Advocacy & Communication SOLUTIONS

The ACS Guide to Shifting Issue Narratives

"Narrative change" is a phrase used often but one that is often misunderstood. What does it mean in practice? This ACS tool offers an introduction to how narratives shape public understanding and how organizations can begin to shift them through communication, relationships, and everyday decisions.

Narratives are shaped and changed through many forces, including communication, organizing, relationships, policies, programs, institutional practices, resource decisions, lived experiences, and culture. That's why narrative change is long-term systems change and cultural work. No single strategy changes a narrative on its own. Keep in mind that lasting narrative change is strengthened when these efforts are paired with broader strategies to change the systems and conditions that sustain the existing narrative.

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Section 1: Understanding Narrative Change

Understanding the differences between narrative, storytelling, framing, and communication is critical when shifting the narrative about an issue. Recognizing these distinctions ensures your narrative shift is authentic, effective, and lasting—rather than shallow or misunderstood.

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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.

Narrative change rarely happens all at once. Public understanding typically shifts over time as people are exposed to new ideas, values, experiences, and messengers. This tool explores narrative change through three stages, outlined below. These stages are not always linear, and multiple competing narratives may exist at the same time.

Remember:

The goal of narrative change is not simply to create new messaging,
but to gradually shift understanding, expectations, relationships, and behavior over time.

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Section 2: The Existing Narrative

The first step in narrative change work is understanding the existing narrative surrounding your issue. Every issue exists within a broader public narrative—a set of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that shape how people understand the problem and who they believe is responsible for addressing it. Some current narratives may reinforce harmful assumptions, stigma, fear, or individual blame.

Before building a future narrative, it is important to understand the dominant narrative currently shaping perceptions of your issue. Consider the following questions to identify the existing narrative about your issue.

1. How is your issue most commonly discussed today?

2. Is it accurate or fair? Why or why not?

3. Who is portrayed as responsible for the problem or solution?

4. What causes or solutions are most often named?

5. Who benefits—politically, economically, or socially—from this narrative staying in place?

6. Whose voices and perspectives are elevated, ignored, or erased in the existing narrative?

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7. What emotions does the existing narrative create?

8. What values or assumptions are reinforced through this narrative?

Here is an example: "It is not the responsibility of government to address childcare needs of parents. These decisions must be left up to families and leave government out of personal decision making."

Section 3: The Future Narrative

At its core, a future narrative is not a list of messages—it's a shared belief about how the world works. Strong future narratives help people imagine a different future while also creating a sense of shared responsibility for building it. Rather than focusing only on problems, future narratives articulate what should be true and why it matters.

To help you identify the future narrative you want to see, answer the below questions.

- Why does the narrative need to shift *now*?
- What's at stake if the narrative remains unchanged?
- Which specific assumptions, beliefs, or ways of thinking need to shift for progress to occur?

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- What does a better future look like? What is the future you want people to see, believe in, and help build?

- What role can people play in advancing the future narrative? What do you want them to do?

- What do you want people to do, think, or feel next?

Here is an example: "Our region is a place where every child has the opportunity to thrive. By ensuring access to high-quality, affordable childcare for all families, we support children's development, strengthen our workforce, and build a more prosperous community."

Section 4: The Interim Narrative

Interim narratives help create a bridge between the existing narrative and the future narrative. They introduce new ways of thinking that feel credible, relatable, and actionable within the current cultural and/or political environment. They help move people toward the long-term idea by emphasizing shared values, practical benefits, or areas of common ground that can open the door to broader change over time. Use the questions below to help draft your interim narrative. You don't need to complete everything at once—focus on what feels most relevant right now.

1. What shared values or beliefs does your community already hold that connect to your issue? Consider things like economic opportunity, safety, family stability, or community pride. Complete this sentence to help you identify this shared value or belief: "Most people in our community agree that

."

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2. Where do you see examples of the future, ideal narrative starting to show up, even if it's not exactly where it needs to go?

3. Complete this sentence to identify the concrete step or shift that will make your interim narrative feel accessible today: "One thing people can do right now to move closer to the future we want to see is

."

4. What harmful assumptions does the existing narrative reinforce that your interim narrative must be careful not to repeat, even unintentionally?

Using your answers above, draft 2–3 sentences that bridge where people are today and where you want them to go. Aim for language that is true to your values, credible in today's environment, and points toward your future ideal state.

Here is an example: "Childcare is critical for parents' participation in the workforce and supports local employers, making it important for communities to expand access and affordability." This reframes a values-based social issue as a shared economic and community concern—a stepping stone toward a future narrative about collectively prioritizing children's well-being and equity so they can thrive.

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Section 5: Putting the Future Narrative into Practice

Now that you have a better sense of the future narrative you want to bring to life, identify concrete changes in how your organization operates, communicates, makes decisions, and shows up in the world in service of that future narrative. Narratives only change real when they are reinforced through everyday actions.

Step 1:

Identify Where the Old Narrative Still Shows Up

Even after defining a new narrative, older assumptions and habits often remain embedded in day-to-day work. Reflect on the following:

What organizational policies and practices unintentionally reinforce the narrative you want to change? Think about things like how programs are designed or delivered; how staff talk about participants, communities, or clients; and who makes decisions in your organization.

Which partnerships—including with funders—are unintentionally reinforcing the narrative you want to change?

Step 2:

Name What Must Change to Reinforce the Future Narrative

For each area of misalignment you identified above, ask:

- What would it look like to act in alignment with the future narrative?
- What practices, habits, or norms need to shift?

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- What decisions would look different if the future narrative truly guided our work?

- Who else needs to use this new narrative? How will you reach them?

Step 3:
Identify Priority Areas for Action

Narrative alignment does not require changing everything at once. Many organizations begin by identifying a small number of high-impact opportunities where shifts will be visible, meaningful, and achievable. Early wins can help reinforce momentum and build internal buy-in for broader change over time. Identify:

- 1–3 areas where change would most strongly reinforce the future narrative

  1.

  2.

  3.

- Areas where small shifts could have outsized impact

- Places where alignment is most visible to staff, partners, or the public

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Step 4:

Decide How the Narrative Will Show Up in Practice

Future narratives should show up consistently across both external communication and internal operations. For each priority area, ask:

How should the future narrative show up in:

- Storytelling?

- Communication?

- Internal decision making?

- Relationships with partners or communities?

- Policies, procedures, or expectations?

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Step 5:

Build Accountability and Reinforcement

Narratives fade when they are not reinforced. Ask:

- How will we check whether our actions still align with the future narrative?

- Where can reflection on narrative alignment be built into existing processes (staff meetings, evaluations, planning cycles)?

- Who is responsible for noticing and naming misalignment?

- How will we celebrate examples of alignment in action?

Remember, narrative change is sustained through repetition, reflection, and reinforcement. Without reinforcement, organizations often drift back toward familiar narratives, especially during moments of pressure, urgency, or political change.

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Section 6: Messengers

Narratives are reinforced not only through ideas, but through the people and institutions that carry them. Different messengers hold different levels of trust, influence, credibility, and reach with various audiences. Changing the narrative of your issue takes intention, strategy, and the right messengers. Key messengers can play various roles in helping shape the narrative about your issue.

Take a moment to think about who is shaping the story about your work and how to shift that story in a better direction:

- *Think about: Who has important experience or knowledge to share?*
- *Who do community members already trust?*
- *Who could help more people understand the issue?*

Examples include:

- Those directly impacted by the issue
- Community leaders
- Service providers
- Faith leaders
- Businesses
- Researchers
- Public officials

Key Messenger:	What needs to change?	How can we build a relationship?	What support or information do they need?	Who will take the lead?

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Section 7: Tracking Signs of Narrative Change

Narrative change usually happens gradually. You may first notice it in the language people use, whose voices are heard, and the decisions or actions people take. No single quote, story, or decision proves that a narrative has changed. Instead, collect examples over time and look for patterns that move toward—or away from—your interim and future narratives. To track signs of narrative change, reflect on the following:

1. What new language, ideas, voices, or actions are appearing more often?

2. Where does the existing narrative continue to show up?

3. What should we reinforce, adjust, or try next?

Conclusion

Remember: Narrative change is not a one-time exercise or a final product—it is an ongoing practice. You may find that your narrative continues to evolve as conditions change, new voices are brought in, or your understanding deepens. That is not a failure of the process, it is a sign that the narrative is alive. Narrative change takes patience, discipline, and courage—but it also creates the conditions for lasting systems change. You now have a shared foundation to begin that work.

Need help designing and implementing a narrative change process? ACS is here to help. Contact us at info@advocacyandcommunication.org.

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