Tips to Avoid Individualism in Human Service Communications

REFRAMING HUMAN SERVICES NETWORK
Bringing new clarity to human needs and human services.

Deeply rooted in the American psyche is the belief that attributes broadly associated with success in life, like health, well-being, safety, and financial security are determined almost exclusively by personal choices and behaviors. This individualism trap 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. This means they don't consider, much less support, human service programs and policies that address social challenges.

Defaulting to individualism can result in harmful misconceptions including that:
- A person's condition is attributed to their actions and choices, assigning them responsibility for fixing it, rather than understanding how the broader societal systems and structures contribute to their situation and should help improve it;
- People therefore need human services because of their own choices, behaviors and failings;
- Direct service recipients are the sector's sole beneficiaries, instead of illuminating the broader societal benefits of the sector's work;
- Human services are just direct, one-time, temporary charitable interventions to address the basic needs of people in crisis, leaving out large segments of the sector's work, such as prevention, research and advocacy;
- There are deserving (e.g., employed) and undeserving (e.g., unemployed) recipients of human services; and
- Those who benefit from human services are "the other," stoking a "them" versus "us" zero-sum outlook.

To help prevent communications from activating the individualism trap and these misperceptions, below are nine tips of what to avoid and what to advance, based on FrameWorks Institute's Building Well-Being Narrative and other framing strategies.

Lead with the Value of Potential

Avoid omitting an explanation of why the issue is significant which could trigger the view that the challenge only affects other people.	*Advance the value of human potential to frame why the issue is important to all of us* by articulating how human services help all individuals reach their full potential and contribute to our communities, thus benefitting everyone.

Use the Construction Metaphor

Avoid comparing human services to a "safety net" and using journey metaphors (e.g., climbing a ladder out of poverty) and bootstrap language which can lead to thinking that human services are just provided in times of individual crisis and that individuals alone can pull themselves out of the challenges they face.	*Advance the explanatory construction metaphor* to describe what human services are and how they work to build well-being in order to generate greater public understanding and support for external help.

Add Life Cycle Examples

Avoid focusing on human services as direct services for the vulnerable at one point in time that can result in us versus them thinking.	*Advance examples that show how human services address challenges across the life cycle t*o normalize them and avoid a perception that they are only for certain people.

Explain How It Works

Avoid opening with a statement of the problem which can cause people to default to thinking that the individual caused the problem for themself.	*Advance an explanation of the problem* by extending the construction metaphor to explain how well-being is undermined by forces outside our control, so people don't blame individuals.

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Use Context

Avoid presenting an issue without context which can make policy solutions seem moot.	*Advance an explanation with context about systemic and structural factors* so the public sees that policy solutions are applicable.

Employ Data for Context

Avoid presenting data without context about the scope of the problem because the public won't see that the problem affects many people.	*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.

Tell Thematic Stories

Avoid telling episodic stories about one particular individual that focus narrowly on individual actions, problems and responsibility in which the public is more likely to attribute a person's condition to their actions and choices and can limit the sector's ability to engage the public in the policy and systems solutions to the challenges people experience.	*Advance examples of individuals that contribute to telling a thematic story or explanatory example* that helps the audience see the broader issues, trends, systems, and solutions and how they matter to all of us and promote societal well-being.

Propose Government as Problem Solver

Avoid suggestions that the government is inept or not up to the challenge of solving social problems which can lead to thinking that individuals must see their way out of problems.	*Advance government as the appropriate problem solver* for action with specifics about what it needs to do and how to hold it accountable.

Be Mindful of Language

Avoid alienating terms like "vulnerable" and "needy" that can exacerbate beliefs that human services are for other people, rather than solutions we all benefit from.	*Advance person first language* such as people who are homeless, not the homeless, and use "we" and "us" language, to avoid "othering" and to create the sense that we're all in this together.

For more guidance on this topic, see:
- **Reframing Network Newsletters**
  - **Columnist Illustrates Familiar Challenge for Human Service Organizations**
  - **How to Tell Your Success Stories**
  - **Rethinking Personal Stories**
  - **Seeing the Forest**
- **FrameWorks Institute's "Storytelling for Social Change: A Wide Angle Lens Approach to Reframing" (password: nhsa)**
- **FrameWorks Institute's Strategically Reframing Success Stories, an example of how to shift from an episodic success story to a thematic success story.**

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.