



Influencing Change: Telling Your Story

Each of us has a compelling story to tell that can inspire action.
Some tips for helping you prepare.

“Some people think we are made of flesh and bones. Scientists say we are made of atoms. But I think we are made of stories...that are what people remember, the stories of our lives and the stories that we told...” -- Ruth Stratton

“Emotion is the fast lane to the brain.” -- Doug Stevenson

1. Purpose and outcome for the presentation. What do decision-makers need to know about what you know – what you’ve experienced, what has worked or not worked in your life? What do you want people to understand, feel about that understanding, and do because of that better understanding? This is not story-telling for the sake of telling your story. It’s story-telling to influence change.

2. Understand decision-makers. Few of them have any experience with homelessness; nor do they have much time to study all issues in-depth because they have to weigh in on a lot of competing issues and priorities (Michigan House members represent 78,000 voters, all with their own priorities). They trust people they know, so talking with them more than once is key; and they take action based on individual stories!

3. Make it conversational. If you’re speaking to a group, use the same words you would use in telling the story to just one person. Use questions directed at one person, not a multitude. For example: “Have you ever felt so frustrated you could explode?” Not, “Who here has felt so frustrated you could explode?” Talk like you are talking to just one person. This helps keep a personal connection.

4. Think back on your experiences first. If you plan to tell about a particular event, incident or moment to help illustrate your story, think for a few minutes about it, as if you are back in that moment. Image in detail the sights, sounds and smells of that moment. Jot down some thoughts - whatever you are comfortable sharing. It will help you retell that incident in a more vivid way.

5. **Choose what to share.** Which parts of the story do you want to share? It's OK not to share parts of your story. Your story belongs to you! If you think information shared could be too painful for you or misused by someone who hears it, reconsider whether or not to share it. If you find yourself over-sharing, just stop, take a breath, and start again.

6. **Emotions.** Personal stories are deeply moving. Most people feel differently each time they tell their story. And that's normal. But what happens if you tear up? It's totally fine to say, I need a minute; please bear with me while I pause. And then do just that. And don't apologize. Tears are an important part of living.

7. **Draw in the audience.** If you are getting close to a key part of the story, consider pausing, or just "tip off" the audience by saying something like, "The next part of my story is hard for me to tell." Or, "What I'm about to say next is one of the most important parts of my story." Or, "If you don't remember anything else, I hope you take this with you."

8. **Pauses are okay.** It's totally fine to pause at any time to gather your thoughts, to slow yourself down, to emphasize a point, to bring the audience back to you. If you are uncomfortable with pause times, silently count to 8 to give yourself a pause.

9. **Managing nervousness.** The vast majority of people are nervous when talking about their experiences with others. That's why it's so helpful to prepare. You can write down key thoughts to use as references during the presentation. But do not read from them. Practice in front of a friendly audience and bring a family member or friend with you as a support person. Sometimes it helps to focus on a friendly face. If you can't bring them, think about what helps you feel supported and successful before, during and after the presentation.

10. **Finishing it up and tying it all together.** Ending the story is important and sometimes difficult. Your closing words are an opportunity to remind people the message you want your story to leave them with. Give them something to think about and even act on (what you want them to do).

By the way, if you are inclined to nervousness, memorize opening and closing remarks. It will help you feel more confident.