

The Power of Stories

An Idea into Action Blog.

Overview of Idea to Action Project: When exploring the complex work of bringing ideas into action, the core question for this research team is what components of the process might reveal themselves as “good bets” for more successfully translating ideas into sustained action. Discover early resources from the project which give leaders and educators some concepts and questions to consider in change processes.

Purpose: This blog discusses the power of stories to help individuals adopt new practices or ideas. While the suggestions provided below might be most relevant for organizational leaders looking to institute a large change initiative, many are suitable in a wide variety of other scenarios like changing (or creating) classroom procedures or even helping a friend understand a new fad.

People often encounter new ideas which are worthwhile – a new teaching practice backed by research; an organizational initiative proven to increase efficiency – yet still, it takes a ton of effort for people to act on these good ideas. The I2A team is attempting to address what we call the “uptake problem” – the challenge people face when they are asked to and perhaps trying to adopt some new practice. We’ve often asked why the uptake doesn’t “take.” Additionally, we are interested not just in uptake, but what makes uptake widespread. Why do some ideas seem “contagious” and catch on like wildfire while others have a more limited influence?

One of the most promising ideas to these questions revolves around **stories**. Stories can help individuals adopt new ideas by aiding them in overcoming personal barriers to change, while also acting as a social “contagion” that allows the idea to spread rapidly between individuals.

Why uptake doesn’t take

People are not passive recipients of change – to adopt a new idea, individuals need to overcome various emotional and rational barriers. While both barriers are important, stories are an especially effective communicative form for helping individuals overcome emotional barriers like fear and/or a general discomfort with change.

There are a variety of ways stories (both fiction and non-fiction) can help individuals overcome emotional barriers. People understand the world by means of plots – we often “live inside” stories, putting ourselves in the character’s shoes or feeling emotionally connected (Moon, 2010). Individuals might feel isolated or fearful of implementing a new idea, but the story can convey ideas of solidarity and hope to help them overcome this barrier.

What makes ideas contagious?

Research shows that mass media/impersonal channels can help create *awareness* of a new idea, but interpersonal influence exerted through peer-to-peer conversations is the most successful way to spread *adoption* of the innovation (Rodgers, 1995). This is because new ideas involve risk and uncertainty, and people tend to rely on others they know and trust to provide reassurances that attempts to adopt the new idea won’t cost time, money or result in embarrassment.



The Power of Stories was developed by the Idea to Action initiative at Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, with Independent Schools Victoria (AU). Questions? Email pzlearn@gse.harvard.edu.

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Stories are widely regarded as an effective way to persuade people to adopt and spread a certain idea. They are viewed as an authentic way to connect with adopters and encourage people to think in terms of narratives – creating an easily spreadable “take home” message (Berger, 2016). Stories often help individuals overcome the various individual barriers they might be facing, allowing them to then persuade peers who encounter similar barriers.

Here are a few ways to quick start your use of stories which can help the uptake and spread of a new idea/initiative:

- **Use stories to kickstart a new idea:** Seeing an issue through the eyes of a protagonist can help people consider viewpoints different from their own, so narratives are often useful when introducing a new direction or initiative (Sole & Wilson, 2002). When different perspectives are considered, candidates are more likely to be open-minded and resist forming emotional barriers.
- **Use stories to present strategies which help individuals overcome “action inhibitors”:** Marshall Ganz uses the term “action inhibitors” to refer to emotional barriers like inertia, fear, and self-doubt. Stories that include specific strategies for action move people toward motivating emotions like urgency, hope, and confidence (Ganz, 2011). For a fuller explanation of Ganz’s framework for crafting a “public narrative” to motivate action, see the source list below.
- **Make the idea the central piece of the story:** It seems simple, but many stories are told without the contagious content at its core. Make sure your “take home” message is clear and gets at the change you desire.
- **Use stories to demonstrate how the new idea is consistent with existing values and beliefs:** Stories which embody the values/beliefs of their audience are more likely to be spread (people spread things they believe in and care about) and help alleviate emotional barriers (if people feel emotionally connected, they are less likely to have doubts about adopting the new idea).
- **Use stories to create moments of reflection:** Stories should include powerful “ah-ha” moments that allow the audience to reflect on their past experiences and beliefs. These moments can provide the audience with a chance to reflect on what is standing in their way of adopting the new initiative.

References

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