# Insights and Actions from Interviews With People Who Tell or Study Stories in Philanthropy

*Created by the Center for Public Interest Communications*

## Introduction

In our first report for this project, ["Better Stories, Better Language,"](#) we noted that there is a narrative vacuum in philanthropy that makes it hard for people to understand the role of foundations and their contribution to a better world. We also know that the field is filled with expert storytellers who have the skills, knowledge, and mindset to tell stories that can address this gap. To better understand what best practice for the sector might look like, we interviewed 11 people who are highly regarded by the field as experts in storytelling and narrative. We wanted to get their recommendations for the new kinds of approaches the field might take to storytelling but also explore the constraints storytellers face, the context in which they work, and the expectations created by their supervisors and collaborators. This report distills their recommendations and insights.

*Some quotes have minor edits for clarity that are noted with brackets and ellipses.*

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**Overview of Methods**

In July and August 2023, the Center team interviewed ten practitioners who work at foundations or with philanthropy and one academic who studies philanthropy and nonprofits to gather insights about their work, their use of stories, messages and metaphors, and their views about dominant narratives and possible counter-narratives about foundations and philanthropic work. In late August and early September 2023, we coded these interviews to help us unearth insights from the interviews. The insights will be helpful for understanding the views of those in the philanthropic sector to know more about what types of stories, metaphors, and messages might be effective in helping Americans better appreciate what foundations do in their work and how they improve various areas of life in the U.S.

We used two methods to arrive at the following insights: the first is consensus or frequency among the interviewees, which meant at least eight participants agreed on some area of inquiry. The second is through identifying bright spots or areas of positive deviance. Bright spots are specific interventions or viewpoints that the interviewees found particularly effective.

Both methods can also unearth negative findings. There might be consensus about what does NOT work or there may be bright spots focused around areas of failure. Negative insights are included in this analysis and can be helpful as they will help us develop guidance about what not to do–and this often helps solidify what action should be taken.

The interview subjects either work as part of communication teams and departments or work very closely with communications in roles such as CEO. There was a mix of subjects who work on large communication teams and small ones, with most working on small communications teams. There was some racial and ethnic diversity across the interview subjects. Most interview subjects work for foundations or nonprofits of varying endowment sizes. The interview subjects worked at or with a mix of foundation types, including family, community and corporate foundations.

## Five Insights for Foundations on Their Current Narrative Context

To better understand the context of this moment for foundations, we asked our interviewees about some of the current narrative trends happening in the philanthropic sector. The following trends and bright spots stood out:

**Foundations hold a unique storytelling position in the philanthropic narrative space due to their relationships with multiple grantees, partners, and communities.**

Multiple interviewees pointed out the importance of grantee relationships to their storytelling. Specifically, their work across issue areas allowed them to draw connections between actors in the social change ecosystem and stories beyond their grantmaking space. This vantage point is an asset when trying to establish a narrative; to borrow a metaphor from Kamal Sinclair, stories are individual stars and narratives are the constellations that come from connecting those stars.

> "Some of the most interesting communications use longer-form narratives to explore big-picture issues that impact your grantmaking that aren't specifically focused on your particular strategy or your particular grantees. These narratives can speak to several elements that actually impact and connect many of the issues we care about at once."
>
> Claire Callahan
> Director of Communications, Stupski Foundation

In this role, foundations demonstrate a role as narrative connectors. This practice also provides an opportunity for foundations to clarify their role in a community and how other community members fit as well.

> "Oftentimes what we see in the media and other places is polarized communities, divided communities, and I think philanthropy can be a unifier. Philanthropy is not just for those of great means, but those who could mean to do great. It is a really powerful, universal opportunity and the most powerful element of this work and these stories. We want to find heroes, but we also want to be heroes, and I think some of the stories that we talk about allow people to see both."
>
> Kyle Caldwell
> President and CEO, Council of Michigan Foundations

**The public perception of the philanthropic sector – including foundations, nonprofits, and other charitable entities – is "surface level." Americans do not know the technical or regulatory aspects of foundations, and they do not fully understand how often they interact with different forms of charitable activity.**

The scholar and the practitioners we interviewed agreed that the American public is unlikely to know much about the specifics of the sector, especially tax laws. The jargon related to this tax law is one part of the sector's opaque dictionary, which one of the practitioners called

"philanthro-speak." While describing the results of a survey they conducted, the scholar we interviewed said:

> "Something that I wouldn't say was completely shocking, but I think is very interesting is really just how surface level the typical American's understanding of philanthropy in the sector is … We asked a lot of factual questions about whether people understand the tax implications of their charitable giving and not surprisingly, people don't know much minutia, or fine-tuned details. We also asked questions about policies regarding community foundations and donor-advised funds and the rules and regulations, and very few people know the technical details."

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Chelsea J. Clark, PhD
Research Associate, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

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This scholar went on to say it was surprising how the survey respondents perceived what foundations and nonprofits do or how often Americans interact with them.

> "We asked, 'Did you or someone in your household receive services from a nonprofit within the past year?' And what we saw was that only about 5% of our respondents said yes to that question … And we asked a follow-up question about the types of services that they've received, letting them give their own responses. We found many referenced basic needs-related services."

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Chelsea J. Clark, PhD
Research Associate, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

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**While all three of the harmful deep narratives exist, "the biggest single problem is that the savior narrative persists for both nonprofits and foundations."**

In the first phase of this project, we identified three deep narratives that negatively portrayed the role of philanthropy and foundations in American society: a distrust of wealth, an unease with private funds solving public problems, and a single hero saves the day.

All the interview subjects recognized the three deep narratives in popular discourse, and they considered all of them to be prevalent. However, the "single hero saves the day" narrative – also referred to as the "savior narrative" – was considered the most prevalent of the three. That said, the interviewees did not believe them to be true and advised on how to overcome the narratives.

> "I would say maybe the biggest single problem is that the savior narrative persists for both nonprofits and foundations. Person A was in trouble. Our organization got involved with them, they're fixed, now they're better, give us money. It's just that, no agency, and it's what Trabian Shorters talks about with deficit framing and the organization coming in as savior, et cetera. And there's no asset framing and there's no agency for the individual. I think this continues to be maybe the biggest single problem in storytelling in the whole philanthropic sector, to my mind."

Andy Goodman
Director Emeritus, The Goodman Center

**The grantee-funder relationship, storytelling ethics, and evaluation metrics are barriers practitioners face when developing a stronger narrative.**

Throughout the interviews, practitioners who worked at foundations or who have worked to improve foundation storytelling capacity identified hurdles communicators face when doing this work. The first has to do with the grantee-funder relationship and the restrictions that come about when trying to highlight specific grantees. Interviewees noted that program officers didn't want to appear to be picking favorites or didn't want to add additional work for grantees in the reporting process. Another issue in the relationship is that people at grantee organizations appear to feel pressure to "make the donor happy." Additionally, in the process of focusing on grantees, actors within a foundation can be overlooked in the story, which is a missed opportunity to clarify where foundations fit in this work and what foundation teams actually do.

> "We've had different foundation staff members say, 'Oh, if we're going to pick one grantee or if we're going to pick one staff member to highlight, aren't we picking favorites?' We have the good fortune of having a pretty small team. For the staff who want to be thought leaders, we usually can find opportunities for them to do so. But when you have 500 plus grantees, that makes it hard to equitably highlight all of them."

Claire Callahan
Director of Communications, Stupski Foundation

> "Grantees, development staff, and comms people in nonprofit organizations are still so stuck on what we need to make the donor happy. They are trained to place us as the funder in the headline, but we don't want to be in the headline. We want them to be in the headline because they're actually doing the work."

Claire Callahan
Director of Communications, Stupski Foundation

> "The reason nonprofits are organized by issue is that philanthropy is organized by issue. We need to head toward a better way to organize ourselves, which might be by approach, legislative approaches, educational approaches, power building approaches, et cetera, or potentially by constituency or by broad goal, establishing democracy for example or making economies that work. The 'issue' thing – it makes it very hard from the nonprofit end to make bigger action."

Rinku Sen
Executive Director, Narrative Initiative

> "I think one of the great failures of storytelling in the philanthropic sector is there are these amazing individuals working at foundations, bringing their expertise, their history,

their point of view, who remain in the background because it's not about us, it's not about the individuals."

Andy Goodman
Director Emeritus, The Goodman Center

From a storytelling ethics standpoint, multiple interviewees noted the challenge of picking a single hero or exemplar organization without tying their story to a larger movement, which is not only a barrier to good storytelling but also a barrier to understanding the full context of the issues that organization, its partners and its community face.

"It's tempting and easy to look to extraordinary individuals. But they're part of a field. There are others doing this work as well, who, for whatever reason, have not gotten the elevation or haven't been lifted up in the same way. What could — and should perhaps — be interesting is a taking a little bit more of a mosaic or "quilting" approach where you say, 'Yes, there are certain individuals who have a particularly compelling or extraordinary story, but they're part of the fabric of a larger movement that's been growing across time.'

Sean Gibbons
CEO, The Communications Network

"Often, grantees and foundations perpetuate the 'exemplary organization' narrative by picking one organization to highlight. As funders, we should highlight our grantee partners; that is part of our job as a funder. But if you're only going to speak about one of them and make them the poster child for the thing to do in that space, you're not illuminating the broader ecosystem that they're working within."

Claire Callahan
Director of Communications, Stupski Foundation

Another ethical storytelling barrier practitioners currently face is the overemphasis on success and a lack of self-reflection from foundations. The question raised then is: who are we serving? Are we centering the person behind the story or are we centering what foundations might need from the story?

"We often feel like we are good people doing work for social good, so we don't have to self-reflect on our own practices and processes. But no person or organization is beyond recalibration, especially when our goal is for social good. We need to constantly self-reflect and ensure that we are putting the wellbeing of those that we serve first."

Sarah Lowe
Director of Research and Evaluation, Define American

Lastly, a familiar barrier from communications that transfers to storytelling efforts is how we evaluate the success of the stories we share.

"It's hard to quantify. We can quantify by metrics from social media, likes and readership and things of that nature. But in terms of how it makes them feel about our PSO

[philanthropy-serving organization] or if they continue to invest in our PSO, I think that's harder to quantify. Our membership has gone up 27% … So, I feel like that's a pretty good indicator that we're doing a good job communicating the value, but I don't know if it's because of effective storytelling, necessarily."

> Ashley Heath Dietz
> President and CEO, Florida Philanthropic Network

**Building a narrative takes time and it requires connecting to larger themes — and foundations' narrative work funding may be too focused on short-term effects.**

When it comes to narrative-building work, one of the interviews stood out in terms of the practitioner's critique of some narrative change practices the philanthropic sector has adopted. This interviewee noted that two major faults are that narrative change work sometimes puts an issue-focused story ahead of a theme-based narrative and that some narrative change work can be too short-term. While this applies directly to narrative change investments, we also need to consider a long-term, theme-based effort when building transparent and clear narratives about philanthropy and foundation work.

When discussing the focus of narrative work, this practitioner said:

> "Folks are trying to come up with a narrative that is a story for each issue. So 'I'm a housing advocate, I need a housing narrative.' 'We are a coalition of labor unions, we need a labor narrative.' But I think that what we actually need is one or two big ideas toward which we all agree to narrate. I don't think those ideas can be imposed on anyone. I think they have to emerge and be organized around.
>
> "I agree with you that much of the story that philanthropists tell is about their impact on an issue. If you're a public foundation, you're telling that story to attract donors. If you're a private foundation, you're telling that story partly to justify your existence and potentially to attract partners to your strategy. 'If I can get more people to support the work I think is awesome on labor rights, then I'll be having an impact that's larger than my specific foundations.' So setting aside the problems these issue silos create for policy change or organizing campaigns, the narrative problem is that we wind up with an incoherent set of stories. They don't add up to a theme, a value that gets repeated long enough and by enough people to saturate the society for at least a decade, shall we say."

> Rinku Sen
> Executive Director, Narrative Initiative

When discussing the length of time needed for narrative work, this practitioner said:

> "It takes up to 50 years to move deep narrative change, 50 years of saturating repetition. It took at least 50 years for enough Americans to think that abolishing slavery was a good enough idea to fight a war over it, to elect Abraham Lincoln instead of the other guy. It did not take two years. It didn't take five years.

"When funders today talk about 'I've been funding narrative for two years or five years and things haven't changed,' I think to myself, 'You haven't been funding narrative. You've been funding strategic communications, maybe more strategic, maybe less strategic, but communications, and you've been funding short-term efforts in an environment that is unfriendly to them.'"

Rinku Sen
Executive Director, Narrative Initiative

## Six Actions Foundations Should Take

In addition to identifying the current narrative environment that foundations exist in, the interviewees identified some actions that foundations should take based on their experience, their observations of the success and failures of other foundations, and their own perspective on ethical narrative and storytelling practices.

**Build a cohesive narrative centered around a theme and long-term vision rather than loosely connected stories.**

Narrative change campaigns require practitioners to identify the connective tissue between stories on a larger scale to tie them together in a coherent way. [Building on the insight from the interviewee in the previous section](), foundations need to identify a theme they are building to and how the stories they tell connect to this. Other interviewees recognized this as well, as mentioned in the insight above about [foundations' unique storytelling position]().

"What I have leaned toward—and I think this is a trend among communications resource people and experts who work a lot with grassroots organizations or … community-based organizations—what I lean toward is creating architectures and frameworks and then letting people craft their own stories and messages, because people have the right to make decisions about what story they're going to tell, with what idea behind it, and to whom. That kind of decision-making capacity is the only way we advance.

"But it could be freedom, could be hard work, could be belonging, could be democracy. There are a lot of things it could be, but I think finding that cross-cutting narrative vision where people working from different perspectives can feed into a particular value or idea, that is what we aspire to."

Rinku Sen
Executive Director, Narrative Initiative

Additionally, themes allow for more flexibility in collaboration, which is important for building narratives about the philanthropic sector. This is in contrast to the rigidity of message discipline.

"There's a lot of obsessive talk about message discipline in my world. 'We need message discipline. Everybody needs to be saying the same things.' That has gone on for decades, and we still don't have a lot of message discipline. I'm thinking it's not something for us. Maybe there's something untenable about it for the kinds of work we support, where there's a high value on community decisionmaking and resistance to top-down tactics."

Rinku Sen
Executive Director, Narrative Initiative

**Tell the story about what foundations actually do transparently.**

All of the interviewees viewed transparency as a good thing – where the money comes from, where it goes, how it helps, and how it is used. They noted that the sector should tell more transparent stories about the sector and how foundations work, which can be one way to address the above context issue that people don't fully understand what philanthropy includes.

The interviewees described a few different types of transparent stories that work well, including stories about how foundations are nimble, the potential of collective small investments, the lessons from failure, and the importance of showing the manageable steps toward success. And if grantees or donors helped in any of these stories, being transparent about that can make them feel heard or appreciated as part of the community of change. This transparency helps flip the "single hero" narrative on its head by showing how change actually works.

So tell the nimble story:

"There's a lot of innovation that can happen in the philanthropic world, especially when we think about big donors who can just push a button and dump a whole bunch of funding into something that lets something move quickly. The government isn't designed to move quickly."

Chelsea J. Clark, PhD
Research Associate, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

And the stories of smaller, local investments:

"We spend a lot of time talking about the big bets that large investors make, but we don't spend enough time talking about the impact of collective small investments that lead to greater transformation at the local level that are some of the more powerful narratives."

Kyle Caldwell
President and CEO, Council of Michigan Foundations

Share stories from plans that didn't work so we all can learn and innovate:

"It was such a shame to not speak more openly and honestly about the fact that prior iterations of the foundation had invested so much time and so many resources into these strategies that really didn't pan out. Telling those stories could save other people the same disappointment and actually help prove the point of a lot of communities who are

saying, 'I know you want us to do this, but we know from experience that's not going to work, so please do this.' Being more honest about philanthropy's failures could help a lot of different players within the field."

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Claire Callahan
Director of Communications, Stupski Foundation
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And the stories of all the steps so change feels possible:

"[There is a ton] of science saying, if you offer people an example of people working on a big, thorny, hairy monster of a problem and they see someone, even if it's very modestly, putting a shovel on the ground and turning over just a little bit of dirt, they see a path forward."

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Sean Gibbons
CEO, The Communications Network
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**Incorporate a variety of voices in your stories and give the speaker space to develop their story—including grant recipients, directly affected people, and staff doing the work.**

When we asked interviewees about which voices and themes they include in their stories, they primarily said the "people we help." However, some also mentioned the staff doing the work at the foundation, their founders, the issues they address in their work, and the systems that create the problems they are trying to solve.

We heard a variety of metaphors used to describe this approach—passing the microphone, putting people in the driver's seat, crafting their own story—but at the core of each of these is the active role of the story owner with the support of communicators. They should be in the driver's seat regarding what is shared and how it is shared. They should be given the microphone to tell their own stories rather than having a story told about them that is what others think their story should sound like.

"Put the grantees in the driver's seat. They know what they're doing. They know what they're doing. In fact, I would argue that the way we do it is a little bit easier without putting the burden on them, asking them, 'Hey, what do you want to see? What would you like covered? How important is this current event to you? Because we think it's important, but do you think it informs your work?'"

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Communications Manager at a national foundation
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"Maybe we're a little bit of a curator, but generally, at our best, we're a microphone passer, we're the MC, the hype man or whatever. We're constantly passing the microphone to others."

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Sean Gibbons
CEO, The Communications Network
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"I lean toward … creating architectures and frameworks and then letting people craft their own stories and messages, because people have the right to make decisions about what story they're going to tell, with what idea behind it, and to whom. That kind of decision-making capacity is the only way we advance."

> Rinku Sen
> Executive Director, Narrative Initiative

"We've been trying to show voices of impact and people who speak truth to power, who are trying to shine a light on our own sector, what it can and should be doing, and holding up their values on social justice. So we're really conscious of making sure it's their voice that is telling a story and that we become sort of the reporter observing and centering them in the story, and their voice, rather than any spin we might put on the work."

> Kyle Caldwell
> President and CEO, Council of Michigan Foundations

Multiple practitioners emphasize the importance of including the staff members in the storytelling because they also bring a rich understanding to this work and they play a role in moving philanthropic work forward. Incorporating the voices of staff members helps clarify what foundation work actually looks like and allows for a transparent depiction of decision-making.

"I think one of the great failures of storytelling in the philanthropic sector is there are these amazing individuals working at foundations, bringing their expertise, their history, their point of view, who remain in the background because it's not about us, it's not about the individuals."

> Andy Goodman
> Director Emeritus, The Goodman Center

"They want the money that they allocate to have the greatest impact. So they have to do the homework to figure out where's the inflection point, where's the leverage, where we can apply our funds. Not necessarily an organization, but either a way of doing things or a certain area, et cetera. And how they come to that, how they figure that out, to me, that's sort of an overlap of transparency and clear storytelling."

> Andy Goodman
> Director Emeritus, The Goodman Center

"The chief storyteller role helps amplify the mission, shows people why the work is important, and offers an opportunity for everyone to understand their role in supporting the work that we're doing."

> Kyle Caldwell
> President and CEO, Council of Michigan Foundations

**Experiment with stories that show that change is an ecosystem—and be clear and honest about fondations' role in it.**

A metaphor that came up in multiple interviews was the idea that change is an ecosystem. Not only are there systems that are affecting the issues we work on, but there are connections between all the entities in this work, and each of those entities has a particular role. Some interviewees said foundations should tell clear stories and describe philanthropy's role within the community more often. Others mentioned that foundations do not always do a good job of enacting this type of transparency.

> "If you're not being transparent, you can't be clear … We have to get rid of those narratives that we talked about, this idea that philanthropy is going to save the day. We have to be honest about where we're situated and then also realize that this is an ecosystem."
>
> Communications Manager at a national foundation

> "Talking about the broader ecosystem as opposed to 'this district does it right' or 'this one grantee is changing everything,' you get a much broader sense of what's possible. When you highlight the broader ecosystem, you also unleash this idea of abundant grantmaking as opposed to scarcity grantmaking, which makes grantees compete against each other. There will always be an element of who gets what, but funders play into that too much. Funders should be telling stories about 'here's how these organizations are working together in cohorts to change this system' and 'here's what's possible if you actually fully fund them to do those activities', rather than making them all compete for peanuts."
>
> Claire Callahan
> Director of Communications, Stupski Foundation

One of the interviewees gave an example of how they are planning to incorporate this style of systems-storytelling into their foundation's work. Their team is putting together a three-piece series on the Supreme Court's decision on Affirmative Action—a thought piece from their program director, an interview with a group of grantees working on this issue from various perspectives, and a conversation with students who interact with some of their grantee partners. The interviewee said that Incorporating the youth voice was important because their foundation "feel[s] like the youth voice is really undervalued and underheard in philanthropy, especially in the higher education space where you're making decisions that literally impact them and their education and their future work opportunities."

> "Some of the most interesting communications use longer-form narratives to explore big-picture issues that impact your grantmaking that aren't specifically focused on your particular strategy or your particular grantees. These narratives can speak to several elements that actually impact and connect many of the issues we care about at once."
>
> Claire Callahan
> Director of Communications, Stupski Foundation

**Replace "philanthro-speak" with clear, de-jargoned language to communicate better with people within and outside of the philanthropic sphere.**

The interviewees all agreed that internal jargon needs to be eliminated from communication with the public, or if a term needs to be used, it needs to be explained clearly. Stories should be jargon-free.

> "Part of our role in communications is translating our internal jargon. We all know what an affiliate is or an agency partner is. But for our external communications, we need to translate that jargon back into normal speech."
>
> > Aaron Scott
> > Director of Communications, Community Foundation of the Ozarks

> "Instead of saying eliminating abstract language, we just try to speak in plain English, and not speak in philanthro-speak about our work."
>
> > Ashley Heath Dietz
> > President and CEO, Florida Philanthropic Network

> "We asked a lot of factual questions about whether people understand the tax implications of their charitable giving and not surprisingly, people don't know much minutia, or fine-tuned details. We also asked questions about policies regarding community foundations and donor-advised funds and the rules and regulations, and very few people know the technical details."
>
> > Chelsea J. Clark, PhD
> > Research Associate, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

> "Any good storytelling, it's multimodal, because not everybody learns the exact same way. Maybe that's the other thing about all of our storytelling: We try to think, 'how can we meet the audience where they are?' Obviously, people have different learning styles and different ways of processing information or receiving information, or even from a messenger perspective who they like to listen to and who they don't."
>
> > Sean Gibbons
> > CEO, The Communications Network

One of the "transparency" solutions we fall back on is providing facts and data, but data only increases obscurity without clear context through storytelling and plain language.

> "That's an area that we really need improvement on. I think that re-communicating information that people already know and facts about the organization. I don't know if that's storytelling."
>
> > Ashley Heath Dietz
> > President and CEO, Florida Philanthropic Network

"I think there is a focus on trying to increase transparency about what an organization does. But also, organizations have a lot of data and there's a desire to just get the numbers out there. Organizations will say things, like 'This amount of our spending goes to this, and this portion of our budget covers that.' Again, that's back to the organization wanting to demonstrate its impact. Organizations know that donors want to see the impact of their gifts."

Chelsea J. Clark, PhD
Research Associate, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

**Introduce systems through the stories of real, nuanced people**

Multiple interviewees noted the importance of talking about the systems philanthropy works in, but they also emphasized that the way to get actors to care about a system is to introduce it to them through a person. Foundations need to be better at telling compelling stories about real, nuanced people interacting with complex systems to make folks care.

"What makes a good story is always the people in the story who you meet and care about and identify with, who pull you into the narrative, who you engage with, who will then take you through the story. And those people may introduce you to systems and problems and organizations, et cetera, but you still need the people.

"We still need to meet the individuals and get to know them and care about them and get close enough to the action that we can actually tell compelling stories by individuals. But those stories ultimately highlight systemic problems. And even if these individuals do triumph, the message can still be, despite their triumph, there are still these systemic issues that need to be overcome, that they triumph in the face of systemic issues. So I do think we need to tell more stories like that."

Andy Goodman
Director Emeritus, The Goodman Center

The most powerful stories include what it means to be human. A story about something we can connect with in the human experience will be more powerful and move people to action compared to stories that are harder to connect with. Interviewees gave examples about vulnerability, nuanced demographics, immersive experiences, etc.

"The stories that are the most powerful are always when they show essences of vulnerability and humanness in the things that we do."

Ashley Heath Dietz
President and CEO, Florida Philanthropic Network

"I, having grown up cross-culturally, often find that I am not seeing stories that are as nuanced as I would like, that they all seem to come from a very similar background, a very similar cultural and socioeconomic perspective, that I don't always relate to."

Bethany Wearden
Director of Storyteller Support and Advocacy, Define American

"In the field of narrative change and culture change, that way of storytelling seemed to really galvanize people. I think it's because it tapped into universal storytelling. Something about not fragmenting ideas into individual experiences had the impact of speaking from the collective to the structures and systems  in a way that then activated individuals within the structures and systems."

Sarah Lowe
Director of Research and Evaluation, Define American

## Interview Codes

The Center's research team used the following codes to identify areas of consensus and examples of positive deviance or "brightspots" in the interviews. "CODE" signifies what researchers were looking for, and "PROBE" signifies additional questions interviewers used to prompt further reflection. The codes cover all possible answers and not every code was identified in the interview analysis. The existence of a code does not mean that any of the answers or interviewees were classified under the code.

### Broad Codes for the Full Interview

CODE: 1. Brightspot (an area of success, especially of a deviant or different approach that worked)

CODE: 2. Negative effect from a story for the organization

CODE: 3. Metaphors heard or used in the interview

CODE: 4. Brightspots of metaphors used to describe their work or philanthropy

CODE: 5. Effective messaging used in their work

CODE: 6. Ineffective messaging used in their work

CODE: 7. Effective stories or types of stories used in their work

CODE: 8. Ineffective stories or types of stories used in their work (flatline)

CODE: 9. This was a particularly rich interview–go back to

    CODE: 9a. This interview was pretty thin

    CODE: 9b. Innovative story structure

    CODE: 9c. Great quote for the project

CODE: 9d. Interesting, but don't know where it fits

**Codes Used for Specific Questions**

**SECTION 1 – YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SECTOR**

Can you begin by telling me your name and what you do in your job?

> CODE: 1. Occupation

Can you briefly share what inspired you to get into this field?

> CODE: 2. Inspiration to do communications work well

> CODE: 3. Inspiration to work in philanthropy

Can you tell me about the mission of your employer and how your work fits into that mission?

> CODE: 4. How their work fits with mission of their employer

> CODE: 5. How their work in comms fits with mission of their employer

Can you explain your role in terms of how your role connects to the communications functions of your organization? For instance, maybe you are in a comms department or have another role but interact with the communications department or communications person of your organization–or do you have another type of role?

> CODE: 6. Do they work in comms

> CODE: 7. On a small comms team

> CODE: 8. On a large comms team

> CODE: 9. Contracted comms at their employer


**SECTION 2 – USING STORY AND NARRATIVES IN YOUR WORK**

Do you tell stories as part of your work? If so, how often do you use them and how much time would you say you spend working on them?

> CODE: 1. Spend a lot of time working on stories

> CODE: 2. Do not spend much time on stories

> CODE: 3. They do not use stories much at all

How do the stories you tell connect to your communications objectives?

> CODE: 4. Stories they tell connect to promotion of their organization

> CODE: 5. Stories they tell connect to fundraising

> CODE: 6. Stories they tell connect to issue they are trying to solve

> CODE: 7. Stories advancing programmatic goals (we do x, y, z storytelling)

How do the stories you tell in your communications affect how your organization is perceived?

      CODE: 8. Our stories show our organization doing good work for the people we help

      CODE: 9. Our stories show our organization doing good work for our funders

           CODE: 9a. Our stories show how our organization does its work

           CODE: 9b. Our stories help us build trust with the communities we serve

           CODE: 9c. Our stories mostly focus on grantees/issue/partners

           PROBE: 9d. Why do you think this is the case?

Who or what are your stories about?

      CODE: 1. The people we help

      CODE: 2. Our staff doing the work

      CODE: 3. Our funders

      CODE: 4. Our leadership

      CODE: 5. The issues we address in our work

      CODE: 6. The origins of the problems we are trying to solve

What kinds of people appear as characters in your stories?

      CODE: 1. The people we help

      CODE: 2. Our staff doing the work

      CODE: 3. Our funders

      CODE: 4. Our leadership

      CODE: 5. The issues we address in our work

      CODE: 6. Systems that create the problems we are trying to solve

When you feature someone as a focal point of your story how do you include their voice in that story?

      CODE: 1. We include some quotes from them

      CODE: 2. The story is primarily in their voice or from a first-person account

      CODE: 3. We reshare direct stories from the person we are featuring without much or any editing

      CODE: 4. For final approval

      CODE: 5. For sharing of the story

      CODE: 6. Co-creation of story

      CODE: 7. We do NOT share their voice directly

In our review of the stories the field tells, we uncovered several deep narratives Going one by one– Is the following narrative familiar to you? Can you think of a story you or someone else in your organization told that fit this narrative? *(NOTE: Interviewer put the narratives up on the shared Zoom screen.)*

*Distrust of Wealth – Narratives that center on philanthropy's wealth in relation to the people they serve, concern about where that wealth comes from, and skepticism about the intentions of philanthropy.*

> CODE: 1. Recognized narrative
>
> CODE: 2. Most prevalent of the deep narratives
>
> CODE: 3. More detail on distrust of wealth narrative
>
> CODE: 4. Example of the narrative

*Unease with Private Funds Solving Public Problems – Narratives that question or overstate philanthropy's role in political spaces either by stating that it threatens democracy or by claiming it "fills a gap" (which has positive and negative implications).*

> CODE: 1. Recognized narrative
>
> CODE: 2. Most prevalent of the deep narratives
>
> CODE: 3. More detail on unease with private funds solving public problems narrative
>
> CODE: 4. Example of the narrative

*Single Hero Saves the Day – Narratives that put the focus on an individual's story rather than the systemic problem. These narratives either make philanthropy the savior or rely on "bootstrap individualism" of a directly impacted person.*

> CODE: 1. Recognized narrative
>
> CODE: 2. Most prevalent of the deep narratives
>
> CODE: 3. More detail on single hero saves the day narrative
>
> CODE: 4. Example of the narrative

Going one-by-one on displacement narratives–we would like to ask the same question. Thinking of the sector, does the following narrative ring true to you? Can you think of a story you or someone else in your organization told that fit this narrative? *(NOTE: Interviewer put the narratives up on the shared Zoom screen.)*

*Telling Transparent Stories (Stories that are specific about what you prioritize, what your funding does, and who does the day to day work)*

> CODE: 1. Most prevalent of the displacement narratives
>
> CODE: 2. We should be doing more of this as a sector and organization
>
> CODE: 3. Example of the displacement narrative

CODE: 4. Definitions of displacement narratives

*Telling Clear Stories (Stories that clearly describe philanthropy's role within the community)*

CODE: 1. Most prevalent of the displacement narratives

CODE: 2. We should be doing more of this as a sector and organization

CODE: 3. Example of the displacement narrative

CODE: 4. Definitions of displacement narratives

*Telling System Stories (Stories that emphasize communities taking action to address a systemic issue)*

CODE: 1. Most prevalent of the displacement narratives

CODE: 2. We should be doing more of this as a sector and organization

CODE: 3. Example of the displacement narrative

CODE: 4. Definitions of displacement narratives

*Eliminating abstract language and choosing metaphors that accurately reflect your work*

CODE: 1. Most prevalent of the displacement narratives

CODE: 2. We should be doing more of this as a sector and organization

CODE: 3. Example of the displacement narrative

CODE: 4. Definitions of displacement narratives

PROBE: Have you tried a different displacement narrative?

CODE: 1. Yes (example of a different displacement narrative)

CODE: 2. No

What are some examples of particularly strong stories you have seen told by someone in the sector?

CODE: 1. Here is a particularly strong story example

PROBE if they say yes: Why do you think this was a strong story? What aspects or attributes made it particularly strong?

I'd like to know a bit more detail about the stories you tell about how your organization does its work. Can you think of an example of a story you've told or produced that would help someone understand how the organization gets ideas, sets funding priorities or makes decisions?

PROBE: Whose voices do those stories include?

CODE: 1. The people we help

CODE: 2. Our staff doing the work

CODE: 3. Our funders

CODE: 4. Our leadership

CODE: 5. Fictional characters

CODE: 6. Systems

CODE: 7. Issues

CODE: 8. Other

PROBE: If you don't mind, would you send me the links to these stories after our talk?

CODE: Here is a particularly strong story example

Is there anything else you think we should know that we did not ask you about for this project?

See broad codes list.