

# WAIT, WHOSE MOVEMENT IS THIS?

## Encouraging Agency and Non-Exploitative Storytelling

It's important to remember that general support for a group (such as being employed at a food bank or other anti-hunger organization) is not enough to truly conduct ally work. While some of the notes below may seem to be common sense, you'd be surprised how often they're overlooked. Keep these points and broader ideas in mind as we continue to strive towards ending hunger:

1. **Bring power analysis as a lens to all of your work.** Through the analysis of institutional power, we identify and unpack systems of oppression, and analyze the narratives that help to legitimize and hold these institutions in place. ([storybasedstrategy.org](http://storybasedstrategy.org))
  - **(Re)Evaluate your organizational partnerships.** Food insecurity is one of several symptoms of a politically-charged problem: racial and economic inequality. When the end-game is to simply provide more food (or even higher-quality food) to those in need, it encourages stories of symptom relief, not of problem-solving. Symptom relief is important and necessary while we work towards ending hunger. Still, if your organization receives substantial funding or other input from donors that discourage social/economic change it undermines our ability to end hunger now. The partnership is ultimately exploitative.
2. **Money and Metrics Matter – until they don't.** Of course organizations would like to be viable long-term while meeting their intended goals. Because of this, some are increasingly valuing metrics of marketing and internal development when making decisions concerning the impacted community. Even when well-meaning, it's a slippery slope to consider internal goals to be more important than assisting the community itself. If your organization has slid down this path, it's likely time to refocus. The overarching story of “what matters” is determined by the affected community – not by your organization.
  - Adapting to the voiced needs of the impacted community helps ensure long-term viability. As the needs evolve, so must the organizations that seek to assist.
3. **Build capacity to receive criticism,** to be honest and accountable with our mistakes, and recognize that being called out for making a mistake is a gift—that it is an honor of trust to receive a chance to be a better person, to learn, to grow, and to do things differently. ([theantioppressionnetwork.com](http://theantioppressionnetwork.com))
4. **Listen more and speak less:** hold back on your ideas, opinions, and ideologies, and resist the urge to “save” the people we seek to work with ([theantioppressionnetwork.com/allyship/](http://theantioppressionnetwork.com/allyship/))
  - Prioritize listening to elders, youth, women, queer folks, and people of color. Listen to impacted communities' experiences, stories, and histories, as told by them. ([storybasedstrategy.org/anti-oppression-principles.html](http://storybasedstrategy.org/anti-oppression-principles.html))

5. **Whenever possible, the impacted community itself should write, speak, or otherwise creatively convey their experience/ideas.** Being able to do for self is the core of personal agency.
  - Interpersonal agency refers to the availability of allies to *properly assist* when called upon by the impacted person/community. There is no agency when supportive efforts are misguided.
6. **Get the story right.** If you must write someone else's personal narrative, don't publish until the highlighted person has reviewed and approved the article. Ask if you've conveyed the story accurately – not just in reference to facts, but also with *proper tone, context, and imagery* that reflects his/her viewpoints; not the organization's.
7. **Avoid “unicorn stories”.** When organizations use narratives of extraordinary individual hardships transformed into extraordinary success, it reinforces the falsehood that ending hunger is about “pulling yourself up from your boot straps”, or working class families working even harder than they already are. Solutions to hunger are not personal or individual. Instead, focus on the fact that success comes from systematic solutions to economic disparities, oppression, and racism.
8. **Remember there is no hierarchy of suffering, but there is still a core constituency.** If you decide to showcase a lower level of food insecurity, it should be accompanied by at least one story of substantial food insecurity because that is the core of the movement.
  - Lower levels of food insecurity tend to speak to the middle class because it's largely a middle class issue. Highlighting this can broaden the audience and overall support of food justice, but narrow focus on these stories brings attention away from those substantially affected.
  - Stories of low/moderate levels of food insecurity have different perspective than more severe or chronic levels. There is “no hierarchy of suffering”, meaning ideally no level of food insecurity should occur for anyone...but the experiences are still markedly different. Be sure to always clearly involve those most impacted.
9. **Conduct interviews not interrogations.** A pre-written list of questions that fits the organization's agenda doesn't leave room for interviewees to guide the narrative. *Listen* to him/her (**see #4**) and let those responses guide the conversation. Be sure to respond to the interviewees with thoughtful follow-up questions or comments that amplify the issues raised within their statements.
10. **Respect privacy/build relationships** – Seeking help can be an emotionally charged experience. Don't intrude on a sensitive time, such as standing outside of a food pantry, to ask for comments. Instead, build relationships with organizations that deal directly with the impacted community and devise appropriate ways of identifying potential interviewees/spokespeople.
  - By respectfully building relationships we increase trust. As trust builds, we can better understand the fullest arc of an individual/collective narrative, and convey the story with deserved respect.

11. **Do not use fake stories.** Food insecurity is a *real* issue involving *real* people. Learn who some of those people are. Don't diminish the truth by creating mailers or other media with stock characters.
12. **All deserve dignity.** Use photos that don't romanticize poverty or depict the disheveled/unhygienic. There's a thin line between showing a harsh truth and exploiting those with hardships.
  - It's not unreasonable for some people to assume that being interviewed and photographed at home for publication also includes professional hair styling, makeup, or other amenities often provided by newsstand magazines. Let them know in advance what to expect.
  - Likewise, get advanced consent to photograph homes/cars/personal belongings. That way people can accept/ decline without immediate pressure, and prepare how they see fit.
13. **"Incentives" for people to share their story, participate within your organization, or become a spokesperson, can easily enter the territory of coercion.** Regardless of good-intent, be mindful to ensure you are not being manipulative.
14. **Consider long-form content.** In the age of internet micro-content it's easy to assume that the average attention span can't handle a well-written 2,000+ word essay. Many are afraid of being "too wordy". The fact is, the impacted community deserves more than a snippet or ten second sound-bite. If we want effective storytelling, we have to produce something worth engaging with.
  - "85% of all web content is less than 1,000 words long, but long-form content of more than 1,000 words 'consistently gets higher average shares and significantly higher average links' than shorter content. In fact, as copy length increases, both social shares and links from other domains increase" (copyhackers.com/2016/02/short-long-content). By not enabling the impacted community to share experience in robust ways, the power of storytelling suffers.
  - If your initial reaction is to think "our employees don't have the bandwidth to research/interview or create this type of storytelling" **please see #5**
15. **Increase inclusion** -- involving people from the impacted community at all levels of your organization helps ensure that we don't marginalize the voices of the people we seek to assist. This includes the board of trustees and other governing positions.
16. **A seat at the table doesn't always equate to a voice at the table.** Even those who are said to be "included" can be virtually invisible. Be vigilant to encourage all suggestions, viewpoints, and stories to be not just heard *but acted upon* when fitting.
17. **Allyship is not an identity and not self-defined**—it is a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalized individuals and/or groups of people —our work and our efforts must be recognized by the people we seek to ally ourselves with (theantioppressionnetwork.com).

*The success of food justice is the success of your organization;  
make sure the reverse is true.*

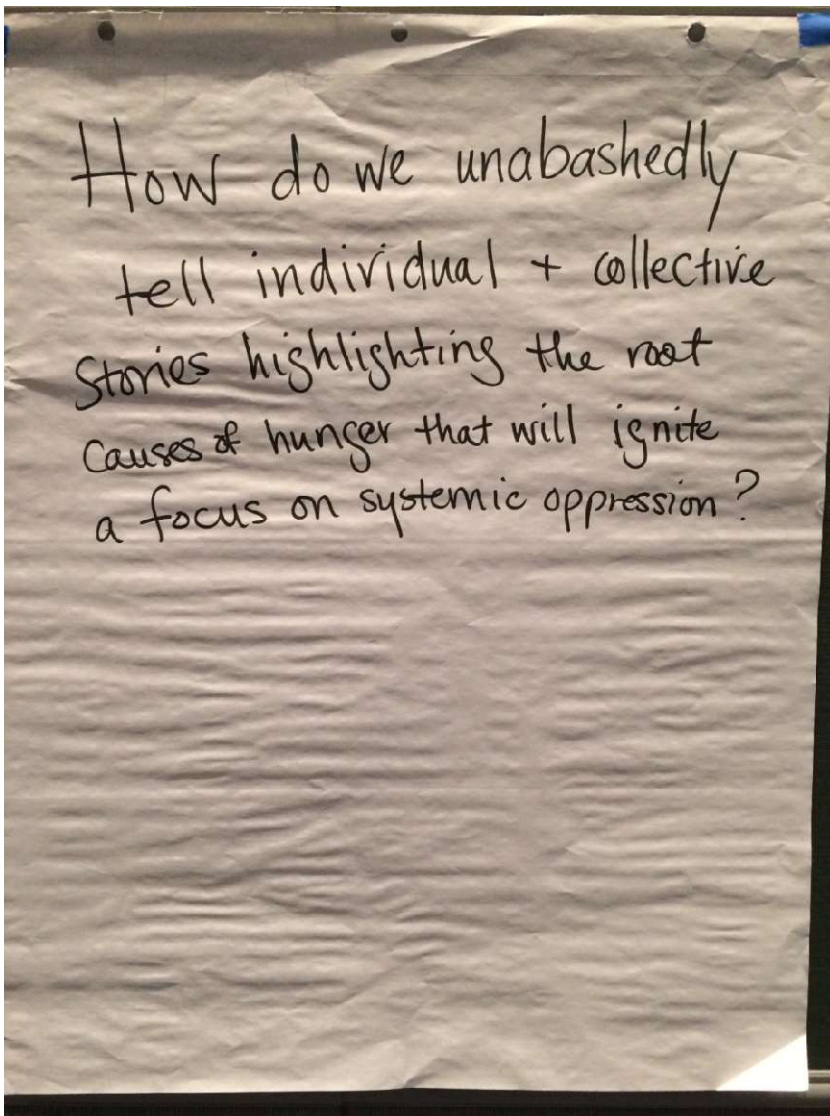
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### Session Overview:

While many key components of non-exploitative storytelling can be found within the list of tips given above, CTHG participants were (and still are!) encouraged to work within groups to come up with self-created answers backed by their own experiences.

Most of all, paying sharp attention to power dynamics (tip list #1 and #2), making space for the impacted community to communicate directly, building capacity to receive criticism, and realizing that the narrative “lede” (a journalistic term for the main idea of a news article) must be about systemic change, not personal success, is what will help ensure non-exploitative storytelling.

Within our CTHG group work, the following “lede” ideas for discussion were created:



How do you  
allow for the complexity  
of the story while  
also uplifting the  
storyteller?



How do community  
members maintain  
power in their sharing, the  
collecting, and the distribution of  
their stories to affect change;  
in the movement; our daily  
work?

highlight  
discuss  
root  
causes

How do we authentically  
honour the culture  
of the storyteller  
and ensure that those  
whose stories are being  
shared have the  
most power in  
the process?

How do we  
highlight dignity  
without taking  
more than we  
can give?



How do we authentically tell stories  
of community members without:

filtering voices

· Endangering safety

· Usurping power

· Inserting an agenda

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