Embracing a story-culture in our nonprofit organization helps us to realize that stories can be gathered from a multitude of sources and can serve many purposes. When we're gathering stories to support our evaluation efforts, we'll need to apply a strategic lens to the stories we collect.

Here are three strategies to consider when gathering stories for evaluation:

1. Determine what we want our story to do.
2. Find stories that demonstrate impact and fit with the organization's strategies, goals and mission.
3. Find stories that are personal and emotional

1. What do we want our story to do?

Defining our reasons for collecting stories can help us use them more effectively. Consider the following reasons for collecting and telling a story.

- To share our success
- To advocate for change
- To learn about what works and what doesn't
- To share resources and knowledge
- To persuade or influence an audience
- To motivate change

In addition, we need to consider how we intend our stories to be shared. Possible ways stories can be share include:

- Internal use
- Shared with funders and donors
- Shared with the community more broadly
- Used for marketing purposes

Keeping our organization's strategic plan or logic model in mind will help to guide the kinds of stories we collect and how we analyze them. This is important, as stories used in evaluation should tie back to elements of our plan. Stories that undermine or seem inconsistent with our plans can create confusion or send mixed messages to our audience.

2. Find stories that demonstrate impact and fit with your organization's strategies, goals and mission.

Collecting stories that show how we're making a difference with the people we serve can be a vital part of an evaluation. Stories from our clients, volunteers or other stakeholders are tangible evidence of our impact. In order to determine what kind of stories to collect, it can be helpful to think about the impact our organization *wants* to make on its clients and on the broader community. In this way, its' more likely that stories we gather will be related directly to the goals of our organization.

We may even need to expand our idea of what constitutes a 'good story'. Success stories demonstrate our positive impact while other stories can point to where changes are needed in our organization.

Stories can be collected through:
- Interviews
- Video
- Photography
- Written submissions
- Journaling, drawing or other art forms
- Community story collectors

Collecting and Analyzing Stories

Analysis and reflection are important for understanding what the stories are telling us. In order for stories to be used to their fullest extent in evaluation, we need to collect and analyze them using sound methods of collection, documentation and analysis. Some elements we need to consider when using stories for evaluation include:

- **Asking open-ended unbiased questions during story gathering.** Using this approach will allow us to hear the positive, negative and unexpected about our work and impact.

- **Following a systematic process for collecting stories.** One way to do this would be to use similar sets of questions and style of interviews.

- **Keeping interpretations grounded in the stories themselves**. Although there may be many ways to interpret the stories we collect, we need to ensure our interpretation is supported by the content of the story.

- **Support with other data.** When making interpretations about impact based on a story, we need to support our findings with other data such as surveys, monitoring data or third-party reports.

Tips for Analyzing stories

1. Group similar stories together and look for any themes that emerge.
2. Consider if the stories represent something typical about the program and its intended impacts or if they are unique.
3. Step back and look for patterns – connections between events or similarities in what people are saying.
4. Describe the patterns and how they relate back to the program being evaluated.
5. Ask colleagues and key stakeholders to weigh in our analysis. Do they see the same thing or do they have other interpretations?

3. Find stories that are personal and emotional, that provide meaning for our audience

In order for our stories to connect with the people we're hoping to reach, they must be about the people we serve and not about our organization. Effective stories are descriptive and experiential. They convey emotions, allowing the reader to connect on a personal level with the story being told.

What's the overall message of our story? What do we want our readers to do after they read it? In order to clarify our thinking around this, we can write down the following:

- our key audience for the story (be as specific as possible),
- the specific purpose of our story
- the key message (stick to one)
- the feeling or reaction we want from our audience
- and our call to action.

Adapted from Capacity Canada's Storytelling Manual for Nonprofits
https://capacitycanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Storytelling-Manual-for-Nonprofits-Capacity-Canada.pdf