Caroline Nobo Sarnoff

Caroline Sarnoff is the former Director of Outreach at Measures for Justice, a nonprofit research organization in Rochester, New York dedicated to data-driven assessments of the criminal justice system. She hired Narativ to create a training for new employees.

We sat down with Caroline to talk about the story-based onboarding program we created. The conversation highlighted the kinds of information the training unearthed, its implementation, and its impact on new hires. We also talked about Measures for Justice's future plans for story-based training.

Caroline emphasized several key benefits of the onboarding program:

- dramatically shortens the learning curve for new hires
- contributes to organizational knowledge
- enables employees to perform at a higher level

Q *Caroline, tell us a bit about Measures for Justice?*

A Measures for Justice is a nonprofit research organization that specializes in county-level measurement of criminal justice systems. We use a series of performance measures to look at the whole system from arrest to post conviction. We look at things like public safety, fair process in the system, and fiscal responsibility.

My team, the data outreach team, has to collect a lot of data. We travel around the United States, going county to county, meeting with criminal justice practitioners and stakeholders and asking them to share data with us.

And why did Measures for Justice approach Narativ?

Our data outreach is completely unique. So even when we hired employees who had worked in the criminal justice field or who were attorneys, no one was prepared for this role because it doesn't really

exist anywhere else. Our challenge was, how do we train someone for something they've never done without them actually going and doing it? I wanted a way for people to envision what a day at their job is going to look and feel like. And that's really important when you have a job that someone can't always visualize. I reached out to Narativ with the question of how we can help new hires understand what their job is going to look like from their very first day.

What was the onboarding process at Measures for Justice before our workshops?

I had been at Measures for Justice for two years. Initially, I traveled to various counties for stakeholder meetings by myself. I hired one or two people but did not implement a formal training period. I basically said, "Okay, just shadow me. Sit with me over the course of four or five meetings. I'll give you some materials and then you're ready to go." They were thrown into the fire from the very beginning. It wasn't very effective or efficient. And Measures for Justice kept growing; I've hired 8 or 10 people over the last few years. We realized we needed something with a little more structure in order to have an effective training process.

When we first connected, we started to think about what stories you have, Caroline: What experiences had you had on the road, going all to these different counties and stakeholders? And what kinds of scenarios would a new person likely encounter?

I didn't even realize how tangible those stories were and how much they could inform the work that my team was doing. That was great. You helped me understand how just telling a story

Q
A

We know these stories are really interesting; they can also be informative for someone else down the line.

could create something really useful.

I wasn't able to zoom out and see that there were themes in these meetings and typical scenarios that I could pass on to new people on my team. I thought they'd just have to learn by sitting through meetings themselves. But there were some clear themes that you helped establish, and then we were able to create a training structure that is a series of stories based on those different scenarios. That was very useful.

After we worked with you to mine your stories, what happened next? What was your process to share those learnings?

We created a podcast-style training program with eight different training modules, each representing a typical scenario a data outreach team member might encounter. We follow that up with an in-person training session. So everyone listens to those podcasts, then we work with them to tell their own stories.

We have two goals: First, we want to help them feel comfortable sharing stories internally about what they experience on the road. Second, we want them to feel comfortable talking about Measures for Justice during meetings with stakeholders. We want them to have the tools to effectively tell stories about why Measures for Justice matters and why data matters. And we want them to be able to do this in a short story clip, because we know that resonates with people on the road.

How do you think this onboarding process impacts the people in these new positions?

It is a very practical way for them to understand what was going to happen without having to be

thrown in right away. And it also creates a great culture of openness right away. Here I am, at the time I was Assistant Director and then Director, being really candid about my successes and failures, saying, "Hey, this was horrible, but I learned from it." So I think it allows people to say, "Oh, so sometimes it's going to be horrible. And you know, I heard Caroline talk about her failures and her successes. So now I feel really comfortable sharing my failures and successes too." And I think that has been the biggest takeaway. From day one, we've created this really open atmosphere where it's acceptable and encouraged to tell your stories about what's happening every day as a team.

We're seeing that the onboarding time is reduced now.

Q *How do you see your training program evolving at Measures for Justice?*

A You need to be ready to adapt training to whatever it needs to be. We're evolving. When we started these meetings, there was less at stake. We were still developing our data portal, which is now live. No one knew about us. We were very under the radar. Over the last two years, we've grown super fast. So when we ask for a meeting, we're not really going in under the radar anymore. We need to come in a little more prepared. We now have standard and foundational messaging that we didn't have two years ago.

So our newest training is focused on how we can add more stories to talk about core messaging, the very basic things that we want people to get out there. So, we're not only just training about scenarios you might encounter, we're also using stories to train about the foundation of Measures for Justice.

It's not just my stories now. We have a team of a lot of wonderful people who have been on just as many site visits as I have and who also have really valuable lessons to be shared. So we're incorporating other members of the team into our onboarding and training so they don't just hear my voice, but other voices as well.

We're actually already telling stories and sharing these experiences with each other. And now we are making a point to get them down and make them a tool. We know these stories are really interesting; they can also be informative for someone else down the line.

That's a great point. You're leveraging something that happens informally in a lot of companies. Instead of having that informal exchange limited to a short conversation that only two people hear, you're actually sharing it with the entire organization. And then every time someone new comes in, they get a chance to hear and learn from that?

That's how we build that institutional knowledge. Measures for Justice is a nonprofit that has had a huge impact over four years. So how do you take someone who is brand new and bring them up to speed on everything that's happened over the last four years so they have that institutional knowledge, so they feel like they have ownership of their role, the mission, and the messaging? You do that by giving them a chance to hear everything that's happened.

Have you noticed any other benefits of this training process?

My whole team telecommutes: We have people in New York, Michigan, Missouri, Washington, California. So for me there's a really practical benefit. We get to know each other even though we haven't met each other. With some of the people that I'm working with, it'll be months before I sit down and see them in person. In the training, they hear me talk about something intimate or vulnerable through these stories. So right away, they know who I am. They feel comfortable reaching out to me because they've heard me talk so much. If you watch a reality show every day for a year and then

you see the person on the street, you'd be like, "Oh, hey, I know you." You'd feel like you know them because you've heard them talk; you've heard their stories. So that's been really great for me.

Do you think stories have changed the organizational culture in other ways?

We actually hired an organization to come in and interview everyone who did the training and give us some feedback on it. And definitely the big takeaway was openness. People understand as soon as they join that this job is going to be really tricky and you're not going to be successful if you do it on your own. You have to, from the first day, be willing to commiserate and strategize with everyone on your team or you're just going to hit a wall.

The other impact has been performing at a higher level. Instead of having to go in right away with no background about what to expect, *people are far more prepared for that first meeting. We're seeing that the onboarding time is reduced now. *What used to take several months to get people ready, now they're listening to the trainings, doing some other exercises, shadowing one trip, and then they're going out. So it's been a very effective in the amount of time that it takes to onboard someone.

If you have a team, you need to train them. One of the big challenges in corporate America is how to reduce that new employee learning curve: How do you put in place systems to make someone feel like they belong from day one?

That's a culture thing. I've worked at other really large, corporate research organizations. And their training process is they drop hundreds of pages of reading on your desk and they say, "Okay, we're working on these five grants. I need you to get up to speed." No one sits down and tells you the background and gets you really feeling it. You just read, and that's your training. I found that really lacking as a holistic approach to bringing someone on board.

It's just boring. You've got a new job; you want to be engaged and show that you're ready–and then you're in your office reading for two weeks. Our approach is a couple of hours of listening to stories, and then a fun conversation about those stories and what you've learned.

Have you done anything else with the stories you've gathered?

At Measures for Justice, we have about 40 team members across all departments. Data outreach is sort of a hard job to wrap your mind around, and our colleagues in other departments didn't really understand what we do. So the stories were great to use internally, outside of our data outreach team. They help other staff understand what our role is like. That's been great for the research team especially. Research gets the data. They clean and code it, but they might not understand everything that went into it: the blood, sweat, and tears it took to get people to share the data with us in the first place. Stories help them have some empathy and understanding about what people who collect data go through every day.

We haven't put the stories out externally yet, but we are now doing new training to help us share those stories with funders. Measures for Justice is 100 percent foundation-funded, and stories are a great way to help funders or potential funders understand the sort of work we're doing and our messaging. I think it could be a really useful tool. ∎

> *The other impact has been performing at a higher level.*