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## Is Narrative Strategy a Communications Strategy?

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The short answer is yes... but only if we understand that everything we do is a form of communications.

Actions speak louder than words – or as Ralph Waldo Emerson once cautioned: *“What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.”*

### OVERVIEW

Narratives, as referenced here, are the meta-stories that we communicate about our values, beliefs, ideology and our aspirations for the future. Narrative strategy is using that shared grounding to shape meaning, challenge the toxic narratives we face and create the world we want.

In the context of the Grassroots Policy Project’s framework for transformational (or governing) power, narrative strategy is centered in the “third face” of power – that of shaping worldview and ideology. Thus, narrative strategy is a critical element to building the power to make systemic change and is equally as important as the “first face of power” (winning concrete and structural changes in peoples’ lives) as well as the “second face of power” (developing stronger leaders, a conscious/active base and alignments of organizations with a common sense of a collective ‘we’).

And while narrative strategy addresses a distinct arena of power, it is also deeply connected to the work of both campaigns and infrastructure building – it is connected to everything we do. Narrative strategy has the most potential for developing and holding power when it is deeply connected to campaign strategy, base-building strategy, and leadership development strategy.

At GPP we often lift up three key elements of narrative strategy

- Unmasking or exposing the dominant, toxic narrative
- Elevating an aspirational narrative grounded in beliefs and values
- Contrasting these different narratives and offering a choice

This can be done with both words and actions – both explicitly and implicitly.

## WORDS DO MATTER

Often communications strategies are designed for various kinds of campaigns (electoral, legislative, legal, direct action). They are designed to improve our chances to win the current campaign. The challenge is that this approach makes it less about strategy and more about deliverables. It is less about shaping thinking and meaning, and more about using arguments and language that we believe will help us win a specific campaign. And it rarely is focused on what the campaigns are we want to run next or how we are linking campaigns together.

One problem with this approach is that communications deliverables (tactics) are often reflective of the dominant narratives that we ultimately have to change. These toxic narratives are insidious and capture our thinking if we aren't diligent. One example is using "consumer protection" when referring to health insurance which reinforces the narrative that health insurance, and health care, is a commodity and thus should remain in the private market. Another is making the "good for business" argument when it comes to work place issues like wages, paid sick time and more. We can be so focused on winning a campaign that we don't realize we are hurting ourselves in the long run – or, at a minimum, missing opportunities to set up future work.

One quick example of how an evolving understanding of communications strategy can shape the work:

- Early work on minimum wage tended to focus how long it has been since the minimum wage was raised and how these workers deserve a raise. Note how this is a very short term approach to messaging.
- This work evolved to begin to couch this in terms of dignity in the work place and that all people are deserving of dignity. You can see how this begins to tap underlying values that can be used in other work-place campaigns.
- The missed opportunity in the work, so far, is to connect our values to the role we want to see OUR government play. Something along the lines of "we've already recognized the need for our government to set a minimum wage because corporations are motivated to drive wages down – that's why the minimum wage exists". This approach begins to link our underlying values to how we want government to promote human dignity vis-à-vis the economy which sets up a larger narrative that is useful on a whole host of campaigns.

A communications narrative strategy defines the themes and messages we want to use grounded in our underlying values and beliefs, with an eye to the future we are trying to create and offering a choice to the audience of each communication. How those themes and messages are delivered through written and verbal communications is also shaped by more than winning the current campaign but by also making future campaigns possible.

## AND IT'S MORE THAN WORDS

To have an effective and powerful narrative strategy we need to consider all the ways our actions communicate ideas and meaning both internally in our organizations/movements but also externally to those we want to sway - elected officials, voters and more. Failure to integrate our own narrative into everything we do means we can unintentionally send mixed messages. A few quick examples:

- Targeting a corporation or set of corporations to get them to change their behavior is a useful organizing strategy. It sets up a villain (or villains) and provides a focus for people's anger. And, if not done carefully, it can also send a message that these are the "bad apples" and reinforce the idea that the corporate economy, as a whole, is still sound.
- Excluding undocumented immigrants from policy proposals will often increase the chance of passing the policy but it lets stand, and reinforces, the idea that they are less deserving of dignity, less worthy.
- Training leaders to lead primarily from anger can limit the imagination and hopefulness that can arise from also leading with aspirations. It can send the message that "this campaign" will fix the problem which, again, says that overall the systems are working but we just need to tweak them.
- Having good frames and messaging grounded in our values narrative breaks down if member leaders are asked to tell their story without grounding them first as they will often, unintentionally, speak into or out of the dominant narrative.

The point here is that we communicate values and beliefs in everything we do. It happens with the campaigns we pick, how we run the campaigns, how we recruit members, how we develop leaders, the public actions we undertake, the interactions we have with elected officials and more. If we are not intentional about the values and beliefs we are communicating, we can often fall into the same trap as people with the title of communicators and reinforce the toxic narratives – or at least fail to lift up an aspirational narrative.

## INTEGRATED STRATEGY

**The challenge, then, is to approach all our work with narrative change integrated throughout so there is consistent communication of our values, beliefs and ideology in both words and actions.** Some basic tools and steps to consider include:

- First and foremost, develop a written grounding narrative that expresses core values and beliefs. This grounding narrative is often best if short (one page), is developed by a cross-section of the organization (or alignment of groups), and then serves as an ongoing tool for internal strategy development.
- Examine your current organizing practices to see where you can integrate elements of your grounding narrative. For example, how might you conduct a 1:1 differently? Or

how might you introduce yourself in a meeting or train leaders to tell their story in way that is connected to the grounding narrative?

- Use the grounding narrative as a tool in defining what campaigns to take on. Too often we organize from a problem-solution-campaign framework and then try to add messaging on at the end which may or may not be consistent with our grounding narrative. A description of a different framework, a values-centered model for organizing is included at the end. It can help us bake-in the values and aspirations into how we define our campaigns and campaign strategy from the outset.
- For each campaign, or set of campaigns, go through an exercise to develop narrative frames around the campaign. A narrative frame answers the questions:
  - What are the core values being violated and what is the cause of that violation?
  - How will this campaign eliminate (or reduce) that violation?
  - What is the aspiration for the future that this campaign achieves, or at least works toward?

Each campaign might have multiple frames and a set of campaigns (or issues) might have some common frames which become themes to tie them together.

- Develop campaign strategy and communications strategy as an integrated strategy from the beginning. For example, organizing might look different when looked at through a lens of narrative strategy versus simply a “win the campaign” strategy. A great example of this was the campaign in Minnesota to defeat the attempt to limit marriage through a constitutional amendment. The decision to ground the campaign marriage is an expression of love, and everyone deserves to have the option to marry the person they love, led to a voter contact strategy that was less focused on persuasion and more focused on a values conversation. This strategy not only defeated the constitutional amendment but built momentum that led to the passage of legislation making “love the law” by recognizing and legalizing same-sex marriage.

## IN THE END

**Narrative strategy is a communications strategy when we recognize that everything we do communicates who we are and what we believe. And,**

- We will not achieve the world we want if we cannot shift and hold the public narratives that shape what is possible.
- We cannot shift and hold public narratives with words alone.
- Only by aligning our actions and our words can we begin to elevate a different understanding of the world, a different sense of the meaning of our lives together, that then offers a competing narrative to the toxic narratives that now limit us.
- When we do this, we increase our power to make change.

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# Traditional Organizing Model

The traditional organizing model in labor and community organizing has focused on activating anger around a problem, identifying a potential solution and designing a winnable campaign around a narrowly defined demand. The example below shows how the traditional model would approach the situation where children are being separated from their families at the border.



# Values-Centered Organizing Model

The values-center organizing model builds on the strengths of the traditional model by supplementing anger with hope. Instead of focusing exclusively on the problem, the values center frames the problem as a violation of widely shared values. This model not only enables organizers to craft winnable campaigns, it also enables organizers to sequence campaigns within a longer arc that leads to deeper and deeper realization of shared values. The example below shows how the values-centered model might approach the situation where children are being separated from their families at the border.

