Conceptual Levels: Bringing It Home to Values

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Why is it so easy for the radical right to label progressives as wishy-washy flip-floppers? Why is it so hard for progressives to shake these labels? The answer lies in some old habits.
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The Values Gap

For decades, the radical right has systematically set out a system of core values, set up organizations that promote those values, supported political candidates who stood for those values, and enacted legislation that reflects those values.

When we hear conservatives talk about politics, they talk about beliefs, values and morality. Every policy they support connects back to values. This resonates with the American public (see Gallup poll The Cultural Landscape: What's Morally Acceptable", June 22, 2004).

> "[A] **moral core** is more important than...any particular issue."

Americans believe that leaders should have a moral core that informs what they do. This moral core is seen as more important than one's stance on any particular issue. George W. Bush is perhaps the best example of this in recent memory. He summed it all up in the 2000 campaign, when, after facing criticism for his lack of mastery of foreign policy details, he responded: "Nobody needs to tell me what I believe. But I do need somebody to tell me where Kosovo is." *(New York Times, 3/15/99)*

Progressives hear this and tear their hair out: How could the *President of the United States* actually *boast* about his lack of knowledge? And who really *cares* what he believes if he doesn't know what he's doing?

For better or for worse, however, most Americans do believe that values are important when choosing leaders. This shouldn't surprise us, given that the American democratic system—in contrast to so many European democracies—involves choosing a person, rather than a party. Parties are about policies, but people are about values.

Conceptual Levels

Progressives must rethink their policy goals in terms of values. There are always underlying moral reasons for supporting certain policies and opposing others. The first task then becomes identifying the values behind any given policy.

The system involves three Conceptual Levels that can be remembered by using the mnemonic V-I-P:

- Level One: **Values**
- Level Two: **Issue Areas**
- Level Three: **Policies**

The temptation for progressives is usually to talk about policies in terms of statistics: affirmative action is necessary because African Americans make up 14.7% of the current college-aged population but only 8% of college students [1]. Seat belt laws are needed because 9,200 people died needlessly in motor vehicle accidents in 2000, and because injuries to less than one-half of 1% of the population cost the rest of us $26 billion [2].

This may be true. But eyes and ears glaze over at statistics if they aren't contextualized in terms of values. The question progressives don't often answer explicitly is: *Why* do these statistics matter to us?

Here are conceptual level structures for the same two issues:

Level One: Values	***Fairness, Opportunity***
Level Two: Issue Area	Civil Rights
Level Three: Policy	*Affirmative Action*

Level One: Values	***Protection, Responsibility***
Level Two: Issue Area	Consumer Safety
Level Three: Policy	*Seat belt laws*

Affirmative action and seat belt laws are important issues. Considering conceptual levels allows us to see that they matter to us *because* we believe in fairness, opportunity, protection and responsibility. It is our commitment to these values that drives us to fight for the policies we support.

Putting Values Front and Center: A Three-Step Plan

If you identify yourself as a progressive, chances are you think of politics largely in terms of policies, and you may not be immediately aware of the values that underlie your beliefs about these policies. And if you work for an advocacy organization, odds are your organization has been formed around a specific policy or issue area. Your group's activity and expertise is probably all at Level Three, or perhaps Level Two.

The key is to train yourself, and those with whom you work, to think more in terms of Level One values. If you can change your thinking, you will also change your language, and you will begin to see new ways of organizing and advocating that will open up unforeseen possibilities for progressive change.

Rockridge recommends three steps to effect this change:

1. Identify Your Level One Values

Take five minutes to list out the Level One values that underlie your progressive commitments. If you are an advocate: Why do you show up to work every day? What makes your difficult work worth all the effort and, too often, frustration? Why do you keep on? For non-advocates: Why do the issues that matter to you matter so much?

Try to keep your answers in the form of general values rather than specific outcomes. For instance, say: "I believe the vulnerable should be *protected*," not: "I want to make sure every child has access to immunizations." If you care about prison reform, is this because you believe in fairness? In opportunity? Second chances? Forgiveness? Redemption?

Speak your values, not specific outcomes

~~"I want to make sure every child has access to immunizations."~~

Better: "I believe the vulnerable should be *protected*."

~~"We need harsher penalties for slumlords."~~

Better: "Every family deserves a *safe* and *healthy* place to live."

Or perhaps you're devoted to low-income housing issues. Is this because of opportunity? Fairness? Safety? Health?

Sit down with your friends and colleagues, and see what you've come up with.

2. Review and revise your materials

Once you have identified the Level One values underlying your work, look through your literature. Are the Level One values front and center? Would a reader know right away what values underlie your organization, or would they have to wade through a sea of individual facts and statistics before taking a guess at what your organization stands for? Values can be demonstrated by thinking carefully about the kinds of images you choose as well as the language you use.

Are your graphics complicated tables and charts tracking the increase in local well pollutants from 1997-2003? What if they were images of *healthy families* gathered around their kitchen sinks drinking crystal clear water?

Do your call-out quotes cite activists or other public figures calling for a "37% increase in district funding for school arts programs"? Could they speak of "*opportunities* for our children to learn and grow"?

These are just examples to get you going. You know your issue; you know your audience. Collaborate with co-workers on appropriate revisions and improvements.

3. Be Consistent

Ideas get accepted as "common sense" when words expressing those ideas are repeated often enough that they become the normal way to talk about the issue.

Progressives commonly encourage diversity of expression as a matter of creativity and individuality. But diversity of expression gets in the way of the public accepting your ideas as natural common sense.

The reason is this: When words are repeated, the corresponding frames are evoked repeatedly. When they are evoked often enough, they become entrenched in people's brains – like images burned into a screen. They then become common sense. This is a phenomenon that advertisers have exploited for decades, and that has enabled conservatives to control public debate. Conservatives' use of repetition is not a failure of creativity. It is a *use* of creativity, and a centerpiece of their strategy.

Repetition need not be authoritarian; it can be an expression of moral unity.

[1] Statistical Abstract of the United States, US Census Bureau, 2003.

[2] "The Economic Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2000." National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation. May 2002.

The foundational content of this piece draws on work by George Lakoff, as originally published by the FrameWorks Institute.

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Welfare Reform Illustration:

Conservative	Liberal/Progressive
Level 1: Values and Principles	
Self-discipline, reward for work, self-determination, personal responsibility, government hurts	Obligation to the collective good, shared responsibility, unequal starting places, government helps
Level 2: Issue Categories	
Moral behavior, taxes, education	Poverty, social welfare, inequality
Level 3: Programs and Policies	
Tax cuts, business incentives to create opportunity, short-term "bootstrap" help for individuals	Financial aid, health care, housing, educational assistance so people will take advantage of opportunity
Basic Argument	
Welfare hurts rather than helps by undermining the very attributes that people need to be successful (hard work, self-discipline, etc). It makes people dependent rather than independent. It rewards immoral behavior by giving people something that they have not earned, thus worsening the problem.	Welfare helps by giving people the basic necessities they need to be successful. It makes people independent by providing a helping hand. It encourages moral behavior in society by sharing with those who are disadvantaged. It is a manifestation of our obligation to the collective good