



Unexpected Messengers

Do you ever feel like policy and decision makers aren't really listening to you? Or that you're having the same conversation about the same problems that you always have?

Elevating different voices from our partners and allies in public conversations can dramatically shift the dynamics and help re-frame the issue. Often legislators and policy makers hear from the same stakeholders time and again on their issues, and stakeholders may appear to have selfinterest in the proposals at hand.

Using an unexpected messenger can help policy makers understand how a proposal benefits the community at large, and can provide a unique and important voice in support of the issue.

Background

Often as advocates, we rely on our core partners or clients to tell the stories about the problems we face. However, the voices we elevate to tell our stories may be perceived as having self interest in the proposal — they or their organizations will benefit if the proposal is passed or the budget is increased.

In addition, these traditional messengers may have a narrative about the issue that doesn't change, and that doesn't help policy makers to see the issue and its connection to other issues in different ways. We may be inadvertently putting up silos around ourselves and our issues with our choice of messengers.

Using unusual or unexpected messengers can bring a new dynamic to our advocacy. It can frame an issue differently for policy makers, it can shed new light on the impacts of the problem we seek to fix, and it can make connections to other problems and impacts that result from our problem.

Finding unusual messengers begins with thinking of people who can help you tell your story differently. See the questions below and exercises to get you started on thinking about who can help.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Who usually tells our story to policy makers or the media? What is their interest in the issue? Do policy makers or the public perceive them as having a self interest?

Examples:

Before: Using traditional messengers, you might build a panel of testimony for policy makers or create a panel for the media using the following voices:

- › An affordable housing developer
- › A resident of affordable housing
- › A case manager or resident services manager on-site
- › A tax credit investor.

After: We know housing is critical and the foundation for opportunity. Affordable housing has a range of positive impacts on communities and people's lives that go beyond just the developer, the owner, and the resident. Using unexpected messengers, consider building a panel of testimony for policy makers or create a panel for the media using different voices. Some ideas might include:

- › A teacher to talk about how the kids now have stable housing and are ready to learn;
- › A doctor or nurse who can talk about the health impacts of being housed; or
- › The employer of a resident who lives in your building who can talk about what stable housing means for their employees.

You might also include any of the people from the above panel as well to provide background, expertise, or another voice.

Next Steps

- › **Keep thinking about who is affected when your organization or the policies you advocate for are successful. Who else is impacted and benefits? What community resources are affected? Who can help you tell the story?**
- › **Try it out. The next time you pitch a story to a reporter, or arrange a visit with a policy maker, take along one of your unexpected messengers and ask him to talk about the benefits of affordable housing. What is the result? How is the conversation different?**

Exercises

(Note: If you already did this ripple effects exercise in the "Landscape" tool, pull it out!)

- › **Think about someone your organization is currently helping. Put them at the center of a piece of paper, and think about all the systems that are in place that might help that family stabilize. Write down the systems or kinds of assistance you can think of.**
- › **Next, write down all the good things that happen because this person is now stable in housing – i.e., their kids do better in school, they are able to work, etc.**
- › **Now, think about who can help you tell this story – is it a case manager? Or a child's teacher? A doctor or a nurse? An employer?**
- › **Think about the other organizations or people involved in this person's life who see and understand the benefits of the stable housing. Perhaps housing stability means they are more involved in a church, or they volunteer at their child's school.**