

Creating a Message Box

It is easy to get bogged down in the details of policy debates and to be pulled into defensive positions when trying to articulate your positions or proposals. One of our central challenges is to keep our communications focused on our vision and values—a story big enough for people to see what is possible in their community (or state) and why. There will be plenty of time and opportunities to fill in details and deal with the intricacies. Our communications needs to set the big picture first. Using a message box can help you do that.

Complete the attached message box by answering the following questions.

That Vision Thing

What is your vision for the community, state, or society? What drives you to seek the change you are working for? Your communications needs to be aspirational and inspirational. Even when addressing difficult challenges and realities we all need a sense of what is possible and why.

Values First

Why does this issue matter? Discipline yourself to answer this question first in your communications. Leading with values sets the stage for all the rest of your communications and motivates your audience to action. Don't be afraid to talk about the big ideas that are at stake: Opportunity, Prosperity, Justice, Freedom, Protection, Common Good, etc.

Problem Statement: We're in this Together

What is the problem? And, what is at stake for everyone in your state/community if it is not addressed? Motivating public will and public action for the kinds of changes we seek will only happen if people can see and feel how we are interconnected and interdependent. We must articulate how the conditions facing our neighbors ultimately affect us all.

Another important consideration when we describe the problems we face is helping our audiences see the systemic nature of the problem. Often, in a desire to make a problem seem real, we tell a story about how a specific individual is affected. This, however, can narrow the problem so that individual solutions seem sufficient. Instead, we need to explain problems so that systemic solutions follow naturally.

Solutions: We Know What to Do

What must be done? And, how is this possible? We must talk about solutions and about the incremental, yet positive, steps that can be taken to address the challenges we face, to take advantage of new opportunities, to create the future we all desire. Laundry lists of terrible statistics will not get us there. Make sure your solutions are prominent, pragmatic and achievable.

Using a Message Box

Message boxes can be an important communications tool to help you develop a coherent, values-based message and to stay “on” that message. Creating a message box helps you to consider the big picture before you talk or write on a specific policy issue. And, if you use it consistently, it can help keep your communications on track and on your terrain.

Message boxes can:

- Distill your key arguments to the ones you need to repeat over and over;
- Keep you focused on Level One values and solutions;
- Help you to characterize the problem, or challenge, in a way that supports YOUR solution;
- Be your “cheat sheet” for developing materials (op-eds, blogs, constituent newsletters, and testimony) and preparing for interviews and debates;
- Create a safety zone from which you answer hard questions;
- Prevent you from repeating damaging frames;
- Prevent you from wandering off into technical jargon, acronyms and statistics; and
- When used consistently by all or most of the public spokespeople for an issue, message boxes can help create an echo chamber that reinforces itself in the public mind.

Getting into and back into YOUR Box - keeping conversations and interviews on Your Terrain

One of the important uses of the message box is to help you stay off of the opponents’ turf and keep you from repeating damaging frames that an interviewer may use in a question he/she asks of you. Using your message box can help you bridge or pivot back to your own message.

You can use bridging and pivoting phrases to get you back to the statements of your own message box, such as:

- “Actually . . .”
- “That’s a good question. (pause) Here’s how I think about this issue . . .”
- “The real question is . . .”
- The important thing to remember is.....
- What we are talking about here is....
- What matters most is...
- To put this in broader perspective...
- I would like to emphasize that...
- Let’s not lose sight of the core problem....
- At the heart of the matter is...
- Taking a closer look what we see is....
- At the end of the day, none of those issues can be addressed without...¹

Resources:

[FrameWorks Institute Ezine #1: Bridging](#)

¹ Berkeley Media Studies Group (1999) and World Health Organization (2005)

Message Box:

Your vision for the community, state, society. A sense of purpose and goal that drives you to seek the change you are working for. Your aspiration and inspiration.

A clear statement of the problem you are trying to address in a way that everyone can see their stake in addressing the issue.

Vision
Problem **Solution**
Values

The solution you are proposing and the principles or outcomes it is designed to achieve or uphold.

The Level One Values that underpin your proposed solution. The answer to the “why does it matter” question.

Message Box:

