



PUBLIC NARRATIVES & RELATIONAL MEETINGS

Level 2: Fundamental activist skills

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Stop violence against women speech 2010 © Amnesty International

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

If you haven't signed up to join our movement yet, head over to our [Get Active](#) page.

You can find other modules on fundamental activist skills [here](#). We recommend getting familiar with them all if you are new to activism.

If you have any questions please get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au.



International Women's Day march 2017. © Amnesty International

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our module on public narratives & relational meetings. In our [Introduction to Activism at Amnesty International](#) we wrote that activism is about organising and mobilising. That we need to do both to have a successful activism strategy. In this module we're going to go more in depth about some skills specific to be a more successful organiser.

Organising is about building deeper relationships with others. We do this for a variety of reasons. It's so we can increase the number of activists in our movement. So we can pool together our skills and resources, to increase our capacity for activism. It's so we have more people coordinating and supporting higher level activities. So we have what we need to achieve our goals, to achieve change for human rights. To have more leaders who can help us to distribute power, so we aren't spread too thin. In this module we'll look at some organising skills you can use to deepen those relationships.

We will look at how you can use personal storytelling to inspire and seek commitment from people. Also so they can better connect with our movement and what we are trying to achieve. We'll also examine how to make one on one meetings more meaningful. How they can lead to deeper engagement and a stronger relationship with the movement.

Why is it important to build connections with other activists?

What connects each and every one of us in the movement is our desire to see change in the world. We have to build a network of committed people to increase our impact. People we know will turn up and take action. We can't rely on their passion for human rights alone; we need to build commitment to one another and to the cause by identifying shared values. By building connections and developing commitment your goals become intertwined.

The deeper our involvement becomes as activists, the more vital it is that we work with others. This is not work we can do alone or should do in isolation. It's not only the benefit of being able to better distribute the work. There is also our need for a support network to be there with you in solidarity during stressful times. People you can turn to who remind you why you do this work. Who can give you strength when you most need it. To know that you are never alone and that together you can bring about change.



This monthly vigil in Townsville needs regular commitment from activists to be successful. © Amnesty International

Public narrative - Story of self, us and now

Let's start looking at some methods you can use to build those relationships. The first is a form of storytelling known as a public narrative. Stories have a massive influence over our experience as human beings. From a young age we learn to interact with the world through stories. It's how we develop a lot of our values and views. Good storytelling stays in our minds and shapes who we are.

Facts have a major role to play in our activism. They inform our campaigns and are how we're able to prove that injustices are happening. They define the strategy we are going to use. But they don't tend to have a strong effect on the general public on their own. If facts contradict a person's beliefs they can interpret them in a biased way or even ignore them. If the facts are too overwhelming then we can pretend they aren't there to feel better. We're sure you can think of examples where this has happened.

Tapping into people's emotions is very effective though. Emotions inform us of what we value. What we value in ourselves, in others, and in the world. If something doesn't cause us to feel a strong emotion, it's probably not something important to us. So, because we experience values through emotion, they are what move us to act.

Stories allow us to express our values. Not as abstract principles, but as a lived experience. They have the power to move others too by accessing their own emotions and values. We have to tell stories that evoke emotions like anger, urgency, solidarity and hope. If we're successful in this we can engage and mobilise people to take action. A good story has the power to change the world.

One way you can tell such a story is through a public narrative. All stories have a common structure, a plot. Something happens to the character. They have to make a choice. That choice yields an outcome. We learn a lesson from that outcome. In a public narrative you are that central character in the story. You talk about how you had to make a choice and how the outcome changed you. You tell the story to inspire others to reach the same outcome you did and then encourage them to do something.

A public narrative follows the following structure.

- **Story of Self** - Your experiences and connections to an issue.
- **Story of Us** - How that experience caused you to take action by joining a movement.
- **Story of Now** - How others can do the same and take action together.

Let's look at these in more detail.

1 Story of self

The 'story of self' is how you get an audience to relate to you and the issue you care about. It's where you explain your connection to the issue and how it affected you. It's describing the moment you had to make a choice between acting or doing nothing. The moment you stood up and became an advocate for change and justice.

This moment doesn't have to be something particularly extraordinary. It doesn't need to revolve around a series of momentous events. You don't even need to have had direct experience with the issue you care about. We can make any story interesting by adding in more detail and infusing it with personality. If your moment was watching the news, hearing something unjust and that made you act, then tell that story. What's inspiring and relatable about a story of self is how genuine you are in telling it. Telling it in a way where your audience can imagine themselves in your situation. They can feel what you felt and picture the choice you made. How it led you to want to do more.

We want them to have an emotional response to our story. That they respect and empathise with us because of our honesty. They appreciate our courage in opening up to them about something personal. In the end we want them to connect those emotions to their own values. Because that is when we start to build a connection with our audience. When we break down the barrier between ourselves and the people we are speaking with. We want them to stop seeing themselves as a passive onlooker, but someone who is part of our story.



Activity: Have a think about why you decided to become an activist. When did you first decide you wanted to do more? What were the circumstances? Was there a specific moment? How did you feel? What choices did you make?

2 Story of us

By this point in the story you've invited your audience to form a relationship with you. You've done this by opening up to them, by being vulnerable and expressing your values. If they have shared values then they will feel a connection with you and want to know more. We have to transform this tentative relationship with them into something more solid. That is where the 'story of us' comes in.

The story of us is about shifting people from being outsiders to being part of the team. You do this by explaining what you did to get more involved around the issue you care about. That you knew it wasn't something you could do on your own. Which is why you found a community you could work with to achieve change. You can talk about why you chose this specific community, why it spoke to you. How you saw your values reflected in the Amnesty International movement. That you could see how worthwhile it was to give your time and energy to it.

You'll need to explain what the movement stands for - what values you connected with. How the movement made its own choice to stand up against this injustice. You can describe past wins and what we have achieved so far. Challenges we have overcome and what we are up against now. The goals we have set for ourselves and our vision for winning. We need to instil a belief in them that this movement brings about change. Through your story other people will start imagining themselves a part of it. We are now opening the door for them to come in. They'll be making a conscious decision about whether they will accept the invitation.



Activity: Have a think about when you decided that joining this movement was the right choice for you? What were the values of the Amnesty movement that spoke to you? Why did it stand out from other options? Do you stand by that decision?

3 Story of now

All good stories end with something for the audience to contemplate, a moral. This is what we call the 'story of now'. At this point the audience should care about the issue and see how being part of the movement will fix it. But we have to give a sense of urgency to it. Otherwise we are only talking to people that care, but aren't ready to do something about it. They'll most likely go back to their lives without taking action. Unless we get them to commit to doing something on the spot. This is where they get to make that choice.

The 'story of now' outlines what we as a collective need to do next to create change. What we need them to do right now. We have to articulate the challenge ahead of us. That we understand it in great detail and have a great plan to win. But we need many people to be part of it or we may not get there. We have to encourage our audience to think about their values and how important those are to them. The action needs to be specific. It has to be something they can commit to on the spot. So if it's too big a choice and overwhelming, it's not going to work. They need to feel excited about the opportunity and picture what the world looks like if we win.



Activity: Now that you've got a bit of a clearer idea what a personal narrative is you should check out some examples. A great example is James Croft's [speech on the bullying of LGBTQI people](#). You can find this example and many more online. Watch it and try to identify the story of self, us and now. How effective were they and why? What was powerful about these stories? Why did they give a sense of motivation? Of course you don't need to be a presidential candidate to have a powerful story. But you can start imagining what yours looks like by seeing others put it into practice.

When would you use a public narrative?

So you might be thinking that you understand how a public narrative works, but not sure when you'd use it. After all, you might not be planning to speak to a crowd of thousands anytime soon. Well let's take it back to what we covered at the beginning of the module. The purpose of telling these stories is to develop deeper relationships with others. To encourage them to join you on this journey as activist. So that you will have more support in the work you do and can achieve more.

So you can use a public narrative on a smaller scale to get this result. It's great to use in small groups. Particularly with people that are new to the movement or considering joining. You can tell your story of self, encourage others to do the same and then tell the story of us and now.

You can use it online when raising awareness about an issue. Think back to powerful posts you've seen on social media for example. Where someone has described the personal affects something has had on them. Then encouraging others to be aware of the issue and to do something about it.

But the most common use you'll have for it will be in one on one meetings. When you are getting to know another person and are trying to develop a deeper relationship. Weaving your narrative into that meeting will be a faster way for them to know what you stand for. Whether they want to work closer with you or not. We call these relational meetings.



A meeting of like minded people 2014 © Amnesty International

Relational meetings

Relational meetings are one of the most important parts of organising. Their purpose is to develop or maintain a working relationship with others. It's so we can gain a mutual understanding of each other's values and motivations. To share stories with one another and explore common interests.

These meetings are not always about getting a commitment from them for something. There will be asks from time to time, but they are not the focus. There should be a purpose to them though, a reason for meeting. But the main reason for meeting is to show how much you value the relationship with them. That you want to make time to meet, listen to one another and work together. It's about being genuine. Here are some tips on what to do in a relational meeting.

Where possible make sure you've got these meetings scheduled in so you can both plan for them. Also that there is enough time to talk, 30 - 45 minutes is a good length. This is so the meetings have your complete attention. Bumping into someone at random and having a quick catch up doesn't tend to do the trick. You'll feel unprepared, rushed and unfocused on what you need to do.

If it's your first meeting with them you'll want to share your public narrative with them. Particularly if they haven't heard it before. It's a useful way of getting your views and values across without them having to ask a lot of questions. You'll want to get this information from them as well. After that they're more about checking and seeing how they're going. As well as giving updates on what you've been working on. Every time you meet is a potential moment to begin collaborating more.

Most of the time you'll be having these sorts of meetings with other people in your movement. If you're part of a community group you'll be wanting to have these on the regular, particularly if you are a leader. It helps people to feel engaged, respected and appreciated. When people start to drift away, it's usually because they've lost that connection.

But you may also have these meetings with people external to the movement as well. These may be partnerships with other organisations or community groups. There will be times when you need each other in your activism. It's wise to maintain these relationships even when you're not doing activism together.

There's a fine line between scripted and improvised. Go in with a purpose, specific information you want to share and to gain from them. But don't structure it too much. It's supposed to be a relaxed conversation between colleagues. Don't let it stray too much to your personal lives unless there is a reason to do so. You're both there for relationship building to benefit your mutual activism.

Ask them questions that relate back to their work. Try to find common ground so that the conversation is relevant to the both of you. Practice active listening, give them a chance to speak. Respond to what they say with interest. Don't be too eager to change the subject to your purpose for meeting until the time is right.

If you do have an ask of them that you'd like them to do, don't be pushy. You don't want it to seem that the only reason you met is because you want them to do something for you. Bring it up towards the end of the conversation that you need some help and gauge their interest. If they are unable to do it, find out whether they'd be able to help at a later date. Also find out if there's anything they need from you. It's okay to decline these requests if you don't have the time and energy to do it. These relationships should have a pretty even give and take.



Activity: Practice having a relational meeting with someone you already know. It doesn't matter if they are an activist or not. It could be a casual friend you haven't seen in a while. Schedule time to meet with them and go in with a purpose. Something you would like to find out from them and also information you want to give them. Tell them about what you are doing as an activist, practice your narrative with them.

That's where we'll leave this module. We want to emphasise that both of these skills are something it can take a while to learn. There's a lot more information out there on these. If you'd like to learn more about public narratives check out the work of [Marshall Ganz](#) who is a leader in this area. He has a lot of online workshops to get the most out of your narrative. So start putting together your story and trying it out. Also make sure to have a look at our other modules on [fundamental activist skills](#) too.

If you have any questions please get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au. Thank you for your time!



Visit the Skill Up page for more activist development resources.

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