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Storytelling for Sustainability
A GUIDE

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Storytelling for Sustainability

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This guide is part of a series of resources that we are developing for practitioners working to embed sustainability at their organizations.
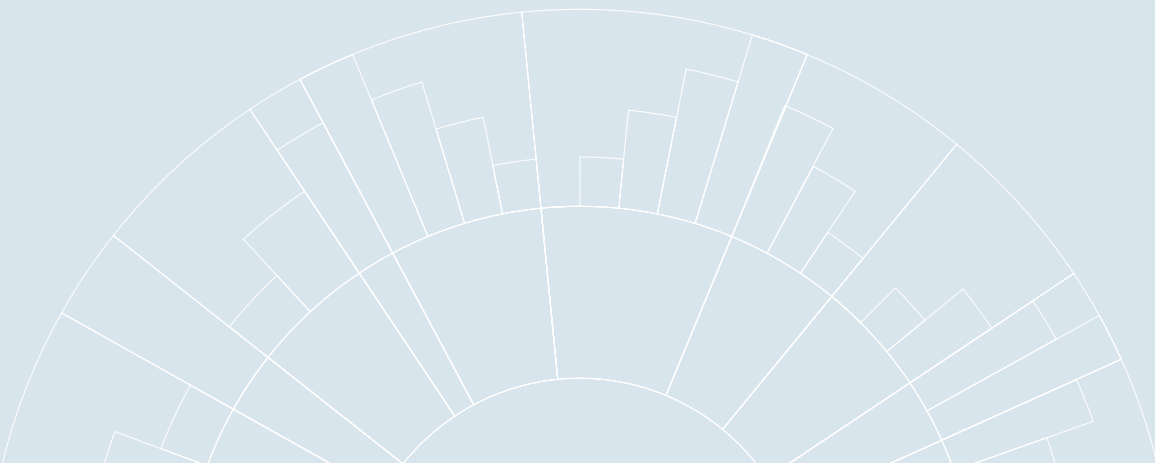
Our resources are co-created with our practitioner partners based on an extensive review of academic research, practitioner guidance, and feedback from experts and practitioners. Preliminary versions are trialed in workshops and in pilot projects in our partner companies, through working with global practitioners in executive, sustainability, operations, human resources, marketing, and communication roles in a range of industries. Feedback is then incorporated into successive versions of the resource.

It is important to note that our research is ongoing. We recognize that the knowledge presented here is provisional and we invite you to participate in improving these resources.

Note: Many of the good storytelling examples that were shared with us during this project were focused on safety storytelling in high-risk industries. Safety storytelling is a more established practice than sustainability storytelling in many organizations, and while storytelling to promote safety is not the same thing as storytelling to promote sustainability, there are lessons that can be learned from this work. Where appropriate, these lessons have also been incorporated into this guide.

More information about the Embedding Project and the development of future guides can be found at the end of this document, or at:

www.embeddingproject.org

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Introduction

When people in organizations communicate, they often do it through stories.[1] People use stories to reflect on the past, make sense of the present, and speculate on the future.[2] In this guide, we examine how storytelling can be leveraged by organizations that are working to respect ecological limits and uphold socially just business practices.

This guide on Storytelling for Sustainability aims to help you:

- Reflect on what storytelling looks like in practice
- Understand why storytelling is important for embedding sustainability
- Become a better storyteller
- Learn from other practitioners' experiences with storytelling and plan your own efforts

In an effort to improve our understanding, we are continuing to capture stories about sustainability storytelling, and will include these stories in future versions of the tool.

We encourage you to reach out with feedback or to share your stories about sustainability storytelling with us.

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Storytelling in Organizations
Articulating a Pattern of Choice

ROGER'S CLOSE CALL[a]

Two managers at a mining company have a conversation while walking to a meeting:

"I take it you heard about Roger parking in the dumper truck's blind spot? It was a close call."

"I heard… I'm glad he's ok but, man, how many times do we have to hear stories like this?"

Sometimes we think about stories as following a classic arc in which there is a defined beginning, middle, and end.[3] It goes something like this: a main character is presented with a challenge, makes a choice in response to this challenge, and his or her actions yield an outcome.[4] For example, executives at Nike are known to tell the story of how, when faced with the challenge of building a better running shoe, founder Bill Bowerman chose to pour rubber into his wife's waffle iron, inspiring Nike's first shoe, the Waffle Trainer. This story is told often to point to the roots of the company's culture of innovation.[5]

Figure 1: Storytelling Arc

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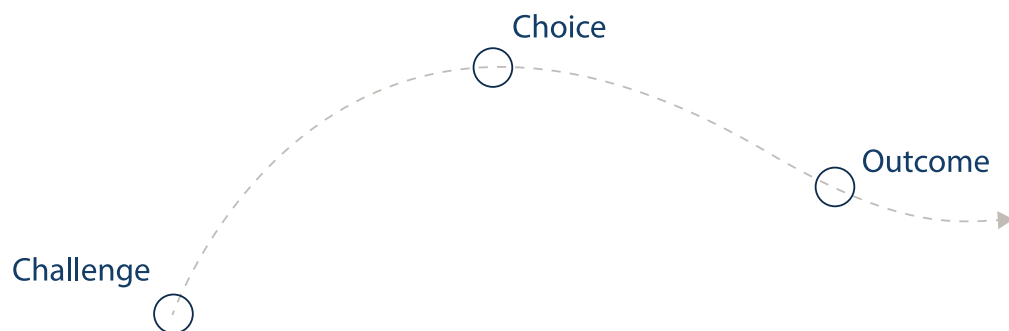
[a] This is a fictional interaction based on a true story. Blind Spots, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpM5_flN334&feature=youtube_gdata_player

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However, most of the storytelling in organizations is not necessarily like this.[6] As in the example above about Roger, stories often surface in abrupt and incomplete fragments, in people's conversations.[7] On their own, these fragments may not make sense; however, they can be quite meaningful when situated within the context of organizational life.[8,9] The two managers in the example above know who Roger is, the history of safety incidents at the company, and why Roger may have parked in a dumper truck's blind spot. Together, the managers draw on this context as they make meaning of the incident.

Stories that surface like this become woven together with one another in their telling and retelling. As this happens, the underlying messages of these stories have the potential to come together into an organizational narrative. An organizational narrative tells you about the way things are and how things came be.[10] You can think of narratives like storylines that capture the essence of people's day-to-day experiences. Most people have a sense of the dominant narratives in their organization and these storylines tell them about the types of choices and actions that are valued.[11]

IN PRACTICE: CORE NARRATIVE

Over time stories weave together to form an organizational narrative. Stories like the one about Roger, from above, have woven together to create a narrative about safety. In the past, the safety narrative led to the sense that incidents were inevitable, contributing to more near misses and accidents. Deliberate investments in storytelling at this company have helped it to shift the core safety narrative to one of accidents being preventable and worth preventing. These interventions have included formally capturing and surfacing near miss and "failure" stories like this one about Roger, and facilitating candid discussion about them in meetings and training sessions. These efforts to shift the narrative, combined with a number of other tactics, have led to dramatic improvement in the organization's safety performance.

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THE ROLE OF CHOICE

While often downplayed, the role of 'choice' in stories is a crucial aspect of organizational storytelling. Choices are important because we learn about what is acceptable in organizations through experiencing how others react to our choices. It is also likely that the most memorable messages we encounter in organizations are those that help us determine the types of choices we should make.[12]

Stories help us to learn from one another's experiences and in the process gain insight into how people come to their choices.[13] Stories are useful for sharing this type of "know how"[14] because they give us concrete, tangible examples to emulate and explore.[15]

PATTERNS OF CHOICE

People tend to make choices that are consistent with what they perceive the dominant narratives in their organization to be.[16] Change tends to happen in organizations when people begin to see a different set of choices available to them.[17] They start to see these choices as they surface in the stories that get told and retold in people's everyday conversations.[18] As this pattern of choices emerges, different narratives begin to take shape and lays the foundation for others to also make different choices.[19]

It's important that the people in your organization see how the choices they face on a day-to-day basis align with a narrative that captures your organization's vision for sustainability. In our conversations with practitioners, we've seen that those having success with embedding sustainability are investing in helping people in their organization to see an evolving pattern of choices. They have actively surfaced the choices made by senior leaders and fellow employees to connect sustainability to the existing organizational narrative or even to forge a new narrative around sustainability.

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Worksheet: Understanding Your Organization's Narratives

What are some of the more prominent narratives in your organization? Ask yourself, "If someone was making a movie or writing a novel about us what would the main storylines be?" For instance, we've heard about narratives that center around concepts like 'quality', lean manufacturing, or cost cutting.

Do any particular stories come to mind that exemplify these narratives?

Can you see a sustainability narrative taking shape in your organization? Try to describe it. Can you recall any choices people have made that are helping this narrative surface?

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What is 'Good' Storytelling?

When people come across a good story, they tend to pass it on. In our conversations with practitioners about storytelling, they often mention someone in their organization who has a reputation as a great storyteller. Maybe it's a former CEO, or someone they know in operations. We found that people are also curious about how they can become better storytellers themselves.

While storytelling may seem like something that comes naturally to some people, it is also a skill that can be learned.[20] We looked to storytellers in a wide variety of contexts such as film, radio, novels, non-fiction writing, and even viral videos to understand how people tell good stories. We also engaged with practitioners experimenting with how to tell sustainability stories in their organizations.

Below we synthesize what we've learned into five key tips. We've also provided a worksheet that you can use to think through how to tell a sustainability story that you're hoping to share.

EXPLAIN THE 'CHOICE'

While it's nice to tell people about how many kilograms of materials were recycled or how many children in the community benefited from a new playground, we've learned that focusing on outcomes like these is not necessarily what makes a story impactful. Instead, try to articulate the choices people in your organization made to help these outcomes happen.

Don't forget to share that a decision was made to change a policy or that management saw the value in spending more money now to save money in the future. These choices pave the path for a pattern of decision-making that supports the sustainability behaviours that you are trying to highlight in your storytelling. It's not just about saying a choice was made. It's about describing the options the main character had, and giving a sense of how they engaged with these different alternatives to come to a decision about what action to take. Without this, stories tend to fall flat.

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GIVE A VOICE TO CHALLENGE AND FAILURE

It is important not to gloss over the challenges people face in the stories you tell. We've learned that people often find that the stories they hear about organizations or individuals contributing to sustainability come across as too easy or too convenient. They hear the story but they are thinking: "well, they may have done that, but it's not that easy in our department" or "she managed to do that but that's because she is much more senior than I am." Make sure you don't gloss over the challenges along the way. Challenges are inherent in good stories;[21] don't forget about them.

IN PRACTICE: STORIES OF FAILURE

We have seen practitioners find value in shifting the dominant narratives in their organizations by surfacing stories about times when things did not go as intended.

One organization where we have seen this willingness to reflect on challenges commissioned a film maker to go to its different sites. The film maker worked with employees to get them to give their perspective on a safety incident that happened at the site. Many of the stories are about close calls or near misses that could have been fatal. In the films, different employees are seen candidly sharing their perspectives about mistakes that were made that led up to accidents.

The films were shown at monthly crew meetings for all employees at all of the organization's different operations. They often responded to seeing the films by relating what they saw to their own experiences and sharing personal stories about similar situations. Candid dialogue like this has helped the organization cultivate new thinking on safety.

When it comes to failure stories and sustainability, frontline employees frequently pointed to an inconsistency between their experiences and the "storyline from corporate."

For example, employees in one organization talked about the contradiction they felt when they consistently heard about the company's commitments to conserve energy, but were unable to turn off the lights in their own office when they leave.

These contradictions can turn into powerful narratives and it may be necessary to give a voice to these perceived "failures". Surfacing perspectives that counter the dominant storyline is necessary for new core narratives to emerge.[22] It is also important for resolving the inconsistencies that can hold companies back as they try to embed sustainability.

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RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO WRAP UP YOUR STORIES IN A NEAT BOW

Good storytellers "show" without telling. They don't tell us what they are going to tell us, tell it to us, and then tell us what they told us. Instead they provoke us to think critically about a story and come to its meaning on our own.[23] When we can't grasp the meaning right away, sometimes we play the story over and over in our head. Sometimes we talk about it with friends and family as we try to make sense of it. It might take an evening to figure it out, but once we get it, it sticks.

We've watched as companies produce videos that tell sustainability stories, complete with a narrator in the background carefully explaining the meaning behind the story. We have all seen examples where a company profiles the story of an employee that came up with an idea to reduce waste that ends with the message "At X company, we're committed to sustainability; it's the right thing to do, and good for our business." Instead, try to cultivate a sense of curiousness in your audience. If you spoon-feed your audience the moral or meaning of your story, they have no motivation to engage with it and the message won't stick.[24]

CAST YOUR ORGANIZATION IN AN ENABLING ROLE

Stories that feature the "organization" as the hero in a story tend to be a bit boring or sometimes even make us roll our eyes. That's not to say that your organization won't have a role to play in a story which is about sustainability and the people in it. Instead, try to position your organization in a facilitating role in your stories. Have the organization sit in the background, supporting the journey of the main character or protagonist.[25]

MAKE YOUR STORY RELATABLE

When we hear a story and feel like we could possibly encounter a similar situation in our own lives, we experience it like a "surrogate";[26] even though "it" didn't happen to us, it is like we were there. This allows us to potentially learn from the experience as if it was our own. Help you audience to see what they have in common with the characters in your story.[27]

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IN PRACTICE: FINDING A WAY TO RELATE

In our conversations with practitioners, it has become apparent that the stories that they have tried to tell are not always broadly relatable across their organization. For example, a practitioner at a global organization broadcast a story about an innovation developed by a manager at its head office in North America. The story seemed to resonate with its North American employees. However, it didn't gain any traction in Asia, where the majority of its employees are located.

As an earlier attendee at one of our storytelling workshops, he thought about the relatability of the protagonist in his story. He tried again, this time sending out a story about an idea developed by a group of mid-level employees in the company's Thai operations that resulted in a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. Within weeks, multiple people from the company's Asian sites were coming forward with similar ideas of their own.

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Worksheet: Crafting a Story

Use the following questions to think through a sustainability story you are thinking about sharing with others in your organization.

Who are the main characters in your story? What details can you share to show what they have in common with your audience?

What challenge are they facing?

How can you show how your organization supported them? What is your organization enabling?

What choices were they facing? What are the different ways they could respond to the challenge you described above?

What do they decide to do? Why?

What is the meaning of the story that you're interested in highlighting? What are the main lessons or morals? What might others take away from the story?

How might you subtly convey this without giving it away? What pieces of the story are essential to delivering this message?

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Building Organizational Capacity for Sustainability Storytelling

HELMET AT THE HELM[b]

Two employees greet each other as they walk from the parking lot to their office:

"Did you see the CEO interview yesterday? …It was strange seeing him in a bike helmet."

"Yeah. I didn't know he normally rides his bike to work. Someone told me he even bikes in the rain."

The most common approach is to capture sustainability stories – perhaps about something an employee, senior leader, or other stakeholder has done – and share these more broadly throughout the organization. A second approach is to integrate stories and storytelling into new employee onboarding. We have also seen some organization invest in storytelling training, and include storytelling as a part of training exercises so that employees can begin to integrate sustainability stories into their everyday interactions out in the operations.

Capture Stories and Share Them With Your Organization

PICKING UP STEAM[c]

A practitioner at an electronics manufacturing company recounts his experience with a sustainability story:

"I heard about this great innovation in one of our plants that saved a bunch of energy and saved a lot of money. I decided to capture that story and put it in our weekly newsblast. Before I knew it we had five other people coming forward with ideas."

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[b] This is a fictional interaction developed for the purposes of this guidebook.
[c] This is a true story from a global electronics manufacturing firm.

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Practitioners often start with this approach when they are thinking about how they can use stories to embed sustainability. Often times they will share these stories in an email blast, or post them on a company intranet or internal social network. Sometimes these stories are written up. Other times practitioners will partner with communications professionals and develop the stories into videos or short films.

If these stories are told in a way that others in your organization can relate to, they have the potential to inspire people to reflect on their own experiences as they talk about these stories with others in their organization. However, we've seen that this approach alone is unlikely to forge a sustainability narrative. It needs to be combined with other approaches where people in your organization are engaged more directly to be the storytellers.

Integrating Stories into Onboarding

MEMORABLE MOMENT

A manager recalls his first week on the job while having coffee with a new employee:

"Thinking back, what I most remember is that our VP turned up at the start of our onboarding session…and then he told us about a time early in his career when he worked in another company and felt a lot of pressure to push the limits on safety to meet the production numbers. They ended up having a bad accident and one of his direct reports was injured. What stays with me is that he said we should never feel like we face that choice here."

Engaging senior leaders, or respected managers, to share personal stories can be a powerful way to socialize new hires, and give them something to draw on when making their own choices.

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Investing in Training

Increasingly, we are starting to see organizations send both senior and emerging leaders for training to become better storytellers, and also incorporate stories into regular employee training.

IN PRACTICE: STORIES IN TRAINING

One innovative example comes from an organization that made storytelling a core part of trying to shift its narrative around safety. In developing a new mandatory day-long training session on safety, they elected to have employees lead the sessions and invested in training these employees in storytelling. These employees then guide a group of fellow employees through crafting a fictional story about a personal safety incident.

The facilitator asks each employee to think of an at-risk behavior they engage in regularly (such as talking on a cell phone while driving), and then to imagine that they have an accident in which they get hurt. The employees need to describe who would find them first.

Then, they are asked to think through the friends, family, and co-workers who would need to be contacted, and how each of these people would be affected by their injury (for example, maybe they miss an important trip they planned with their daughter, or maybe their partner is unable to work for an extended period of time because they need to act as a caregiver).

As they discuss each of these accidents, they get practice experiencing what it is like to share stories about safety. In the process, they discover the moral that, "safety is not just about me. It's about all of the other people in my life who would be affected if I got hurt."

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Integrating Stories into Everyday Operations

Practitioners are also beginning to consider how they can integrate sustainability stories into daily activities in their companies. This is an increasingly common approach in high-risk industries in an effort to cultivate new narratives around safety.

IN PRACTICE: SAFETY MOMENTS

A safety moment is a quick tip or anecdote about a time when you put yourself or another person in a situation that was unsafe. In some organizations, safety moments have become mandatory; all meetings, whether at the corporate office or out in the field, start with a safety moment.

In an analogy to safety moments, some practitioners have experimented with "sustainability moments". However, like safety moments, it takes time for employees to feel comfortable sharing sustainability stories. It can be particularly challenging because they may not have a clear understanding of what sustainability means for the company and what it means in their own life. At the beginning, employees may not be able to identify sustainability stories. They may need to hear other people's stories first before they can start to reflect on their own experiences.

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Worksheet: Developing a Plan for Storytelling

Now that you have a sense of the different ways to approach storytelling for sustainability, take a moment to make a plan for what you could do next.

PICK AN APPROACH

As a sustainability change agent, your time is limited. Pick one approach that you can commit to trialing over the next year:

>   Capture stories about employees, senior leaders, or other stakeholders
>   and share them broadly throughout your organization
>   Integrate stories into onboarding activities
>   Invest in storytelling training
>   Integrate stories into everyday operations
>   Other (if you know of a different approach you would like to try)

IDENTIFY PARTNERS

Is there anyone whose support you need to make this happen? What will you need from them? These may be other people on your sustainability team or people in HR or Communications. It could also be someone who could facilitate a storytelling training exercise, or a senior leader you want to engage as a storyteller as a part of new employee onboarding.

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CONSIDER YOUR RESOURCE NEEDS

What resources would you need to make this happen? Do you have access to these resources? Could you get them?

MAKE A PLAN

What steps can you take to make this happen…

In the next month…

In the next three months...

In the next six months and beyond…

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ASSESS OUTCOMES

What does success look like? What do you hope will be different as a result of your investment in storytelling?

How can you assess whether or not this change has occurred?

For example, if you selected Capturing and Crafting you might track the response to your stories (i.e. do people read the stories, do they respond by sharing their own stories, do the stories lead people to come forward with new ideas). For Investing in Training or Integrating into Onboarding you may choose to follow-up with some of the people who attended these sessions and ask them to describe what they remember most from the sessions.

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Conclusion

Stories are powerful. We use them every day. As a practitioner, you can leverage storytelling to create opportunities for people in your organization to arrive at their own learning moments about sustainability, where they begin to think critically about what it means for them and for your organization.

Every organization is different, and it would be misleading for us to suggest that there is one exact path for sharing stories to embed sustainability. As you work with stories, here are four key things to consider:

1   Ask yourself: Where are we at? What are the dominant narratives in your organization? How have these storylines become so prominent?

2   Try to identify the choices that are being made in your organization that could potentially shape a sustainability narrative.

3   Reflect on your own storytelling skills: Can you tell stories in a way that your audience can quickly relate to? Do you give others space to come to the meaning of your stories on their own?

4   Consider how you can create opportunities for sustainability stories to get told and passed on in your organization.

5   Share your experience with others. If you have stories about sustainability storytelling, contact us so we can help you share your stories and connect you with other practitioners so you can learn from their experiences.

We have included additional resources online we encourage you to review as you work to embed storytelling for sustainability at your organization.

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Endnotes

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About the Embedding Project

The Embedding Project is a collaboration between leading sustainability researchers and practitioners undertaking pioneering work on embedding sustainability globally. By facilitating global communities of practice, we gather the best available knowledge and, working with our practitioner members, we create practical assessments, guidebooks and tools that help you chart your company's path to good business.

Our work is anchored in a review of prior academic and practitioner work on embedding sustainability conducted in 2010 for the Network for Business Sustainability that resulted in a framework to guide companies in their sustainability efforts. Our framework charts a portfolio of organizational practices that, together, lead to embedding and highlight the importance of balancing your efforts to deliver on your sustainability commitments while laying the foundation for the changes that will help you become more sustainable.

The initial framework was enthusiastically received by the business community and in response to requests from organizations for more information and guidance on implementation, Dr. Bertels in partnership with the Network for Business Sustainability brought together a dozen leading global companies to form an Embedding Sustainability Working Group to test and refine the framework. Working for three years with global practitioners, the framework has now been refined into a practices assessment tool that charts an organization's maturity and embeddedness.

We invite you and your company to participate in this ongoing research and join other companies leading this effort. The Embedding Project can help you understand your past efforts, identify gaps, benchmark against your peers, prioritize next steps, and provide the guidance to do so. Our partner companies benefit through opportunities to learn from their peers in facilitated and structured processes that explore the topics that matter to you.

To learn more about how the Embedding Project could support you and your company, visit us at embeddingproject.org.

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