

The Leadership Task of Prompting Cognitive Shifts: Shaping Perceptions of Issues and Constituencies to Achieve Public Service Goals

By Erica Gabrielle Foldy, Laurie S. Goldman and Sonia M. Ospina

“We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” Franklin Delano Roosevelt
Needle exchange programs to reduce HIV/AIDS
“Yes we can!” Barack Obama
Grameen Bank and the growth of microlending

Above are powerful examples of how public leadership can achieve goals through shaping perceptions of problems, solutions, and people. Sensegiving – shaping how people understand themselves, their work, and others engaged in that work – is critical to organizational leadership (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Bryman, 1993). We developed the concept of the *cognitive shift* – a change in how an organizational audience understands an important element of the organization’s work – as the desired outcome of the sensegiving process.

Our research studied how entrepreneurial, social change nonprofits attempted cognitive shifts concerning the *issue* they wanted to affect and the primary *constituency* they served. Organizations prompt these cognitive shifts by framing situations – by intentionally shaping people’s interpretations. Their framing strategies also apply to public sector leadership, as similar strategies can mobilize backing for a government initiative or help constituencies join together to implement a solution.

We interviewed 173 members of 20 community-based, social change organizations chosen by the Ford Foundation because their leaders or leadership teams were exemplars in tackling critical social problems with effective, systemic solutions. These organizations attempted a broad range of cognitive shifts, through a variety of framing strategies, which are summarized in the two tables below. We also provide examples of some of these shifts and strategies.

Issue-Related Cognitive Shifts and Associated Framing Strategies

Issue-Related Category	Cognitive Shift	Framing Strategies to Achieve Shift
How an audience views the problem	Establish a new root cause of a problem.	Enable legitimation of the new understanding of the problem by de-legitimizing existing institutions; demonstrate that they are the root cause of the problem.
	Heighten the importance or broaden the scope of a problem.	Argue that that this is not a new problem; it is a natural extension of the previous understanding of the problem.
How an audience views the solution	Establish a new solution to a problem.	Explain that the new solution is an alternate way to reach the audience's previously articulated goal or mission.

Framing the problem. Some organizations try to get people to focus on the root cause of a problem, rather than what they see as mere symptoms. Justice Now uses legal advocacy to address issues facing women prisoners in California, such as poor medical care and sexual abuse. But it is also trying to change the way audiences understand the root cause of these issues: Prisons *themselves* are the problem. To change audiences' perceptions of the root cause of a problem, organizations often need to de-legitimize existing institutions.

Other organizations are seeking cognitive shifts by heightening the importance or broadening the scope of how their primary constituency frames its concerns so that they resonate for a larger group of constituents. The New York Immigration Coalition brings together immigrant organizations from a wide range of ethnic communities and encourages them to focus on *immigrant* policies which affect all of them, not just *immigration* policy which affects these groups in different ways. "So many of the groups in the immigrant rights movement are much more focused on just immigration policy and visas and legalization... The [New York Immigration] Coalition is trying to deal with ...the issues ... once people get here: education, housing, social services access..." NYIC argues that these issues are a natural extension of their previous concerns and, therefore, legitimate.

Framing the solution. Organizations change thinking about solutions, often by clarifying that the solution – whether seen as radical or moderate – is simply a new way of reaching the audience's previously articulated goal or mission.

AIDS Housing of Washington (AHW) is attempting a controversial shift in how other homeless and housing organizations think about providing services to substance-abusers with AIDS. Rather than requiring sobriety, they created a residence for homeless AIDS patients using a harm reduction model which allows residents to use drugs or alcohol as long as they follow a "code of behavior and... [are] good citizens." In their words, their "humble goal is to revolutionize the way people think about drug use treatment." But they couch this revolutionary approach as simply a new way to address the established goal of supporting people with AIDS.

Constituency-Related Cognitive Shifts and Associated Framing Strategies

Constituency-Related Category	Cognitive Shift	Framing Strategies to Achieve Shift
How the constituency views itself	We are powerful.	Promote self-confidence among constituents. Strengthen constituents' identification with their cultural group as a source of power and wisdom. Spur constituents to identify as members of a broader, more powerful group.
How one part of the constituency views another part	They are human and worthy of respect. They can hold authority.	Argue that everyone deserves a voice; everyone has a story. Demonstrate that, sometimes, one must contravene one tradition to preserve another.
How others view the constituency	They are powerful. They are deserving.	Argue that constituents are responsible for the organization's effectiveness. Cast constituents as experts, not victims. Demonstrate that constituents are "good citizens." Show that constituents are targets of abuses.

How the constituency sees itself. Many organizations we studied are trying to affect how their primary constituency – the group that the organization exists to serve or organize – sees itself. Most commonly, they encourage constituents to see themselves as powerful and capable, as active agents rather than passive recipients. CASA of Maryland describes its low-wage, Hispanic immigrant constituency as “makers of history” and “co-authors of justice,” to help them move from simply receiving services to demanding their rights by thinking of themselves differently.

These organizations also encourage new, broader identities that encourage diverse constituents to see their shared interests. As one member of NYC noted, “It’s like we are in separate ghettos in our own nationalities...When I started to be more involved with the Coalition, I realized that maybe I am closer to the immigrants than the Hispanics... Because before being considered Latina, I am considered as an immigrant... We need to defend first our interests as immigrants...” Redefining oneself as an immigrant, rather than only as a member of an ethnic group, links one to a larger, and therefore more powerful, group.

How one part of the constituency views another part. This kind of shift varies across organizations. One approach is to prompt one sub-set of a group's primary constituency to stop de-humanizing another sub-set. The Cornerstone Theater, dedicated to bridging divides of race, ethnicity, class, and sexual preference, creates community productions that bring together different, and often opposing, subcultures. One production brought together gang members and police officers. After the show, cast members met to debrief: "People are breaking down... and it is often connected to who they are and how they have been transformed by this process."

How others see the constituency. Many organizations work to change how the general public views their constituency, prompting them to see constituents as powerful and therefore deserving respect, even if they are poor or disenfranchised. One way is to insist that constituents be seen as policy experts, not just as victims of problematic policies. When members of Community Voices Heard, an organization of women on welfare, speak to the press or public officials, they "tell their story," but in a way that is directed at changing policy, not simply recounting their troubles.

In other instances, organizations work to convince the public that their constituents deserve better circumstances. The New Road Community Development Group, a low-income black community nonprofit fighting for home ownership and higher quality housing, became frustrated that their community was being stereotyped as "lazy" welfare recipients even though "everybody here has a job." They painted a sign that "laid out where [their members] are working" and nailed it to a tree, attracting media attention. The sign established that their members were employed, thus good citizens and deserving of decent housing

Other organizations claim their constituents deserve better because they are being mistreated or abused. Justice Now took this tack after nine women inmates in California's prisons died in an eight-week period. They attracted media coverage by "talking about international human rights standards and equating the conditions around the deaths to torture." Justice Now framed the issue as some women inmates being targets of torture and human rights abuses, thus deserving better treatment even if they have been convicted of a crime.

In summary, these exemplary nonprofit social change organizations were often very strategic in how they framed problems, solutions, and the people they served. This suggests that other nonprofit and public organizations could also be more deliberate in their framing processes. Organizational leaders might want to talk explicitly about the shifts they are trying to create, whether these fit together or act at cross purposes, and how well they match the organization's goals and mission. Prompting cognitive shifts is at the heart of public service leadership.

References

Bryman, A. (1993). Charismatic Leadership in Business Organizations: Some Neglected Issues. *Leadership Quarterly*, 4, 289-304.

Gioia, D.A. & Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12, 433-448.

Related Resources

“Sensegiving and the role of cognitive shifts in the work of leadership” by Erica Foldy, Laurie Goldman and Sonia Ospina in *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008) 514–529.
<http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/files/Sensegiving&CognitiveShiftsinLeadership1108.pdf>

The Authors

[Erica Gabrielle Foldy](#), PhD, is an affiliated faculty member of the Research Center for Leadership in Action and an assistant professor of Public and Nonprofit Management at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service of New York University.

[Laurie S. Goldman](#) is a lecturer in social policy in the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University.

[Sonia M. Ospina](#), PhD, is the faculty director of the Research Center for Leadership in Action and an associate professor of Public Management and Policy at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University.

Research Center for Leadership in Action, NYU Wagner

The Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at New York University’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service supports leadership that listens to many voices and serves as a resource for making systems and organizations effective, transparent, inclusive, and fair. RCLA supports change agents tackling critical public challenges through rigorous, practice-grounded research and reflective processes that strengthen the theory and practice of leadership. As an academic center, RCLA conducts rigorous social science research, employing a variety of innovative and participatory methodologies to the issues of contemporary leadership.

Web: www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership

Email: wagner.leadership@nyu.edu

Phone: 212.992.9880

© RCLA 2009