

The Psychological Power of Storytelling

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Stories leap frog technology, taking us to authentic experience

Posted Jan 16, 2011

As I wrote in my last [post "Transmedia Storytelling: The Reemergence of Fundamentals"](#), Transmedia storytelling is very exciting, but it isn't new. It is the ultimate mashup of ancient traditions and new communications models. There have been stories and messages delivered across different media every since the Cro-Magnon man figured out that mineral pigments like iron oxide and black manganese could be applied to the sides of rocks and caves. Whether chronicling life, communicating with others, or creating an inspirational image, there were stories being told. Media technologies have come a long way since cave painting and have so many new capabilities, that the orchestration of a story across multiple media platforms can be a complex creative endeavor. This is was a significant enough shift in application that in April 2010, the Producers Guild of America added a transmedia producer designation so the producers who expand a storyline onto three or more platforms can get credit.

The ancient art of storytelling

Even with technology's increasingly sophisticated and jaw-dropping capabilities, the tools are becoming simultaneously more accessible and user-friendly. So much so, that the boundaries are blurring not just across technologies but also across the people who are creating, using, producing, augmenting, distributing, hacking, mashing, and every other '-ing' imaginable.

In spite of all the excitement, however, the human [brain](#) has been on a slower evolutionary trajectory than the technology.

Our brains still respond to content by looking for the story to make sense out of the experience. No matter what the technology, the meaning starts in the brain. The transmedia producer may get the credit line, but the success of the transmedia effort rests on the resonance, authenticity, and richness created by the storyteller.



Stories are authentic human experiences. Stories leap frog the technology and bring us to the core of experience, as any good storyteller (transmedia or otherwise) knows. There are several psychological reasons why stories are so powerful.

- Stories have always been a primal form of communication. They are timeless links to ancient traditions, legends, archetypes, myths, and symbols. They connect us to a larger self and universal truths.
- Stories are about [collaboration](#) and connection. They transcend generations, they

engage us through emotions, and they connect us to others. Through stories we share passions, sadness, hardships and joys. We share meaning and purpose. Stories are the common ground that allows people to communicate, overcoming our defenses and our differences. Stories allow us to understand ourselves better and to find our commonality with others.

- Stories are how we think. They are how we make meaning of life. Call them schemas, scripts, cognitive maps, mental models, metaphors, or narratives. Stories are how we explain how things work, how we make decisions, how we justify our decisions, how we persuade others, how we understand our place in the world, create our identities, and define and teach social values.
- Stories provide order. Humans seek certainty and narrative structure is familiar, predictable, and comforting. Within the context of the story arc we can withstand intense emotions because we know that resolution follows the conflict. We can experience with a safety net.
- Stories are how we are wired. Stories take place in the imagination. To the human brain, imagined experiences are processed the same as real experiences. Stories create genuine emotions, presence (the sense of being somewhere), and behavioral responses.
- Stories are the pathway to engaging our right brain and triggering our imagination. By engaging our imagination, we become participants in the narrative. We can step out of our own shoes, see differently, and increase our empathy for others. Through imagination, we tap into creativity that is the foundation of innovation, self-discovery and change.

Stories connect us and bridge differences

Social media technologies have created a demand for fundamentals: authenticity, participation, and engagement. Special effects and funny Super Bowl ads are fine, but they are expensive one-offs if they do not touch the core of experience. I don't care how you calculate, that's not going to get you a very good ROI. When organizations, causes, brands or individuals identify and develop a core story, they create and display authentic meaning and purpose that others can believe, participate with, and share. This is the basis for cultural and social change. This is a skill worth learning.

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How to Tell a Story

10 SIMPLE STRATEGIES

JONAH SACHS

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Maybe it's because we're all so overloaded with information.

Maybe it's because we're all so starved for meaning.

Or maybe it's because, thanks to social media, everyone's become a broadcaster these days.

Whatever the reason, we're all getting the same memo at the same time: if you want to be heard, you'd better learn to tell better stories.

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We live in a world that has lost its connection to its traditional myths, and we are now trying to find new ones—we're people, and that's what people without myths do. These myths will shape our future, how we live, what we do, and what we buy. They will touch all of us. But not all of us get to write them. Those who do have tremendous power.

And where there is power, there is struggle for it. That's why, just below the surface, just beyond what the uninitiated can see, there are wars going on. The soldiers at are Tea Party demonstrators and champions of "the 99 percent," climate change activists, makers of computers and sneaker brands. They seem to be fighting over ideas and dollars, but they are really fighting for control of our stories.

Understanding these story wars will make you a more effective communicator and a savvy media consumer. I want you to be part of the wars because our world is badly in need of solutions in so many places—economic, social, and environment to name just a few. The ability to dream up and spread these solutions lives and dies on the ability to tell great stories and inspire people to think differently. Nothing is more urgent than that right now.

But talk to marketers or activists, managers or educators who've found themselves on the receiving end of this advice, and you'll hear the same thing: "Yeah, I understand I need to do it, but please tell me *how* to do it."

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Usually the conversation ends awkwardly there. It doesn't have to. In writing my 2012 book, *Winning the Story Wars*—a manifesto on how to break through in our media saturated world—I uncovered 10 simple strategies that anyone can use to start telling stories that get heard and move people to action.

I know what you're thinking: 10 simple strategies? Storytelling is an art that takes inborn talent and intense dedication to develop. But after spending a decade researching its practice, I'm convinced that storytelling is less like playing a concerto and more like the classic board game Othello: "a minute to learn, a lifetime to master." Well, maybe a few minutes.

So let's say your challenge is to get a customer to buy something, your team to work better together, or thousands of people to join your urgent cause. Put down your facts, your threats, your pleadings, and your special offers and try these simple storytelling strategies.

“Whatever the reason, we're all getting the same memo at the same time: if you want to be heard, you'd better learn to tell better stories.”

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1 Know What a Story Is

Ok, this first strategy isn't quite a "strategy." It's the single concept you'll need to put the nine other actionable strategies to work. Bear with me on this one.

We've all been told stories since we were toddlers, so we think we know what they are. Go see a movie and tell a friend what the "story" was and you'll probably describe a bunch of characters experiencing a series of events, conflicts and settings.

Of course, that's just the surface of a story. Stories are the most powerful persuasion tool human beings have ever devised, but they can only be reliably crafted by understanding what lies beneath the obvious and visible surface.

Every visible element of a well-told story is placed on the visible surface for a specific and strategic reason—to illustrate a truth about how the world works. We call this truth the "Moral of the Story." Our brains are programmed by millennia of evolution to tune into stories so that we can learn from the experiences of others—and not have to make too many stupid mistakes for ourselves. We sit in rapt attention with the expectation that, at the end, the story will all make sense. And for the story to make sense, everything that happens should point back to a single compelling truth. That's the Moral.

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We can go one level deeper in understanding a story, however. The Moral is itself based on core values the storyteller wants to share with audiences. When we hear a story with the Moral "better safe than sorry," we know the storyteller values safety and security. A storyteller who teaches us "he who hesitates is lost" is teaching us to value risk and adventure. The reason that teams, tribes, and even civilizations have been built on stories is because stories are containers for values. They bind us together in a sense of "us" by getting a group to share a sense of us what is important and what's not.

Ok, that's it for the background. But it was worth it, right? Now you know what stories are all about.

2 Figure Out What You Stand For

Whether you're trying to tell stories for your brand (as a marketer) or for yourself (as a leader), the first step is knowing what values you stand for. Brands and leaders who are clear on their values, and know how to communicate them, consistently perform higher than those that don't.

By choosing the values you promote in every story you tell, you stake out a territory and ask others to come join you, driven by their own sense of what truly matters. It's how you turn audiences into evangelists.

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Marketers have long known not to simply shout their features or benefits at people, but to tell them stories based on universal human values. For the last hundred years, however, the universal values most marketers appealed to were fear, greed, status seeking and safety. This is known as “inadequacy storytelling” because such stories make audiences feel like they lack something that only a relationship with a brand or leader can fulfill.

“Whether you’re trying to tell stories for your brand or for yourself, the first step is knowing what values you stand for.”

Of course, inadequacy storytelling works—we see it everywhere. But there is an anomaly, a leftover from the dying Broadcast Era. Joseph Campbell, the mythologist who studied stories across cultures and times, told us that the stories that have always worked best don’t scare people. They call them to heroic action and to live out transcendent values. Base your stories on values like these and you will be a storyteller that inspires, rather than frightens audiences to action.

So as a brand or leader, what do you stand for? Consider these transcendent values as you search for your core: Community, Justice, Transparency, Self-Expression, Love, and Perseverance.

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3 – Declare Your Moral

Ok, so your ready to write that story that will rocket your 30-second spot, your rousing speech or your next pitch to breakthrough. But how?

The place to start is not on the surface. The characters, conflict and settings are all about how you’ll tell it. Before you get to that, you need to know what you’re trying to say—the what is the Moral of the Story.

To find your Moral, ask yourself: “What core belief held by my audience would I like to speak to, or change, with my story?” Maybe your customers believe your product is just a plain old tool that they can buy more cheaply somewhere else. Maybe your team feels they need to fight fire with fire when conflicts arise. Maybe your voters feel there’s no use discussing a more positive future when things have gotten so bleak.

Great stories can shift such beliefs on a dime by introducing a new belief system about how the world works that is more compelling than the old one.

When Apple wanted people to see the personal computer not as a business machine, but as a font of personal creativity, they released the sensational 1984 story-ad. The Moral? Creative non-conformists empowered with the right tools will rule the world. The world instantly agreed.

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When legendary NBA coach Phil Jackson couldn't get Michael Jordan and company to control their tempers (or win) against the dirty-playing Detroit Pistons, he told them a story. Jackson told of the Sioux warriors who thanked their enemies before entering battle because they knew only a great enemy can make a great warrior. The Bulls calmed down and beat the Pistons 27 times in a row. The old belief? An eye for an eye. The new belief, love your enemy. One didn't work, the other did.

And, of course, there's Barack Obama's relentless 2008 storytelling campaign, always pointing back to the same Moral: Working hard and working together, we can bring hope to America. Voters knew (and loved) what he stood for because he knew what his Moral was and never stopped telling stories about it.

All three of these examples appeal to transcendent values: Apple appealed to Creativity and Self-Expression, Jackson to Love, and Obama to Community and Perseverance. These master storytellers found perfect alignment between a core truth and common values

So before you start crafting your story, ask "What's the Moral of my story?" Write it down as big as you can, and as you go through the next steps make sure every word you commit to your stories is building the case for your Moral.

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4 • Now Prove It

Finally, we're ready to get to the story surface, which is where we'll stay for the rest of these strategies.

With your Moral in hand, you have two choices: yell it at your audiences (hint: that's not storytelling) or prove your Moral by showing it play out in the lives of relatable, tangible characters.

The easiest way to find a powerful and authentic story is to ask of yourself "how do I know my Moral to be true?" If it really is true, you should be able to identify real-life experiences you've had, stories you've heard as a child, or well-known books, movies or legends that bring your Moral to compelling life.

By drawing from your own repertoire of experiences and stories, you'll connect the story you're telling to you in a deeply authentic way, building your power to tell the story well.

“The easiest way to find a powerful and authentic story is to ask of yourself “how do I know my Moral to be true?”

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Phil Jackson has spent much of his life with the Sioux and is deeply spiritually connected to that tribe. When looking for a story to illustrate his Moral, he drew on his own authentic experience. It gave his story credibility with his players because they knew the story was sacred to him. Ridley Scott borrowed 1984 from George Orwell's iconic book that had iconically proven the dangers on conformity. Obama borrowed "Yes We Can" from his experiences as a long time organizer and Morals of past movements he admired.

Tangible experiences you've had or compelling stories you've heard are the best raw material from which to craft your next story. Just look at the best speeches and advertisements. Very few of the stories they tell came from thin air.

So step back and ask, "what story proves my Moral to be true?" And don't worry about copying. Once we're through with the remaining strategies, you'll have made the story very much your own.

5 • Stop Trying to Be the Hero

Every great story has a great hero—the main character audiences get behind and want to see succeed. In creating his famous "Hero's Journey" model to explain the most successful stories of all time, Campbell showed that the hero was usually a helpless outsider, the least likely person to change the world (think Luke Skywalker, Dorothy, tiny Frodo).

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Why is this setup so popular? Because audiences usually feel like helpless outsiders themselves—not heroes. They can relate to such characters and by the time the story is done, they believe they can be a little more heroic themselves. As storytellers trying to spur people to action, isn't that what we want?

There are two lessons here: First, as the marketer or leader telling a story, you are not the helpless outsider. You're the expert. There are so many subtle ways we cast ourselves as heroes of our own stories—either by talking incessantly about ourselves or making the lead character a thinly veiled stand-in for our own egos. It's time to stop. You and your brand are not the hero, your audience is.

Which leads us to the second lesson: Make sure the main character(s) in your story are people who start out a lot like your audience and then evolve to be like your audience's aspirational selves. You'll be amazed how people will perk up and listen.

So take that raw story you've ripped from experience or pop culture and start creating your own version of it. Emphasize the characteristics of the hero that your audiences will be able to relate to. And get off your high horse—the hero of your story is not you. One way to do this is to sprinkle your story with humor—it takes you out of the role of hero and into the role of trusted friend.

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6 • Show the Broken World

The easiest way to set the stage for your story is to describe the imperfect landscape your hero inhabits—the broken world. At the beginning of the adventure, things are not right. Specifically, your hero toils in a reality in which she believes she is not empowered to live her higher values and get the results she desires.

Paint a clear picture of this world in a way that will get audiences nodding their heads and saying “Hey, that’s my world. I face those challenges too.”

7 • Make Sure There’s Action

The action of the story doesn’t really start until the hero (the character your audience wants to be) comes into contact with the nemesis (the character your audience doesn’t want to be).

The two forces meet and we get on the edge of our seats until one prevails. These kinds of conflicts are what make most stories compelling.

So as you craft your story, ask who stands in your hero’s way? Classic stories feature an actual bad guy. If you go this route, here’s an interesting twist on the formula: The villain is not just pure evil. He is often who the hero might be if she failed to pursue her higher values. Remember

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who Darth Vader really was? He’s the guy Luke would have become if he had given in to his rage. If you have a real villain, make him as relatable to your audiences as your hero—the villain will provide a powerful cautionary tale within your larger story.

But villains don’t have to be individuals. They can be outmoded attitudes, group beliefs or even that nasty voice within the hero herself that tries to hold her back.

Whichever strategy you choose, it’s key that you mold your story to clearly name what stands in your hero’s way.

8 • Reveal the Moral

In most stories you’ll tell to motivate a change in belief, your hero will overcome the villain or obstacle and succeed. How she conquers the forces against her reveals the Moral of the Story.

This moment of success is the most important scene in the story you tell. Provide rich and vivid detail about how your hero makes an unlikely choice, a difficult sacrifice or breaks old habits to achieve the ultimate breakthrough.

Here you’re revealing your core truth about how the world works. Do this well and you won’t have to spell out your Moral. Audiences will instantly grasp it and begin to apply it to their own lives.

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So focus on this scene of ultimate breakthrough. Does your hero learn to believe in her own power? Does she give her power up, learning to trust her community? Does she finally utter a truth everyone else is afraid to speak? Every great story hinges on a thrilling moment to illustrate its Moral, and yours should to.

9 • Break the Mold

Now you've got your pieces in place—your hero, your villain, your moment of breakthrough.

The obvious way to arrange these elements is like this: describe the broken world; introduce your hero; introduce your villain; show the conflict and then the breakthrough; describe the world as better in the end.

But obvious is rarely best when it comes to telling a story. Great storytellers surprise audiences by starting in unexpected places. Perhaps we enter the story at the moment of breakthrough and then flash back to the broken world. Or maybe we start from the perspective of the villain first encountering our hero.

Once you feel comfortable with your core story elements, you have endless choices as to where you begin and where you end. You won't discover the best strategy until you've tried many combinations. But when you find the right one, you'll often know right away.

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10 • Stay On Ground Level

Details matter. The sights, sounds and smells of a story make it come to life. If you tell your story from the detached 35,000' perspective, you'll be doing little more than dressing up a string of facts in the clothes of story.

Instead, bring audiences right down to the ground—that's what makes identification with the characters possible. Embellish your stories with visual or verbal details that leave audiences feeling that they were truly there and that they've learned these lessons for themselves.

This takes work. It means getting into the heads and hearts of your characters. Ask yourself, "what would it have been like to have this experience?" Then narrate your story from the insights you've gained.

“Embellish your stories with visual or verbal details that leave audiences feeling that they were truly there and that they've learned these lessons for themselves.”

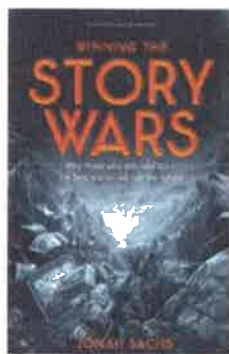
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In writing *Winning the Story Wars*, I gave myself this same challenge. In telling the stories of Moses, Robert Oppenheimer, and the Arab Spring to illustrate my points, I actually role played each of these characters. I tried my best to cross space and time to inhabit their worlds. Then I told their stories as if I were there walking side by side with them. It turned a book about storytelling into a book of powerful stories.

Let's be honest, no story will hit all ten strategies perfectly, and a great story can't be written following simple steps. But if you do take the time to steal a story from memory, myth, or the experience of others and then fine-tune it with the timeless concepts I've given you, you'll have a powerful place to start. **And the next time someone tells you it's time to tell better stories, you can tell them you're well on your way.** 📖

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Info



BUY THE BOOK Get more details or buy a copy of [Winning the Story Wars](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR As the co-founder and CEO of Free Range Studios, Jonah has helped hundreds of major brands and causes break through the media din with unforgettable campaigns. His work on legendary viral videos like "The Meatrix" and "The Story of Stuff" series have brought key social issues to the attention of more than 65 million people online. A constant innovator, his studio's websites and stories have taken top honors three times at the South by Southwest Film Festival. Jonah's work and opinions have been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, FOX News, Sundance Film Festival, NPR and in *Fast Company* magazine who named him one of the 50 most influential social innovators.

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Patrick F. Adrami (R) ROCKINGHAM COUNTY 19 (4TH TERM)

Management consultant; 9 Tall Pines Drive, Stratham, NH 03885; (H) 603-772-3489; (O) 603-781-272-8001; (email) Abrami.nhrep@gmail.com; January 22, 1949, New York, NY; single; 2 children; Roman Catholic; Seaford HS (Seaford, NY); University of Buffalo (Buffalo, NY; B.S., 1972); University of Buffalo (Buffalo, NY; MS, 1975); Industrial Systems Engineering Advisory Council (chair), Univ. of Buffalo (2011-present); Engineering School Advisory Council, University of Buffalo (2012-present); Health Information Management Systems Society (fellow, life member, 1976-present); Great Bay Little League (Board Member, 1991-92); American Institute of Industrial Engineering (1976-present). **PRIORITIES:** Balanced budget with no new taxes; pension reform; voter registration reform. **PERSONAL:** Hiking, AMC Four Thousand Footer Club; skiing.



COMMITTEES: Ways and Means (Vice Chairman)

REPRESENTS: Stratham

Selected 2015/2016 Roll Call Votes

OPPOSES Expanded Medicaid **SUPPORTS** Repeal concealed carry **SUPPORTS** Voter eligibility
OPPOSES Min. wage increase **SUPPORTS** Implement Real ID

Gene G. Chandler (R) CARROLL COUNTY 1 (18TH TERM)

Real estate and timber sales; Box 296, Bartlett, NH 03812; (H) 603-374-6603; June 28, 1947; 2 children; Protestant; Kennett HS(Conway, NH); Olivet College (Olivet, MI); NH College (Manchester, NH); Bartlett Selectman (43 years, chairman 23 years); Dep. House Majority Leader (1997-98); House Majority Leader (1999-2000); Speaker of the NH House (2000-04); Deputy Speaker (2015-16); Speaker Pro Tempore (2011-12); House Republican Policy Leader (2006-08); Senior House Republican Leader (2008-10/2013-14). **PRIORITIES:** Keep moving forward on improving the infrastructure along the Rte. 16 corridor and the state in general; help with any government problems the people of my district may have. **PERSONAL:** My grandchildren, hunting, fishing, golf, gardening, the outdoors in general.



COMMITTEES: Deputy House Speaker; Public Works & Highways (Chairman); Rules (Vice-Chairman)

REPRESENTS: Bartlett, Hale's Location, Jackson

Selected 2015/2016 Roll Call Votes

SUPPORTS Expanded Medicaid **SUPPORTS** Repeal concealed carry **SUPPORTS** Voter eligibility
OPPOSES Min. wage increase **SUPPORTS** Implement Real ID



Ronald J. Belanger (R) ROCKINGHAM COUNTY 8 (13TH TERM)

Police officer (retired, 1977), private investigator; 8 Braemoor Woods Road, Apt. 201, Salem, NH 03079-3397; (H) 603-893-0659; (email) ronald.belanger@leg.state.nh.us; June 15, 1939, Chelsea, MA; 3 children; Roman Catholic; Chelsea HS (Chelsea, MA); Bunker Hill Community College (Charlestown, MA; 1976); Rockingham delegation building committee (1983-84); Salem selectman (1984-87, 1997-2006); Salem Planning Board (member, 5 yrs); Salem ZBA (member, 2 yrs); Merrim diabetes association (board of directors, 1987-92); Arlington pond protection association (board of directors, 1982-92); Mass. Police Association (member, 1961-present); Chelsea Police Relief Assoc. (1961-present). **PRIORITIES:** Lower taxes; oppose any new taxes, income, sales and real estate;

keep Salem residents informed on pending legislation; work to bring better paying jobs to NH. **PERSONAL:** Photo, fishing, boating, traveling, helping others.

COMMITTEES: Commerce & Consumer Affairs

REPRESENTS: Salem

Selected 2015/2016 Roll Call Votes

EXCUSED Expanded Medicaid **SUPPORTS** Repeal concealed carry **EXCUSED** Voter eligibility
EXCUSED Min. wage increase **EXCUSED** Implement Real ID

Clyde J. Carson (D) MERRIMACK COUNTY 7 (3RD TERM)

Selectman, Warner; finance director, Northeast Catholic College; 33 Kearsarge Mtn. Road, Warner, NH 03278; (H) 603-456-2562; (email) clyde.carson@leg.state.nh.us; Tufts University (Medford, MA; B.A.); Eberhard-Karls-University (Tubingen, Germany). **PRIORITIES:** Stop downshifting costs to counties, towns, school districts, and property taxpayers; keep the NH advantage through increased funding for education; infrastructure investment; support our educators, firefighters and police officers; ensure NH meets the needs of our growing senior population; energy efficiency projects.



COMMITTEES: Municipal & County Government (Ranking Committee Democrat)

REPRESENTS: Warner, Webster

Selected 2015/2016 Roll Call Votes

SUPPORTS Expanded Medicaid **OPPOSES** Repeal concealed carry **OPPOSES** Voter eligibility
SUPPORTS Min. wage increase **SUPPORTS** Implement Real ID

David E. Cote (D) HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY 31 (18TH TERM)

Freelance legal researcher; 96 West Hollis St., Nashua, NH 03060; (H) 603-882-2244; (O) 882-2244; October 28, 1960, Nashua, NH; single; Nashua HS (Nashua, NH). **PRIORITIES:** Easing unnecessary restrictions on voter registration **PERSONAL:** Reading, chess and music.



COMMITTEES: Election Law (Ranking Committee Democrat)

REPRESENTS: Nashua Ward 4

Selected 2015/2016 Roll Call Votes

SUPPORTS Expanded Medicaid **OPPOSES** Repeal concealed carry **OPPOSES** Voter eligibility
SUPPORTS Min. wage increase **SUPPORTS** Implement Real ID

Caroletta C. Alicea (D) MERRIMACK COUNTY 8 (3RD TERM)

CEO, Granite Bay Connections, Inc.; CFO, Community Integrated Services; Sr. VP and Co-Owner at Granite Bay Care, Inc.; 4 Stirrup Iron Road, Boscawen, NH 03303; (H) 603-796-6119; (O) 603-224-0044; (email) caroletta.alicea@leg.state.nh.us; August 8, 1951, Knoxville TN; 3 children; Congregational; Henley Preparatory (Jamaica Estates, NY); Springfield College (Springfield, M.A.; B.A. Human Services); Emerson College (Boston, MA, 1989); Merrimack Valley School Board (chair policy committee); Merrimack County Executive Council (member, 2014-present); NH Council on Suicide Prevention (member); Private Provider Network (member, 1997-present). **PRIORITIES:** Women, children and family issues; education. **PERSONAL:** Swimming, creative writing.



COMMITTEES: Assistant Democratic Floor Leader; Children & Family Law (Clerk)

REPRESENTS: Boscawen

Selected 2015/2016 Roll Call Votes

SUPPORTS Expanded Medicaid **OPPOSES** Repeal concealed carry **EXCUSED** Voter eligibility
SUPPORTS Min. wage increase **EXCUSED** Implement Real ID