Find your voice: Creating a Narrative for Local Government Innovation

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The art of storytelling can motivate others toward collective action. Marshal Ganz from the Harvard Kennedy School developed a narrative tool to help leaders drive innovation by connecting people, resources, and networks to achieve a vision.

A Public Narrative connects the head, heart, and hands. Stories combine strategy and emotion by linking the story of self (why you are called to action), the story of us (the shared values of those affected), and now (the action you are called to).

Self: Focus on a choice point- a key decision you made within a challenge, and the outcome. This establishes motivation and credibility with your audience. For example, when did you first care about local government innovation and why?

Us: This is "why" your group is called to action and connects with shared values. For example, a parent becoming involved in school reform work, realizing it’s a community challenge, and working with other stakeholders.

Now: This is your "ask." Highlight a clear and achievable action within your urgent challenge. For example, voting for a school bond or participating in a bake sale fundraiser.

Narrative Structure:
Start with a character (you) facing an unexpected challenge and the need to make a choice. Transport people to a snapshot in time, a moment that helped shape your life. What was the outcome and what shared values will you need to call on? Public Service? Ambition? Creativity? What will you ask of your audience? Commitment? Giving? Volunteering?

Example:
The Town of Red Cloud, NE faced an immediate child care gap – parents and caregivers organized with the Nebraska Community Foundation and Town Council to create a new childcare facility. Organizers used Public Narrative as a way to fundraise and create a sustainable program to serve their community.
Q + A

In Red Cloud, was there any cooperation with town authorities?
The child care facility is run by a 501(c)(3) charity organization, with all funds through Nebraska Community Foundation, but the Town of Red Cloud provided essential help and support to the effort. Town Council passed a measure that the childcare issue falls within the burden of government, so the city helped with the design and survey, which qualified as charitable activity. Council also provided small annual operating grant to support the facility.

How does a Public Narrative create community?
You’re helping to create a sense of community by highlighting shared values. I’m a big believer that community is forged in action. You’re being a leader by creating community. This relates not only to community development work, but can be applied to to agencies, departments, or whoever you’re working with in your local governments. The goal is to help people understand they have agency and become motivated to express the agency.

Do you have any final comments?
This is a tool I believe in and have seen effective in areas from fundraising, to reorganizing state agencies, and public private partnerships within universities. It comes down to relationships and trust. Change moves at the speed of relationships and the ability to connect with people. Public Narratives are the groundwork for change to happen.

Resources

Virtual Event Recording: https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/recording/5302837226861646595

Marshall Ganz's Story of Self: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfsfG3DkSuA

The Do's and Don'ts of Public Narrative: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-RYp0mlVcQ&t=16s