

# How to Use Storytelling to Build a Movement

A practical guide to  
uniting people, igniting purpose, and  
turning turbulent times into  
momentum



a Nonprofit Storytelling Conference Publication



# How to Use Storytelling to Build a Movement

*A practical guide to uniting people, igniting purpose, and turning turbulent times into momentum*

## When the world shakes, story is how we stand.

In times of upheaval - whether social, economic, or political - nonprofits often find themselves at the heart of change. Movements are born when people believe that something better is possible and that they have a role in making it happen.

Storytelling is the most powerful tool you have to rally people around your cause, give them hope, and show them how they can be part of the change.

This little booklet will guide you through using storytelling to build a movement, even in the face of uncertainty or opposition.

## 1. The Three Key Elements of a Movement-Building Story

Every powerful movement starts with a story that creates urgency, belonging, and action.

### 1. A Clear Villain or Obstacle

- Every movement needs an antagonist - something or someone that must be overcome.
- This could be a broken system, an injustice, a crisis, or even an old way of thinking.

Example: "For too long, families in our city have been trapped in a cycle of poverty because of predatory lending practices. But together, we can change that."

#### **Quote for Inspiration:**

"The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." - Nelson Mandela

### 2. A Compelling Vision of What's Possible

- Show your audience what could be. Help them imagine the world after they take action.

Example: "Imagine a city where no family is forced to choose between rent and food. Imagine a system that helps people build wealth instead of keeping them in debt."

**Quote for Inspiration:**

*"I have a dream that one day... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." - Martin Luther King, Jr.*

### 3. A Role for the Listener

- The most important part of movement-building stories: they give the audience a role to play.
- People need to know how they can contribute, whether through donating, volunteering, advocating, or spreading the message.

Example: "By joining this fight, you can help end predatory lending in our city. Here's how."

**Quote for Inspiration:**

*"Do what you can, with what you have, where you are." - Theodore Roosevelt*

## 2. How to Craft Stories That Spark a Movement

### Step 1: Find the Moment That Defines the Problem

- Identify a specific moment that illustrates why change is needed.

Example: Instead of saying, "There's a housing crisis," tell the story of Maria, a single mother who had to sleep in her car with her two children after being evicted.

**Quote for Inspiration:**

*"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." - Martin Luther King, Jr.*

### Step 2: Introduce a Relatable Hero

- This could be a real beneficiary, a passionate advocate, or someone on the front lines.
- Show their struggle and transformation, making it clear that they are still in the fight.

Example: "Maria refuses to give up. She's fighting for her kids - and for thousands of other families like hers."

**Quote for Inspiration:**

*"A small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." - Margaret Mead*

Step 3: Build an Emotional Connection

- Use sensory details, inner thoughts, and raw emotion.

Example: "Maria sat in the front seat of her car, staring at her two sleeping children in the back. 'How did it come to this?' she whispered."

**Quote for Inspiration:**

*"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." - Maya Angelou*

Step 4: Create Tension - But Keep It Hopeful

- Movements thrive on urgency, but they need hope to grow.

Example: "This is the moment to act. For the first time in decades, we have the chance to change housing laws in our city."

Quote for Inspiration:

*"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." - Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Step 5: Offer a Clear Call to Action

- Avoid vague requests like "Join us." Be specific about what people can do now.

Example: "Call your city council member today. Demand they vote YES on the Housing for All bill. Click here to send an email now."

Quote for Inspiration:

*"It is not enough to be compassionate - you must act." - Dalai Lama*

### 3. Types of Stories That Build Movements

#### 1. The Origin Story – Why your movement exists.

| *"The time is always right to do what is right."* - Martin Luther King, Jr.

2. **The Moment of Change Story** – A turning point that made action inevitable.

| *"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."* - Mahatma Gandhi

3. **The Personal Testimonial** – A first-person account from someone affected by the issue.

| *"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."* - African Proverb

4. **The 'What's at Stake' Story** – What happens if people don't act.

| *"It always seems impossible until it's done."* - Nelson Mandela

5. **The Success Story** – Proof that change is possible.

| *"Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness."* - Desmond Tutu

## **Final Thoughts: The Power of Your Story**

Movements rise and fall on the strength of their stories.

In times of upheaval, the right story can cut through the noise, give people a sense of purpose, and rally them to action.

You don't need to be a world-class storyteller - you just need to tell stories that matter.

If you want to go even deeper into storytelling, join us at the Nonprofit Storytelling Conference. You'll learn from experts, workshop your stories, and leave with the skills to help turn your mission into a movement.

Visit <https://nonprofitstorytellingconference.com> to learn more and secure your spot!

**If you found this guide helpful, please forward it to a friend who could benefit from it.**

**Get help raising more money. Come to the Nonprofit Storytelling Conference. For more information, go to:**

<https://nonprofitstorytellingconference.com>