

Tips to Avoid Fatalism in Human Service Communications



Fatalism is a misperception that challenges are too big, complex, entrenched and inevitable to address or solve. It is one of the cultural models — or “deeply held understandings that motivate thought and behavior in largely unconscious and automatic ways” — that results in the public’s unproductive interpretations of human needs and services. Fatalism’s limited outlook means that audiences think nothing can be done about the problem at hand, so they don’t consider, much less support, human service programs and policies to address them.

Below are seven tips of what to avoid and what to advance, based on FrameWorks Institute’s Building Well-Being Narrative and other framing strategies, to help prevent communications from activating fatalism among the public who is needed for support.

Lead with the Value of Potential

Avoid omitting an explanation of why the issue is significant which could trigger the fatalistic view that the challenge is not important enough to think through.

Advance the value of human potential to frame why the issue is important to all of us by articulating how human services help everyone reach their full potential and contribute to our communities.

Use the Construction Metaphor

Avoid comparing human services to a “safety net” which has partisan associations, and can also conjure up “politics as usual” and government is inept and corrupt mindsets that can activate fatalism and shut down conversations.

Advance the explanatory construction metaphor to describe what human services are, as well as how they work to build well-being to generate greater public understanding and support.

Balance Urgency with Action

Avoid getting mired in just conveying urgency which can leave the public with a sense that a challenge is too big to solve.

Advance a balanced story that moves quickly from conveying urgency to sharing concrete solutions and actions that can address the challenge.

Adopt an Explanatory Tone

Avoid crisis framing which can overwhelm the public with problems, making it harder to see, and be motivated to work towards, solutions.

Advance an explanatory and pragmatic tone to convince your audience progress is possible.

Explain How It Works

Avoid opening with a statement of the problem which can cause people to default to fatalism.

Advance an explanation of the problem by extending the construction metaphor to explain how well-being is undermined by forces outside our control, demonstrating how cause results in effect.

Focus on Solutions

Avoid overly emphasizing the problem you’re seeking to fix, as stressing the problem can lead people to conclude it’s impossible to resolve.

Advance how your proposed solutions address the challenge by applying the construction metaphor to describe how human services restore well-being when it’s disrupted by life’s storms and include life cycle examples to avoid a perception that the problem is too big to fix and lacks answers.

Embed Data in Context

Avoid presenting data without context about the scope of the problem because a lack of background can allow the public to fill in their own, inaccurate story and default to fatalism.

Advance data as proof points by supplying data that support the challenge and solution in the Building Well-Being Narrative to strengthen your case, rather than relying on data to make your case.

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See the following Reframing Network Newsletters for more guidance on this topic:

- Reframing Tricks and Treats to Avoid Fatalism
- Shining a Light on the Solutions
- Framing the Challenges Facing the Human Service Sector

Sources:

FrameWorks Institute, Framing Public Issues, June 2004, available at <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf>

Bales, Susan Nall, Volmert, Andrew, Baran, Michael, O'Neil, Moira and Kendall-Taylor, Nat (2015). Talking Human Services: A FrameWorks MessageMemo. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, available at <https://www.nationalassembly.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/TalkingHumanServicesFrameWorksMessageMemoFINAL.pdf>

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