

BRIDGE ENTERTAINMENT LABS RELEASES RESEARCH BACKED STORYTELLING PLAYBOOK TO HELP HOLLYWOOD BUILD MORE CONNECTED AMERICA

Research-backed principles developed through collaboration with Hollywood creatives, executives, and leading social scientists.

LOS ANGELES, CA, UNITED STATES, July 7, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- As conversations continue following America's 250th anniversary about the nation's identity, culture, and future, [Bridge Entertainment Labs \(BEL\)](#) is urging Hollywood to play a leading role in shaping the country's next chapter through storytelling. BEL has publicly released its [Storytelling Principles for Creating New American Stories of Us](#),

research-backed concepts designed to promote viewpoint diversity and equip creators and entertainment executives to build narratives that transform how audiences see one another across lines of difference. The release comes as Hollywood grapples with how to tell stories that resonate across increasingly fragmented audiences while many creators search for narratives that transcend political polarization without sacrificing artistic authenticity.

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Over the past couple years, BEL has emerged as the first-ever "Hollywood office" for the bridge-building and depolarization movements, connecting entertainment

leaders with leading researchers, civic innovators, and cultural changemakers working to address America's growing divisions. Through relationships and partnerships that include Disney, Paramount, Imagine Entertainment, and leading filmmaking and academic institutions including Sundance Institute, Princeton, and Northwestern, BEL is rapidly growing an industry movement



Steven Olikara, Brian Grazer, Christina Voros, and Joshua Seftel at Aspen Ideas Fest (Craig Turpin/Aspen Public Radio)

dedicated to leveraging storytelling at scale to strengthen belonging and audience connection.

BEL's approach is guided by an Advisory Council that includes former Paramount Pictures Chairwoman and CEO Sherry Lansing, showrunner Dave Caplan, and pioneering culture-change strategist Greg Propper, among others.



Rather than prescribing what stories should be told, BEL's principles framework identifies four storytelling characteristics that can help Americans to see each other across our divisions - known as the 4 C's.

The 4 C's:

CURIOSITY: Stories that encourage audiences to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and remain open to unfamiliar perspectives.

CONTACT: Stories that break our bubbles, modeling meaningful interactions between people from different backgrounds, beliefs, and lived experiences that challenge assumptions and create opportunities for understanding.

COMPLEXITY: Characters and narratives that reject stereotypes and embrace the nuance, contradictions, and depth of real human experience - avoiding tropes and stereotypes.

(GOOD) CONFLICT: Conflict that drives growth, reveals humanity, and deepens understanding rather than simply reinforcing division; giving all characters a strong, coherent moral frame.

"Hollywood has always been at its strongest when it expands our sense of who belongs in the story," said founding CEO Steven Olikara. "As America begins writing its next chapter after its 250th anniversary, storytellers have a unique opportunity to help shape a new Story of Us. The question isn't whether entertainment shapes culture—it always has. The question is what kind of culture we're helping create. Storytellers have a responsibility to shape who we empathize with, whose voices matter, and how we imagine our shared future. The 4 C's are not a formula for storytelling. They're an invitation to consider ways in which their stories can help audiences better understand themselves and one another. Great storytelling doesn't erase differences—it helps us engage them with humanity, imagination, and openness."

The principles synthesize insights from several BEL-commissioned studies and broader research on the power of vicarious contact and narrative transportation to influence attitudinal and behavioral change, and to reduce intergroup prejudice. For example, when a Black-ish episode called "Lemons" made a case for empathy, calling on its audience to consider that the "other side" may have a viewpoint worth listening to, a study found that viewers became 6% more likely

to empathize with partisans on the other side.

BEL believes these principles aren't simply relevant to stories about politics or social issues; they can strengthen storytelling across every divide (eg. geography, age) and genre, from comedy and family entertainment to prestige television, documentaries, and blockbuster franchises.

The release follows a featured conversation at Aspen Ideas Festival, where BEL Founding CEO Steven Olikara moderated a discussion with Imagine Entertainment's Brian Grazer, Christina Voros (Yellowstone, The Madison), and Oscar-winning filmmaker Joshua Seftel exploring storytelling's role in strengthening empathy and connection across America's divides.

A key advisor to BEL who co-developed the 4-C's, Dave Caplan, Ph.D. Media Psychology and Writer/Executive Producer on Roseanne, The Conners, George Lopez, The Drew Carey Show, says: "It's not an overstatement to say that storytellers are our best, last hope to show that differences between people are real—but how we deal with them is a choice. I've spent my career writing characters who disagree, frustrate one another, and still find ways to remain human. BEL's Storytelling Principles put language and psychological science behind what many writers intuitively know: audiences connect most deeply with stories that embrace complexity instead of caricature. Inclusive, relatable entertainment doesn't weaken great storytelling—it strengthens it."

"Bridge Entertainment Labs shares the values I bring to storytelling- an opportunity to dive below the surface of a character's behavior and words and explore their innermost thoughts and the origins of bias. Through dramatic storytelling we can bring the values and psychological needs of characters (who stand in for people in our lives and culture) to the forefront so audiences can see themselves and others through a more empathetic lens. It's why I first became a scientist and then a film and television director- the drive to shine light on the invisible so we can all work from the same set of assumptions-- and dispel those which are false," says Valerie Weiss, Ph.D. and television director Star Trek: Strange New Worlds, Outer Banks, Ginny and Georgia.

As audiences become increasingly fragmented and Americans search for belonging and common ground, BEL believes the entertainment industry has a unique opportunity to create stories that reflect the full complexity of the American experience while rebuilding shared cultural experiences.

Since launching in 2023, BEL has activated more than 4,000 storytellers, bridge-builders and entertainment executives through industry salons, leadership convenings, content consultation and research partnerships, growing a movement around storytelling that expands empathy and audience connection.

BEL will continue advancing these conversations through upcoming programming with Sundance Collab (on July 9th) and other industry partners throughout the rest of this year.

The full report, "Storytelling Principles for Creating New American Stories of Us," is available at:
<https://bridgeentertainmentlabs.org/storytelling-tips/>

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