Story Building Blocks
Fundamental elements of compelling stories

1. AN EFFECTIVE CHARACTER

- Universal need (often emotional/intangible rather than physical/tangible)
- Relatable for similarities (i.e. mother, father, etc.) or through connection to unexpected obstacle (i.e. “it could happen to me, too”)
- Charismatic, yet authentic (not necessarily a perfectly polished spokesperson)
- Three-dimensional (What do others think of the character? What other interests/personality traits does s/he possess? Not solely defined by their need.)
- NOT the organization in most cases; the organization is a supporting character
- Consider confidentiality and/or ethical implications of asking someone to be your featured character

2. TRAJECTORY

- Plot that propels the story forward; think action!
- Choices/devices to consider:
  - Where/when to start?
  - Time sequence – linear, or flashback/forward?
  - Pacing – get into action quickly or slow build-up?
  - Whether/how to resolve the story?
  - Setbacks or no setbacks? (as a way to acknowledge organizational failure/growth)

3. AUTHENTICITY

- Character’s voice, perspective – and the perspectives of others
- Details; telling your audience how to feel vs. showing your audience and letting them decide how they feel (hint: the latter is much more compelling!)
- Avoid jargon
- Provide broader context about issue prevalence, past challenges/successes, etc.

4. ACTION-ORIENTED EMOTIONS

- Move people to action
- Choose active emotions (anger, anxiety, excitement, awe) vs. passive ones (contentment, sadness)*
- Follow up with a call-to-action in your content or presentation (or both)

5. A “HOOK”

- Lead with a sense of urgency
- Immediately provide a sense of whose story it is, what’s happening at this moment in time, and what’s at stake.**

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