



Why Organizations Thrive – Lesson 6

September 2010

By Jonathan Poisner, www.poisner.com

I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Thrive*. The article details fifteen lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),¹ buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

Collectively, I believe these lessons are a very useful set of principles that any Executive Director can use to improve their organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.

This article is Lesson 6: Know and tell your stories.

In my first year at the Oregon League of Conservation Voters I remember going to our fundraisers and telling people about OLCV in a very direct and logical manner – our mission, our challenges, and the environmental issues in front of the legislature. This was how I was trained to present information in grad school. People found me interesting, and we raised money, but the room felt devoid of energy.

I wish I could remember who suggested it, but somebody suggested that I instead tell a story. Give people a lot less about what was going on, but capture the heart of OLCV by going all the way back to our founding.

I took their advice and started telling a story about why OLCV existed. The story began in Eugene with a small set of individuals who came together around a kitchen table. It wove in some history, several heroes and villains, reversals in fortune, and success over time.

The change in how people responded to my pitch was palpable. We raised more money and, perhaps as importantly for my own ability to lead OLCV, I came away from these events jazzed instead of drained.

Why does telling stories matter to nonprofit organizations? And how can an organization consciously know and use its stories?

At its heart, nonprofits are an effort to corral resources from a broad array of people and to then direct those resources to accomplish some mission.

Stories are critical at each stage of that equation. Stories convey emotion in a manner that dry facts cannot. By telling stories, we create characters with whom those we're seeking to influence can identify. By identifying with those characters, the audience is more likely to behave in a manner consistent with them.

¹ I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

Telling stories has one other benefit that's worth mentioning: people remember facts when delivered as part of a story more than if you simply told them the fact. An anthropologist would say this has something to do with the way our brains are hardwired through evolution. I don't really care about the why – I care about the implication.

The implication is that nonprofit organizations that know and tell their stories are more likely to corral resources and more likely to influence target audiences.

They're also more likely to have their message accurately repeated by others, including whatever nuggets of information are most important. In short, they're more likely to thrive.

So where should an organization start if it wants to tell its stories?

I'm not going to give you a full rundown on *how* to tell a story. There are many experts to turn to for that. My favorite is Andy Goodman. If you have a chance to take one of his workshops or webinars, or just to read his publications, take it.

I do want to share some of my thoughts about how to *institutionalize* storytelling for your organization. I wish I could tell you that under my leadership OLCV had done all these things. Alas, some of them were just items on the to-do list that never got done.

There are three main steps any organization should take: collect your stories, train your staff, and use your stories.

Collecting stories is pretty straightforward. Just as many organizations have created image libraries where staff who're looking for a visual image can find one suitable for the occasion, they should create a story library that's accessible and searchable.

What are some stories that belong in this story library?

For starters, the story about your organization's founding.

You should also have several success stories that match up with different asks you're going to be making. There should be a "volunteers save the day" success story, an "extra money just in time made the difference" fundraising success story, and a "we overcame the forces of darkness and made progress" advocacy story.

In addition to stories from the organization's perspective, you should generate some stories from the first person perspective of those you're serving. At OLCV, that meant writing up a story from the perspective of a legislative hero who we had helped elect against villainous opposition so that he could do great things for the people of Oregon. For other organizations, that might mean finding a local environmental advocate who can tell the story of their favorite river protected thanks to your organization's work.

In addition to success stories, you should also have challenge stories. These are the unresolved stories you're in the middle of, where the ending isn't yet clear. They should have urgency to them, particularly if used in fundraising just before the ask.

Another category of story that belongs in the library is one that I was slow to embrace – the personal involvement story. Instead of being set in time with the organization as part of it, these stories are about why staff and board are personally engaged in the cause. They may well take place prior to the organization's existence.

At first, I didn't get why my personal story mattered. Why should I tell the story to OLCV audiences about how I developed a deep love of nature? Why does it matter that my devotion to the cause stems from experiences as a teen hiking and camping, juxtaposed against the horror I felt watching sprawl eat up the farmland in the area around where I grew up?

The answer became clear when, at the urging of a fundraising trainer, I began to tell that story. People identified with it. It helped me forge relationships with donors that helped them open up to me. And in the process, when it came time to seek their help, they were more likely to embrace our work.

So collect these personal from your staff, your board, your volunteers, and your donors.

Which brings us to step two: train your leadership on how to use stories.

Tell the stories as part of your new staff or board orientation. Role play with them as they practice telling the organization's stories. Involve them in collecting stories and give them positive feedback when they provide a new one that belongs in the library.

You can also take a step back and provide basic training on storytelling – everyone should know the basic elements of a good story. And perhaps as importantly, train them about why stories matter so that they will use them if it's not a natural approach for them.

If you've collected your stories and trained your leadership, step three is a breeze: tell them. In your written materials, when you give presentations, and online – wherever you communicate consider first and foremost if a story belongs front and center.

I am continuing to explore this topic. As you have success (or failures) using stories, I would appreciate hearing from you for my own story bank about storytelling.

Jonathan Poisner is an independent management consultant who helps nonprofit organizations thrive. He helps organizations with strategic planning, evaluation, coalition building, fundraising, communications, and other organizational development challenges. He can be reached at jonathan@poisner.com.