

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM AF4Q'S STORYTELLING JOURNEY

Aligning Forces for Quality is the signature effort of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to lift the overall quality of health care in targeted communities. Our 16 communities cover 12.5% of the US population, and range in size and demographics, from tiny Humboldt County in California to the city of Memphis to the entire state of Maine.

AF4Q has worked hard to develop a culture of story collection and story telling. Here are a few of the lessons we learned along the way.

**Focus on the Bright Spots.** Chip Heath, the author of the book SWITCH, spoke at one of our conferences on the idea of a "Bright Spot." His theory is pretty simple. Imagine you have a child and she comes home with a report card with an A, three Cs and an F. Most parents focus immediately on the F – how can we fix this? Tutors? More studying? Bribery? Heath said we should be focusing on the A. Go meet the kids' science teacher and find out WHY she is succeeding in science. Is it where she sits? The fact that the teacher is teaching kids in small groups? Bribery? We learned that instead of looking for THE story, we needed to look for MANY stories – the ones that are the bright spots in healthcare transformation.

**Ask the right questions.** Stop asking the question that leaves you with writer's block – what's a good story about your work? – and start asking questions: What was the problem you were trying to solve? What was your AHA moment? Do you have advice for someone who wants to shamelessly steal your idea?

**Tell stories as you go, don't wait until the end.** Share your experiences and your journey, not just your results. Waiting until the story has a result means you miss a lot of opportunities. One important one is that you can't build a rapport with a reporter over time if you only call them when your work is all tied up in a pretty bow. Reporters aren't fans of pretty bows.

**Look for the stories you want or need.** We think about story gathering a little like fishing. If you know the story you want, you need to go see if it exists. If you want to catch salmon, you go to where the salmon are. You don't sit on the dock and hope a salmon swims by. We had been waiting for people to submit their stories, and some did. But mostly we had to go get them, go to the people on the front lines and ask the questions.

**Look at what you are doing from another perspective – or get another perspective on your work from another person.** Sometimes you can't see your best story because you are too close to it. One of our alliances was talking about some work they had done in readmissions and our staffer said "that's incredible – you need to capture that." The community person was surprised because to her, that wasn't a story, that was just her job.

**Anecdote doesn't eliminate footnote.** Telling a story doesn't invalidate data or undermine accuracy. A story is a lead-in, the tip of a deeper iceberg. Don't be afraid telling a story will make your work appear less. It will actually help make your important data more accessible and give more people entry.

**Package small stories.** *Then* look for trend stories. Don't wait for the perfect moment. Every story isn't headed for the front page of the New York Times. We package our small stories in lots of ways. For instance, we help package some of the stories from our alliances as standalone postcards, mini brochures, even magazine articles. They use them for leave behinds and use the text on their websites and in their newsletters. Small stories are eminently tweetable ... which brings me to ...

**Engage on social media.** AF4Q engages broadly on our Twitter handle (@aligningforces) and via conversations with the hashtag #AF4Q, and many of the Alliances now also have their own Twitter handles. Social media is a powerful way to disseminate stories. AF4Q is not a huge organization, but when we focus, we can make waves on Twitter. At our last meeting, we had around 8.8 million impressions – like each of our 300 meeting attendees telling 29,000 people a story about our work. That's a pretty good dissemination tool.

**Define what makes a story work for your organization.** This one is a little more about the logistics of making it work. We look at every story through the lens of whether or not we think it can spread – and because we work with lots of researchers, we wanted to give them a few “data points” to use to determine if a story will likely spread. So we tell them to make sure their stories:

- Are **sticky** – catchy and compelling
- Show **progress**, feature measureable improvement
- Include a **replicable** idea
- Have an **emotional** component – and features a real voice
- Illustrate a deliberate **action** *and*
- Are grounded in **data** and evidence

Sticky, progress, replicable, emotional, action, data – SPREAD.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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