

*Ethical  
storytelling*  
「UNBOXED」  
by

33

# Your guide to telling employee stories *ethically*

January 2023



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Ethical storytelling UNBOXED  
*We are ThirtyThree*

*We're ThirtyThree –  
one of the UK's leading employer  
branding agencies.*

As *visual creators and storytellers* for the world's biggest employer brands, our creative choices matter – they shape perceptions, enable conversations, and inspire change. And for years, we've helped our clients create communications that drive their diversity and inclusion efforts forward.

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*Find out  
more*  
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1

*Welcome to*

UNBOXED

*This guide forms part of UNBOXED, ThirtyThree's inclusive employer branding series.*

By bringing together forward-thinking companies, we're exploring how *DE&I is essential for an authentic and powerful employer brand.*

In our inaugural event on 16th November, we discussed how to incorporate *ethical storytelling* into employer branding practices – specifically, the telling of employee stories.

The content in this guide has been adapted from a keynote presentation by ThirtyThree's senior communications consultant Joanna Drury and a panel discussion with guest speakers from Accenture and B&Q.

Our thanks go to all our participants and attendees, and to ThirtyThree's Creative team and production house 33RED Films, who provided insights and examples for practical application throughout the creative process.



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Why do we care  
about telling  
*ethical stories?*



Employer branding, at its heart, relies on *the power of effective stories*. Stories that explain what you stand for, how you operate, and what it's like to be part of your organisation.

In recent years, we've seen a rise in the use of employee stories as a tool for showcasing employers' inclusive culture, values, and purpose.

And the way we gather and tell these stories about our cultures, and about our commitments to DE&I, is materially shaping how our candidates, employees, clients, and customers see us.

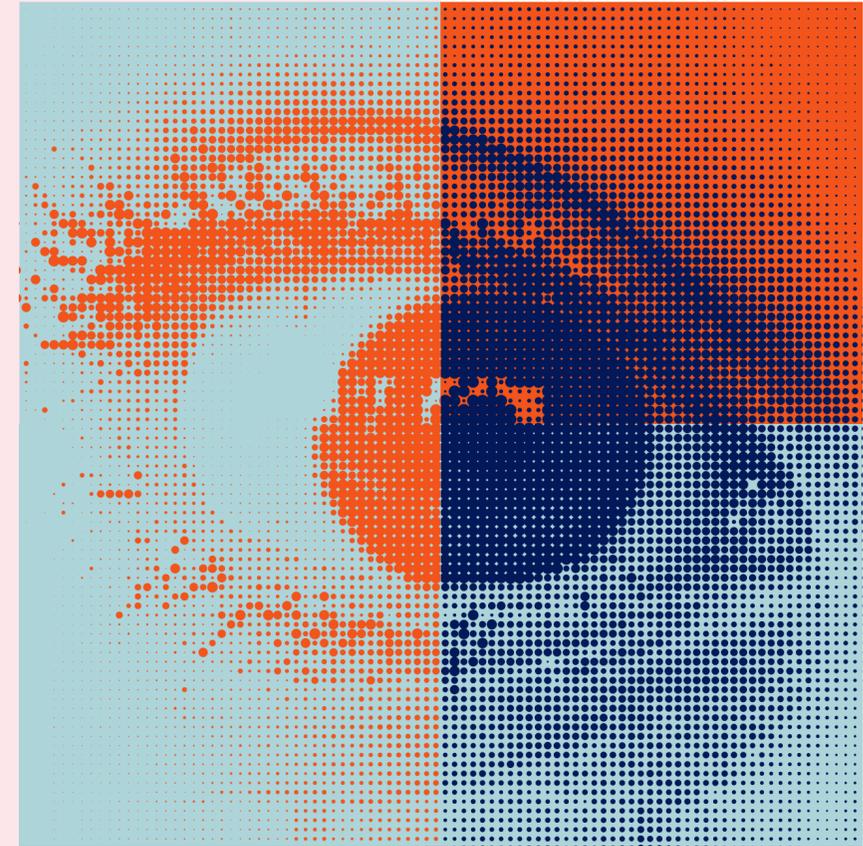
“

Whether through blogs, emails, social media or video, using stories to highlight an organisation's impact is an *engaging* way to invite people into the good work being done.

”

Ethical Storytelling™

What do  
*candidates*  
and *employees*  
think?



76%

of Gen Zers will end relationships with companies that run ad campaigns perceived as macho, racist or homophobic.

*Source:* McKinsey

76%

of job seekers look at diversity and inclusivity when deciding whether to accept a job offer

*Source:* Glassdoor

80%

of employees identify as allies and state that they want to be allies.

*Source:* McKinsey

52%

of Gen Z employees who are not satisfied at all with their organisation's D&I credentials leave within 2 years.

*Source:* Deloitte

“  
The interviews you conduct and the stories you tell are an extension and expression of the inclusive culture you are trying to cultivate.  
”

*Clearly*, if you want to attract and retain talent, you must ensure that the stories you tell about your culture and your commitments to DE&I are watertight. *Every story you tell is a chance to live out your values and prove your authenticity.*

“  
Having leaders out at the front understanding the value of inclusion and diversity makes such a palpable difference. The smallest of stories can show why we care, and what we’re doing to prove it.  
”

3

How do we  
define an  
*ethical story?*

You might think that telling an ethical story is just about the words that you put on the page, website, or social platform.

*But it's about so much more than that.*

It's about examining:

# Why

*you want to tell someone's story*

# How

*you persuade them to share their story with you*

# Where

*their story will be published*

# What

*you depict in the images you choose*

# Who

*retains editorial control of the story*

“

*It's important to gain the trust of the people whose stories you're telling. And the only way to do that is to build the relationship – bring them on the journey of what you're doing and why. If they believe in it, they're going to feel more closely connected to it.*

”

All these elements have been set down in a pledge by a community of storytellers and researchers in the social impact space. Their *Ethical Storytelling™* pledge outlines a set of principles that help non-profits tell stories that are truthful, nuanced, educational and empowering.

They believe that stories are more than tools for soliciting donations, and that *they shape the experiences of both the subject and the consumer.*

Find out  
more



“  
We believe people’s stories are more than emotion-generating machines. That story consumers are more than guzzlers of emotion. And that stories should always be constituent first, donor second.  
”

Ethical Storytelling™

How does a  
social impact  
pledge affect  
*employer  
branding?*

It turns out that some of the themes present in the *Ethical Storytelling™* pledge are highly relevant to those of us telling stories about our employees and cultures.

We believe that the pledge emphasises three key themes – *consent, freedom, and dignity* all of which can be adapted and applied to how we tell stories in employer branding.

4

What can  
agencies and  
employers do  
*in practice?*

## Ensure *informed* consent

- Fully explain why, how, and where your employees' stories will be used – before any interview or shoot takes place.
- Give your employees the psychological safety, power, and opportunity to withdraw their story at any time if it conflicts with how they wish to be represented.

“

During a campaign with ThirtyThree, one of our colleagues changed their mind about sharing their story in an external film. Instead, we offered them the chance to share their story in written form on our website, and now *they're happy to still be part of the campaign.*

”

## Encourage free *expression*

- Don't go into an interview with the expectation of a particular soundbite – be open to the story your employee wishes to share and give them the final say on their narrative.
- Acknowledge and confront what needs to change in your organization and share your aspirations if you don't yet have the culture that you're working towards.

“

Your aim should be *the representation of the true organisation, who you are and where you're going*. Otherwise, you will see greater levels of attrition when somebody arrives and realises it isn't the company they thought it was.

”



## Portray with *dignity*

- When selecting images or footage to be featured alongside your employee's narrative, make sure they are empowering and respectful.
  - Be mindful of unconscious bias and avoid imagery or messaging that sensationalizes or stereotypes your employee.
- 

## A note on *unconscious bias*

Just as companies in the social impact space are telling the stories of vulnerable individuals, we in the DE&I space are often telling the stories of people in marginalized groups, who may face a considerable amount of unconscious bias – especially if they have multiple marginalized identities.

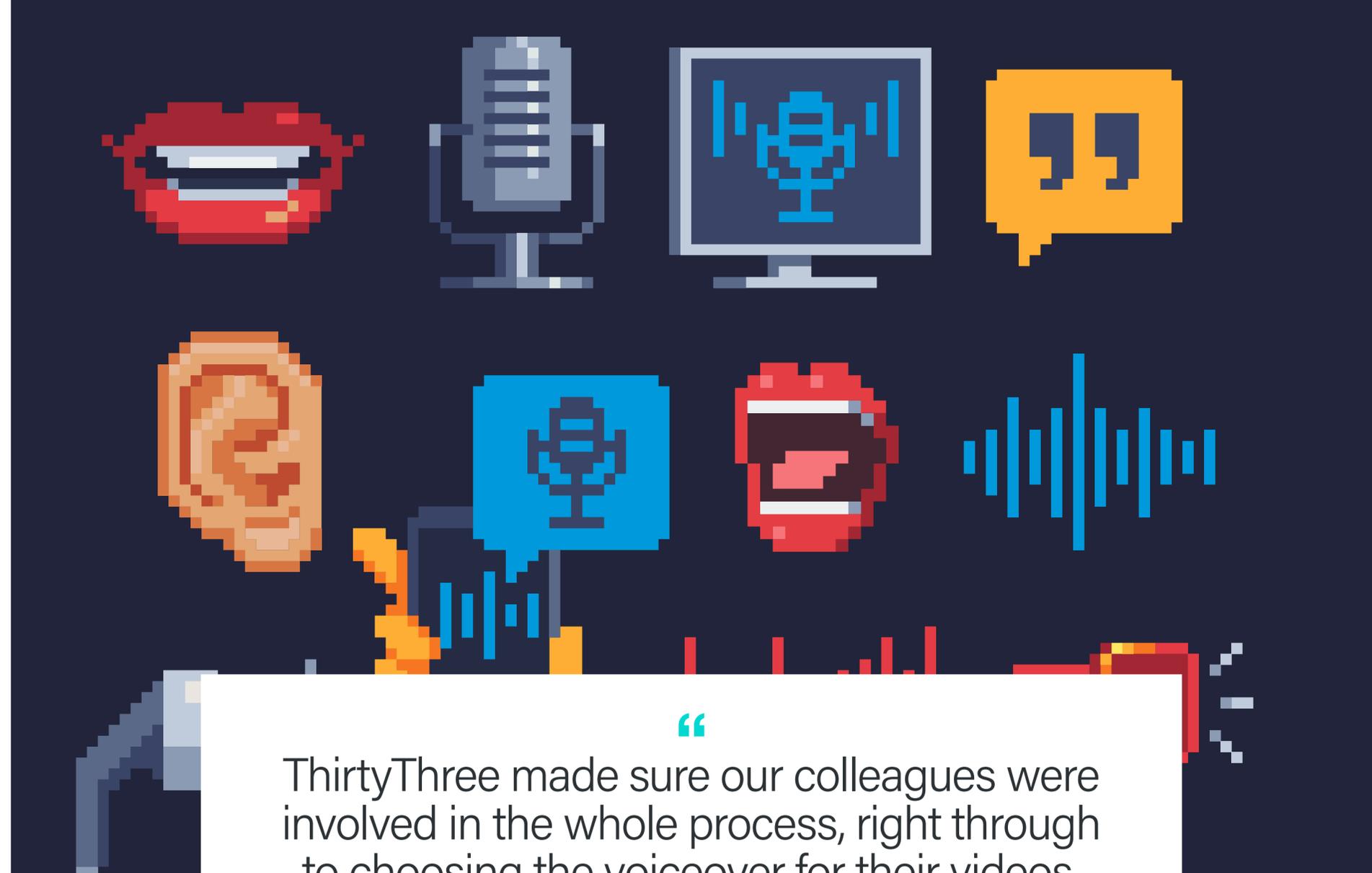
Unconscious bias could lead to colleagues feeling reluctant to offer their story, fearing misinterpretation or negative representation. Keep in mind that they may also have been approached to take part in several campaigns and could be feeling fatigued or exploited by the time you approach them.



“  
Instead of repetitively interviewing the same group of employees, try sharing your aspirational DE&I strategy. *Show how you’re building a more inclusive culture by interviewing the people who are working to make it happen.*  
”

How can we *challenge* unconscious bias to ensure *consent, freedom, and dignity*?

To avoid unethical storytelling, we can start to confront our unconscious biases by using marketing frameworks that ensure positive portrayals of the employees whose stories we're telling.



“  
ThirtyThree made sure our colleagues were involved in the whole process, right through to choosing the voiceover for their videos. We wanted them to be empowered to pick who represented them as part of their films.  
”

Watch  
the films



## Gender Equality Measure (GEM)

The GEM is widely recognized as the gold standard for measuring gender equality in advertising and media, and measures against *four key criteria*:

- *What is the overall opinion of the female presented?*
- *Is she portrayed respectfully?*
- *Is she depicted inappropriately?*
- *Is she seen as a role model for women and girls?*

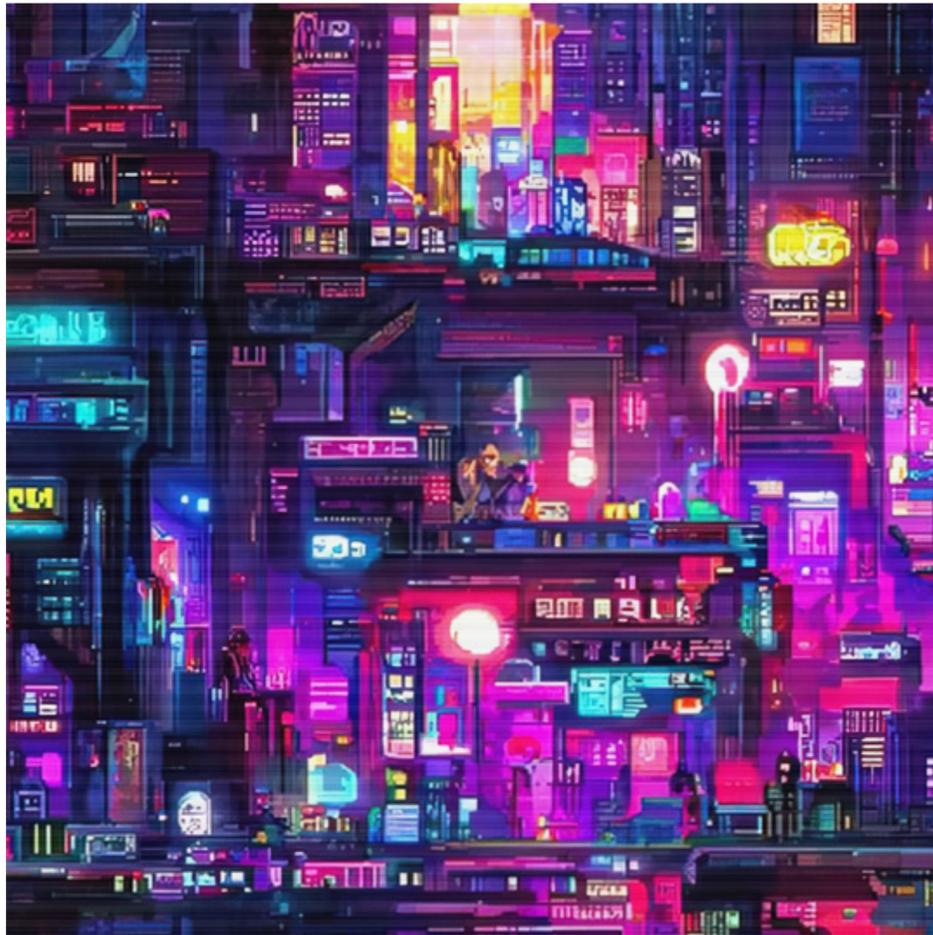
The GEM's questions encourage advertisers to move beyond stereotyped portrayals of a single lived experience of womanhood. Research from Ipsos shows that when adverts positively portray women, there is an increased positive impact on the long-term brand relationship as well as on short-term behaviour change.

We believe it is not a stretch to consider that the same impact might be felt if we adopt this framework to guide our portrayals of other groups, too. This will help us to produce more authentic stories that capture the intersectional nature of employees' identities.

“

Rather than entering a conversation thinking, 'I'm only going to ask questions about one aspect of this person's identity,' it's about understanding their lived experience as an individual. Ask about where they've come from, where they're going, and their experience of being in the workplace. *Because that is always going to be true and honest and unique.*

”



## Google All In

Google's *All In Inclusive Marketing Insights* also offer us another perspective on challenging unconscious bias, including confronting stereotypes of place and setting.

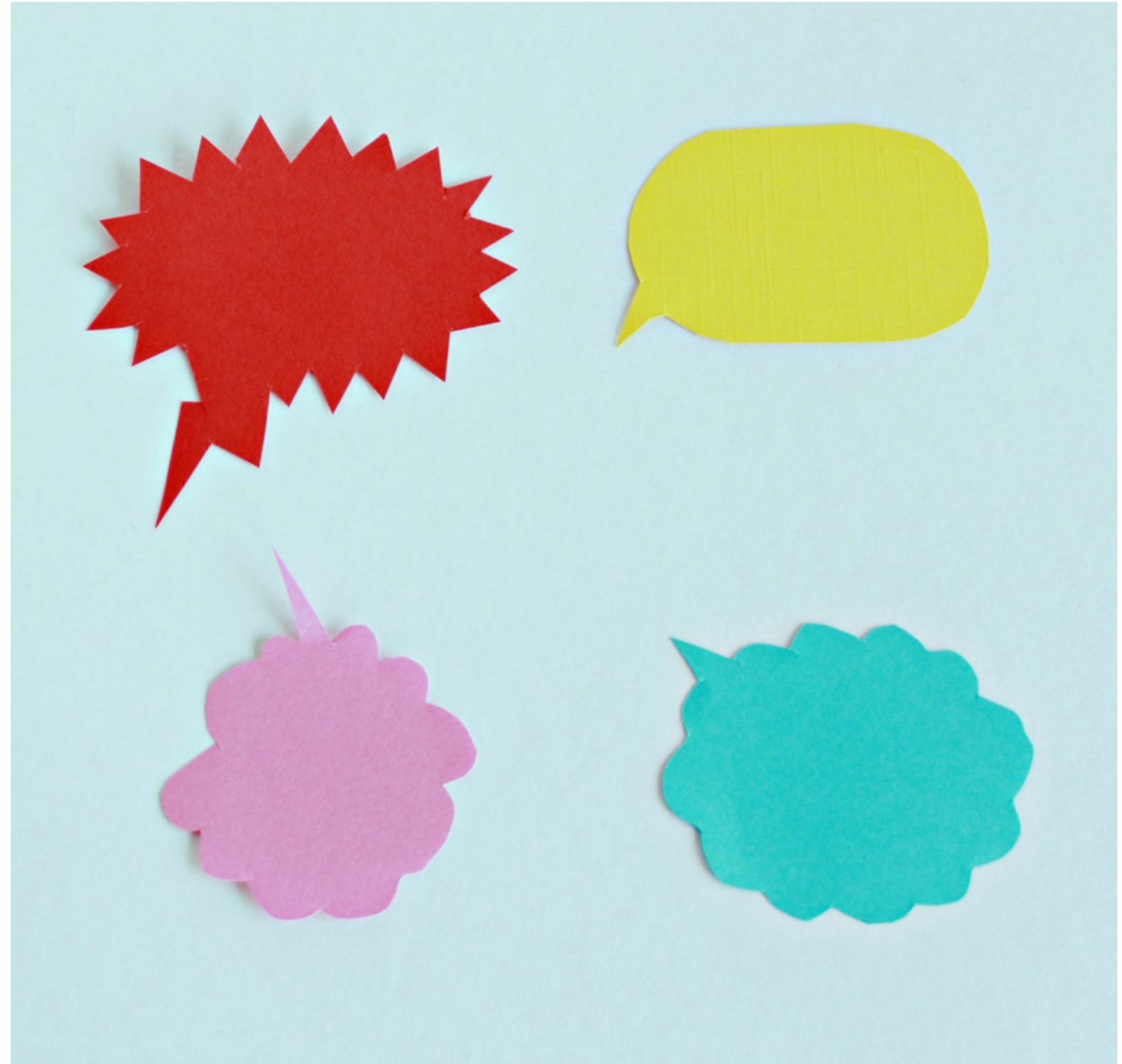
Google recommends *avoiding stereotyped or romanticized settings*, and instead choosing a variety of authentic locations while acknowledging their unique culture. They also recommend eliminating discriminatory place-based language, such as 'inner city,' and avoiding place-based hierarchies or value judgements, such as 'best' or 'worst.'

## How does the *employer/employee* power imbalance lead to unethical storytelling?

Unconscious bias and stereotyping might influence the types of images and language we use (for both people and places), but the power imbalance between employer and employee can further exacerbate the problem.

*The story that employers want to tell and the one that employees are happy to share doesn't always overlap.*

But due to the contractual nature of the relationship, employees don't always feel comfortable speaking up when their story is used or told in a way they're not happy with.



“

Agency interviewers often see more honest accounts of an employee's experience because they exist outside the employee/ employer power dynamic. That's helpful for us as copywriters because it means *we can tell more authentic stories that are grounded in the realities of your organisation.*

”



## How can we increase *psychological safety* for our employees?

Increasing psychological safety starts with *how you position the campaign* you want to run.

Instead of focusing on the benefits to your organization, try reframing your request in terms of *what's in it for your employee*. Perhaps it's increased exposure for their career, or an opportunity to further a cause they care about.

Next, make sure the employee knows that *they can retract anything they say* at a later stage if they feel uncomfortable.

Finally, consider inserting steps into your approval process that give the employee *clear opportunities to step away*. Without this, some employees may feel uncomfortable speaking up about any changes they wish to see.

“

Involve someone they trust in the interview process, like a friend or line manager.

If there is any instance where the colleague feels like they don't want to take part, and they don't want to opt out of the process via the employer brand team, *a peer can give them the confidence to say, this doesn't feel right.*

”

## What can you *start doing* today?

Here are our *three top tips* for ethical storytelling.

### 1 Create space for 'no'

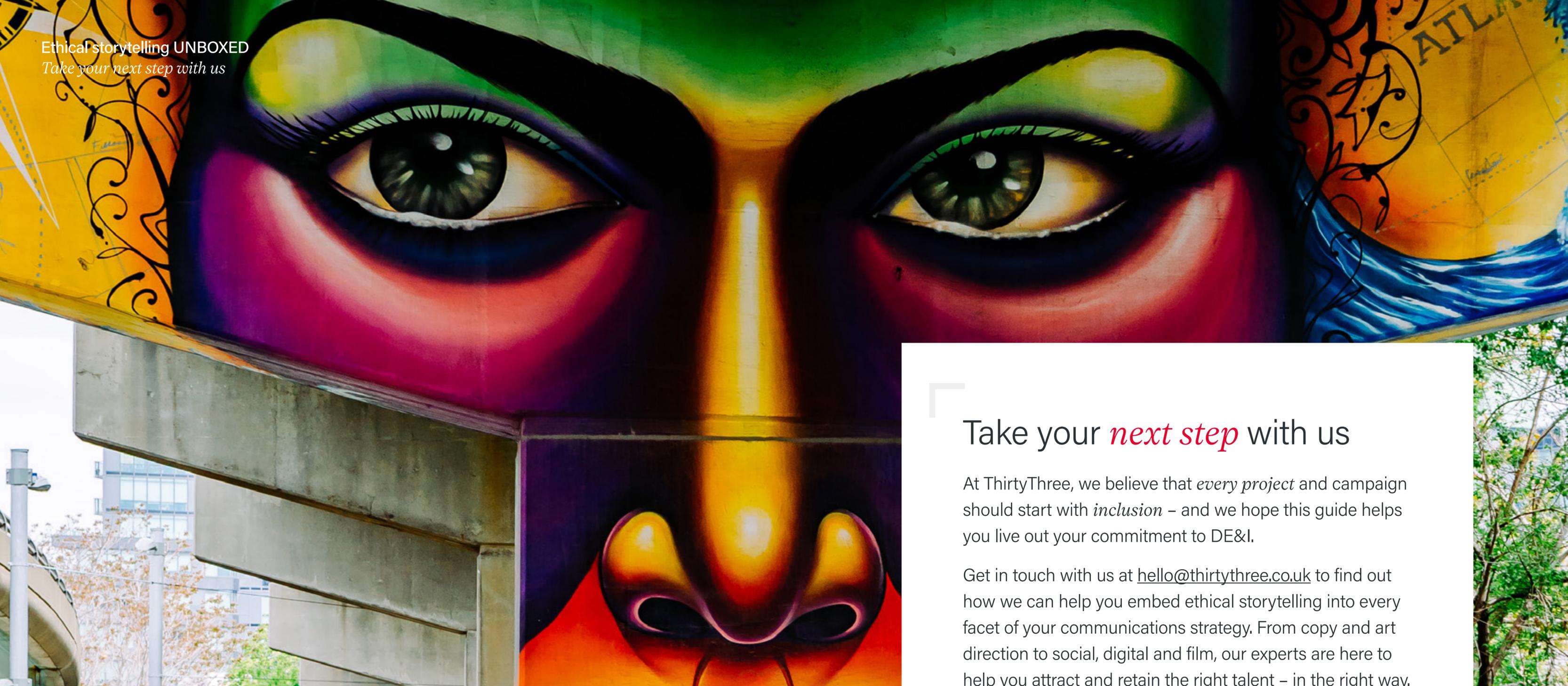
*Make sure employees understand exactly what they're signing up for*, especially if they're working in a second language, and build in multiple explicit opportunities for them before and after interview to make changes, suggestions, or withdraw their story.

### 2 Don't be afraid to reframe

Although you might start with a specific idea of the story you need, you should leave room in your interview and your editing process to ensure you capture your employee's true insights and opinions. *The story you create together will be so much more authentic, engaging, and believable if it's one they want to tell.*

### 3 Focus on the *individual*

When creating DE&I campaigns, *be aware of, and challenge, your own unconscious biases* to ensure that all language and design decisions are grounded fully in the story your employee has shared with you, and not in pervasive stereotypes.



## Take your *next step* with us

At ThirtyThree, we believe that *every project* and campaign should start with *inclusion* – and we hope this guide helps you live out your commitment to DE&I.

Get in touch with us at [hello@thirtythree.co.uk](mailto:hello@thirtythree.co.uk) to find out how we can help you embed ethical storytelling into every facet of your communications strategy. From copy and art direction to social, digital and film, our experts are here to help you attract and retain the right talent – in the right way.

To hear more about our award-winning DE&I work and to catch our next UNBOXED event, make sure you follow us on social, too: [@WeAre33](https://www.instagram.com/WeAre33) [@33redfilms](https://www.instagram.com/33redfilms)



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*The inclusive employer branding series*

*by*

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