Advocacy & Communication SOLUTIONS

A new ACS tool for the long, many-handed work of changing how people understand your issue.

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Ready to Shift the Narrative on Your Issue? ACS Built a Guide for the Long Game.

Here's something we hear more and more: *"We need to change the narrative."* It shows up in strategic plans, funder briefings, and coalition meetings. And then, almost every time, the conversation turns to new talking points or a refreshed set of key messages.

That's only one small portion of the work. Narrative change is a phrase used often but one that is often misunderstood. It gets used interchangeably with messaging and communication, and it is so much more than that. Narratives are shaped and changed through many forces, including communication, organizing, relationships, policies, programs, institutional practices, resource decisions, lived experiences, and culture. No single strategy changes a narrative on its own.

"We need to change the narrative."

The term may feel trendy, but the work is as old as advocacy itself. Every major shift in public understanding—about who deserves care, what government is for, whose voices count—happened because many partners pulled in the same direction over many years. Narrative change is long-term systems change and cultural work.

With the election behind us, the work ahead starts in earnest. Whatever your issue, the conditions that shape how people understand it haven't changed on their own. And because narrative sits underneath everything else, your policy agenda, your communication, your partnerships, and your programs all benefit when the narrative moves.

That's why ACS developed **The ACS Guide to Shifting Issue Narratives**: a practical introduction to how narratives shape public understanding and how organizations can begin to shift them through communication, relationships, and everyday decisions.


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The Basics of Narrative Change

Narratives shape how people interpret problems, solutions, responsibility, and possibility. They influence public opinion, policy decisions, organizational behavior, and cultural norms over time.

Because narratives are often deeply embedded in institutions, media, and everyday language, changing them requires more than a communication campaign. It requires understanding the narrative currently shaping public understanding of an issue and intentionally reinforcing a different vision through messages, relationships, decisions, and actions.

Key Definitions

Understanding the differences between narrative, storytelling, framing, and communication is critical when shifting the narrative about an issue. Mastering these distinctions ensures your narrative shift is authentic, effective, and lasting—rather than shallow or misunderstood. Narrative work helps you decide *what vision everything else should reinforce.*

Definition and Role	Answers the Question	Timeframe	Example
Narrative is the strategic foundation. It is high-level, long-term shared vision shaping values and behaviors.	"What is the big idea we want the world to believe about this issue?"	Long-term, slow to change	Young children need access to high quality and affordable childcare to thrive.
Storytelling brings the narrative to life. It uses specific tales to illustrate and humanize the narrative.	"What personal example shows that big idea in action?"	Short-term, fast-moving	A teacher shares a story about a child succeeding in kindergarten as a result of early childcare.
Framing shapes how people interpret the narrative. It is the strategic selection of language that guides interpretation of the narrative and story.	"How should we present this idea to influence how people see it?"	Medium-term	Childcare is an investment in our future rather than an expense.
Communication is the delivery channel. It is all methods and channels used to transmit narrative and story internally and externally.	"How do we get this message across effectively to our audience?"	Short-term, fast-moving	Emails, talking points, press releases, social media, meetings, etc.

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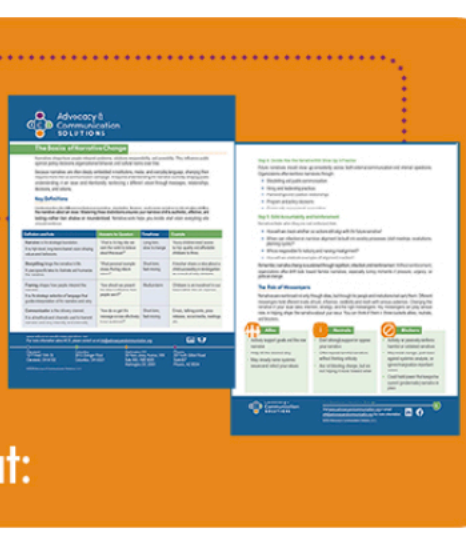
Narrative Change in Action

Women in the Workplace

- **The old narrative:** "Boys will be boys." Harassment was treated as a fact of working life, and the burden of managing it fell on the women experiencing it.
- **The interim narrative:** "Sexual harassment is not appropriate." Decades of legal cases, workplace policies, training, and reporting established that the behavior was a problem, not the women naming it.
- **The new narrative:** #MeToo. The shift from individual incidents to a shared, systemic experience moved the conversation from compliance to accountability.
- **What it took:** Courts, HR departments, journalists, employers, survivors, and organizers over more than 40 years. The hashtag was a visible, culminating moment that helped galvanize and strengthen a new narrative.

Inside the Guide

The tool walks you through narrative change in seven sections, with guided questions and working examples throughout:



- **Understanding Narrative Change:** Why the differences between narrative, storytelling, framing, and communication matter—and why recognizing them keeps your narrative shift authentic, effective, and lasting.
- **The Existing Narrative:** Eight questions to surface the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs currently shaping your issue—including who benefits from this narrative staying in place and whose voices are elevated, ignored, or erased.
- **The Future Narrative:** A future narrative is not a list of messages—it's a shared belief about how the world works. Prompts to articulate what should be true and why it matters.
- **The Interim Narrative:** How to build a bridge between where people are today and where you want them to go, with language that is credible in today's environment.
- **Putting the Future Narrative into Practice:** Five steps to help you find where the old narrative still shows up in your own policies, practices, and partnerships—and to decide what must change. Narratives only change when they are reinforced through everyday actions.
- **Messengers:** A planning table to identify who community members already trust and how to build relationships with them.
- **Tracking Signs of Narrative Change:** How to collect examples over time and look for patterns.

Download The ACS Guide to Shifting Issue Narratives

Need more help?

Narrative change takes patience, discipline, and courage—and it is rarely something one organization does alone. Whether you're naming the existing narrative around your issue for the first time or ready to design a multi-year, multi-partner narrative change process, ACS can help. Contact us toll free at 1-877-372-0166, or visit advocacyandcommunication.org

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