

Reframing for a New Big Picture¹

Reframing – the work of literally shifting how key publics understand an issue or idea, what they believe about that issue and idea and how the structures that provide meaning and context in shaping ideas/issues work to shape your issue specifically – is not a short term project. However, there are short, intermediate and long-term framing projects that we can undertake right now to move us forward. One way to imagine this process is to think of it as building a bridge. You need to know the two points you want to connect before you can begin. In our case these two points are moving from A) the current context, aka “WE ARE HERE” to B) building the infrastructure and changing conditions necessary to creating the transformation we seek, a.k.a. “THERE.” We have to be clear about the location of both points in order to bridge them effectively.

The work of bridging these two points requires attention to the gaps in knowledge, belief and value differences that hold us in the current context. We must also pay attention to the assets and resources available right now that will help us get further faster. Figure 3a shows how this process of inquiry works to develop framing and re-framing strategy. We usually populate the answers in the first and third column, and then return to the middle column to “build the bridge” from “here” to “there.”

¹ This is adapted from *Weathering Together: Resilience as a Vehicle to Reshape Policy, Political Will and Reimagine the Public* for the Pathways to Resilience Working Paper Series, published May 2014. The full paper is available [here](#).

Figure 3a: Identifying Key Framing/Re-Framing Activities

Addressing the Current Context	Bridging Toward Our Goals	Building Infrastructure/Making the Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the current conversations and “state of belief” on this and related issues among our key constituencies? • How are the words that define our frame being defined in the public conversation? What room is there for <i>our</i> definition(s)? • Who are the actors shaping the conversation and what is their credibility? What are the opportunities for amplifying our voices? • Is there a sense that we can solve these issues? What solutions are being offered? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What must our constituencies and other key “publics” understand and agree on in order to support this agenda? • What “evidence” (stories of success, data and beyond) needs to be developed and disseminated to build credibility for our framework? • What are the fundamental, competing beliefs that must be deconstructed/reconstructed to create more “social space” for supportive beliefs? • What are the opportunities to provide a glimpse into a future with our better policy ideas? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What will the public conversation and belief look like and sound like when we succeed? • What are the key concepts and terminology that will help drive this era of transformation and how and where will they be defined? • Who will be considered experts and their input critical to informed decisionmaking? • What will be considered best practice and good policy?

Figure 3b (below) is provided as an example showing the chart populated with some of the key framing activities to be done to advance the resilience framework. As you use this tool for your specific issue or idea you are working to reframe, it is important to note that this is not a linear process. We must test and develop a comprehensive strategic communications approach that incorporates all of these elements over time as they overlap, inform and shape each other.

Figure 3b: Examples of Key Framing/Re-Framing Activities to Advance Resilience Framework

Addressing the Current Context	Bridging Toward Our Goals	Building Infrastructure/Making the Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polling, surveys and focus group research to identify beliefs and understanding among key segments • Get out front in defining the term for the broader publics • Advance govern together/better together themes • Building on beloved community themes to increase sense of shared stake in collaboration for sustainable/resilient/fair/compassionate nation • Delegitimize opposition policies as lose-lose propositions; Delegitimize corporations that profit from status quo as credible spokespersons in the debate; Increase credibility of “green” voices • Unmask opponents’ misleading tactics including fake science, fake “victims” of protective policies, “AstroTurf” lobby groups, corporate authored sermons to wrap propaganda in religious terms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand resources that translate the science/evidence into metrics and stories that are more easily understood • Provide practical, sensible solutions that help the public see how we make a difference beyond individual change • Tell stories about models for economic, governance, collaboration and ecological practice that works (i.e., health in all policies, cooperation economy, etc.) • Tell stories that help reinforce our connectedness as human beings across race, class, nation status. • Develop a compelling story of the future that goes beyond how we try to fix the problem. • Counter Dominion frame with “good stewards” frame, aware of our interconnectedness with all life and responsibility for the planet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build public support for corporate regulation and accountability and incentives for triple bottom line investments • Build shared public understanding and support of good stewardship and human rights frameworks as foundational principles for policy and practice • Build support for revenue generation mechanisms such as affirmative tax reform, land valuation and green credits • Shift official language, definitions, operating policies and recommended and/or best practices to align with our framework • Ensure this framework and underlying values are integrated in key curricula including K-12, human rights education, professional training and key disciplines, e.g., planning.

Laying the Foundation for Effective Meta Messages

These framing activities taken together can form a potent basis for the development of supportive meta messaging – overarching themes that provide a communications and storytelling framework at the movement or mass level. Such high level messaging is best developed collaboratively, where the “on the ground” expertise of advocates and other key stakeholders can inform its focus and content.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff describes three levels of messaging. Level 1 is the expression of broad, overarching values like fairness or responsibility — the core values that motivate us to change the world. Level 2 is the issue we work on, like housing, the environment, schools, or health. Level 3 is about the nitty-gritty of those issues, including the policy detail or strategy for achieving change. Using messaging about climate crisis and resilience as an example, most climate messaging with few exceptions, tends to hover at the most detailed level of expression. This can make connecting with broad publics difficult as it is at Level 1 that the broadest numbers of people connect in the deepest way. According to Lakoff, people’s support or rejection of an issue will be determined by whether they can identify and connect with the Level 1 value. Values are motivators, and messages should reinforce and activate values.

Developing meta messages to advance a comprehensive framework requires identifying broad values that cut across our different Level 2 (and 3) issues. The key to a meta message is not that every advocate across the panoply of work utters the same words. Rather, in the context of all our messages, we should voice the same underlying Level 1 or broad values. In addition, meta messages emphasize interconnection or how issues and values fit together in a landscape or context rather than as an individual issue “portrait” or campaign. Surfacing connective or meta messaging requires time for planning and building a shared analysis that connects the dots between issues and campaigns.