lives, including the loss of loved ones, trade-offs we were forced to make between long-term health and financial stability,

and futures (ours and others) that were irrevocably altered. Telling our stories honestly and vulnerably is what lends them a moral force and calls on others to act urgently, but requires that we relive our traumas publicly and repeatedly. This can be extremely challenging to get through, even when we want to tell our story.

Solution: There is no easy solution to this challenge. The telling of a traumatic story does get easier with time for most people, though. It can be helpful to start telling your story in small, supportive settings, and gradually work your way up to more public venues if you choose to. Such stories can lend courage to others who have suffered silently under our healthcare system, or who may blame themselves for what they went through. Your story also serves as a powerful reminder to those who may believe they are personally sheltered from our broken healthcare system that any one of us can fall through the cracks with disastrous consequences, or see the same happen to a loved one, despite our best efforts.