

*The Patient Experience Post*

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## 5 Steps for Building a Storytelling Culture

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Everybody loves a great story. For healthcare professionals that's a great thing because, within the walls of our organizations, every day, there are dozens, even hundreds, of stories taking shape. If only we could become more adept at finding, capturing and sharing them.

But, like most things, before you rush off to find stories, it's important to put some strategy behind the process.

### 1) What stories do you want to tell?

The stories you, your staff, and even your patients, tell will paint a picture of your organization—a picture that can either be brand-supportive or brand-detracting. So, the first step to take, is to think about the stories you want to tell.

One of the biggest gaps that we see as we work with healthcare organizations is that leaders fail to define what they want the culture to be. They tend to take the approach of, "We'll know it when we see it." But that reactive approach won't help you create the culture that will move your organization forward. You've got to consciously plan for it, and then find the stories that support that desired culture.

Frequently told stories and legends, repeated over and over again. But to be effective, they must support your mission, vision, and values. That's what creates strong societies, cultures—and healthcare organizations!

### 2) Focus on the positive

Isn't it interesting how negative stories seem to spread much more quickly than positive ones? That's why it's important to find and re-tell the positive stories that reinforce the mission, vision, and values. If negative stories are shared more than positive, that is what people will remember. I talk about this specifically with nurses in my book, *Reclaiming the Passion; Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing*. If all we talk about are the negative things that happen in our profession, that becomes nursing's story. Then who would ever want to become a nurse? Instead, focus on telling about the soul-filling, heartwarming

aspects of the career. It will remind you of why you became a nurse and will leave a positive and lasting impression on anyone listening.

Leaders need to set the example through their behaviors and conversations too —focus on the positive!

### **3) Teach people how to tell stories**

In a previous position I held with a healthcare organization. I instituted a process that has become part of our model to help organizations find the stories that are hiding all around them. How? By reaching out to staff to teach them how to spot a good story. Finding the story is the first step in being able to share it.

This serves another purpose as well. How often do you hear departments complaining that: “Nobody ever covers us in the employee newsletter!” or “How come we didn’t get recognition for XYZ?” Well, if they don’t share their stories, how can the organization know about them? Spotting the stories helps the communications department to share them.

Offer employees some tips on how to craft a good story. First, make sure that these stories match your mission, vision, and values. Then, provide them with some tips. These tips from Pixar can be a good starting point:

Tell stories that are part of the human condition—stories that will resonate with others. Healthcare, again, lends itself to many of these types of stories. We want to tell stories that appeal to the heart.

Create a clear structure and purpose. Part of what Pixar suggests is identifying what “greater purpose” your story serves. In our case, that greater purpose is supporting your mission, vision, and values.

Include a character to root for. Often this may be a patient (who has agreed to share their story). But, it could also be an employee, a volunteer, a physician or other clinicians.

Appeal to the deepest emotions of your audience. From a positive point-of-view, focus on topics that appeal to happiness, hope, and goodwill.

Share something unexpected or surprising.

Make it simple and focused. Pixar advises: “Combine characters and hop over detours.”

Not everybody is a natural born storyteller, of course. Make it clear to employees that you don't expect them to write their own stories, just to share them with the appropriate individual or department (likely the communications department).

#### **4) Teach managers to incorporate stories into their daily huddles**

Managers can play an important role in laying the foundation for a culture of storytelling. Encourage them to share stories during their daily huddles and department meetings. The communications and marketing departments can support the effort by curating and distributing the stories.

#### **5) Capture and include stories in your internal and external publications. Stories that are told, and retold, stick.**

The best stories are the ones that we hear repeated over and over again. Think about classic fairy tales and fables that we all know so well. These are stories that include elements of Pixar's tips shared above. They're stories that speak to the human condition, have a clear structure, include a character to root for, share something unexpected or surprising, and are simple and focused.

What stories are you telling? What stories remain untold? Follow these five steps to bring your organization closer to its mission, vision, values and brand promise.

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Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.