



## CHAPTER 8

# The Key Role of Communications in Driving Impact

Clear and concise communication is a fundamental necessity for organizations of all kinds, including philanthropic entities. Communication is more than just the act of information transmission; it is a strategic methodology that shapes perception, drives action and, in the broader sense, plays a role in when and how organizations achieve their mission.

Communication shapes an organization's internal culture, its levels of transparency and legitimacy, and its ability to expand influence, build partnerships, and collaborate. Accordingly, good communication must start internally.

### *Internal Communications*

Includes staff emails, intranet posts, and internal reports. Aims to inform and engage employees and board members, and to reinforce alignment and focus on organizational mission and goals.

### *External Communications*

Includes external emails, press releases, annual reports, social media posts, and public presentations. Targets outside stakeholders, such as communities, grantees, potential donors, and the public to inform, drive action, build awareness, or change mindsets.

Both internal and external dimensions are essential to an organization's success; and while internal communication establishes the foundation for aligned messaging and a cohesive organizational culture, this chapter will specifically delve into the realm of external communication.

Embracing communication as a strategic tool can help amplify key voices, inspire stakeholders, and create a ripple effect of positive change. Philanthropic organizations have a unique opportunity to advocate for causes they believe in; and effective communication enables you to amplify the voices of the communities you serve, raise awareness about critical issues, and drive social change.

Well-crafted communication strategies give stakeholders a voice and invite them to actively participate in your endeavors. However, inclusive and transparent communication can sometimes be a challenge for the philanthropic sector as philanthropies have to grapple with the challenge of telling their stories in a way that not only ethically grabs attention but holds it. By using some of the following tools and tips for external communication, you can share a vision and impact in a manner that is accurate, engaging, and meaningful, all while using an inclusive, equitable, and non-exploitative lens.

## Implicit Communications

Even when you're not producing a blog or report, your actions, decisions, and even inactions contribute to your organization's narrative. Whether with purpose or inadvertently, they are a constant broadcast of your values, priorities, and mission. Here are some points to reflect on:



**The silent message:** What are you not saying? Remember, inaction or silence can also be a form of communication.



**Internal makeup:** Who are you hiring, funding, and promoting? These choices are part of your organization's narrative.



**Mission alignment:** Does your work align with your stated mission? Or are there discrepancies?



**Endowment reflection:** Where is your money going and what does that say about how you walk the walk? Are your investments contradicting or supporting your mission?

Communication isn't only about the words an organization says or writes. It's an ongoing process that embraces both explicit and implicit forms of expression. Being aware of this implicit form of communication can complement your intentional messaging, reinforce your credibility, and further your mission.

## Key Components of a Communications Strategy

To build a sturdy foundation for successful communication, donors should consider it a pivotal component in their overall strategy. This can involve understanding the audience, setting clear objectives, amplifying the voices of grantee communities, assessing organizational needs, connecting with external resources, establishing thought leadership forums, and implementing strategies for consistent and transparent communication. Addressed in more detail below, these steps ensure that philanthropic messages align with mission, resonate with stakeholders, and contribute to meaningful impact.

### Understand the Audience

Before anything else, understanding who you are speaking to is vital. Different audiences require different communication approaches. A deep understanding of your audience enables you to tailor your message and methods to ensure that messages will resonate.

### Set Clear Goals and Objectives

Determine what message you want to convey, who you want to reach, and what action you desire from them. These decisions drive the rest of your communications strategy.

### Amplify Grantee Communities

Telling stories about organizations and programs through the lens of the service users or participants can serve as a vehicle to highlight the work of grantee communities. By leveraging their own reputation, philanthropies can direct more attention and support to the causes their grantees champion.

Developing a robust communications strategy within an organization involves four key steps.

#### 1. Assessing capacity and organizational needs:

This includes assessing your communications talent that is in house and determining whether the organization has the necessary skills and resources needed. Often philanthropic organizations have a small or nonexistent communications team or lack anyone with the requisite skill set to manage bought in services. Accordingly, conducting this assessment and planning to build capacity is the first step.

**2. Connecting with resources:** Once needs are identified, organizations can connect with resources that can help produce compelling content. This might be in-house, or it might involve hiring a communications consultant, investing in professional development for current staff, or partnering with external agencies.

#### 3. Establishing thought leadership forums:

Philanthropies can establish or participate in thought leadership forums, such as blogs, webinars, or conferences, to share insights and best practices, highlight the work of grantees, and engage with stakeholders.

#### 4. Developing strategies and avenues for regular communication:

Building and sustaining trust with all stakeholders requires consistent and transparent communication internal and externally. Some simple strategies might include running regular “stories” meetings where stakeholders, program leads, and other representatives discuss potential stories across platforms. Using an editorial calendar or social media scheduling tool to plan communications ahead of time will allow you to see, at a glance, that your efforts are rolling up to an overarching narrative for the organization. Consider hiring a communication consultant or agency if you do not have the skill in-house to set these systems up.

## Additional Tips from Communications Agencies

- **Building Capacity for Communications:** With a well-thought-out communications strategy, adequate capacity, and the right platforms, philanthropies can craft and share stories which inspire action, promote change, and forge stronger connections with stakeholders. Every organization’s storytelling journey is unique, and the best tools for your

foundation will depend on your specific needs, audiences, and objectives.

- **Stay in your Lane:** Doing everything all the time, on every platform, to every audience, with messaging that doesn't roll up to any kind of overarching narrative is what's known as the "shiny object" paradigm. It's more effective to "stay in your lane" and communicate about only what you are uniquely placed to communicate.

- **Speak to your Audience:** When planning outward facing communications, keep front of mind the questions of, "What are the communications goals?"; "For whom?"; and "Why now?" If a piece of content doesn't speak to organizational goals or themes, or speak to one of the identified audiences, consider whether you should share it at all.
- **Champion Program and Community Leaders:** Creating a streamlined and simple process

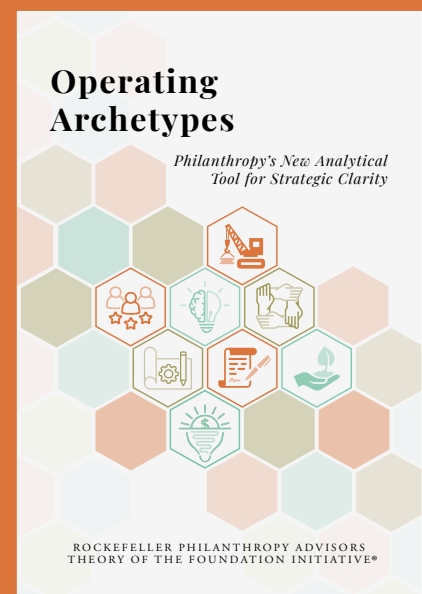
## Communications by Operating Archetype

Communication is one of the four key capabilities in Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors' Operating Archetypes model. Operating Archetypes are metaphorical representations that illustrate what a philanthropy seeks to achieve and how it puts its resources to work. For certain archetypes, communication is particularly crucial—for example, Think Tanks, which are typically focused on disseminating findings on complex issues to decision makers, affected communities, and the general public. Arnold Ventures, a U.S. based philanthropy that represents a Think Tank archetype, has an imperative to identify, promote and invest in evidence-based policies and programs that maximize opportunity and minimize injustice. In addition to building the evidence base for effective social policy, Arnold Ventures has begun to invest increasingly in communicating and promoting its findings. As the foundation's vice president Sam Mar put it, "Research and evidence are great and necessary to know what policies work and why but none of that is sufficient if nobody is aware of this knowledge."

Similarly, Campaign Managers need to navigate the broad range of viewpoints, approaches, and theories of change held by the stakeholders across different sectors while building consensus around campaigns. Ramping up communications is important to building trust, as well as relaying goals, and thus to sustaining momentum.

Field Builders increasingly rely on a robust communication function. As a globally recognized Field Builder, Wellcome Trust of the U.K. is dedicated to strengthening institutions that are responsible for generating, disseminating, and applying scientific insights to catalyze breakthrough ideas and establish the evidence base for effective health interventions. In addition to building knowledge by working with external researchers, Wellcome has invested in deepening its in-house roster of scientific experts and advisors who help guide the organization and communicate research findings to relevant audiences.

Venture Catalysts focus on convening power to bring diverse voices to sharpen their lens for discovering and investing in promising early-stage solutions. As a Venture Catalyst focused on promoting and enabling biodiversity conservation in Brazil for example, Boticário Group Foundation uses a variety of financial instruments, including an environmental impact acceleration program to strengthen the business community's impact investing capacity.





for amplifying the work of grantee partners is an important step in creating an authentic communications strategy that benefits the communities you're seeking to serve. By meeting organizations where they are, allowing them to tell you the easiest way to share information, and letting partners guide the process, you can ensure that this communications strategy doesn't become extractive and create more work.

- **Find Natural Storytellers:** Have regular check-ins with people who might have interesting stories to tell. Consider regular editorial meetings to look at the editorial calendar together and listen to their ideas. Building those relationships is a great way to get a rich mix of current and relevant content.
- **Choose the Right Platforms:** Different platforms have different audiences and engagement styles. It's important to select the platforms that your target audience uses and that suit the type of content you are sharing. Some platforms are universally popular and provide a wide reach. Philanthropies can leverage these platforms, adhering to best practices for each to maximize engagement. Many platforms offer ways to build communities, such as groups or hashtags on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok or other social media. Philanthropic organizations can use these tools to cultivate a community of supporters who can amplify their message.

## Crafting Empowering Narratives for Change

Narrative and sentiment change are powerful tools that involve reshaping the discourse surrounding a particular topic and influencing prevailing sentiments and perceptions. Stories, in particular, possess an extraordinary power to shape perceptions

and sway public opinion. A critical component of communications, storytelling is a potent tool that helps organizations connect with their audience on an emotional level. The magic of storytelling lies in its ability to convey a message in a way that resonates with the audience. In philanthropy, compelling stories encapsulate the heart of the organization's mission and the efforts it makes to effect change. A well-crafted story can inspire, foster empathy, and motivate action. Storytelling that drives empathy and action goes beyond mere facts and figures—it's about forging a meaningful narrative arc that engages both the mind and the heart. It is here where philanthropic organizations can play a pivotal role in altering attitudes and behaviors, especially concerning harmful stereotypes and biases.

The role of philanthropic organizations in driving narrative change extends beyond their own activities; they can also serve as vital advocates for their grantees' work. By amplifying the successes and challenges faced by their grantee partners, these organizations can create awareness, build momentum, and garner support for the issues their grantees are addressing. This process, however, demands a delicate balance. Philanthropies should amplify their grantees' work without overshadowing them or claiming undue credit for their achievements. The stories told must be emotionally resonant without exploiting or further marginalizing the voices of grantees. Inclusion of the communities impacted is imperative at every stage, and highlighting active agents of change is paramount. Each piece of content should ideally culminate in a compelling call to action, inviting the audience to engage more deeply with the cause.

### Using an Asset-Framing® Lens

To accomplish this, philanthropic organizations can employ an "asset-framing" lens. Created by renowned social entrepreneur [Trabian Shorters](#), this approach

focuses on highlighting the strengths and potential of individuals or communities rather than dwelling on their deficits or problems. It allows organizations to craft empowering narratives that break away from reinforcing harmful stereotypes or stigmas. Asset-framing operates on the assumption that all individuals possess inherent value even before any interventions take place. In contrast, deficit-framing tends to define people by their problems, often leading to negative perceptions. Embracing asset-framing triggers a move towards empowerment and inclusivity.

### The Power of Language and Narratives

This transformative perspective infiltrates even the mission and value statements of organizations. Traditionally, these statements have often been laden with deficit-framing language. For instance, "We help at-risk youth in high-crime neighborhoods" contains two deficit-framed statements. In contrast, an asset-framed version would read: "We help young people overcome obstacles and achieve their dreams." This shift is profound, conveying a desire to help individuals realize their ambitions rather than reducing them to their challenges.

Narratives wield immense power in shaping judgments and perceptions. Consider for example, the impact of language in the context of significant social issues. Campaigns advocating for marriage equality shifted the conversation from oppression to aspiration, focusing on the right to honor commitments. Similarly, the term "pro-choice" was crafted to focus on rights; and the terminology shift from "gun control" to "gun safety" speaks volumes. Language matters profoundly; words steer perceptions.

### Embracing Change for Empowerment

Historically, many social good organizations used deficit-framing language to emphasize crises and engage supporters. This includes in their mission statements, for example, "We help at-risk youth in high-crime neighborhoods." This common statement has not one, but two deficit-framed statements. Instead an asset-framed version would read: "We help young people overcome obstacles and achieve their dreams." The shift is profound. Asset-framing conveys the desire to help individuals achieve their ambitions, rather than reducing them to their challenges.

Asset-framing doesn't ignore challenges; it acknowledges them but reframes the narrative by

## Effects of Framing One Group as the Standard

Language is so important that even the order in which you put words can matter. A recent study<sup>1</sup> using four similar statements ("girls do just as well as boys at math," "boys do just as well as girls at math," "girls and boys are equally good at math," and "boys and girls are equally good at math") revealed that minor changes in framing can unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes, even when the content intends to promote equality. When boys were mentioned first, participants tended to attribute more natural ability to boys; when girls were framed as the standard, however, that number reversed. Interestingly, participants did not recognize any bias in the framing despite the outcome.

This research underscores the critical role language plays in shaping perceptions and the potential for unintentional reinforcement of stereotypes, even in well-meaning statements. In the context of philanthropy and communication, it highlights the need for careful wording to ensure that messages genuinely convey equity and avoid inadvertently perpetuating biases, making it vital for philanthropic organizations to consider not only what they say but also how they say it to effect meaningful change.

introducing individuals through their aspirations and contributions before mentioning their challenges. The brain wants narratives and will build them. Over time, framing things in the deficit creates cynicism and eats away at hope. One of the benefits of asset-framing is that when you state someone's aspirations, your brain instantly associates them with worthiness. It becomes much easier to see that the problem is not the person but situations and systems that block their worthy aspiration. This approach helps break the association between an individual and the problem, fostering a more empathetic and empowering perspective.

<sup>1</sup> Eleanor K. Chestnut, Ellen M. Markman, "Girls Are as Good as Boys at Math" Implies That Boys Are Probably Better: A Study of Expressions of Gender Equality, *Cognitive Science* September 2018. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cogs.12637>

### Cultivating Empathy and Hope

Remember, defining people by their challenges equates to stigmatizing them. It's essential to review your organization's mission and vision statements to assess where they fall on the framing spectrum. Consider initiating discussions at board or leadership meetings to reevaluate the wording of your statements and messages, with the aim of adopting an asset frame rather than a deficit frame. This shift cultivates a narrative that reflects worthiness, optimism, and the potential for positive change.

### Communications Examples

Real-world examples can provide invaluable insights for organizations looking to enhance their communications strategy and storytelling. Below are two good examples highlighting how philanthropies have leveraged the power of communication in radical ways to drive impact, inspire change, and foster stronger relationships with their stakeholders.

At the intersection of various fields, Italy-based Fondazione CRT's Officine Grandi Riparazioni (OGR) project demonstrates the power of communication in creating clarity and transparency. Through proactive and comprehensive communication efforts, OGR has succeeded in making its complex work understandable and accessible to various stakeholders. By meeting partners and populations where they are, OGR has been able to foster engagement, build partnerships, and inspire collective action toward shared goals.

ArtPlace America stood out for its commitment to empowering grantees to tell their own stories. The organization provided technical assistance, hosted social media takeovers, and worked with multiple communications partners and grassroots leaders to amplify community voices. In addition, the funder provided technical assistance and paid contributors to ensure that the narratives shared were authentic, engaging, and impactful. As a time-limited fund, the strategic pivot to communication was a critical part of its strategy, ensuring its impact and learnings continue to resonate and inspire long after their funding cycle ended.

These examples underscore the importance of transparency, inclusivity, and strategic communication in amplifying impact and fostering stronger relationships with stakeholders. They also highlight the value of investing in communication, whether it's by building internal capacity, leveraging partnerships, or developing storytelling techniques.

## Ethical Considerations in Storytelling

When sharing stories of those from vulnerable communities, representation, consent, and the potential for exploitation demand special attention and care.

- **Representation:** It's essential to ensure fair and accurate representation when telling stories. This means acknowledging and respecting the diversity and individuality of people, their experiences, and the communities they represent. It also means avoiding stereotypes and assumptions that may perpetuate harmful biases.
- **Consent:** Storytelling must always be based on informed consent from the individuals whose stories are being shared. This involves being transparent about how the story will be used, who will have access to it, and the potential implications of sharing the story.
- **Exploitation Risk:** Stories should be told in a way that does not exploit the experiences or circumstances of the individuals or communities being showcased. This means avoiding 'trauma porn'—the overuse of distressing details just to provoke a reaction—and not commodifying or oversimplifying complex issues for the sake of a compelling narrative.

Keeping these ethical considerations in mind can help protect the integrity of the individuals and communities involved and contribute to more ethical storytelling in philanthropy.





# Evaluating Communications Strategies

Regular evaluation of communication strategies helps philanthropies to understand what works, what doesn't, and how to improve their efforts over time. Having impact goals and objectives, identifying appropriate metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs), and leveraging available tools can aid the evaluation process.

## Setting Impact Goals and Objectives

Just like any other organizational initiative, storytelling should have clear and measurable objectives. These goals can range from raising awareness about a specific issue, driving contributors, or increasing stakeholder engagement. By setting explicit targets, organizations can stay focused and unified in their communication efforts, ensuring that every story told aligns with the overarching mission and vision. Regularly tracking progress and adjusting strategies based on the results can help to optimize impact and ensure the organization is always improving in its storytelling efforts.

## Metrics and KPIs for Evaluation

Choosing simple and meaningful metrics is key in the evaluation process. Metrics might include reach, engagement, conversion rates, and sentiment analysis, among others. For example, if an organization's goal is to raise awareness about a particular issue, metrics could include the number of views, shares, likes, and comments on their stories across various platforms. It's also vital to consider qualitative feedback, such as comments, testimonials, and reviews. These insights can provide valuable context to the quantitative data and highlight areas for improvement. By understanding what resonates with their audience, organizations can adapt approaches accordingly and strengthen storytelling efforts.

## Tools for Evaluation

There are numerous tools available that can assist in the evaluation process, each offering unique features and benefits:

- **Google Analytics:** A comprehensive web analytics tool that provides insights into website traffic, user behavior, and engagement. This data can reveal how well your stories are reaching and resonating with your audience.
- **YouTube Analytics:** This built-in tool offers an in-depth look at your channel's performance, including views, likes, shares, and viewer demographics. It can be particularly valuable if video is a key part of your storytelling strategy.
- **Hootsuite:** A social media management platform that allows you to schedule posts, track performance across various platforms, and listen to conversations about your brand or topics of interest.
- **SurveyMonkey:** An online survey tool that can help gather qualitative feedback from your audience. This can provide valuable insights into how your stories are perceived and their impact.
- **Brandwatch:** A digital consumer intelligence and social media listening tool. It can provide sentiment analysis, which can help gauge public opinion and emotional responses to your stories.
- **Tableau:** A data visualization tool that can help represent your evaluation data in an easily digestible format, revealing trends and insights that might be harder to see in raw data.

These are just a few examples; there are numerous others. Training and familiarity with these tools are essential to maximize their utility and ensure accurate interpretation of data. Remember, the right tools for your organization will depend on your specific objectives, the size and capacity of your team, and the platforms you're using for storytelling.

Evaluation is pivotal for any organization seeking to enhance its storytelling. By setting clear objectives, using appropriate metrics and KPIs, and leveraging the right tools, organizations can gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of their storytelling efforts. This data can guide future strategies, ensuring the organization's stories continue to resonate with their audience and drive the desired change. The final section of this chapter will provide a summary, calls to action, and additional resources for storytelling in philanthropy.

## Conclusion

This chapter touched on the growing role of communication in driving impact within philanthropic efforts. Communication, and in particular storytelling, has emerged as a critical strategy in the philanthropic sector, helping to build transparency, legitimacy, and trust, while also mobilizing resources for targeted areas of impact. Communication is not a one-time effort; it is an integral part of your organizational culture. By fostering a culture of communication, you create an environment where ideas are freely shared, feedback is valued, and collaboration is encouraged. When communication is embedded in your organization's DNA, it becomes a powerful tool for innovation, learning, and continuous improvement.

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## Calls to Action for Philanthropy

Philanthropies can increase their impact by harnessing the power of strategic communication and storytelling in innovative and impactful ways.

- **Engage in authentic storytelling:** Incorporate the key components of communication strategies to promote narrative change, advocate for grantee work, adopt asset framing, and create compelling content.
- **Invest in storytelling capacity:** Understand your organization's unique communication needs and invest in enhancing capacity, whether that involves hiring new talent, providing training for partners, grantees, staff or community members, or leveraging external resources.
- **Evaluate success:** Be proactive in setting clear, measurable goals and objectives for your storytelling efforts. Use appropriate metrics and tools for evaluation and be prepared to adjust strategies based on feedback and results.

## Additional Resources for Storytelling

There are numerous resources available to support storytelling in philanthropy:

- **Rockefeller Foundation's Digital Storytelling for Social Impact:** A rich resource that outlines how digital tools can be used for compelling storytelling, complete with case studies, expert advice, and tactical tips.
- **Interactive Tools and Training:** Resources like the [Storytelling for Change](#) course from Acumen Academy offer valuable training on crafting compelling narratives for social impact.
- **Learning from Grantmakers:** Reports like "[Communicating for Impact](#)" offer insights into how grantmaking organizations are leveraging storytelling in their work.
- **Digital Storytelling Communication Toolkit:** Resources like the [Digital Storytelling Toolkit from Nonprofit Tech for Good](#) offer practical advice on using digital platforms for storytelling.