

Telling Your Personal Story

Most of us think of story telling as a casual act. Because this is the case, we often tell stories in a spontaneous way that may not be organized. This works well in many instances, but not for the purpose of advocacy. To encourage systems change, personal stories need to be told in a much more structured way. The story we tell key decision makers must clearly communicate a purpose, and at the same time, include memorable details that keep the listener's interest long after the story is told.

Legislators and other public officials often hear thousands of stories every day. That's why it's important to move your personal story to the front of their mind by making it efficient and effective.

Components of an Efficient Story

An efficient story is one that is well organized. The speaker quickly makes key points and uses memorable, but short examples to reinforce each point. Think of your story as a segment on the 10 o'clock television news. On a news program, important stories are given no more than three minutes. In this brief amount of time, a news reporter must communicate the key facts, use examples to support those facts, and keep the viewer sufficiently interested in the story. In summary, an efficient story should:

- Have a clear purpose
- Be well organized
- Be told in a way that respects the time of the listener (no longer than three to five minutes)
- Be told only in the amount of time necessary to make the point
- Suggest a solution to the problem

Components of an Effective Story

An effective story has elements that are not easily forgotten. It communicates key points and uses examples that make an emotional connection with the listener and are easy to understand. An effective story should:

- Have understandable key points
- Have good examples to reinforce the points

- Engage the listener so they feel personally involved in the story
- Suggest a remedy to the problems related in the story

From the Storyteller's Perspective

Your story is important because your personal experience is valuable for shaping effective legislation or other changes in systems. When talking to your legislator or other public official, it is important to point out why you think your personal story is important, and then provide ways that the official can help you and others. Always offer to assist the decision makers in collecting more information or participate in ongoing meetings to create effective legislation or plans. If they ask questions you are unable to answer, always tell them that you will find an answer and call them as soon as possible. Don't try to "make up" an answer. Lastly, be sure to thank them for taking the time to hear your story.

From the Legislator's or Public Official's Perspective

The legislator, legislative aide, or other decision maker may have some knowledge about your issue, but will probably need additional information. This person may also wish to help, but might not know how to help. Some officials may wonder why your issue is important to them and question what the result will be from their efforts.

We Can Work Together

In the end, it is important to let the public official or legislator know that you are willing to work with him or her to help solve the problem. If you are both committed to working together, you can persuade others of the issue's value. It's also good to remember that resources for solutions may be limited, but it is still well worth the time to make sure the legislation or proposed plan for change is the most effective it can be. Lastly, a complete solution to the problem may not be achieved all at once; a continuing commitment to work together may be needed to properly address the issue.

Telling Our Story Exercise

After forming a group, tell your stories to each other and critique them. Be sure to ask yourself the following questions:

1. Did the storyteller indicate that he was talking about his own experience or about a friend or family member?
2. Did the storyteller give enough background information?
3. Was the story focused? Did the storyteller communicate specific points? What were those specific points?
4. Did the storyteller use good examples to support the points and were they based on personal experience?
5. Did the storyteller have suggestions for solving the problem?
6. Was the storyteller sufficiently convincing? If you were a legislator or public official would you want to help resolve this person's issue? Why?
7. In a few weeks, what will you remember about this story?