THE CHRONICLE OF
PHILANTHROPY

ARTICLE
MARCH 26, 2018
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Understanding Culture Is Key for Social-Change Advocates

By Nat Kendall-Taylor

In efforts to drive social change, many nonprofits and foundations focus more attention on getting their messages out than on getting them right. As a result, many campaigns get a lot of press and play, but don't make a lasting impact.

How can nonprofit advocates do more to get their messages right? By understanding the culture we live in and how it affects the messages we spread.

At FrameWorks, the nonprofit I lead, we study cultural attitudes and beliefs about a wide variety of social issues. We know that culture complicates communications. If advocates understand culture, they can communicate more effectively with members of the public.

Culture has so many facets and meanings we often refer to it as swamp. Some of the creatures in the swamp are like beautiful orchids, such as the American ideals of freedom, justice, and equality for all. From the perspective of social change, these orchids make our world a better, more beautiful place, and help us drive change.

But we have also found more threatening attitudes and beliefs in our cultural swamp. Like alligators, these beliefs threaten to swallow up advocates' efforts to move society forward. We have found that three gators are particularly threatening to advocates for social change. On issue after issue, whether it be homelessness or aging, immigration or climate change, these gators derail productive, progressive thinking. They are:

Individualism. The belief that our outcomes in life are the result of our effort and drive as individuals. This is classic "bootstraps" thinking. Why did a student graduate with straight A's? Because she was motivated to learn and driven to succeed. Why is a teenager in jail? Because he weighed the costs and benefits of committing a crime, and decided on the latter.

Tribalism. The belief that the social or economic group we belong to is in competition for scarce resources with people in other socioeconomic groups. This often leads to zero-sum thinking — the belief that more resources for another person or group means, by definition, less for me and my group.

Fatalism. The belief that we can't solve — or even do much to address — most of the problems we face in society because they are too big and intractable. Government can't solve problems either, because it is inept and corrupt. As a result, we will always have crime, poverty, homelessness, and other social ills.

These beliefs prevent advocates for social change from moving forward. Individualism prevents people from understanding the social factors underlying success — how access to fluoridated water affects people's oral health, for example. Tribalism keeps people from seeing the "public" in public systems, eroding support for an immigration overhaul, poverty reduction, and other issues that are seen as benefiting only certain groups of people. And fatalism saps public support for systemic solutions, whether they are designed to help us create a better education system or curb the effects of climate change.

These three beliefs are fattened up by a steady diet of stories in the media — and sometimes even from advocates for social change — about the power of individuals, the importance of tribe, and the difficulty of change.

A Changed Narrative

As an anthropologist, I know that social change requires culture change. Culture is strong and deep and durable. But it is not fixed. It changes — and it does so in response to stories we tell.

Imagine if we came together as advocates, across the many issues we work on, to change these stories and find new ways to help people understand what it means to be an American. Imagine if we came together to challenge false narratives about how people pull themselves up by their bootstraps, how we have to protect ourselves before helping others, or how government is inept. Imagine if we truly understood and appreciated how the environment in which we live affects our outcomes. Imagine if we supported — rather than rejected — each other across groups, and if we had faith in change and hope in our future. We would live in a much different country and a much different culture.

The good news is we can change these narratives, and we can change our culture.

Take homelessness, for example. Experts note that homelessness is caused by a variety of systemic and societal factors: the rising cost of housing; a shortage of affordable, long-term housing options; insufficient social support and the effects of violence; punitive and insufficient welfare systems;

trauma and adverse experiences in early childhood, and addiction, poor mental health, and the breakdown of relationships.

Added Context

But the public doesn't see it this way. In a recent study of public thinking in the United Kingdom, we found people think of homelessness as sleeping on the streets and blame it on individuals who make "bad" choices or "lack" the will to work hard and save enough money to pay rent. People don't have a full picture of the systemic causes of homelessness or its effects on society — its high economic costs and its corrosive effects on our communities. This image is reinforced by U.K. advocacy communications and stories in the media.

Advocates can counter individualistic thinking by providing context about the systems that matter. They can:

- Explain the economic, political, and social conditions that influence homelessness.
- Go beyond stories about the prototypical "man on the street" and talk about women, children, young adults, LGBT people, and others living in overcrowded conditions or squatting in unsafe structures.
- Show the societal costs of homelessness, such as lower education and employment levels and increased costs of health-care services and education and employment assistance.

If we change the stories we tell, we will change the beliefs we live by and the culture we live in. If we work together to share and tell stories that contest individualism, fatalism, and tribalism, we will move forward with pace and power.

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