

Building Assets, Creating Opportunity

Making the Case with Messages that Work

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Patrick Bresette - pbresette@demos.org

Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector

Dēmos: A Network for Ideas & Action

www.demos.org

Today's Workshop

- Understand how dominant cultural stories, perceptions and frames effect public will
- Explore the dominant public attitudes about poverty, the economy and government that shape attitudes about your issues
- Learn key elements for creating a more productive public conversation about your issues
- Discuss and Practice new approaches and how to apply the lessons to your work.

Our Goal

Public support for a government dedicated to the common good and empowered to address the challenges and opportunities of the 21st Century.



Our Research & Field Work

Research

- Government
- The Economy
- Budgets & Taxes

In the Field

- Policy Shops
- Advocates
- Coalitions
- Electeds & Managers
- Unions



America is at a cross-roads: Public Challenges and Public Will

Building Public Support for an Asset & Opportunity Agenda



- Individual Development Accounts
- Lifting asset limits
- Lending protections
- Homebuyer assistance
- Expanded work supports
- Fostering Microenterprise
- Access to education
- Expanding Tax credits

The Asset Building Knot



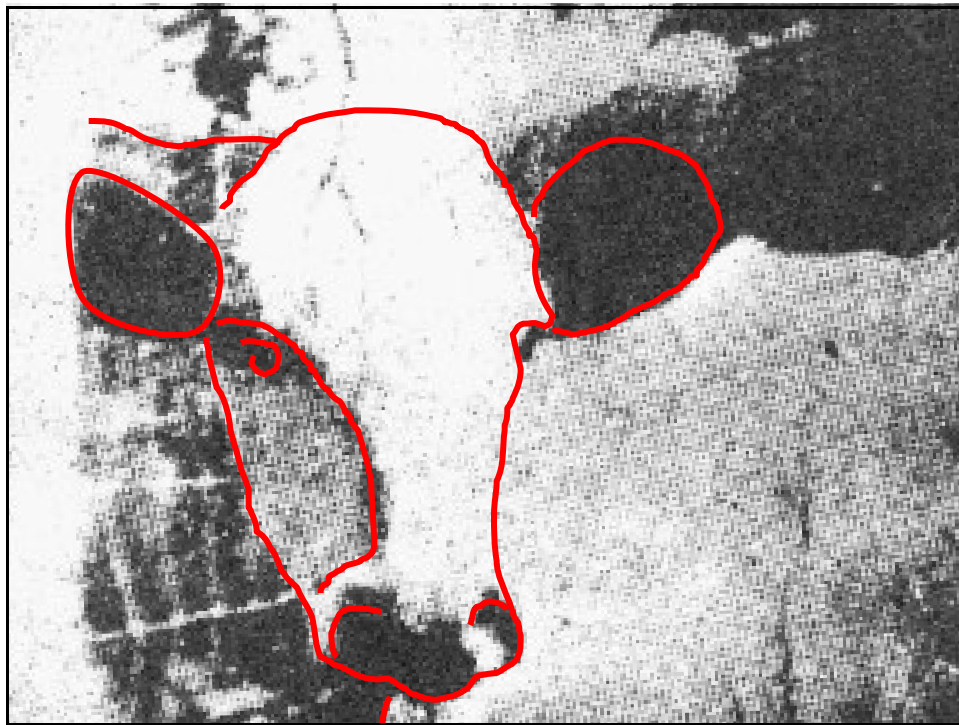
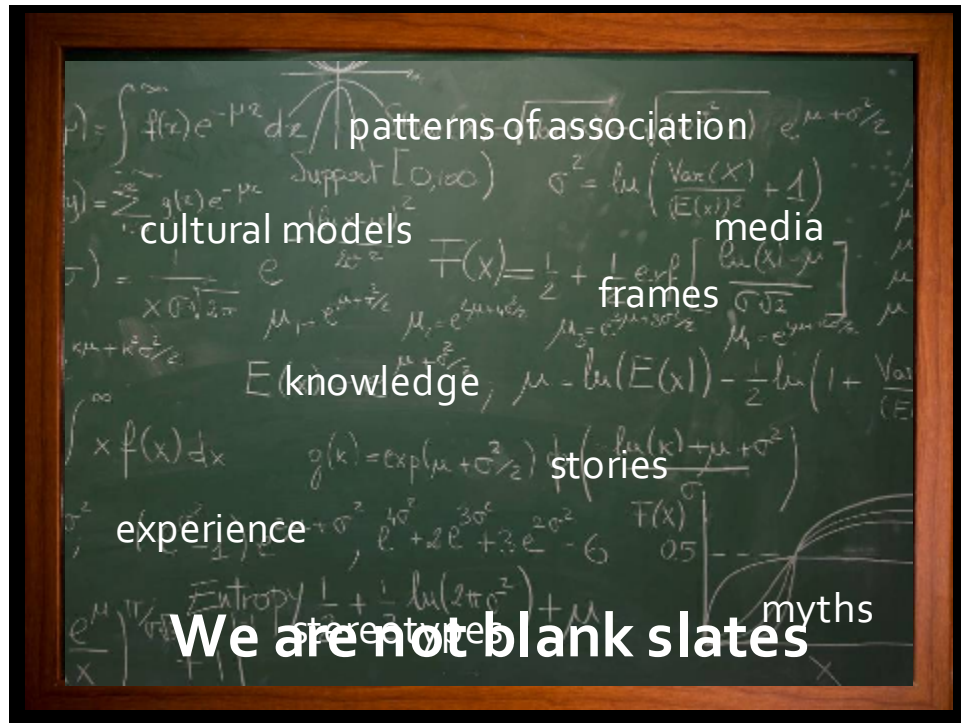
- Poverty
- Economy
- Government

Untying Knots



- Understanding default patterns of thinking
- Finding latent, but more productive avenues
- Mapping a way forward, strategizing for change

Telling New Stories



We Fill in the Blanks

- Once a dominant frame is triggered we fill in missing information.
- The triggered “understanding” is very resilient.
- It happens fast.

**Sam
is a
Weasel**

If Sam is a Weasel,

- And I loan money to Sam, will I ever see it again?
- And I confide a secret to Sam, will s/he keep it?
- And I ask Sam to do something important for me over the weekend, can I count on him/her to do it on time?
- And s/he dated your son, daughter, brother, sister or mother, would you be happy?



our brains are
rapidly seeking
to connect new
information to
the existing
stories in our
heads

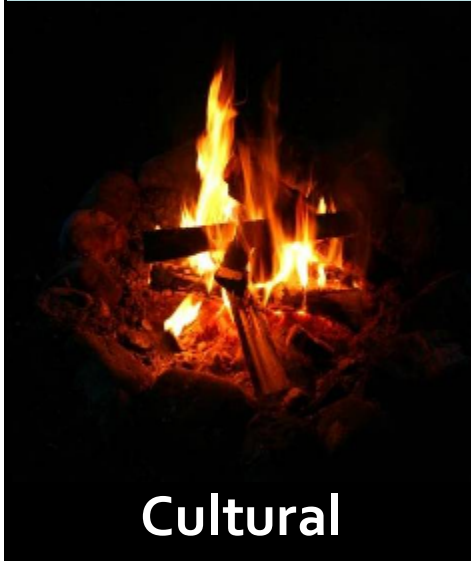
Essential Steps for the Future of America's Wetlands



Why Wetlands Matter

Wetlands **benefit us all**. Wetlands **act as a filter** for the waters of our lakes, rivers and streams. Wetlands improve the water we drink, and the air we breathe. **Wetlands act like giant sponges**. They soak up rain and snowmelt as they occur, serving as temporary storage basins, thus reducing erosion, and limiting the destruction caused by severe floods . . .

Stories



Cultural

"They are the **narratives of life**, spanning the centuries and connecting the generations. They are the **vessels** in which we carry our **history** and **traditions**, our **values** and **lessons for living**, our **hopes** and **dreams**."

The International Storytelling Center, TN

Stories



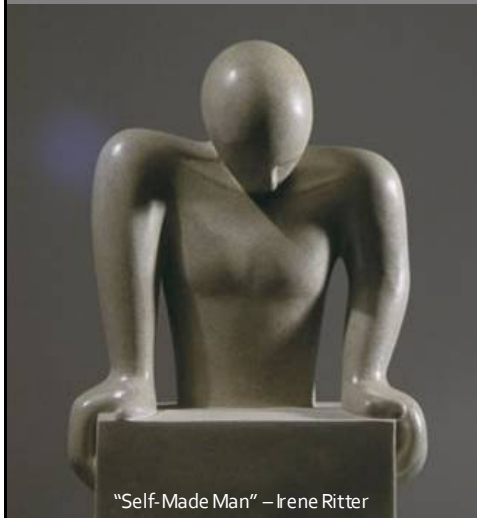
Cognitive

All evidence leads to the conclusion that **concepts conveyed in story form** — more than ideas explained with logic and analysis — **imprint themselves naturally in human minds**."

- Roche and Sadowsky

Deep Cultural Stories and Habits of Thinking Also Shape Public Perceptions

The Triumphant
Individual



"Self-Made Man" – Irene Ritter

Independence

The Benevolent
Community



Dave Kolpack / AP

Interdependence



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Administration for Children & Families

About Asset Building

Asset building is an **anti-poverty** strategy that **helps low-income people** move toward greater **self-sufficiency** by accumulating savings and purchasing long-term assets. The theory behind this approach is that helping people purchase an asset, as opposed to simply increasing their income, provides stability that may allow them to **escape the cycle of poverty** permanently. Examples of long-term assets include a home, higher education and training, and a business.

Traditional Asset Building Stories

Independence & Self-Sufficiency

- Financial independence & personal responsibility
- Individual & family benefit
- Breaking cycles of poverty
- Better than government “assistance”
- Create educated consumers

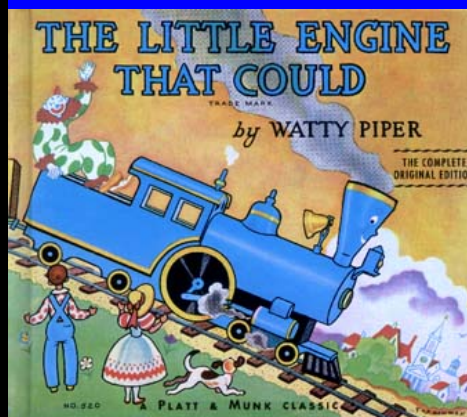




Chicken Little

Desperation

Aspiration



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New Mexico

Land that used to be Enchanting

Home

Wilderness

Threats to Wilderness

Discover About

Wilderness

Special Places

Old Wilderness

Little Peak Wilderness

Pecos Wilderness

Manzano Mountain

Wilderness

Campaigns

Proposed Wilderness

Wildlife

Take Action

Support Us

Press Room

About Us

NEWS

New Mexico Wilderness



A Wilderness Legacy

When Spanish settlers first arrived in New Mexico four hundred years ago, they described rolling hills of vibrant grass and cacti that came up to the knees of mounted horsemen. Later, Aldo Leopold, "the father of Wilderness", wrote of this land of unparalleled biological diversity that the "look dotted hills, lupine-dotted mesas, and lazy trout streams... came near to being the dream of creation."

Sadly, today most of the rolling grasses are gone, the streams have long dried up, and many of the speckled mesas and hills have been sacrificed to economic development and motorized recreation. These lands, once treasured as some of the wildest in the west, are quickly dwindling.

Wilderness Protection is the Answer

There are well over 4.5 million acres of potential Wilderness in New Mexico; only an aggressive Wilderness advocacy campaign will create the

public demand to permanently protect these areas as Wilderness.



New Mexico – Land of Enchantment

The wild lands of New Mexico have been the source of our spirit and culture for a thousand years. We have a legacy of living with the land, not just on it. A new century poses new challenges – balancing growth and prosperity with the open space that is our heritage. The Wilderness Alliance is working to keep this balance and ensure that New Mexico remains enchanting for future generations . . .

How do these
competing **Stories** and
Perspectives effect your
work?

The Asset Building Knot



- Poverty
- Economy
- Government

Our Cultural Stories
about **Poverty** and the
Economy also Get in
the Way . . .

Poverty Story



- Each individual is responsible for his or her own success or failure;
- With hard work comes reward;
- The goal is equal opportunity, not equal outcome; and
- Anyone can achieve the "American Dream".

Source: Meg Bostrom, *For and Economy that Works for All*

Some Public Beliefs work for us . . .

- Hard work should be valued and rewarded
- Working people are struggling
- The country needs to act to impact the economy
- People tend to judge the economy based on their perceptions of *how they and people like them are doing*.
- We can all work together to find solutions

New Openings?

"The current tenor of public sentiment about the safety net remains much more supportive than it was in 1994, when public backing of social welfare programs was at an all-time low."

The Pew Research Center
May 21, 2009



A Closing Door?

"The share that believes that it is the government's responsibility to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves has dropped from 69% two years ago to 63% today, and there have been comparable declines across other items related to government assistance to the needy."

The Pew Research Center
May 21, 2009



How do we understand the Economy . . .

A Difficult Topic



A "Natural Economy"



The Individual Actor Economy

Implications:

- A broadly shared model
- Moral qualities shape economic actions and outcomes
- Inequality happens
- Limited room for government

The Individual Actor Economy



Moral Qualities Shape “Good” and “Bad”
Economic Actions & Outcomes

Inequality Happens



Suspicious of Governmental Role



- *Last Resort*



- *Creates Dependency*



- *Stifles Business*

Government Role is Limited . . .



- *Policing* the
"Bad Actors"



- *Protecting* the
Deserving

. . . and after the fact.

Limited Roles for Us



Worker



Consumer

The Desired Transformation

Default	Goal
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The economy is “free” & “natural” – have to adapt.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The economy is man-made and intentional.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual character/luck determine outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Systems & Structures affect outcomes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone competes for their own interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone’s interests are connected and interdependent.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The strength of the overall economy – GDP, Stock Market – matters.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The economic wellbeing of average people matters.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Government’s role is minimal and reactive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Government’s role is fundamental and proactive.

How do we tell the story?

A middle class doesn't arise by accident . . .

- “Not by Accident” conveys Intentionality
 - Quality of life to sustain or aspire to
 - Not “give me mine”
- “Middle Class” conveys Interdependence
 - Engine of the economy
 - Holds society together

The Intentional Middle Class

A strong middle class, which is the engine driving our economy, doesn't arise by accident, but is the result of deliberate and proactive policy choices.

The Middle Class is No Accident

"Having a strong middle class is an indicator of a healthy country."

53-year old Democratic woman, Oklahoma

"The middle class drives the economy, so government economic policy should be crafted to allow for a broad middle class that can succeed through hard work."

30-year old Independent man, New York

"As the middle class goes, so does the economy and that it is important for the government to make policy that reflects that."

28-year old Republican man, Ohio

How do we tell the story?

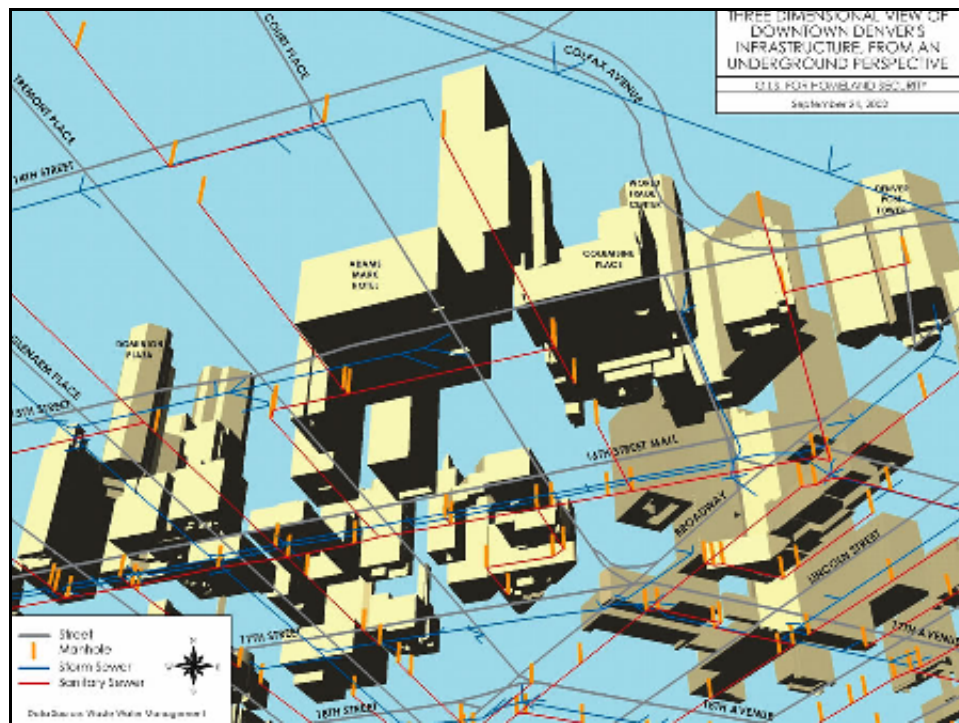
Public structures are foundational to our economy . . .

Explains how it works as well as intentionality and interdependence:

- Government creates and maintains
- Fundamental to prosperity
- Builds and strengthens the middle class

Public Structures as Economic Foundation

The Public Structures (like FDIC, community colleges, Social Security, etc.) created and maintained by government are foundational to prosperity, opportunity and economic stability, as well as the strength of the middle class.



Public Structures are Essential

"Although there are more ways to promote economic growth and stability, one of the most important ways is the use of public structures."

34-year old Republican man, South Carolina

"The average middle class person relies on these systems and structures to maintain a healthy, productive lifestyle. These systems allow Americans to save money, and continue on with their lives at a productive pace. Without these systems the quality of life for Americans would greatly diminish."

25-year old Democratic woman, Maryland

A New View - A New Role



Citizen Managers:
we shape the
economy we need

How do
perceptions of
Poverty and the
Economy effect
your work?



**Dominant perceptions of government
undermine support for public solutions.**



**What are our
stories about
Government . . .**



A Shared Cultural Joke

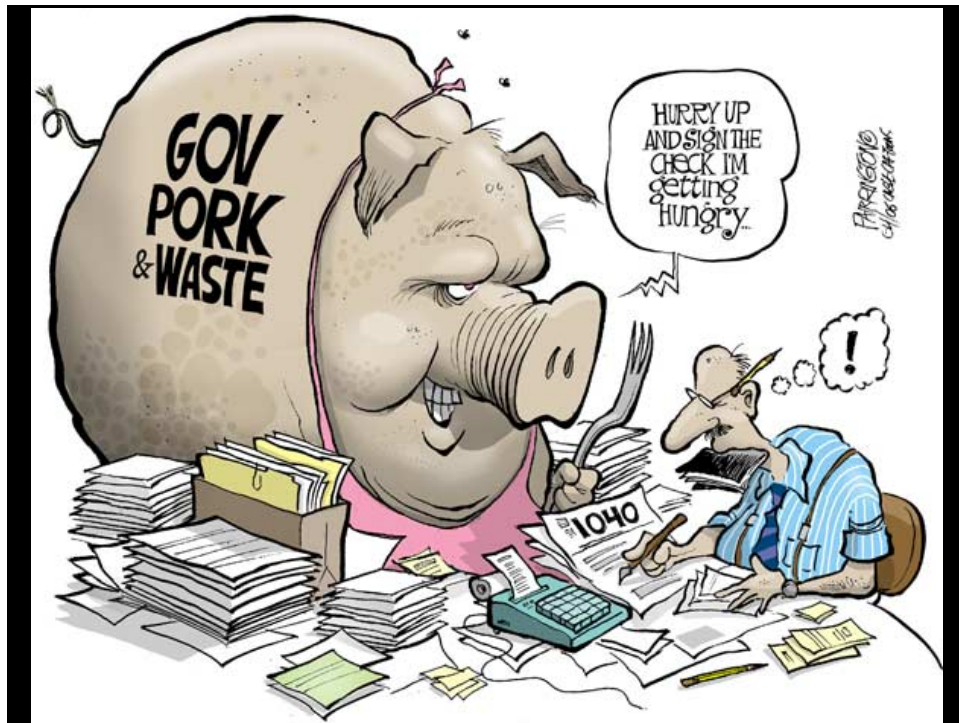
"More Americans can name the three stooges than the three branches of government.

Well, that's because the three stooges are more likely to get something done." - *David Letterman*



What People
Think of Government:
Default Responses





Mission & Purpose



VALUES

- Common Good
- Quality of Life
- Community Wellbeing
- Public Purpose

ROLE

- Protector
- Manager & Planner
- Steward
- Consensus-BUILDER

Mindless Bureaucracy



Systems and Structures

Systems & Structures



- Concrete and vivid images
- The public systems we have created
- How they work
- Why they are important

Mechanisms for Understanding

"... people typically rely on analogies in order to learn complex, abstract concepts. These concrete analogies are **simplifying models** - they help people organize information into a clear picture in their heads, including facts and ideas that they have been exposed to, but never been able to put together in a coherent way ..."

- *cultural logic*

Ozone Depletion



The left image is a diagram of the Earth's atmosphere showing the ozone layer. It labels the 'Ozone layer', 'Ozone hole', 'Polar ozone depletion zone', 'Troposphere', 'Stratosphere', 'Upper atmosphere', 'Lower atmosphere', 'Middle atmosphere', and 'Upper atmosphere'. It also shows a 'Polar ozone depletion zone' and a 'Polar ozone depletion zone'.

The right image is a photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a black tank top, with her hands on her face, appearing distressed or in pain, symbolizing the effects of ozone depletion on human health.



Government as our Public Structures

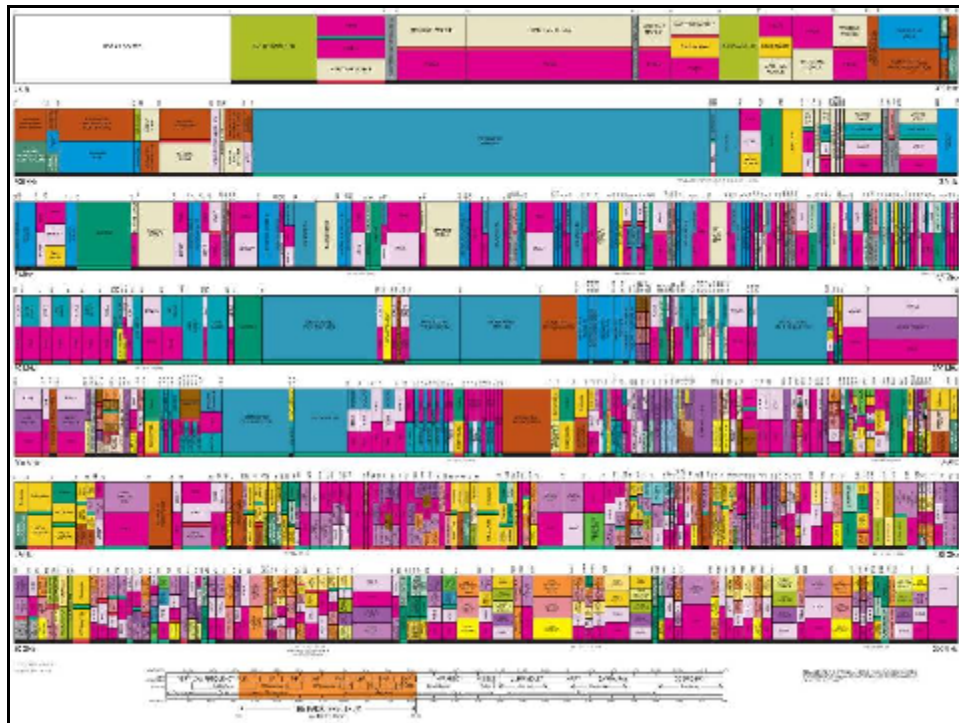
. . . the main advantages that make America so successful come from the **Public Structures** it has created

. . . these Public Structures include the *physical* structures (highways, airports, and communications grids) and the *organizational* structures (the postal system, courts) we need to get things done, and the *social* support systems that help to ensure the health and well-being of our communities

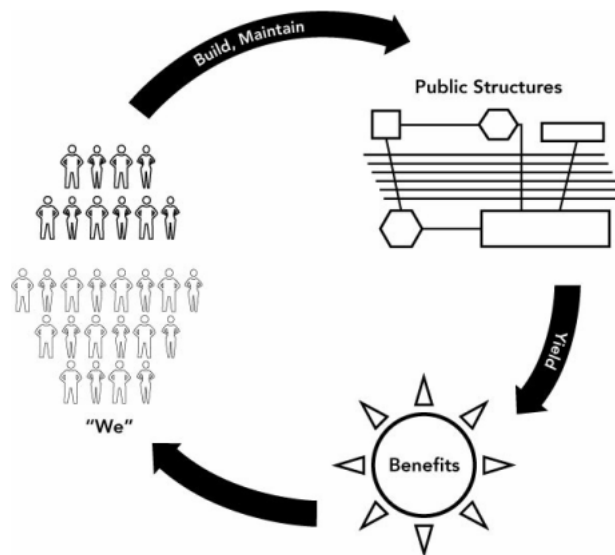
. . . it is our **well-functioning and supported** Public Structures that are essential for overall success . . .

Responses to the Public Structures description –

- What are they?
- Why are they important?
- Can you name some of the important public structures we rely on?



Rounding Out the Story



Social Security is one the best examples of how we as Americans have created a **public structure** that **benefits us all**. Through this one accomplishment, we virtually eliminated poverty among senior citizens. By **pooling our efforts and sharing risk**, we **protect everyone's quality of life** as we age and retire.

Consumer Stance



Government
as Vending Machine

Our Government

What's in it for
me, and what
is it going to
cost?



Citizen Stance

Citizen Thinking



- Interdependence
- Working together
- Problem-solving
- Everyone has a role to play
- “Our” Government
- The Common Interest

Which model is being triggered?

Access to health care, good nutrition and cash assistance is vital to low-income families. Yet, enrolling in programs like Food Stamps and Medicaid has gotten harder and harder over the last year. The new computer eligibility system is riddled with problems. And, turnover in state workers means untrained workers are often ill-prepared to help families get the benefits for which they qualify.

Which model is being triggered?

Of every tax dollar collected by the state of Minnesota, roughly 80 cents is returned to communities and individuals in the form of aid and grants. The remaining 20 cents pays for such things as state highways, appropriations to colleges and universities, prisons, state parks and state government. Some areas receive less than their citizens pay in, while other areas receive more.

Which model is being triggered?

Our children deserve better. They need an education accountability system that provides fair, accurate and understandable information on the effectiveness of our schools. But, rather than debating the merits of our accountability system our Governor and Legislature are slugging it out in that legislative boxing ring we call the Capitol.

Dominant Stories



Just Politics



Bureaucracy



Vending Machine

...can't solve anything ... not my responsibility

New Stories



Mission & Purpose



Systems & Structures



Citizen-Thinking

... our tool for solutions & the common good ...

Making the Case for Government



- **Values:** Articulate the Public Good behind the policies and programs
- **System Thinking:** Help reveal our essential Public Systems & Structures
- **Awaken the Citizen:** What is our shared stake and responsibility?

Expanding the Asset & Opportunity Story

Independence

- Financial independence
- Individual & family benefit & success
- Policy by policy
- Out of poverty
- An educated consumer

Interdependence

- Financial stability
- Community/generational benefit & resilience
- Intentional systems
- Shared prosperity
- Empowered citizens

Tell New Stories

- How does your policy change build an economy that works for all, create strong and resilient communities and a robust middle class?
- What are the systems and structures we need to build prosperity?
- How do your proposals support and empower both individual achievement AND collective benefit?
- What is the role we can all play?

“... A talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change.....”

- Richard Rorty