A FrameWorks Institute eZine

Strengthening Advocacy By Explaining "Causal Sequences"

The Problem: Counterproductive Patterns In Default Reasoning

On issue after issue, average Americans tend to overlook the situations that advocates are trying to address, or to misunderstand them in many of the same ways. These common problems in awareness and understanding result from how issues are covered in the media, from traditional ways of thinking in American (and Western) culture, and from basic aspects of cognition.

Many of the important ideas that the public tends not to "get" relate to the *broader context* of an issue.

🕐 Rural Poverty

> When presented with the fact that most of the poorest counties in the United States are rural, people can easily form a mental picture of rural poverty – in many cases, they call to mind stereotyped images of the run-down shacks and dilapidated farms that characterize "rural dystopia." But what they can't easily call to mind (as demonstrated in research conducted by Cultural Logic and the FrameWorks Institute) is the broader context that creates rural poverty and makes it difficult to deal with – including changes in American agricultural and industrial economies; changes in global trade; and the absence of particular kinds of services in rural areas, such as public transportation systems to help people get to work. Americans in cities and suburbs also fail to see how rural poverty might affect *them*.

🕐 Child Abuse and Neglect

> Average Americans are well aware of the fact that many children suffer tragically at the hands of their parents or others close to them. They can easily picture these chilling scenarios, largely thanks to the efforts of child advocates over the past twenty years. But research with the public makes it clear that these same Americans have at best a dim awareness of the social contexts that make maltreatment more likely to happen, or that can help prevent it – particularly the

importance of factors such as isolation versus the presence of a community support system.

In these areas and others, it is easy for average people to ignore the *connections* that advocates see between one fact and another (or one person and another); the *interdependence* between different players in a community, state or nation; the *ecological* nature of most social problems; and the *history* of an issue.

Instead of thinking like experts, average people tend to default to a number of related, counterproductive patterns in their reasoning.

🕐 Little-picture thinking

According to this way of thinking, the only people involved are the ones immediately affected by a problem. If the Community Reinvestment Act isn't reauthorized, and a particular small town business receives no funds to get off the ground, the "losers" seem to be the individual entrepreneurs, rather than the entire community and the state economy, each of which would benefit from the creation of a successful new business.

🕐 Individual Responsibility

In this common default perspective, people's circumstances are entirely of their own making – or in the case of kids, their parents' making. The solution to families living in dangerous, dysfunctional neighborhoods is simple: Parents should make more money and move out. (Like so much else, the question of attributing responsibility involves *balance*. Of course individual responsibility is critically important, but for most social problems it is not a *sufficient* solution.)

🕐 Consumer mode

For Americans, it is much more natural to look at the world as a Consumer than as a Citizen. If the issue is health coverage, then the questions are, How much does mine cost? How much choice do I have? and, Am I getting the best possible quality? Rather than, What kind of systems can we create that will provide reliable coverage for all of us?

🕐 Episodic thinking

This habitual way of thinking, strongly reinforced by patterns of media news coverage, focuses on individual incidents as opposed to trends and contexts. Even a good news story seems to be about the individual farmer who has been creative enough to find a new market, rather than about the broader trend towards profitable, smaller-scale farming where goods are marketed to local consumers.

🕐 Tendency to take things as "given"

Often, aspects of the world that advocates question and are working to change feel to others like natural and inevitable "facts of life" – some families abuse their children, some neighborhoods and families are dysfunctional, family farms are becoming extinct; etc. To insiders, these all represent challenges – to average people they often represent "God-given" parts of the landscape.

For advocates – and for the people and places depending on their successful efforts – the consequences of these patterns can be very serious. (And note, by the way, that experts in a particular domain are just as likely as anyone else to fall into these patterns when they think about issues outside their own area of expertise.) When thinking is guided by these patterns, people can fail to see the reasons for a problem, the potential solutions to the problem, and the role they can play in solving the problem. They may even be blind to the problem itself.

While average Americans can never be expected to understand and appreciate social problems in the same ways that experts and advocates do, we know from our experience on a variety of issues that real learning is possible, and that this learning can lead to a significant increase in engagement. We also know that advocates make too little use of a tool that can really help learning happen: a communications tool we call "Causal Sequences."

What is a causal sequence?

An effective causal sequence is a clear and concrete explanation of the causes of a problem, including the mechanism by which the problem is created. Causal sequences share certain critical features:

🕐 The "middle term"

Causal sequences include an initial factor, a final consequence, and between these a "middle term" – e.g. Increasing global trade has led to *lowered commodity-crop prices* which has lowered most farmers' income-per-acre. This middle term is the key to a satisfying explanation, which gives people the sense that they grasp the issue. The statement that "increasing global trade has lowered most farmers' income per acre" is much less satisfying and enlightening.

🕐 Negative consequences

Naturally, an effective causal sequence also needs to refer to a problem that is clearly grasped *as a problem*. For instance, the idea of lower crop prices, out of context, might strike most Americans as a good thing rather than a bad one. But the idea of lower income per farm acre is easier to see as a problem – for individual farmers and for a large sector of the economy. This point may seem obvious, but advocates should carefully ask themselves whether the problem they are talking about is obviously negative from their audience's point of view – or

whether it should be thought of instead as a middle term, which is only relevant because of the negative consequence it leads to.

⌚ Conciseness

In order to be effective, causal sequences should be expressed in a brief, tight form, so that listeners or readers strongly feel the connection between the steps. This doesn't mean that there is no room for elaborating the story advocates are trying to tell. But it does mean that somewhere in their text – and earlier rather than later – they need to find a place for a brief, powerful statement about causation.

To sum up, a causal sequence is a brief story with a "domino effect" quality, which starts two steps back from a problem (i.e. the "symptom") that advocates are trying to deal with.

Additional examples (with "middle term" highlighted):

Studies have shown that parents living in poverty *spend a great deal of anxious time dealing with the difficulties and logistical challenges created by poverty (such as finding transportation)*, and therefore have less time to spend in supportive and attentive interaction with their children.

When a child experiences chronic or extreme stress, *the brain releases chemicals that prevent neurons from growing and forming connections with each other –* thereby impeding the development of healthy brain architecture.

When family farms fail in a particular county, *other local businesses that count on farmers as customers suffer too – from local banks to groceries and hardware stories –* leading to an expanding web of financial collapse.

The migration of affluent city-dwellers to rural areas *drives up real estate prices and property taxes*, with the result that longtime residents are suddenly priced out of their own homes.

Note, by the way, that advocates may choose to focus on different layers of a problem, and that the relevant causal sequences will be different as a result. For instance, the first example could be rewritten to focus on developmental impacts, but chooses instead to focus on a mechanism by which poverty affects children – the second example focuses on a later part of the "causal chain." Both can be effective for different purposes.

Causal Sequences Vs. Some Old Favorites

Importantly, causal sequences are more effective at reaching many key communications goals than are some of the tools advocates often default to.

The kinds of <u>anecdotes and human interest stories advocates gravitate towards, for</u> instance, which are intended to give a story specificity and emotional appeal, often lock people into little-picture thinking and prevent productive engagement with the issue:

> *Liz has a backpack loaded with her lunch, her pencils and her erasers, but she is not ready for school. She has never had a book read to her, never seen anyone playing a musical instrument, never been taught to stand in a line.*

> This portrait is certain to direct blame to the child's (obviously "inadequate"!) parents, who fall within the little-picture understanding of a child's life – rather than teaching anything about the larger topic of early childhood development, or about the broader context of opportunities that are more available to some children than others depending on where they live.

<u>Statistics</u>, as presented in advocates' materials, often provide no real understanding, and can easily be ignored – readers may not know what to make of them and may feel that numbers are for specialists. Even worse, statistics can easily be misinterpreted, so that they reinforce the wrong point in readers' minds:

> *Spending in rural school districts is 25 percent less per pupil than in metropolitan districts.*

> Taken by itself, this figure may sound like *good news* about rural thrift vs. urban waste. It would be more helpful to offer a causal sequence that explains why rural school spending is lower and/or the negative consequences of this gap.

<u>Lists</u> are another favorite communications tool because they seem to convey a rich range of information about an issue. Unfortunately, these usually suffer from the same problem as statistics – they give readers no help in tying the information together in a meaningful picture.

> *The valuable services that government provides are endless – from teaching our children to delivering the mail to inspecting the quality of meat and other foods to building and improving highways.*

This list would seem to give Americans an abundance of reasons to value government – yet it does not address the most fundamental problems in public reasoning about government, including the tendency to think as a Consumer, rather than as a Citizen interested in supporting and improving the structures we depend on. Causal stories, about the ways in which public structures are indispensable to American prosperity and quality of life, have more potential to change minds.

When advocates embed causal sequences in their communications rather than relying on anecdotes, statistics and lists, they help readers and listeners think more productively, and get past the cognitive tendencies discussed at the beginning of this eZine. Effective descriptions of the causal forces at play help people focus on broader contexts, on changes over time, on trends and connections.

Conclusion – Do Causal Sequences Work?

From the perspective of the cognitive and social sciences, there are a number of good reasons why causal sequences should be effective tools for communication. Anthropologists, for example, have established that people are more engaged on a topic when have internalized an understanding of it. And cognitive psychologists who study what they call "causal perception" have explored the factors that determine whether people have a sense of "what caused what": Covariation (i.e. the fact that one thing tends to happen *when another does*), Mechanism (i.e. when people have a grasp of *how* one event led to another), and Intervention (i.e. when people have a sense of how *a particular action* will have a particular effect). The latter two factors – which are about a dynamic and active understanding – have played a particularly important role in recent theories of how people think about causation.

Beyond these theoretical considerations, though, there are more practical kinds of proof of the value of causal sequences for advocates. Focus groups conducted by Public Knowledge[1], for example, have determined that when people hear causal sequences explaining some of the current economic difficulties facing rural America, they are more likely to be engaged on the issue, and more supportive of policies that can help, than when they just hear about rural suffering (i.e. the "symptoms") or about the reasons they should care about rural America ("worthiness"). On the subject of global warming, qualitative research conducted by Cultural Logic (and later validated in national surveys by other organizations) found that causal explanations for the mechanism that causes global warming are one of the most effective tools for engaging a broad cross-section of Americans on the issue. The same pattern also holds on other issues, such as health coverage access – when Americans are offered effective causal stories, they become demonstrably more engaged and supportive than when these are missing.

In short, causal sequences work. They provide a simple and extremely effective tool that should be a regular component of advocates' communications repertoire. Advocates would do well to examine their material for opportunities to replace over-used and often

ineffective strategies with causal stories that create helpful and dynamic pictures in people's heads. The rewards in providing the public with a broader and richer understanding of the issue at hand will be well worth the effort.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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