Framing COVID-19

Topic #6: Talking about what comes next

The pandemic is reinforcing the urgency of our missions—and surfacing new possibilities for change. Although we're still in the midst of the crisis, as change-makers, we're eager to think and talk about where we go from here.

But, as ever, we can't assume that what feels important and necessary to us will be widely felt. Building public will for a better future requires strategy, insight, and coordination. It requires us to understand and talk with broad audiences, not just those who already agree with us. It requires us to tell the right stories—and to tell them often, well, and together.

Here, we share three ways to approach talking about the future.

1. **Show that you're responding to the moment—not taking advantage of it.**

Don't risk appearing opportunistic. People reject messages that they feel are insensitive, and messengers who appear to be self-interested are unpersuasive and easily dismissed.

Because these are hard times and we're all experiencing high levels of distress, fear, and uncertainty, any talk of opportunities and silver linings risks backfiring and causing harm. Avoid talking about "bright spots" or "upsides."

Instead of talking about the strategic advantages of the current moment or about competing to advance or "win" on our issues, use language that expresses solidarity. We're not "seizing the moment"or "leveraging the opportunity."We're connecting, rebuilding, and moving forward together, based on what we've experienced, how the world has changed, and what we all need.

When we activate a sense of shared purpose and common identity, we make it less likely that people will revert to their familiar ideological or partisan corners. This helps our ideas for change gain mainstream traction and broad support.
2. Show that bold, collective action is the only response that makes sense.

We need bold action to shape a better future. But calls for major change are tricky to get right in this moment. Depending on the framing, ideas can come off as extreme or utopian—or they can feel important, right, and necessary.

We need to energize and mobilize people to support a big vision—without leaving the impression that we’re asking for the impossible.

We can do this by emphasizing how much we can achieve despite difficulty—not how much people have to abandon or sacrifice. Balance "bold and necessary" with "feasible and possible." Show that real and lasting change can be made to work—and what the shared benefits will be.

"The pandemic has demonstrated that human societies are capable of transforming themselves more or less overnight. Now is the time to usher in broad systemic changes to our economies—and indeed, our entire way of life. We have a chance to reckon with all that our society gets wrong and to start fresh. This is the moment to finally and utterly reject extractive capitalism and neoliberalism, which have failed us."
3. Help people see this time as a moment when change is possible, necessary, and desirable.

The way we talk about time—the past, present, and future—can either increase or decrease public will for policies and actions that will make a difference.

When we use catastrophe terms like "wake," "aftershocks," or "aftermath," we leave the impression that the issue is an impersonal natural disaster and impossible to control. If we suggest that there will soon be a time "when things get back to normal," we send people toward the comfort of nostalgia—rather than keeping them engaged in a conversation about change. If we suggest that "we can never go back to the way things were," people may feel overwhelmed and tune out.

We’ll need to strike the right notes when talking about what and how we learn from this moment. If our tone invites people to think and reflect with us, many will. But if we come off as telling them they’ve had it wrong all along, they’re unlikely to think we are right.

Connect the past (the conditions created—or revealed—by the pandemic) to the present (what governments, citizens, and societies can and must do now) and the future (possible outcomes that matter to us all).

Instead of "we've been getting it so wrong for so long"

"As the dust settles, it’s becoming clear just how misguided we have been. We must learn the lessons the pandemic is trying to teach us—heed the wake-up calls and warnings. We must never go back to a normal where so many are so vulnerable—and a way of life that threatens life on earth. The old 'normal' was a car crash, a disaster. We can, and must, do so much better. There is no other option."

Try "we're at a juncture where we can get it right—or get it wrong"

"This moment calls us to reflect on the kind of world we want to build as we move ahead. We have seen that effective government plays a vital role and also that delayed or uncoordinated action can have grave consequences. We’ve seen how deeply we all need each other, and how our current setup fails to meet the needs of too many of us. Any of the possible paths ahead will be difficult. Let's choose one that leads to the future we want."

About this series

In this uniquely challenging moment, we need to connect people to the bigger picture. We need ways to explain health, enhance community, and offer hope.

We’re pulling guidance from twenty years of framing research and practice to help advocates and experts be heard and understood in a time of global crisis. Every few days, we’ll share a few ideas that can help us all amplify the values of justice, inclusion, and interdependence.

To suggest topics, share ideas, or ask questions, talk to @FrameWorksInst on Twitter. You can review previous topics or share the sign-up link with a friend.