
Briefing summary

- **Who:** For people involved in health care improvement projects who want to use stories to communicate and share important learning from their work.
- **Why:** Telling stories about the experiences of patients and health care professionals is well-established as an effective means of engaging others in improvement work.
- **What:** This briefing includes practical tips on how to identify and tell a good story.

Why is storytelling important in improvement work?

“Never overlook the power of a good story. This is what people will remember about your work.”

Jane Maher, Chief Medical Officer, Macmillan Cancer Support

Stories have been used to hand down learning and knowledge for thousands of years. A good story engages our curiosity, emotions and imagination. It can help us make sense of the world.

In many safety-critical industries, stories of real events are actively used to capture and share lessons with staff in the workplace because they are more memorable than data or lengthy manuals. In the NHS, stories involving patients have become an established way for board members to focus discussions on quality and patient experience. Patient stories also speak strongly to frontline staff, who are often motivated most of all by their individual interactions with patients.

By using real stories as you communicate your improvement work, you can:

- demonstrate there is a need for the work and challenge complacency
- make the potential benefits or outcomes feel tangible to the people you need to influence
- ensure the patient’s voice and/or the experience of individual staff members is heard
- get a message across – good stories are remembered and can be passed on.¹

¹For example, an education programme led by the mental health charity Rethink, which aimed to improve understanding of mental health among medical trainees, found that it was the patients’ stories that the doctors remembered six months later rather than the statistics or facts provided.

What makes a good story?

Telling good stories is a skill, but it is a skill that anyone can learn if you follow a few working principles. The best stories:

- involve only a few people. Stories are more affecting, the fewer people they involve, this is why charity fundraising appeals often focus on one child and not whole communities
- engage emotions or curiosity in a way that makes people care and/or want to know more
- paint a picture in words through the use of a few descriptive details
- lead to some form of resolution – barriers overcome or a transformation made
- carry a central message.

Top tips for telling impactful and engaging stories about your work

As you plan the communications around your improvement project, it is helpful to consider whether there are any stories about the people affected that might help you engage others.

Here are some practical tips for identifying and packaging your stories:

- 1 Choose a story that conveys a message that you need to get across, and make sure the circumstances are meaningful or relevant to the people you want to influence.
- 2 Pick out only the most relevant points that carry the story. Good storytelling depends on your ability to leave out any unnecessary detail.
- 3 Include a good opening that grabs attention and a strong ending. If you find the outcome of the story engaging, it's more likely others will too.
- 4 Ensure the people involved in your story come to life by using a few descriptive details that help people visualise or empathise with them.
- 5 Make sure you discuss with those involved how you will be representing them, by name or anonymously, and agree with them what you will share and how the information will be used. If you are involving and identifying patients, you will need to record their signed consent. Your in-house communications team should have a consent form you can use for this purpose.

Consider involving others who have storytelling skills. Your organisation's communications staff may be able to help or, if budget permits, you could employ a freelance journalist or writer to research and write your stories. You might also want to develop a few stories that convey different messages to different groups of people.

For examples of the use of storytelling in improvement, see:

<http://www.health.org.uk/blog/the-power-of-story-telling/>

There are several ways you can share your stories:

- 1 In verbal presentations and speeches, which are often more powerful if they include one or two good stories.
- 2 In a written format, as an article for a newsletter, as part of a blog or a case study on a web site. Photographs may also help to bring the story to life and are more visually impactful.
- 3 Producing a film/video to show at meetings and events or to post online. Alternatively, you could tell your story through an online audio slideshow, which is often cheaper and quicker to produce.
- 4 Talking to a journalist if you think your story is particularly newsworthy or interesting. Seek advice from your in-house communications team first and notify senior sponsors if you plan to involve the media.
- 5 With other team members so that they can use the stories in their own communications about the project.

Find out more about using different [communications channels](#).

What others say

“The tradition of an oral narrative history that records and hands down learning, insight or collective revelation still thrives in social communities, and Shell has found it particularly effective in helping change our business mindset and improve our knowledge practice.”

Stories from the edge, Shell, 2011.

Resources

For the use of stories in communicating ideas, see: Heath C, Heath D. *Made to stick: Why some ideas take hold and others come unstuck*, Arrow Books. 2008.

For the use of stories in presentations, see: *Making presentations that stick*, Chip and Dan Heath.

<http://heathbrothers.com/member-content/making-presentations-that-stick/>

Stories from the edge: Managing knowledge through new ways of working within Shell's exploration and production business, Shell, 2011.

http://www.providersedge.com/docs/km_articles/managing_k_thru_ways_of_working_within_shell.pdf