

Narrative as Infrastructure: How Storytelling Shapes Systems Change

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March 26, 2026



Storytelling for Systems Change

Story is not decoration. In systems change work, narrative is infrastructure. It shapes which problems get named, who gets blamed, and what solutions feel possible. It also shapes something subtler and more consequential: which systems are allowed to exist at all.

Narratives determine what counts as legitimate, what counts as natural, and what gets treated as an unfortunate inevitability rather than a policy choice. The right story, delivered in the right way, can make the status quo feel intolerable and change feel necessary. This work comes long before budgets are reallocated or new laws are written.

This guide is a step-by-step framework for using storytelling strategically. Not just to generate empathy, but to shift how systems are understood and, ultimately, how they function. Each step builds upon the last.

Step 1: Understand What Story Actually Does (and Where It Fails)

Stories are powerful, but not always for the reasons advocates assume.

[Ella Saltmarshe, writing in the Stanford.Social.Innovation.Review](#), argues that story is foundational to systems change. It can reach beyond moving emotions and address something more structural. Story can help people perceive systemic patterns, build coalitions across difference, and imagine alternatives that do not yet exist. Story changes what people see as normal, possible, and their responsibility. It shapes which explanations feel available and which power arrangements feel inevitable.

That power comes with a significant limitation. A moving personal story, told without strategic intent, can reinforce the very thinking advocates are trying to disrupt. [Research from the FrameWorks Institute](#) shows that vivid individual anecdotes often trigger individualistic explanations. Audiences hear about one person's struggle and reach for causes like personal choice, bad luck, or exceptional circumstance rather than systemic conditions. Emotional resonance without explanatory framing can actively deepen the problem by making structural causes harder to see.

The distinction that matters here is between awareness and influence. Awareness means someone knows a problem exists. Influence means they understand it differently, attribute it differently, and feel accountable to doing something about it. Storytelling that generates visibility without shifting understanding is not systems change work. It is communications.

Practical check: After hearing your story, what explanation is most available to the audience? If the answer points toward individual failure or exceptional circumstance, your frame needs work before your story goes public.

Step 2: Know the Difference Between Personal Story and Strategic Narrative

A personal story describes what happened. A strategic narrative connects that experience to shared values, systemic causes, and a call to collective action. Both matter. Only one shifts systems.

Harvard scholar [Marshall Ganz developed](#) what has become one of the most widely used frameworks in organizing: Public Narrative. It structures story across three linked levels:

- **Story of Self:** Your values, experiences, and what called you to this work
- **Story of Us:** The shared experiences and values of your community or coalition
- **Story of Now:** The urgent challenge you face together and the specific action required

What makes this framework powerful for systems change is its insistence that personal narrative becomes strategic only when it is explicitly connected to collective purpose and present conditions. The story of self is not self-expression. It is a bridge to the story of us, which is a bridge to action.

The FrameWorks Institute's research reinforces why those bridges matter. Without them, individual stories tend to produce empathy rather than power. Audiences feel moved but remain observers rather than actors. Strategic narrative positions people as participants in a shared condition, not witnesses to someone else's.

Practical step: Before drafting any story for advocacy purposes, identify which level you are working at and what the other two levels need to say to complete the arc. If you can't name the specific action the story is building toward, you do not yet have a strategic narrative.

Step 3: Center Lived Experience Without Extracting It

The people closest to broken systems carry the most credible knowledge about how those systems actually work. Centering lived experience is not just an ethical obligation; it is epistemically necessary. It surfaces what institutional data obscures and lends moral authority that no amount of policy analysis can replicate.

But how you do it matters enormously.

Extraction happens when organizations use personal stories for institutional gain (funding, visibility, legitimacy) without meaningfully returning power, credit, or control to the storyteller. It produces what practitioners call "poverty porn": narrative that generates donor engagement while reducing complex human beings to their suffering. Beyond the ethical failure, it is strategically corrosive. Systems change requires trust, and extractive storytelling destroys it by reproducing the very power dynamics the work aims to address.

This dynamic is not theoretical. We have explored it in depth in our previous articles [Thrown Into The Fire](#) and [The Epistemic Erosion Spiral](#).

[The Ethical Storytelling Roadmap](#), developed collaboratively with peer organizations, practitioners, and individuals served, offers a framework built around three principles:

- **Time:** Giving storytellers adequate space to consider participation, prepare, and debrief
- **Transparency:** Being explicit about how a story will be used, who will see it, and what control the storyteller retains
- **Trauma-Informed Practice:** Designing every touchpoint around safety rather than extraction

[Maria Bryan's practitioner guide on trauma-informed nonprofit storytelling](#) adds that consent should be ongoing rather than one-time, framing should center strengths and agency rather than suffering, and storytellers should retain the right to revise or withdraw their participation at any stage.

Practical step: Before collecting any story, be able to answer three questions: What does the storyteller gain from participating? What ongoing control do they have over their narrative? What would you do if they asked you to stop using it? If the answers are unclear, the process is not ready.

Step 4: Know Your Audience and Choose Your Frame

The same story, told to different audiences with different frames, produces different conclusions. Strategic storytellers do not have one story. They have one set of values and many ways of communicating them, calibrated to where their audience actually is.

The FrameWorks Institute offers useful insight here: audiences come to any issue with existing mental models, or “the pictures in people’s heads.” Your story will be filtered through those models whether you design for them or not. The question is whether you are working with that reality or ignoring it.

Effective audience and frame analysis involves four steps:

1. Map your audience’s default thinking. What causes do they instinctively attribute, who do they hold responsible, and what solutions feel common-sense to them?
2. Inventory the frames already in circulation around your issue in media, policy debate, and organizational messaging.

3. Choose values and metaphors that open up systemic thinking rather than triggering the defaults you are trying to displace.
4. Test before you scale. Frames that feel intuitively right to advocates often land differently with audiences who do not share the same analysis.

A common and costly error is designing stories for people who already agree. That produces engagement among the converted and has no effect on the people and institutions that actually need to shift. Systems change requires influencing audiences who are skeptical, ambivalent, or operating from fundamentally different assumptions about how the world works.

Practical check: What does your story allow a skeptical audience to conclude? If the frame still points toward individual responsibility or charitable exception rather than structural conditions, the story is not ready for that audience.

Step 5: Build a Story Arc That Moves People Toward Action

A strong advocacy story is not just emotionally resonant. It is structurally designed to move an audience from passive witness to active participant.

[Narrative Arts' Storytelling and Social Change strategy guide](#) has become a foundational resource in practitioner circles. It offers a five-part organizing arc that works well for systems-level advocacy:

- A character with a clear stake in the outcome;
- A conflict rooted in systemic conditions rather than individual failure;
- A turning point where change becomes possible;
- A resolution that names what is achievable rather than only what is wrong; and,
- A call to action that connects the audience to the work in a specific and concrete way.

The most important structural choice in systems change storytelling is this: the audience is the protagonist. Not the individual whose story is being told, the advocate telling it, or the organization leading change efforts. Your story should position the listener as someone whose action is necessary and possible. A story that generates empathy without enabling agency produces visibility, not power.

Ganz's public narrative framework reinforces this point. The story of now is not a description of crisis. It is an invitation that names the challenge, raises the stakes, and presents the audience with a specific moment of choice. If there is no clear action embedded in that invitation, the story will move people without mobilizing them.

Practical step: Map your story against these five structural elements before finalizing it. If the call to action is vague or absent, the story is incomplete as an advocacy tool.

Step 6: Measure Whether Your Story Is Actually Shifting Anything

Narrative change is long-term work, and its effects are often diffuse. That does not make it unmeasurable. In fact, it makes intentional measurement more important, not less.

A [framework published in the Stanford.Social.Innovation.Review](#) proposes four levels of evaluation for narrative change efforts:

1. **Story Design:** Does your story address power structures, center affected voices, and connect individual experience to systemic causes?
2. **Reach:** Are you getting your story to the audiences who need to encounter it, through channels they trust?
3. **Immediate Outcomes:** Are attitudes, knowledge, or behavioral intentions shifting among your target audiences?
4. **Discourse and Systems Change:** Are the dominant narratives in media, policy, and public conversation actually moving over time?

[Opportunity Agenda's narrative strategy toolkit](#) adds a practical discipline: measurement should be built into campaign design from the beginning, not treated as something to evaluate afterward. Define what counts as a shift before you launch. Set a baseline. Identify the indicators you can realistically track with available resources.

For smaller organizations, this does not require a formal evaluation budget. It might mean tracking how an issue is framed in local media over a six-month window, noting how decision-makers describe a problem before and after sustained engagement, or gathering brief responses from community members following a storytelling campaign. What matters is not the sophistication of the method but the discipline of asking the question consistently: is this story changing anything beyond attention?

Practical step: Choose one indicator at each of the four levels and write it down before your campaign launches. Review it at regular intervals and be willing to adjust your narrative strategy based on what you find.

Putting It Together

Storytelling for systems change is not about visibility. It is about influence. It's about shifting who holds explanatory power over a problem, whose knowledge gets treated as credible, and what solutions are considered. Done well, it changes not just what people feel but what they believe is structurally possible and politically legitimate.

The organizations doing this work most effectively are not the ones with the most polished production values or the most emotionally devastating stories. They are the ones who have thought rigorously about what they are trying to shift, earned genuine trust with the communities they serve, and stayed accountable to the difference between generating awareness and building power.

Awareness without influence is not systems change. Empathy without accountability is not justice. The story that moves someone to feel without moving them to act or to see differently will not effect change.

Those who have lived the harm entrusted us with their stories. Our responsibility is to use those stories to shift understanding, build accountability, and prevent the harm from being reproduced.

We owe them more than empathy. They deserve change.