



Lessons from the Field: What We Are Learning and Teaching

In each of our trainings and presentations, we are sharing the findings and recommendations from our *Talking about Government* research, as well as exploring how fundamental framing and re-framing techniques can and should be used to make the case for government. However, we are not just teaching in our trainings; we are also learning from the experiences of our various partners and identifying the challenges they face in fostering a new, aspirational, pragmatic conversation about what government can and should be doing. To respond to these challenges, we are continuously attempting to improve the ways we support our colleagues as they try to reframe the role of government in the context of their daily work.

While teaching framing techniques has been central to our trainings, recently we have been exploring the intersection between framing and storytelling. Paying attention to the stories we are telling is an important element of reframing the role of government in our society. Stories trigger frames which cue our audiences to what is important, what solutions are possible, who is responsible, what their role is, and how government fits into the picture. In our trainings, we've come to learn, alongside our trainees, how "stories" shape public perceptions about particular issues and influence the cultural narratives about life in their state. We have become convinced that we must find connections between particular policy issues and deep-seated "American" stories or parables that evoke notions of shared fate and of working together. We have come to see that telling better, more purposeful stories about government's role in public problems can help us to build greater public support for the public sector.

In this section, we want to share with you some of the lessons we have learned about telling stories and the questions we are raising with our colleagues as we consider how to tell better stories about government.

Lesson: Telling Stories about Government

Every public policy issue has a story. When we try to engage the public in policy solutions – to provide health care to more children, to take steps to address climate change, to support a new job training program for the unemployed – we are trying to tell a story about why our audiences should care and why a "public" answer is needed to these challenges. And, we are trying to tell a story about how government can be part of the solution.

In our trainings and presentations around the country, we are now working with our audiences to identify both the “style” and habits of storytelling they already employ. And, we are helping them to recognize the hidden stories that influence public perceptions about particular issues and invisibly shape the cultural narratives about life in their state.

We have been reading about storytelling as we have explored this concept in greater depth in our trainings, and we’ve become even more convinced of the power of stories. In addition, our partnership with the FrameWorks Institute has helped us to recognize the close relationship between the elements of framing and reframing and the “grammar” of effective storytelling.

Are you telling a productive story about Government?

When you advocate for constructive policy proposals, what kind of “story” are you telling about government? [Ask yourself](#)

1. Am I telling a story of crisis or one of pragmatic possibilities?
2. Do I evoke positive, hopeful images of my state, my community, or my country?
3. What roles do I assign the actors—particularly government and the public--in my “story?”

In myriad ways, stories and narratives help all of us sort out the world around us each and every day. We are often not even aware of the embedded stories we tell ourselves and each other, but they exist. Surging around and within us are stories of crisis, stories of community, stories of solving problems together, and ones of making it on our own. These and many others are the culturally shared narratives we use to make sense of a complicated world. Whether we intentionally tell them or not, whether we pay attention to them are not, the stories are there. And, they have a powerful influence on how we understand the issues of the day.

As storytelling expert Stephen Denning explains, “Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart. And that’s where we must go if we are to motivate people not only to take action but to do with energy and enthusiasm.”ⁱ

Assessing your “Stories” about Government

Here are a couple of things to ask yourself about the stories you are telling about government and the public issues you care about:

Are you telling a “crisis” story or one of pragmatic possibilities?

Consider the differences between the children’s stories – Chicken Little and The Little Engine that Could. Which one are you telling?

While crisis stories and stories with victims as main characters are familiar, the cumulative weight of individual crisis stories does not add up to convince readers of the need for effective government. Rather than focusing on conflict and crisis, we recommend considering how your narratives can evoke hope, aspiration and pragmatic problem-solving.

Do you know your state motto? Your State Song? What is the shared story of your state's history and its founding? Can you use these images, myths and parables to build support for issues upon which you work?

In our work in various states we have found it useful to explore the origins of widely-shared state “stories.” Within them are often insights into the cultural understanding of what a state is about – its sense of itself. We believe that looking into your state’s historical state stories can be a useful – or at least informative - exploration.

For example, in Vermont, where the state motto is “Freedom and Unity” advocates recognized how these seemingly contradictory values shape the state’s self-image and influence attitudes toward government and public policy. In an exercise we conducted, the participants explored the implications and potential of a fierce sense of independence coexisting with a deep commitment to community. They have been working to understand and incorporate elements of this state “story” into their communications.

In Rhode Island, a coalition called One Rhode Island is facing a serious fiscal crisis and new anti-immigrant rhetoric from political leaders. They have been working to provide a sense of historical perspective to these current debates. Rhode Island was founded by people seeking freedom from persecution and looking for opportunities to start new lives. Their state motto is “Hope.” They have been exploring how these founding “stories” can be used to reshape public debate and awareness about their current challenges.

What roles do you assign actors in your “story?”

Every story we tell about public policy issues has characters; typically, government and the public have leading roles in our stories. How can you portray government as a productive, necessary character in your story? How can you talk to the public as citizens, as participants in the story and not merely consumers of government?

Government as a Character in our American Story: Research that Demos commissioned demonstrates that Americans typically see government in very narrow ways - as either elected officials or as a monolithic bureaucracy. When assigned these limited roles in the public mind, government isn’t seen as a necessary, productive, and reliable character in our American story. To help Americans develop a broader understanding of government, our research indicates we must assign government roles that Americans value—such as government’s role as a consensus builder, long-term planner, or protector. In addition, our communications must speak to the mission of government and to highlight the values that give rise to government in the first place.

The Public: Consumers or Citizens? Our research also revealed that when Americans adopt a consumer stance towards government, they bring into civic thinking many of the habits of consumerist thinking. From a consumerist viewpoint, individual gain and individual responsibility is advanced. While from a citizen standpoint, common good, shared fate and mutual responsibility are prioritized. To combat the pitfalls of applying consumerist expectations towards government, we recommend portraying the public as citizens in your story. You can do this by emphasizing our shared responsibility and avoiding portraying government as a laundry list of services that individuals “buy” with their tax dollars.

Conclusion

To broaden Americans’ understanding of government, we all must become more purposeful storytellers about the things we need to do together and why we have created the public systems and structures that help our society function and thrive. We must become more aware of the stories that exist for our individual policy issues and able to determine their impact. And, ultimately, we must learn to tell the big stories – the master narratives – about what life in America could be about and about how our government could be a partner in achieving a quality of life to which we all aspire.

¹ Denning, Stephen. *The Leaders’s Guide to Storytelling*. Jossey-Bass. 2005.