Online library of Quality, Service Improvement and Redesign tools

Public narrative

NHS England and NHS Improvement
Public narrative

What is it?

Public narrative is a leadership practice of using personal values to galvanise others into action through storytelling (Ganz, 2010). As leaders, we accept the challenge and responsibility involved in helping others to achieve their purpose in the face of uncertainty. We use narrative/stories to show how we made choices based on our values and to share the construct of our sense of self – as individuals, then a sense of ‘us’ as groups or communities who have shared experiences and values, which mean we can unite together to take action.

A leader who is skilled in public narrative is able to tell stories that tap into other people’s values and arouse emotions in them that then motivate or inspire them into action.

When to use it?

Storytelling through public narrative is a powerful tool that can be used to bring about change and to galvanise the people around you to take action on any change/improvement that is needed.

Traditionally, leaders of change have been encouraged to be dispassionate and objective and to let their head rule their heart. However, not everyone listens with their head – many allow their heart to lead them so are listening out for messages from leaders that align with their values and beliefs.

As an improvement leader, you can use public narrative to build relationships with your stakeholders and find the values you share that can help connect them with your programme of change/improvement project.

How to use it

Storytelling techniques have a long history in motivating people to change (the Barack Obama US presidential campaign is one such powerful example [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYAr4lhPb_s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYAr4lhPb_s)). They can help you to communicate your change messages in powerful new ways that support you in reaching a diverse audience by drawing on your own experiences, values and motivations and connecting these with your stakeholders.

We all have a story to tell and learning to tell your story in a compelling way is how you will spur others into action.

Revealing your values – what matters to you

Leading people through change with public narrative requires you to use both your head and your heart. You need to explore shared values with your stakeholders and engage the people around you in understanding why they should support your change programme (their motivation) and how they can make change happen (their strategy).
Ganz’s approach to storytelling has three key elements, which are:

- the story of self (sharing your values)
- the story of us (connecting your values with those of your stakeholders)
- the story of now (the need to create a sense of urgency for change along with a sense of hope that change is possible).

The story of self
The power behind your story of self lies in sharing something about yourself and your values with your stakeholders. It is not about revealing your darkest secrets but rather about identifying choice points (important decisions) in your life and sharing these moments in your life where your values have become real and influenced the decisions you have made.

The story of us
In telling the story of us (community), you are looking to identify with the audience what you have in common; your shared experiences and reveal your shared values.

The story of now
Your story of now is the call to action you make to your stakeholders. Your story of now is where you bring urgency to the story/narrative the real and immediate challenge your community faces – the change/improvement that requires urgent action that you want the people you are talking with to take action on. Your story of now should express the hope there is in achieving change and the choice you are asking people to make.

Creating your public narrative is an iterative process and it is important that once you have told your story of self, us and now, you revisit each one to clarify the links between them.

What next?
Remember that choice points are important because they reveal the values that you hold. Think about your audience/stakeholders and how the choice points you share connect with their values. It is these shared values that you need to tap into in order to gain support for your change/improvement programme.

Storytelling is a skill and you will become a better storyteller with practice. Plan how and when you are going to use public narrative to help with your improvement work.

References

Additional resources

www.significantobjects.com