

## ***Harnessing the Energy of Your Founding Story – A Guide***

***Disclaimer:*** *This tool is not intended as legal advice. Your organizational goals, purpose, bylaws, and values should drive the creation of this document.*

Every organization has a founding story. There are five different ways nonprofits can be formed in Alaska, and each one sets the stage for how the organization will evolve. No matter how long your organization has been in existence, it can be very valuable to document the founding story for current and future mission stewards.

---

Searching for and claiming our origin story feels like a universal experience across cultures, generations, and experiences. It is the act of knowing where we came from and what makes us who we are today. There are many paths to get to this place including oral traditions, shared stories, formal documentation, scientific evidence, and artistic renderings. Each effort has meaning and offers us some truths to hold on to as we move ahead to what's next.

Each of us likely has varying personal experiences with searching for and owning our own origin stories which can be thrilling, heartbreaking, insightful, harrowing, surprising, lovely, and perhaps everything in between. Maybe our personal experience makes us either more eager or less willing to search out and document our nonprofit's origin story. And, as a result, we either have an essential building block in our foundation, or we are missing it leaving us on shaky ground.

Every nonprofit mission has a founding story. Within our [Foraker Nonprofit Sustainability Model](#), we refer to this as the source of our DNA as we search for the words to express our Core Purpose and Core Values. Jim Collins, in [Good to Great in the Social Sector](#) calls this the “glue” to understanding what should never change and what can be open for change. Collins underscores that the simple act of knowing this “core ideology” is the difference between thriving and surviving. We agree that knowing, documenting, and living our Core Purpose and Core Values without exception or waiver is at the heart of every other successful decision we make to advance our mission work.

That said, sometimes we start our origin stories with the actual founding moment, which in Alaska could include action by Congress or the legislature that results in a new law or regulation. Or sometimes the story is planted when a national nonprofit takes root in our state – or when a sovereign Indigenous tribe determines that nonprofit status is important to recognition of their goals – or when a person or a few people sit down at their computer and submit their paperwork to the IRS for incorporation. Indeed, these are all part of the origin journey. However, to tell the whole founding story requires rewinding to an earlier moment to share the deeper context of what was happening in the community, the country, and maybe even the world at that time. It requires the context of feelings, hopes, and ideas that propelled the group of people into action in the first place because nonprofit founding is never just about a single person, or a single incident, or a single point in time even as those things, too, matter. To be sure, the origin of the nonprofit sector itself is rooted in the notion of the pluralism of the greater good. It is the people

who pick up that idea and turn it into a formal structure that we recall as the founders, but it was, and will always be, bigger than a single person.

That said, the person or people are the holders and stewards of all of that context and finding ways to remember and document that context and reasons why forming a nonprofit in that moment mattered can be the pieces that all the people who become future holders and stewards need to thrive in service to the mission.

A thriving sector means that nonprofits are formed for as many reasons as there are organizations. We might want to believe that every one of them was created to help people, economies, animals, or our environment thrive but our democratic system means that for every nonprofit doing good in the world by your definitions, there is likely an organization working in opposition that is equally loyal, determined, and inspired by their work. That's just how it goes. In Alaska, we have the added component that our nonprofits are doing the work that county governments would do in other states, so the diversity of missions and origin stories vary widely from one to another. Artistic, religious, cultural expression, workforce and economic development, utilities and emergency services, health and human services, animal and environmental preservation and protection, civic and social connections, business and union advancement – all these “greater good” missions are part of who we are as a sector, and each of our reasons for existing is important.

Based on this diversity, we might imagine that some of our origin stories are dramatic and even traumatic while others feel utilitarian but essential. Some feel like yesterday, because it was, while others are reaching back through generations. There is no competition in this space for “The Best Story” just the right one for each organization.

### ***Why tell the story now?***

There are many reasons to take time to document your organization's founding story. They might include:

- The transition of long-time or founding people within the organization
- The immense shift in the workforce that has lessened the connections of the new team from the essential “whys” of the past
- The need to regroup, regroup, and regain strength after the human, financial, and mission impact stress of the pandemic
- A shift in the national or “parent” organization that is rippling across the state affiliates
- The shifting complexity of the work and the need to be a better or deeper partner with others to make real progress
- Not knowing the answer but knowing it matters because you sense that it will make your work more meaningful and reenergize you and your team to be the stewards of something bigger than any one of you can be on your own

### ***What does a founding story look like?***

Each story will look and feel different, and the visual representation is not necessarily a written document. Rather, it can be in an artistic form of song, dance, play, poem, or physical art. It can be matter-of-fact or highly creative. If it is written, it can be a published paragraph, an essay, or some bulleted reminders. It can be derived from interviews, group sharing, or the passing of a story through oral tradition. No matter the deliverable, the intent is to share it, so use the medium that best reflects your organization's cultural norms and allows the story to be carried on.

### ***What goes into a founding story?***

There is no recipe for your story but generally the essence includes these elements:

- The *social, economic, and political context* leading up to and during the time of formation
- A simple statement of the *core business* (not what activities or services your organization performs, but a consistent identity or glue that holds it together as it grows and changes.) ***Note that these ideas eventually will be refined into your Core Purpose.***
- The *motivation, energy, core beliefs, and cultural norms* of why the work matters have become timeless guiding principles. ***Note that these ideas eventually will be refined into your Core Values.***
- Remember, this can be fun, too. For example, some groups imagine this as telling a fairytale or comic book action where there are heroes and villains and superpowers and far-off destinations to reach.
- Capturing *ultimate success* – even how the founders would know there is no more need for the organization. (Remember, not every organization is meant to last forever. Some of our missions are intended to end because we achieved the ultimate goals. Our daily work should be to reach that destination). ***Note that sometimes we see these words captured in a vision statement or at the end of a progression in a Theory of Change. Or sometimes it has just been told to us and passed down over time.***
- The *original set of services* to be offered in the community and the *core constituency* those services were meant to engage with those offerings. ***Note that this may have changed over time as the needs and scope of the community changed, but it is still helpful to know the beginning.***
- The *timeline* that captures the progression from an idea to conception to birth to growth that can include dates, names, places, or other contexts that should be remembered and celebrated

**Caution:** The one thing the founding story is not is the story of a single person without regard to any of the other features. As noted earlier, nonprofit life is never about one person – ever.

## ***What's next?***

For some of you, this process might be a breeze because you are one of the founders and what you really need is time to capture your lived experience into a form that can be shared. For others, this is a much more involved process that could culminate in a board-staff gathering after a series of steps to uncover the components that matter most to your story.

Once you and your team have concluded this process, it can be put into action in many ways for the betterment of your mission within your community and alongside your constituents including but not limited to:

- Refining your four-word Core Purpose definition to stay on track or get back on track from mission-drifting opportunities
- Refining the five single root words of your Core Values with all the meanings those words carry from your founding as the foundation for all the other decisions – to be your compass into the future
- Homing in on the outward-facing marketing moments of your mission statement and other materials and ensuring they still feel the inspiration and energy of your origin story
- Refining your ultimate definition of success and reflecting on how to plan backward toward the present to see tangible progress in your work
- Celebrating your essence with your team by diving further into what it all means to the people who are the stewards of those ideas today
- Finding ways to bring the founding ideals into your recruitment process to ensure that the next generation of stewards is inspired and motivated
- Reflecting on what is core and unwavering and feeling grounded in how those fundamentals are informing the goals and activities that are open for change today
- Showcase the visual representation of your story with donors and key collaborators and invite them to be part of how the story unfolds
- And so much more...

The list keeps going because the power of our origin stories is limitless. Understanding the core of your organization's DNA and defining success from there allows for other significant decisions including recruiting and retaining the team, increasing the source of your organization's economic engine, and strengthening strategic partnerships to maximize mission.

In a world that feels topsy-turvy every day, there is no better time than right now to do this work. When we do, everything else just makes more sense, and we have the energy to keep going. Yes, it will take time and commitment. But it will be rewarding, and you will know you've taken an important step in preserving and passing on your mission and good work to those who will follow.