



Values

When we communicate about our work, our words are stronger and more compelling when we help our audience answer the question, "Why does this matter to me?" By helping our audience answer this question first, we can start our conversation off on the right path.

Using values statements is a tool we use to help people answer the question, why does this matter to me? When we use values in communicating about our work, we help tell a story about why our issue matters to people. It inspires passion, helps frame or reframe an issue in helpful ways, and keeps conversations moving and "out of the weeds." Using values elevates issues to a level of higher priority.

Shifting the conversation to start with the values that underlie your work is a powerful tool to help start a different conversation. If you feel like people have preconceived notions about your work, or tune you out, starting a conversation with a value statement is a tool worth trying. Values can also help you get a conversation back on track after a false or unproductive start.

Background

We know from research into how people's brains work — cognitive science — that people are trying to connect all incoming and new information to existing stories in their heads. The existing stories and knowledge they have is based on their lived experiences and cultural stories they've been exposed to. (See: "Background" for more details). To more effectively communicate about our work, we need to help people answer the question of why the issue matters to them. Using values is a way to enter a conversation about our work and issues through a new and different door. Values help people understand why the issue is important.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff has researched the power of language to shape human thought. He identifies three levels of analysis:

- › Level One: Values (Opportunity, Safety, Protection, Stewardship for Future Generations, etc.)
- › Level Two: Issue Areas (Housing, Environment, Domestic Violence, etc.)
- › Level Three: Policies (Inclusionary Zoning, Tax Abatements, Housing Trust Funds, etc.)

When we start a conversation with Level One values, we help frame the issue in people's mind differently, and help them answer the question, "why does this matter to me," right from the start. Level One values are values we all recognize.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Look at George Lakoff's three levels of thinking. As an advocate, where do you think you spend most of your time? When you start conversations with people about your work, what level do you start on?

Look at something you've written recently. Can you identify any Level One values? Where are they? Are they front and center in your work?

Examples:

Check out these "before" and "after" examples. Be sure to note the level one values used, and where they are placed in the paragraph:

Before: As a state, we need to preserve the tools that make it easier to build and maintain affordable housing, like the Homebuyer Opportunity Limited Tax Exemption. A variety of tools and strategies are needed to create homeownership opportunities in different communities, and this program has proven effective in our state. The tax exemption is an important stimulus for private and nonprofit for-sale home construction that is affordable to middle-and low-income homebuyers. The benefits go directly to the homeowner in reduced property tax costs, which helps families that can't afford a home in the private market become homeowners. Our communities are better and stronger when we have safe, stable and affordable housing for all our residents.

After: Our communities are better and stronger when we have safe, stable and affordable housing for all our residents. We can ensure everyone has access to safe housing they can afford by preserving tools that make it easier to build and maintain affordable housing, like the Homebuyer Opportunity Limited Tax Exemption. A variety of tools and strategies are needed to create homeownership opportunities in different communities, and this program has proven effective in our city. The tax exemption is an important stimulus for private and nonprofit for-sale home construction that is affordable to middle-and low-income homebuyers. The benefits go directly to the homeowner in reduced property tax costs, which helps families that can't otherwise afford a home in the private market become homeowners.

More Resources

Read "Conceptual Levels: Bringing it Home to Values" by George Lakoff <http://neighborhoodpartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Rockridge-on-the-Levels-and-Values.pdf>

Read "Framing: More than a Message" by Larry Wallack <http://neighborhoodpartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Framing-More-Than-a-Message.pdf>

More Resources, Examples: Check out the Oregon Housing Alliance's "Housing Messages that work" http://www.oregonhousingalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Housing_Messages_That_Work.pdf

Read recent research by the MacArthur Foundation: <http://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/how-housing-matters-survey-finds-american-attitudes-transformed-housing-crisis-changes-lifestyle/>

Exercises

Try to identify at least three Level One values about your issue by asking yourself these questions: Why do you do the work you do, even when it's hard? When you succeed, what does it mean to the people you serve in your community? When people have access to affordable housing, what does that mean for them and their families?

Now, let's turn those values into statements. Try writing one to two value statements about your work. Your value statement should use the Level One value you identified, and should tie the value to your issue. It should be succinct and compelling. You should feel comfortable saying it. Here is an example using opportunity as the Level One value: "Housing gives people an opportunity to build a better life. To succeed, everyone needs a safe place to call home."

Try leading with these value statements in conversations or writing about your work. See the resource list below for values messages that have been tested in public opinion polls. Does it change the tone or tenor of a conversation? How does it feel?

Next Steps

Try showing your value statements to a coworker or board member. What do they think? Do they agree with the values you've identified? Does the value statement resonate with them?

The next time you're writing something about your work – a newsletter article, background for a legislator, a fundraising pitch – pull out your list of Level One values and your value statements. Try using one as your opening sentence.

The next time someone asks you about your work, trying using your value statement. Does it start a different conversation?