

MODULE 4: Mining for Stories— The Right Questions to Ask

CORE CONCEPTS



**Drawing Out Your Best Stories
From Story Sources**



Asking The Right Questions



**MODULE SPOTLIGHT:
Frontline Staff as Storytellers
and the In-Depth questions to Ask**





MODULE 4 : MINING FOR STORIES— THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO ASK

Full Transcript:

How did you do?

By now you should have a list of at least ten sources for great stories.

You are ready to learn how to draw out or mine for your organization's best stories. It's like we are mining for gold. :-) The golden nuggets of a story, those mission moments that you'll craft into a powerful 2-minute story.

Remember Paula from Module 1?

She went from being the mother of one of the children we had screened, a mother who simply wrote a thank you note, to the being the source of one of our most powerful stories at Prevent Blindness America.

For Paula it didn't end there. She never intended to be storyteller. She didn't think of herself as fundraiser for our organization

Paula was not only the source of her story, she became the best teller of her story because she had a very personal passion for our work.

I've seen it happen over and over again, when you help someone connect to their feelings about their experience, a storyteller is born.

I've literally watched unfold before my eyes some of the shyest, most reserved people, who never thought they had it in them, become dynamic storytellers. The tool to help you do just that is a part of my six-step storytelling process and you'll learn about that in Module 5.

But before we get to the process, it's time to talk about a better approach to finding stories.

Has this ever happened to you? It's newsletter deadline time. You run down the hall and say, 'Hey Ron, got any stories I can share in our next e-newsletter?'

If you've tried this, you've likely gotten a range of responses, maybe that you didn't like very much. Sometimes people don't want to take the time to tell you a story. Most often they give you the "deer in the headlights" look because they simply don't know what to say or even how to answer your question.

I know how frustrating this can be. It used to happen to me too. Because it did, it became one of the primary motivators for me to create a better way to find stories.

It's important to remember MOST people don't know how to tell a good story.

And your program staff often feel like they even know a story even though they come into contact with the people you serve every day.

Our job is to help them find those stories.

News flash: You are going to stop asking people to tell you a story. That's right. No more of those potentially awkward moments when all you get is a blank stare.

Instead, you're going to ask questions. Different questions. But the right questions.

This part of the process is what allows people to think about their own experiences and then in their own words share answers that YOU will use to create stories.

I want to make a special point here:

Not everyone HAS to be a storyteller. But using this system, you'll find it much easier to "inspire" people to want to share their observations with you.

Some of you HAVE to be good storytellers. If you are the development director, executive director, the communications staff and especially if you are a board member, I expect YOU to learn to be an awesome storyteller. I do. It's not hard. But it will take practice.

That said, I've watch program staff, clergy, health care providers and social workers, all of them become dynamic storytellers using the system you are learning.

It's the questions you ask that will cause answers to flow. It makes a difference what kinds of questions you ask to find those golden nuggets that are the essence, the start, of a great story.

Here's a tip: Always ask open-ended questions.

You don't want to ask a close-ended question that gets you just a yes or no because now you're stuck, right?

Depending on who you are talking to, here are a few questions you could ask:

What's special to you about our work?

What's the most important part of what we do for you?

Why have you funded our programs?

What's your favorite thing about the family that you served recently?

In the guidebook section for Module 4, you'll find the best story mining questions reference sheet.

I've taken the list of story sources and provided you with some specific open-ended questions to get you started. My list is not all-inclusive on purpose. It's just there to get you started. I know you'll have plenty of your own open-ended questions based on the type of work you do.

Always remember, you should be writing on those worksheets. In the final model and resources section you'll learn how to print more. So use the pages in front of you!

Once you know the right questions to ask, then you put together the nuggets of the who, the what, the where and how together into a powerful story.

Module Spotlight: Frontline Staff as Storytellers and the In-Depth questions to ask

It's time for another story:

I'm in the "training room" at Volunteers of America. Making their way into the room with me are nearly 40 front-line staff. These are service providers who work alongside kids, elderly, mentally ill folks or disabled children and adults and maybe even work with veterans.

The staff are signing in. They have been required to be at this session with me. No one is looking at me. Heads are down. No one is meeting my eyes. The room is quiet. And I can tell these people ARE NOT EXCITED to be here.

So I started asking questions: They were questions like: who can you not get off your mind today?

Which family or person do you still remember from weeks or months ago?

What's the most funny or sad example of why your work is important.

The answers came slowly. But eventually people started to relax. They started talking over each other and wanting to share "their" examples with me.

I explained that I was asking about something called a “mission moment” a tiny moment that had inspired them about their work.

Over the next 45 minutes we used my storytelling process expand those powerful mission moments to emotionally engaging 2-minute stories.

THEN we held a contest! We held a speed storytelling contest. People lined up and paired off with one partner. They had to share a 2-minute story with their partner and when they finished they were given a little bit of feedback and a score.

Then the partner shared their story. They shared back-and-forth about four different with different partners throughout the room. Each time they shared their story they go feedback and a score. The noise in the room was so loud I could hardly hear anything.

At the end of the partner switching time we collected the tally sheets and found the top 5 scores, and THOSE were our finalists in our storytelling contest. You can do this at your office too.

Each finalist had to share their story to the whole room and with an applause meter to determine the best story. NOT the best storyteller...but the best story that inspired us the most.

Remember, these people were the people who walked in and didn't want to be there. They were cheering their co-workers on, the finalists shared their stories. The energy was high. There were tears, there was laughter and some pretty awesome stories shared.

We actually found we had a tie for the top story. And what both Rita and Charlene said was: I never thought I could be a storyteller.

They explained to me that before our time together they were “just doing their work but were honored to do it. But NOW they felt like storytellers.”

What had been created, in about 2 ½ hours, was an entire room full of story sources and yes, even storytellers!

As the staff left the room I heard someone comment—and I'll never forget this: “Next year I'm going to be ready when Lori comes back! I'm going to be the one who wins the contest! I'm going to be on the lookout for mission moments all year long!

That can be YOU and your staff.

While I've said before that I believe there are many types of people who can share great stories and become storytellers. It's inevitable that your frontline staff, those who work directly with the people you serve, are a great source of stories. So I want to offer you a bit more guidance in helping you find the stories they have tucked inside of them. These are some very specific questions that you can ask your colleagues who deliver services on the front lines every day.

Frontline Staff Specific Questions

Who did you turn away last week?

Tell me about one of your people or families that have walked through the door.

Why did they come through our door asking for our services? What are we doing to help them?

Is there anyone you've met lately who made you feel incredibly proud that we're here? Tell me about them and how YOU helped them.

You get the idea.

Asking good questions takes the work out of crafting the story.

50% of telling a good story is FINDING the story. And that starts with the nugget of a mission moment.

Take the names you identified in last module and use them now on the worksheets in this module. List your questions and then start scheduling time to sit down and talk to those people!

The answers to those questions will make module 5 easy and fun!