Framing Communications to Drive Social Change
Strategies for Promise Neighborhoods and Other Collective Impact Initiatives

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Framing is a crucial part of storytelling in all communications—from social media posts to long-form articles to funder presentations. Framing can determine how audiences interpret a message and whether the product achieves its goal. The right framing can also push audiences to look beyond their own biases and build support for the structural change needed to address society's deep-rooted challenges and inequities. This brief summarizes a course presented by the FrameWorks Institute—in partnership with the US Department of Education and the Urban Institute, as part of the Promise Neighborhoods federal training and technical assistance support—about how the right framing can encourage audiences to understand the systemic causes of and solutions to social problems.

Grantees of the Promise Neighborhoods program, part of the US Department of Education, use a data-driven, place-based approach to ending intergenerational poverty by supporting children from cradle to career. Through individual programs, grantees help ensure children have access to high-quality education, health, and other wraparound supports. Grantees also take a systems-level approach to addressing the structural factors that started the cycle of intergenerational poverty by improving opportunities for all residents in a community. With grantees’ deep understanding of the effects of racism, classism, and chronic disinvestment, they can use their communications to push for support for their own programs and for the systemic change needed at the policy and societal levels to eliminate inequities and permanently transform communities.
The FrameWorks course and this brief aim to equip Promise Neighborhoods grantees, partners, and leaders of other collective impact initiatives with strategies and examples to more effectively communicate about their work and to build greater support for the structural changes needed to ensure all people in their communities have the opportunities they need to thrive.

Effective Framing Can Counteract Harmful Thought Patterns and Advance Social Change

What FrameWorks calls “storytelling for social change” is storytelling that can boost people’s knowledge about a problem and its solutions, shift people’s attitudes toward an issue, and convince people to take action and collectively push for systemic changes in policy and practice.

To develop the best framing for this storytelling, communicators must first understand common patterns in how people think about social issues that can work against creating structural change. Through research, FrameWorks identified three dominant patterns in public thinking that can have harmful outcomes for how people interpret stories about social issues:

- **Determinism**: The sense that the end of a story is predetermined
  - In this thought pattern, when people read or hear about a societal problem, they often believe nothing can be done to change it. They believe deeply entrenched problems have lives of their own, and they feel resigned to accept the predetermined outcome. Determinism can keep people from feeling a sense of agency or collective action needed to shape and change those outcomes.

- **Us-versus-them thinking**: Dividing groups into those people belong to and those people do not belong to
  - In this thought pattern, people reading stories often determine which person or group they identify with or belong to and which group they consider different or “other.” Readers can divide those groups in various ways, such as by age, class, race, or gender. Thinking in terms of “us versus them” can activate a sense of competition in readers who feel that when the “other” group is given something, “their” group is disadvantaged or threatened. This zero-sum thinking can reinforce biases and prevent people from seeing society’s interconnected nature.

- **Individualism**: The idea that life outcomes are the direct result of people’s decisions
  - In this thought pattern, people often believe their own choices determine their life experiences, accomplishments, and challenges—and that the same is true for others. People tend to believe those who are successful made good choices, worked hard, and had strong willpower, and, vice versa, those who experience hardships failed to make responsible choices or lacked a strong work ethic. This thinking can prevent people from seeing the societal or systemic factors that contributed to someone’s challenges or successes.
These three potentially harmful thought patterns can perpetuate social challenges and prevent people from pushing for collective change. Effective framing in communications, however, can counteract these patterns and build support for systems-level solutions.

Strategies to Improve Framing in Storytelling and Build Support for Social Change

FrameWorks detailed four strategies to counteract those harmful thought patterns and to build support for social change. Below, we detail those strategies and include examples from communications products developed by the Urban Institute and Promise Neighborhoods.

1. Widen the Lens to Encourage Collective Responsibility

To counteract harmful thought patterns, widening the lens of a story can help audiences think about structural causes of and collective solutions to a problem (box 1). Widening the lens means moving beyond focusing on an individual's or group's challenges and instead focusing on the systemic factors that contributed to that situation and the systems-level solutions that could change it. Widening the lens in stories about Promise Neighborhoods and other collective impact work can help audiences see the societal causes, interactions, and potential solutions involved with an issue, such as education or health disparities.¹ This approach includes three key aspects of presenting a story:

- **Describe the structural causes of a problem:** Rather than describing a problem in terms of the challenges a person is facing, widening the lens would mean explaining the systemic factors that contributed to that circumstance. When discussing obesity rates, for example, instead of telling a story about people making unhealthy food choices, widen the story’s lens to discuss where fast food restaurants are concentrated, where fresh produce is available, or where parks are located that are safe for exercise. By explaining the societal factors that contribute to a problem, communicators can avoid placing blame on individuals and, instead, implicate the broader systems and structures at play.

- **Offer collective, systems-level solutions:** Similar to presenting the systemic causes of a societal problem, effective stories present the systemic solutions to a problem. When telling a story about bike ridership, for example, rather than telling the story of one person who started riding their bike to work, widen the lens to explore where bike paths are available, how well lit they are, or where efforts have been made to educate residents on the benefits of biking. This approach highlights the systems-level solutions needed to address a problem, rather than focusing on individuals and their choices.

- **Feature a range of characters:** To ensure audiences understand the complexity and layers involved with a social issue, effective stories should include a wide range of characters. Rather than focusing solely on one protagonist, a more effective story would feature several characters who fill different roles and represent different levels of interaction within an issue.
When telling a story about high school graduation rates, for example, rather than focusing on one student who excels in school, widen the lens to feature that student’s teachers, family, peers, principal, school district officials, and any other staff from programs that help students advance. This approach shows how everyone is part of a group and social structure, and it demonstrates how those social connections shape outcomes.

BOX 1

**Widening the Lens to Tell the Story of Arts Programs in Perry Promise Neighborhood**

In December 2020, the Urban Institute published a feature story about Perry Promise Neighborhood in Perry County, Kentucky. The story described the program’s efforts to expand access to arts programs for students and widened the lens to describe large-scale causes and solutions.

- **Describe the structural causes of a problem:** The story described how, before Perry Promise, most students in the area lacked access to free arts education, which is crucial for social and emotional learning. It explained how schools in the area had to cut arts programming in recent years because of budget challenges and how those budget challenges resulted from a shrinking county population after the decline of the coal industry and the loss of thousands of jobs. This framing approach avoids placing blame on the students or parents for not being involved in arts programs and instead focuses on the challenges facing the school system that prevented it from offering these learning opportunities.

- **Offer systems-level solutions:** The story explored how Perry Promise takes a systems-level approach to solving the above problem by partnering with schools across the district to fund arts and music programs for students, offering arts engagement activities for families, employing local artists in Perry County who can teach arts in the classroom, and training teachers to incorporate arts education into their other classes. This approach shows the number of people and entities needed to work together to solve this problem.

- **Feature a range of characters:** The story highlights several people involved with Perry Promise’s arts programs, including a fourth grader who participates in a music club, the student’s mom, another parent and local artist who Perry Promise hired to teach students how to paint and to weave baskets, and a Promise Neighborhoods staff member who recruits local teaching artists for schools. Through these characters, the reader can see the range of activities and people necessary to make this program possible and the broader system Perry Promise put in place to ensure all students have access to arts education.


2. **Put Data in Context**

Data are critical to Promise Neighborhoods and other collective impact work. Data can help people understand the factors that contributed to a certain outcome, the efforts underway in a community, and the results of a program in both the short and long terms (box 2). However, when data are presented
without context or the right framing, audiences can misunderstand or misinterpret data, including the message communicators want the data to convey.

Numbers always require interpretation. FrameWorks research has shown that failing to provide the necessary context can lead to the following harmful results:

- **Data can be normalizing:** Without context, audiences often interpret data by accepting that a result is how things are and always will be. This reaction can prevent audiences from understanding that systemic change is possible, and that the status quo is not inevitable.
- **Data can invite distractions and reinforce dominant thought patterns:** When people lack the context they need to interpret data correctly, they will use their own experience or background to try to fill that context void and interpret the data. This can lead people to interpret data to fit into their current way of thinking, rather than being encouraged to think in a new or different way about an issue.

FrameWorks advised that when discussing a data point, communicators should include messaging that answers the following questions, rather than letting the data stand alone:

- What is the takeaway? Why is it important for audiences to know this?
- How can readers make sense of this number in relative terms? Is this a large or small change?
- Are all the terms in the data point defined? Is there any room for audiences to misinterpret the language used?
- What is the call to action for this data point? What do you want audiences to do with this information?
- How have you connected this data point to a broader social cause? Have you avoided placing blame on individuals?

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**BOX 2**

**Putting Unemployment Data in Context in a Story about the Indianola Promise Community**

A 2016 Urban Institute feature about the Indianola Promise Community in Indianola, Mississippi, included a data point about the unemployment rate in the city at the time: 19.4 percent. The story did not let that number stand alone, at risk of being misinterpreted or used out of context. As shown by the quotes below, the story instead explained the systemic factors that contributed to that rate, compared Indianola’s unemployment rate with that of the broader state, and presented solutions to the problem that the Promise Community aimed to lead.

**Context.** “Many of the agricultural and manufacturing jobs that long buoyed the city’s economy are now obsolete, and other jobs moved overseas. Delta Pride, a large catfish processing plant, closed its doors in 2011, and a lot of people are now out of work.”

**Solution.** “Looking at this opportunity to revitalize Indianola and perhaps the region, the Delta Health Alliance along with political, business, and community leaders applied for the city to take part in this
fledgling federal program. “The hypothesis is that a community will transform over time when children receive robust support throughout their childhoods, and those children will grow into productive citizens and stewards of their hometown or city.”

**Source:** Matthew Johnson, “Passport to Prosperity: Indianola, Mississippi,” Urban Institute, September 6, 2016, https://apps.urban.org/features/promise-neighborhoods/indianola-ms.html

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**MAKE DATA RELATABLE WITH SOCIAL MATH**

Another tool for making data easier for audiences to understand is social math, which creates meaning by comparing the size of two things (box 3). Social math uses familiar amounts to put data into perspective for readers and makes it easier to visualize the scale of an issue. For example, to put the statistic “46 percent of adults report needing mental health services during their lifetime” into perspective, social math could add, “That’s roughly 150 million people, the same size as the US workforce.”

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**BOX 3**

**Leveraging Social Math to Explain How Much the Federal Government Spends on Kids**

In a 2017 Urban Institute blog post about how much the federal government spends on the Head Start program for children from families with low incomes, the author used social math to put the spending amount in a more relatable perspective. The post compared the $9 billion spent on Head Start with the $9 billion Americans spend on Halloween every year, demonstrating that the federal government spends relatively little investing in children’s futures.


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**3. Build Understanding through Explanation**

To build understanding among audiences, stories should explain how a societal problem came to be, including the past, present, and future factors at play. Rather than making claims without context, explaining is an inclusive way to bring people into conversations about how to solve problems. FrameWorks offered two tools to improve explanation in stories that aim to drive social change.

**THE EXPLANATORY CHAIN**

This narrative device helps communicators ensure they include the critical parts of a story and connect the dots between those elements (box 4). Stories should include the problem or challenge it is focusing on, the structural cause of that problem, and the collective solution. Depending on the audience, the story might need to include additional links in the chain to be as explicit as possible about the contributing factors and potential solutions to a challenge.
When discussing chronic absenteeism, for example, an explanatory chain might first identify the problem of children having to take sick days and miss school. It could then identify the cause as high housing costs forcing more families to live in unhealthy conditions that can lead to asthma in kids. Then it could name a solution of mandatory inspections of all housing units to ensure landlords are keeping their properties up to code. To build out the chain even further, the story could also explain that absenteeism negatively affects peer engagement for all kids and can harm their development.

### BOX 4
**Building an Explanatory Chain for Youth Engagement in Collective Impact Initiatives**

In a December 2020 Urban Institute brief about youth engagement in Promise Neighborhoods and other collective impact initiatives, the authors used an explanatory chain to describe a problem, its cause, and a solution.

- **Problem:** "Unfortunately, in many environments, young people are viewed only as recipients of services, without the ability to make valuable contributions."
- **Cause:** "Historically, family- and youth-focused initiatives and programming have failed to engage young people as collaborators in the programming process."
- **Solution:** "A strengths-based approach that values the knowledge, skills, and experiences of young people can foster programs that promote inclusive youth development,...attract more young people to programs,...and lead to more robust programming overall."


### THE EXPLANATORY METAPHOR

Metaphors can guide people’s thinking and elicit a stronger connection to an issue because they create a mental image to help people understand a challenge and its solution (box 5). Describing the health of a community as being like a building, for example, can incorporate construction-related words, images, and ideas that prompt generative thinking. By showing the importance of a strong and stable foundation in issues like education, housing, and access to health care, storytellers convey not only that these factors are critical to a healthy society but that they must be actively constructed and maintained. This metaphor can also show that it takes a team to build a healthy community, much like it takes a team to build a successful construction project.
BOX 5
Using a Pipeline as a Metaphor to Explain Promise Neighborhoods' Cradle-to-Career Programs

Promise Neighborhoods often use a pipeline as a metaphor to explain the continuum of programs and services available, from early childhood education, to K–12 school supports, to college and career readiness. This pipeline metaphor helps audiences understand that, just like how a community’s infrastructure requires planning and integration of systems like electricity and water, effective social programs require careful planning and coordination. The pipeline metaphor shows that all these programs are connected, and a problem, or blockage, in one area of the pipeline could affect the rest of the pipeline later on. Different parts of this pipeline also need maintenance and special attention over time, and the pipeline could be expanded to incorporate more programs and reach more people.


4. Appeal to Shared Values to Promote Equity

FrameWorks explained another way to avoid activating dominant thought patterns about social issues: appealing to shared values. This approach can ensure communications products do not feed into harmful thought patterns, and it can build a broad base of support among audiences.

Values, as defined by FrameWorks during the course, are “cherished cultural ideas that orient people’s attitudes and behaviors.” They establish why something matters and how it is connected to a broader community. FrameWorks shared three key values that storytellers can invoke to build support for systemic change (box 6).

- **Interdependence:** People’s fates are shared, and a community is stronger when everyone works together. This value can avoid triggering us-versus-them thought patterns in audiences and can instead convey how addressing disparities helps the common good.

- **Human potential:** When everyone has the support they need, they can reach their full potential and contribute to their communities. This value taps into the idea of collective potential, rather than individual success.

- **Fairness across places:** Where people live should not determine their opportunities or success in life. This value avoids activating us-versus-them thinking in audiences by focusing on places rather than groups, and it emphasizes that fixing existing structures can make places more supportive of people.

Using these framing values early in a story ensures readers are in the most effective mindset from the start, and calling back to these values throughout a story can keep audiences engaged. These three values can redirect readers away from individualistic, us-versus-them, and deterministic thinking; instead, they can encourage audiences to think about systems-level solutions and the power of collective action.
BOX 6

Appealing to Shared Values in a Report Detailing the Cost of Segregation

A 2017 report from the Urban Institute and the Metropolitan Planning Council about the effects of racial and economic segregation in Chicago used all three of the above values. The quotes below from the Metropolitan Planning Council project landing page demonstrate these values in action.

- **Interdependence:** “Everyone deserves an opportunity to earn a living—and the economy is better off when everyone participates in it. Yet, not everyone in the Chicago region has the same pathway to economic success.”

- **Human potential:** “Billions in lost wages. Thousands of young people without the education they need to fulfill their potential. Hundreds of lives cut short by violence. These are among the steep costs all of us in the Chicago region pay by living so separately from each other.”

- **Fairness across places:** “We have identified multiple paths forward so that everyone living in our region can participate in and create a stronger future.”


Conclusion

Incorporating these lessons of widening the lens, putting data in context, building understanding through explanation, and appealing to shared values in communications products can help Promise Neighborhoods grantees and leaders of other collective impact initiatives build support for structural change. By encouraging audiences to think in new ways about collective solutions to systemic challenges, grantees and local stakeholders can push toward greater equity and inclusion in their communities.

Notes

1 Results Count, the performance measurement, management, and training program for Promise Neighborhoods, uses this “widening the lens” approach in what it calls “factor analysis” to examine the systemic factors that contribute to disparities. For more information about Results Count and for examples of how to communicate these ideas through infographics, see Anand Sharma, “Advancing Results through Leadership Development: Reflections on Technical Assistance for the Promise Neighborhoods Program” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2020).

Additional Reading


About the Authors

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