

Kari Robideau:

This is the University of Minnesota Extension Center For Youth Development podcasts series. The topic of this podcast is how to fail at storytelling. My name is Kari Robideau and I'm a youth development extension educator. Joining me is Sam Grant, she is an evaluation director for our center. Welcome to you, Sam.

Sam Grant:

Hi.

Kari Robideau:

Thank you for joining me. As we get started here, I have to say, I know that you have called yourself a data nerd. Will you please tell us a little bit about yourself and then how you've developed an interest in evaluating youth programs?

Sam Grant:

Yeah, so I will let you call me a data nerd and I will take it. I'm excited about it. So, I work as the evaluation director for the Center For Youth Development and I've been doing evaluation here for about six years but before that, working with new and underserved audience. So, I've been with youth development for about 10 years. And I do, I love data, I'm a numbers girl. I'm totally into quantitative data, pulling apart numbers and making sense of them. Which is funny that today I'm talking to you about storytelling because I do love stories. I love chatting, I love interacting with people, I love listening to stories and reading stories. But I'm not a qualitative researcher so it's kind of funny to be telling everyone about storytelling because it's often not my go to in the data world, but I do love it. So, I'm excited to talk to you about another side of data, which can be stories.

Kari Robideau:

Well, however you are telling us how to fail at that story telling. So, we'll see how that wraps around. But I do have to mention that I have worked with Sam Grant and somehow she has always been able to convince me that working with data and evaluation can be fun. And that brings us to our conversation today on that what not to do when reporting about an organization with the use of a story. I'd like to start us off by, one thing that we're going off of today is a blog post that you made and it actually was called How To Fail At Storytelling. And I pulled out a quote that you put in there from Jenny Nabon who said, "Emotionally engaging stories affect more areas of the brain than rational data driven messages, meaning that they are far more likely to resonate." Can you talk about experience that have brought you to that conclusion, and I think I need you to define for us what you mean by storytelling and how it can relate to and communicate program evaluation results?

Sam Grant:

Yeah, so I'm notoriously horrible at definitions. I'm going to show you how bad I am at definitions telling you. How I look at storytelling is storytelling is the way we use stories to illustrate our points. So, right there I'm breaking the rules because I'm using the word stories in the definition of storytelling. I realize that's not my skill set, giving you definitions. But for me, storytelling goes beyond evaluation. It really gets to the heart of who we are as people. We talk to people, we interact with people, it's part of our culture to tell stories. That's how we learn about the world.

Sam Grant:

I spent a lot of my career working with really young children and I see some parallels between the work that I did with young children and that I do with evaluation because stories help us to illustrate our points. It's the way that we make our data stick so people remember it because I know that I would like to think that you're reading my evaluation report, word for word, and sucking it in and loving it and getting really excited about it but you're probably not. But if I tell you a good story that goes along with my point in my data, you're going to remember that, a funder is going to remember that. Someone that you want to convince to come and be part of your program is going to remember that. So, like I said, I might be a quantitative girl, but I can see that qualitative is how you sell your story, you sell your data, you sell your program. That's why I get excited about talking about and thinking about storytelling.

Kari Robideau:

And I can imagine that the right way to tell your story about whoever's youth development program may be listening out there and they want to tell stories about their program that might be different for every program. However, I want to jump us in to the four ways that probably all of us can do this the wrong way, and in that I know that we will come up with some right answers. But let's jump right into the first one then. That we make the story about our organization. When I looked at that one, I thought many of our youth workers who are developing grants or newsletters, we start with that organizational story. We're telling them about who we are, that organization. Tell us more about why that's the wrong way and what we might think about doing instead.

Sam Grant:

I think that most of the time when we're using a story about our organization, we're using that for a reason. Oftentimes that's to spice it up because talking just about our organization and what we do gets really boring. And so we're telling that story to bring readers in, to make people think, "Oh, I want to be part of that organization." Or, "I want to join that program." Or whatever reason we're telling a story. So, when we tell a story and we make it all about us and what we do as an organization, I think we lose readers really quickly because we want to know what the client or the person interacting with the story or with the program is doing. Why are they important? Why is this organization... Why does it matter to them? That's, I think, what makes people interested in hearing the story when it's about the people and not about the thing.

Kari Robideau:

It almost sounds like you're talking about an advertisement, we advertise our program.

Sam Grant:

Yeah, and really great commercials, you can see great commercials tell stories in two minutes that make you remember that's the product I want because of the great story that they told in a really short time. And that's what we hope to do in our storytelling but I think we often get it wrong because we don't draw on that person aspect of our stories.

Kari Robideau:

So, give me an example of that, of a really good organizational story that you heard that brings out the people who are involved rather than the program itself.

Sam Grant:

In our world, I work with youth development organizations, so whenever you have a young person talking about their experience in a program, to me that just stands out right away. I work with the science of agriculture program and so having a young person talk about how they designed a research program that they did as part of this science of agriculture challenge and they worked with this local expert and they tell that story, it makes you excited about doing science because a young person is sharing that excitement. So, they're not saying, "Here's why you should do the science of a challenge." They're saying, "Here's why I did it. Here's what I got out of it." And that makes people connect with them and want to be part of the programs that we're talking about.

Kari Robideau:

Well, I'm going to move us on to a second point you make about encouraging us not to be rehearsed. We do want our stories to be perfect when we're talking about our programs. What is an example of how we can do that without sounding like it's scripted, prescribed?

Sam Grant:

Yeah. I think right now we're chatting on a podcast. People love to listen to the stories that you tell in real time, in conversation mode. So, I think that the boom of podcasts and blogs and vlogs and whatever just gets people wanting to hear a more casual representation. That doesn't mean that you don't plan and you don't think about what you want your story to say. I would never tell you to do that. But I don't think it has to be perfect. And when it's so heavily scripted, it loses the fun and the flavor of being real time. And again, that's why when you have kids giving the story, it's often perfect because kids are often good off the cuff and you can kind of prep them for here's a couple of instances, but their cuteness just shines through when they're telling their stories. It's not perfect and we don't care because we like that natural element of the story. So, I just say don't over script your stories because people get bored of it.

Kari Robideau:

Know where you're going, but don't know exactly how you're going to get there, is that the...

Sam Grant:

Yeah, true. People want to follow along in that journey and it's exciting when it's not following a perfect pattern. I like that.

Kari Robideau:

I'm going to move us onto the third one of your not to dos. You mentioned matching data to a story. So, in other words, we have this story but nothing to back it up. How does that play out in organizations from your experiences?

Sam Grant:

I felt like when I wrote this blog that I had to put in the data in there, because it's a personal thing for me as an evaluator that when I'm writing a report, I'm not going to draw a story out that has nothing to do with the data that I'm working with. And I've run into this as actually a problem with groups that I work with because sometimes in a survey you'll ask for open ended feedback and someone will share a really great experience with the program. That's gold when you get a great story in any kind of evaluation that you're putting out and so you definitely want to use it. But if it has nothing to do with

the rest of the data that supports your evaluation, I'm always telling groups, "You can't use it. You can maybe use it somewhere else, but you can't use it in that evaluation report. If someone is glowing about your curriculum but then all your data is saying you really got to beef up your curriculum because it didn't meet the needs of the audience."

Sam Grant:

So, I think you have to have both. You have to have data and the story. I know in my approach, I'm going to analyze the data, I'm going to make sense of the numbers, and then I'm going to find that story that really brings the data to life. Someone might be more of a storyteller and then they're going to say, "Here's my great story. Where is my data to support it?" Whether that's community data, whether that's evaluation data. There's a lot of different forms of data that you could bring in for that.

Kari Robideau:

Yeah, it really sounds circular to me as you're describing that because we all evaluate our programs and have things that we need to find out more about and gather that data, but yet those stories that we began to hear could come back around and change some of our questions.

Sam Grant:

Right, exactly. So, use them together because they're both really powerful forms of getting feedback from participants, but just make sure that they match up because you shouldn't be contradicting yourself in the data that you're showing and the stories that you're telling. You want them to go together because they really make it powerful.

Kari Robideau:

Absolutely. Well, we have already reached our fourth point in our conversation here, and this one was particularly interesting to me. Your fourth point is we try to appeal to emotions and sometimes we end up victimizing our customers. I feel like this is common in our stories about how we feel, impacting the youth and changing their lives. So, tell us more about your thoughts on this and explain perhaps a better way to do this.

Sam Grant:

Yeah, so this one is one that once you think about it and read this and listen to this podcast, you're going to see it all the time and it's going to drive you crazy. First of all, I'm going to apologize to everyone who's listening to this because it's going to drive you crazy now. But I like the first think that the intention behind this is always good. So, we know that emotions are powerful, that people respond to emotions in our storytelling, that we want to use emotions to connect people through our stories and to make it meaningful. And we always want our stories to have that punch so it sticks with people, right? But I was listening to a training from Brandy Olson who I also referenced the blog posts that I wrote that we will victimize our customers then. And it's so true.

Sam Grant:

So, we often in our stories, we'll make our clients, or the youth in our program, seem like they are helpless and we as an organization are stepping in and we are fixing their lives for them. And to me this is really counter-intuitive to our youth development approach that we have, which is strengths-based, looking at positive assets. So, Brandy gives a suggestion of you want to make people in your stories the heroes, you want to be talking about how your clients are making improvements in their life, not how

they're desolate and they can't make ends meet. It switches the frame of the story and I think tells it in a lot more positive way.

Sam Grant:

Just last week in the university, I'm not going to say which program, there was a series of stories that went out about this young person and how they had no support and our organization saved them and I was like, "Oh, that is a perfect victim story." Because our young people and our families we work with aren't without support. We as organizations are bringing in a different kind of support often, but people don't have absolutely no support systems. So, it feels really negative to be saying that we are saving people. We do great things for people who come into our programs, but that idea of victimizing who's in our program just really drives me up the wall.

Kari Robideau:

Yeah, keeping that positive youth development approach. Coming at it from that perspective opposed to that kind of help based perspective.

Sam Grant:

Exactly. How are we strengthening the people that come into our programs? And sometimes a really great story is to talk about how the people that come into our programs strengthen our programs. I've seen those kinds of stories that to me really speak highly of the fact that you're a learning organization, if you're talking about how your becoming better as you're working with different people in your community. So, that's strengths-based approach I think just works so much better in youth development, and to me it just sells a better message.

Kari Robideau:

So, as we wrap up this podcast, what is one of your favorite stories that, an example of a favorite story of yours that, has captured the data, that has not been organizationally based but youth based and wasn't perfect, that it was a real organic real story.

Sam Grant:

Years ago I was sitting in a County Board meeting and this youth group, which wasn't affiliated with me, broke the rules and you weren't allowed to bring canned presentations into this board meeting and they didn't listen. And I was glad for it because they had such a powerful story that they told to this County Board, where they had snapshots of their program and all the growth and goodness that their program brought. And then they had youth narrating behind this running loop of pictures that it was just such a strong message of this was a community building group and it was amazing. And so I don't have like a perfect youth development example, but in that one I saw, they broke rules, they made it about the youth, they made it about the program and it wasn't perfect. Youth were giggling in the background of the real, but it was so real that they got to break the rules in the board meeting because no one could shut this movie down because it was just perfect. And I don't know what ever happened with the group, but I thought that was some really great storytelling.

Kari Robideau:

Well, Sam Grant, I think through our conversation today, instead of telling us how to fail at storytelling, I think you gave us some pretty good ideas of how to be successful with it. So, I thank you for doing that. And for all of you listening out there, if you want to learn more about evaluating youth development

programs, you can find us on www.extension.umn.edu/youth. That's where you're also going to find research, training and events, both online and in person, and we'd also like you to check out our Minnesota 4-H program as well. In addition to that, you've heard us talk about the blog post that Sam made on this topic. She's also blogged in other ways as well. If you would like to join that conversation, please go to our Youth Development Insight Blog and comment on that, I'm sure she would love to hear from you and make sure you mentioned that you listened to this podcast.

Kari Robideau:

And in particular with this topic she is wanting to hear your powerful stories, so make sure you get in there and share how you have been, instead of failing at story storytelling, we want to hear how you have been successful with that. That concludes our podcast for this time. My name is Kari Robideau, with Sam Grant, from the university of Minnesota Extension Center For Youth Development. Please tune in again soon.