

# Telling engaging stories

## Table of contents

1. Introduction
2. Emotion-Hope-Action
3. Telling stories
4. 'Story of us' what is the story of your organization?
5. Respond to objections
6. Inoculate
7. Framing

### 1. Inleiding

Running a campaign is largely about communication. You talk to your supporters on the phone or over a cup of coffee at their kitchen table. You speak to groups of members at meetings or in their communities. You send emails, texts, and social media posts to individuals members and to large audiences. Every day offers a chance to activate and engage your supporters with the stories you share. But how can you do this effectively?

### 2. Emotion-Hope-Action

The most important ingredient for engaging people is repeatedly telling the so called BOND-themes that your organization has established together with its members. BOND is an acronym in Dutch that stands for Broadly Supported, Solvable, Now, Deeply Felt. This means involving many people, addressing a problem that can actually be solved, focusing on actions that can be taken in the present, and connecting to issues that are deeply felt by those involved. But how you tell these stories makes a big difference. The key way to mobilize people is to vary endlessly around the story structure ANGER–HOPE–ACTION.

If you communicate only anger, many people will drop out, because constant anger is unsustainable for most. Those who are activated by anger alone mainly want to stay angry and do little.



If you communicate only hope, you may become liked, but you won't generate the energy needed to take on a risky and uncertain fight against much more powerful opponents. Again, this primarily attracts people who do not want to take action.

If you communicate only action, you'll find that many people see it as too daunting. They are afraid of the risks or don't believe it will make a difference.

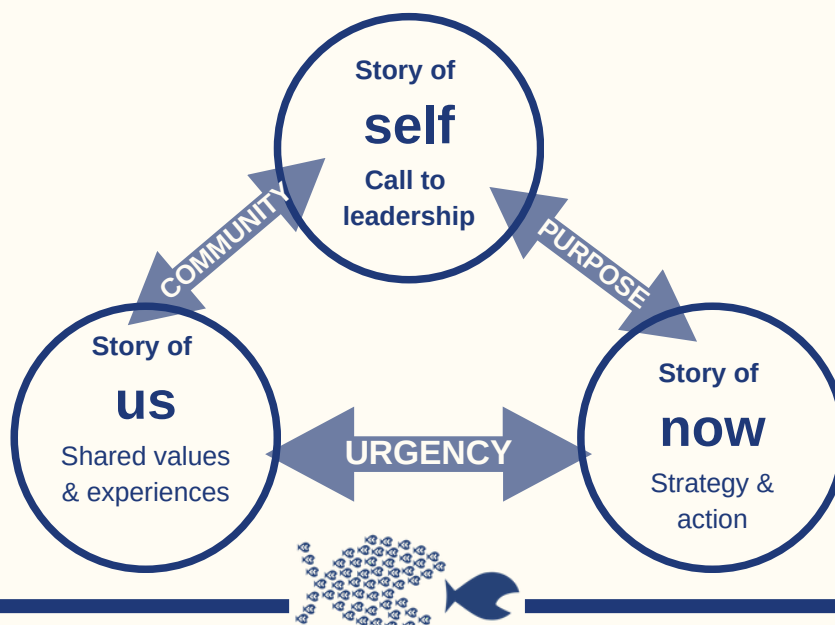
What works is the combination and the build-up. Themes that evoke emotion are the foundation, but hope must be offered. Through depicting a vivid and believable solution, as well as a plan showing how we can step by step combine our forces to make that solution happen. Every time you engage someone, you can invite them to a concrete, appropriate action that contributes to the solution.

How you fill in that emotion, hope, and action depends on the situation. In conversations, we ask many questions and mostly listen. In your email newsletter, you primarily broadcast and address the average reader.

### 3. Telling stories

Communicating as a story, with characters, a plot, and a narrative arc allows you to engage both the hearts and minds of your audience. In organizing, we can draw heavily on the public narrative framework developed by Marshall Ganz. It emphasizes three key elements:

1. The story you tell about yourself;
2. The story you tell about 'us together';
3. The story you tell about the present moment.



A **'Story of Self'** is the compelling story that anyone active on behalf of the organization tells about their personal motivation to be involved and what they bring to that role. This story serves to connect with others you want to activate and organize. It explains how you became who you are and highlights something from your personal story that builds a bridge to your audience.

*"After my first year teaching, I saw that I wasn't able to give students what they needed. The class was too large, and I was drowning in administrative work. I lost the joy I had always felt in my work. A colleague told me about the AOb and that they were looking for someone to serve as a consultant and provide a listening ear to fellow teachers. Colleagues easily come to me with their concerns, so I knew I could do that and contribute to better education."*

The **'Story of Us'** is the story about the group of people you want to organize. What makes us "us"? What shared values and experiences allow us to bridge differences within the group and act together?

*"The AOb is the largest teachers' union in the Netherlands and was formed in 1997 by bringing together several education unions. We are 80,000 people in education who are proud of our profession. Together we advocate for educational staff and for the quality of education. Together we are here for the students. Together we will force a breakthrough that solves the problems in education."*

The **'Story of Now'** is a compelling campaign story about how you move from the current situation (now) to the desired outcome, and what people can contribute. In short, it's the engaging and activating story about your plan to win.

*"A severe teacher shortage has emerged due to years of poor education policy. Increasingly, schools are struggling to make schedules work. The first major step the new government must take is to make the teacher training program (Pabo) free. This won't happen on its own. With your help, we can make it clear that all teachers in the Netherlands demand this and are willing to escalate pressure with work interruptions if necessary. By September, this must be included in the education budget."*

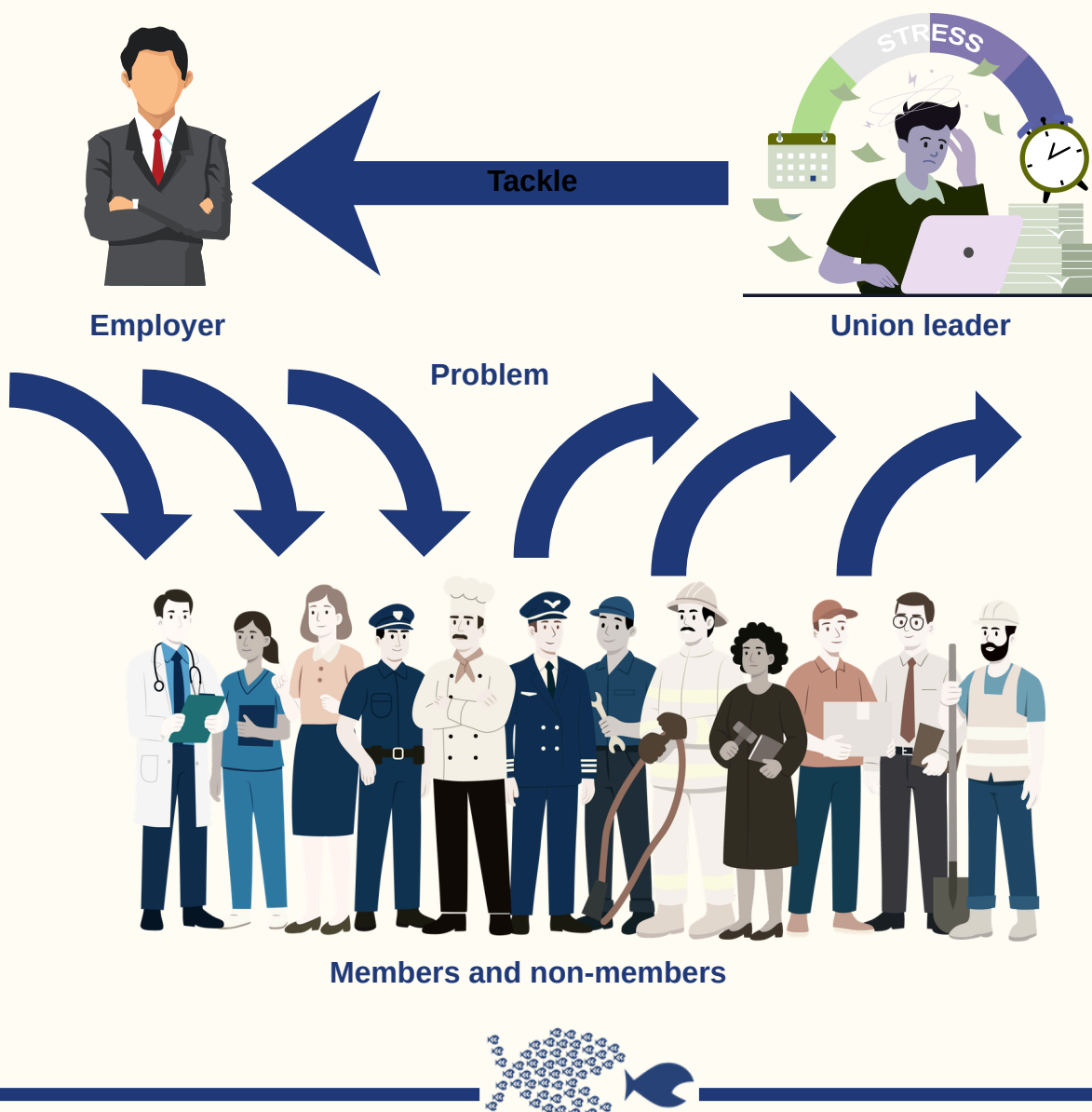


## 4. “Story of us”: what is the story of your organization?

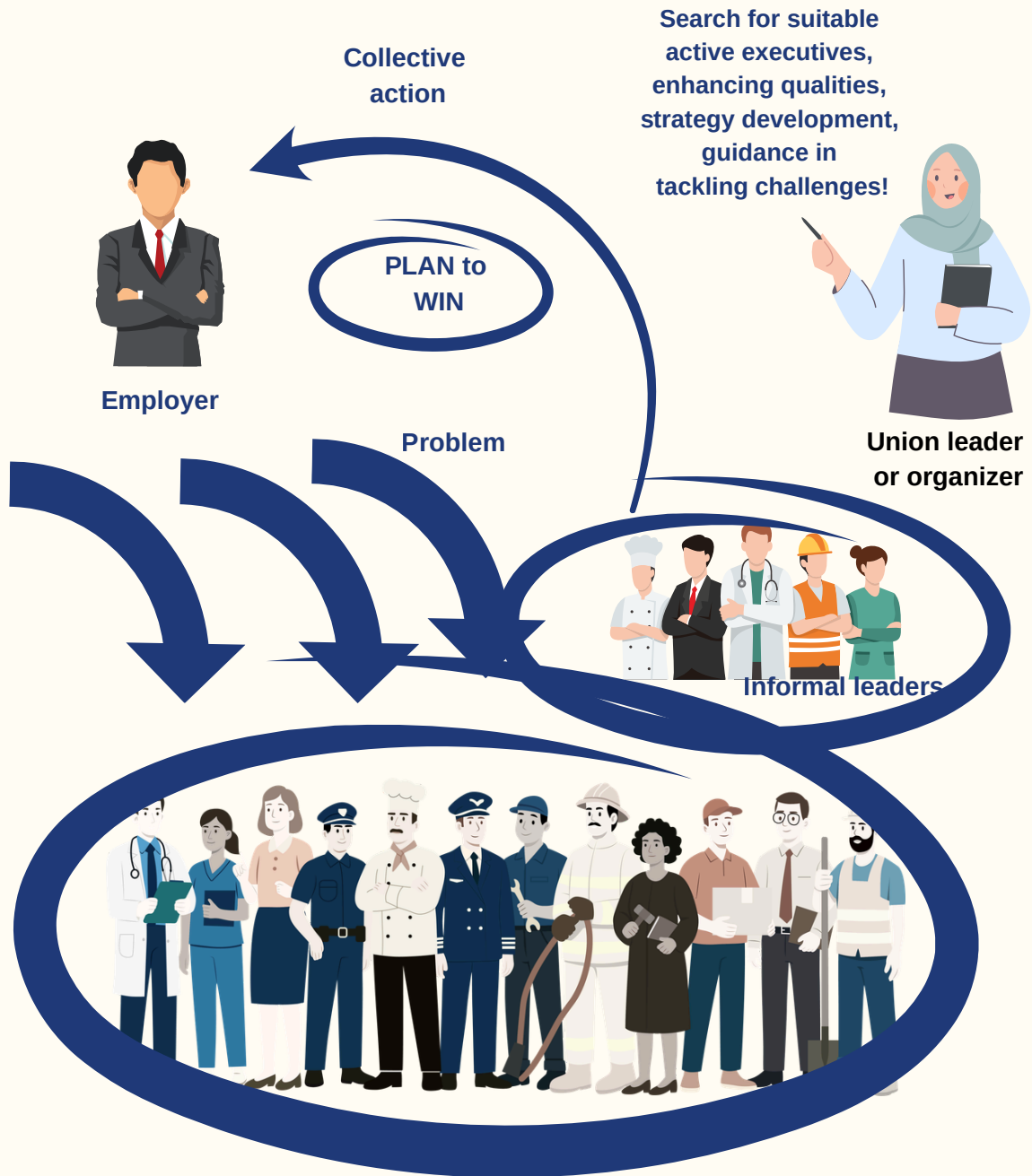
In the story your organization tells, its identity and role are crucial. Who is your organization, and for whom does it exist, and how do you communicate that? If your organization is presented as an anonymous institution where people can only donate money and then it goes off to save the world for them, that story will de-activate people. In that version, the organization is the superhero, and everyone else is just a passive bystander.

If you want to actively engage people, you need to emphasize your organization’s ‘we-story’ in every conversation, every email, every interview. The story of your organization as ‘we, all the people who are actively involved’. A story in which there is no distinction between paid staff and volunteers. A way of speaking in which spokespeople speak on behalf of a group of engaged people, not on behalf of an institution or as individuals.

### An example of a disempowering union story



An example of an engaging union story



# TACKLING IT TOGETHER

Members and non-members



### Action inhibitors

inertia

apathy

fear

isolation

self-doubt

**OVERCOMES**

### Action motivators

urgency

anger

hope

solidarity

YCMAD  
(you can make a difference)

## 5. Responding to objections

The story you also need to have ready is the response to the objections people will raise about becoming active. These objections will come, and most of them are predictable. It's always good to first listen carefully and ask deeper questions about the underlying reasons behind these objections. Are they justified? Can they be solved or worked around? Do they say something about how you communicate or organize your actions? And don't forget: an objection is not negative, it's an invitation to make your story more convincing or to adjust your campaign!



**What lies behind common objections, and how can you address them?**

| Emotion    | Example  | What is needed?           |
|------------|--|---------------------------|
| Inertia    | I'm too busy to get involved.                      | Urgency                   |
| Apathy     | It will never change                               | Anger                     |
| Fear       | If I become active, people will get angry with me. | Hope                      |
| Isolation  | I'm not going to do this on my own, I'm not crazy. | Solidarity                |
| Self-doubt | I really can't do this                             | You Can Make A Difference |

The structure of a response to address objections should always take into account the inhibiting emotions mentioned above, as well as the activating emotions that counter them. When building your response, you can do this by following the following three-step approach:

**Three-step approach: Acknowledge – Answer – Reframe.**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Dealing with objections</b>                   | <b>Example:</b> "It's never going to change."   |
| Confirming the objection                         | Others are not going to solve this for you.   |
| Responding to the objection                      | But you can also do this together with the people around you. Together, you are strong enough to ensure that you are heard, step by step.   |
| Redirecting the objection towards the BOND-theme | You just told me that you're fed up and that "BOND-theme X" is getting in the way of your job satisfaction. Now you have the opportunity to join forces to improve your life together. What are you waiting for?! Are you in? |



## 6. Inoculate

A warned person counts for two. Inoculating people is the proactive way to deal with objections. You want to make activated people resilient to the setbacks and resistance they will encounter once you start trying to put powerful people or organizations under pressure. As soon as an organization activates people and thus regains power, the supporters of the status quo will respond. With a de-escalating or de-activating narrative, and with reprisals and fear-mongering. People who are well inoculated know this can happen, and therefore it doesn't scare them off.

In the same way, you will need to make people who become involved in your organization resilient to setbacks. You will try things that turn out not to work. You will run into the limits of support and infrastructure. You will be overwhelmed by sudden success or unexpected disappointments.

## 7. Framing

The choice of words, or framing, in engaging communication is crucial. There's a big difference between how you communicate when dealing with companies, politicians, or civil servants, and how you communicate with people you want to engage. In the latter case, you want to appeal to emotion and use simple, easy-to-understand language. Below is a theoretical example.

| Example              | Public Communication   | Negotiation table  |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Wages                | A minimum wage that allows you to make ends meet                         | We are demanding 60% of the median income  |
| Class size           | We want to have time for every student again                             | We demand a maximum class size of 20 students  |
| Autonomy             | We want education based on trust in teachers                             | We want more autonomy for teachers. And we demand a reduction in the administrative burden on teachers |
| Inflation adjustment | Wages rise in line with prices so that we do not lose money to inflation | Indexation of inflation at 4.9%  |



## We are Stroomversnellers

Stroomversnellers is a trainers' collective of experienced campaigners, organizers, facilitators, and trainers. We have all been active in environmental organizations, grassroots initiatives, labor unions, or anti-racism movements. Through trial and error, we've learned how to run effective campaigns, build organizations, and create social change.

We are constantly learning and love sharing our knowledge and experiences with others. The world doesn't move in the right direction on its own—far from it. Only with many well-prepared people can a different, more just society come closer. That's why we support a wide range of groups fighting for social and ecological justice, offering advice, strategy and brainstorming sessions, (action) trainings, and workshops. Together, we grow, strengthen our impact, and work toward a better world!

### Toolbox for Movements

This guide is part of the "Toolbox for Movements." The toolbox includes a collection of short digital guides covering the basics of strategy, movement building, activism, and organizing. It provides a solid foundation for beginning activists, while also offering fresh insights for experienced changemakers. [Here](#) you will find links to all other guides published so far.

### We love learning too

If you have ideas for improving this guide or adding your own experiences, we'd love to hear from you!

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