



**CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC INTEREST  
COMMUNICATIONS**  
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA



**Council on  
Foundations**

**Better Stories, Better Language:  
Insights from a Landscape Scan  
to Displace Harmful, Pervasive Narratives  
About America's Philanthropic Sector**

*A collaboration between the Council on Foundations  
and UF's Center for Public Interest Communications  
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# Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Topline Findings](#)

[Taxonomy of Harmful Narratives and Ideas for Displacing Them](#)

[A Distrust of Wealth](#)

[An Unease with Private-Funded Public Problem Solving](#)

[A Single Hero Saves the Day](#)

[Better Stories: Overall Recommendations for Displacing Harmful Narratives](#)

[Let's Use Better Language](#)

[What's Next](#)

[A Path Forward: Principles for What to Do Right Now](#)

[Works Cited](#)

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## Introduction

The philanthropic sector – primarily private foundations – faces criticism and a fundamental misunderstanding of its work, mission, and methods from multiple directions. These critiques not only dampen foundations’ abilities to achieve their individual missions, they burden nonprofits and the communities they serve with public skepticism – something that should concern the sector as a whole. These critiques take many forms, but [recent polling](#) suggests Americans are uncomfortable with the power and wealth concentrated in the philanthropic sector and are most supportive of foundations’ work when it engages in short-term relief for hunger, homelessness, and other immediate crises rather than complex and systemic challenges (Collins, 2022).

This criticism softens the ground for increased regulation and makes it harder for foundations to build support for the solutions they fund. The purpose of this report is to share initial insights about the language and stories foundations use – or don’t use – in describing their work and offer recommendations for a more effective way forward. This report focuses on insights from a review of documents assembled by the Council on Foundations to represent the current national conversation about philanthropy.

As we reviewed thousands of pages of documents, two things stood out:

**1. We need to shift our approach to storytelling.** Foundations tell stories about the results of their work or the inspiration for the work, but not **how** they do the work. In the final episode of her podcast series [“The Sum of Us,”](#) Heather McGhee notes that everything we believe comes from a story we have been told and urges us to consider where these stories come from (McGhee, 2022). Even as foundations are making efforts to build transparency around their work, these efforts are unlikely to shift public perceptions without a new approach to storytelling.

**2. We need new language** that belongs to our field and makes the work understandable and meaningful to audiences who are unfamiliar with foundations. At present, foundations rarely say what they mean, instead using metaphors from other domains and speaking in coded, insider language. Consciously communicating in clear, transparent language that helps people understand and value the unique role of foundations could increase understanding and trust in the sector.

This report will provide initial recommendations for language and stories that could offer a new direction. It will also lay out a plan for gathering, testing, and sharing new approaches, including learning from what’s worked.

## Topline Findings

As we reviewed documents generated by and about philanthropy, two insights stood out.

### 1. The sector faces a “narrative vacuum.”

Kamal Sinclair of the Guild of Future Architects has said, “A single story is like a star. There are billions in the universe and each one is a valuable part of our shared reality. A narrative is a way we imagine the connections between those stars, to draw a constellation, to make meaning and to find patterns (Sinclair & Clark, 2022).”

The narrative vacuum around philanthropy exists for two reasons. One is that the sector needs better stories that aren’t built around single characters, particularly hero philanthropists. Better stories situate systems as characters in those stories. They don’t reinforce power dynamics that center philanthropy but instead present philanthropy as of part of a larger story. Better stories include the people doing the work – the people foundations support and the people within foundations – and how they do it. They include the people we’re trying to help, but they don’t extract or exploit their lived experience.

The other reason for the narrative vacuum is that the sector isn’t collectively reinforcing narratives about how it works. Across America, and from a range of perspectives, there is a lack of understanding of philanthropy; in fact, a survey from [the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy](#) found that just 5.4% of respondents said that they or anyone in their immediate family received services from a charitable org in the last year (Osili et al., 2023). The sector lacks a shared identity and therefore is not engaged in defining its role in a larger ecosystem of change. Foundations are telling stories about their funding and the difference they make, but there’s no peek behind the curtain, and polling shows that the sector’s transparency does not add up to understanding or affection. That may be because transparency is offered around data and high-level spending rather than how foundation staff and leaders make decisions or do their work.

This absence of the connective tissue among the stories the sector tells leaves others to make their own connections. More importantly, the real stories of how change happens aren’t told in a way that helps others learn, gain inspiration, and do it again.

### 2. We have bad language habits.

In the documents we reviewed, there’s an embedded sense of power that centers foundations and applies top-down and hierarchical metaphors (“lifting up”). The funder is often the subject of the sentence and the subject of metaphors and verbs that center foundation power (“leveraging,” “making a seat at the table,” etc). The result is that foundations talk about their work in a way that positions them as holding the power.

We also borrow metaphors from sectors we don’t actually relate to. While metaphors can be an effective communication tool, the sector tends to use sports, military, and financial metaphors, or it uses those that unintentionally invoke violence (“[impact](#),” “front line,” “on the ground,” etc.). When we borrow references from these sectors, we draw connections

between charitable giving and harm. As a sector, we need to explore metaphors that connect philanthropy to the hope, growth, and possibilities of our communities. Within all of these metaphors, there tends to be very little language about how foundations make decisions. Foundation staff aren't visible, nor are the people closest to the problem who are identifying solutions and working to solve them.

While these two points may seem to present a narrow lens in the context of the complex issues the sector faces, we also see a great deal of room for experimentation. Story and metaphor do more to communicate meaning than any other tool in language, and they represent the best paths forward for shifting this conversation.

## **A Taxonomy of Harmful Narratives and Ideas for Displacing Them**

A narrative vacuum presents two dangers: the first is that no one really knows what you do, and the second is that it leaves space for others to define your work – from your day-to-day operations to your motives and values.

But perhaps the most compelling reason to fill this narrative vacuum is that we're not telling the real stories of how change happens. Magical stories of "impact" supplant the reality of how funding makes a difference. They obscure the efforts of the people who are getting the funding, why they need support, and how they're helping people. Transparency doesn't come in the form of annual reports; it comes from showing why funding is essential: the granular, precise descriptions of the work, the relationships built, and the discovery that happens when funding offers people the freedom to focus on what matters most.

A helpful way to think about the connections between narratives is through deep narratives – or age-old collections of themes and ideas that get at how we "make sense of our relationships to ourselves, others, and the broader world (Narrative Initiative, 2019)." We propose that the harmful narratives that exist around philanthropy can be classified into three deep narratives:

1. the distrust of people or institutions with wealth;
2. the unease with private funds solving public problems; and
3. the single hero saves the day.

In the following sections, we dig into the three deep narratives and provide essential features of the narratives and individual stories that tap into them. To develop a stronger collective narrative about philanthropy's role in the overall community of social good, we must understand the narratives that exist now.

### ***A Distrust of Wealth***

At the core of "Distrust of Wealth" narratives is a theme of conflict stemming from wealthy individuals having different privileges, access, and power than middle- and lower-income individuals. When it comes to philanthropy, a lot of this distrust has to do with ambiguity around where the money comes from and who it goes to, in addition to the abstract jargon we use. [Independent Sector and Edelman Data & Intelligence](#) found that trust in philanthropy has stayed

consistently low since 2020 with the most recent survey showing trust in the sector at 34 percent (Independent Sector, 2022).

We see this distrust in narratives about philanthropy particularly when a foundation's identity is closely linked with an individual, and it may lie at the foundation of myths and misinformation about specific funders. For example, the myth that COVID vaccines contain microchips so Bill Gates can track us makes no sense until we look at it through this lens. Some common traits of the narratives in this group are:

- Wealth begetting power
- Scrutiny about the source of money
- Reflections on history or capitalism
- Distance between “the rich” and “the poor”

### “The New Gilded Age” Narrative

This narrative taps into the early history of philanthropy during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, encapsulated well by an episode on NPR's Throughline podcast titled “The New Gilded Age.” Stories in this narrative emphasize the immense wealth of major foundations and rely on the irony of wealthy individuals paying to alleviate problems they helped create. The risk this narrative creates to philanthropy as a whole is a skepticism toward the work and the ability of foundations to participate in communities of change.

Some features of stories in this narrative:

- Direct or indirect questions about how the money was attained and where it goes
- A central antagonist like the original founder or a foundation executive
- A climax that focuses on exploitation, including historical bad acts or current events that call into question why foundations are so big
- Explicit references to the Gilded Age or histories surrounding early philanthropists like John D. Rockefeller or Andrew Carnegie
- Phrases like “robber baron,” “perpetuity” (specifically continuing someone's name), or “Philanthropy has too much money”
- “Charity” framed as an embellishment for a philanthropist

Examples of stories with this narrative:

- The New Gilded Age
- Would The World Be Better Off Without Philanthropists?
- The Radicalization of Race: Philanthropy and DEI

### “Philanthropy Keeps the Rich Rich” Narrative

This narrative takes root in the belief that private foundations and donor-advised funds are a way for wealthy individuals to avoid paying taxes.

This narrative is effective in shifting perspectives because frustration with taxes allows for a quick

tap into frustration with wealthy individuals. A [2020 Institute for Policy Studies and Ipsos poll](#) found that when people learned more about tax breaks and endowment spending requirements, they liked foundations and donor-advised funds less (Institute for Policy Studies & Ipsos, 2020). Both left-leaning and right-leaning organizations tap into this narrative frequently to call for an end to tax benefits or to greatly limit them.

Some features of stories in this narrative:

- A heavy emphasis on taxes and tax breaks
- Conflict stemming from taxpayers paying to cover philanthropy's tax breaks
- "Charity" and "perpetuity" framed as a way the wealthy avoid paying taxes
- Clear calls to action around ending these tax benefits
- A focus on philanthropy as a field with individual attacks on the biggest and most visible foundations by name
- References to endowments or the percentage of philanthropic funds that comes from foundations or donor-advised funds
- Criticism of where the money goes (e.g., donations to sports teams or universities receiving tax benefits)
- Distrust in the motivations of this giving

Examples of stories with this narrative:

- [How philanthropy benefits the super-rich](#)
- [The Limits of Philanthropy](#)
- [Dead billionaires whose foundations are thriving today can thank Henry VIII and Elizabeth I](#)
- [New Ipsos Poll Shows Broad Support for Bold Charity Reform](#)

### "Who Wields Power?" Narrative

Organizations or individuals who use this narrative share stories emphasizing the top-down nature of funding relationships and the directional flow of money in grantmaking. Within this narrative grouping, we noticed various critiques about how much power philanthropy has in decision making within an organization and how impactful funding is on the valuation of certain issue areas. Essentially, wealth has the power to drive issues, and you have to trust that funders won't change their minds.

Within this power-wielding narrative is the idea of "bigfooting" – a reference to a person or group attempting to dominate or upstage others. Stories about bigfooting in philanthropy showcase funders exerting power through excessive oversight, overstating involvement, taking the spotlight, or even undermining the demands of a community. These stories highlight how this behavior can squeeze nonprofits, which strains the funder-grantee relationship and keeps nonprofits from sharing honest insights.

Some features of stories in this narrative:

- A highlight on the distance between philanthropy and an issue it funds
- An emphasis on concentrated power, like a limited board of trustees or specific programs having a large influence on issues

- Conflict stemming from philanthropy's financial power over communities or movements
- A focus on specific decision-making functions like where grants go, or how philanthropic funding elevates or legitimizes certain issues
- Language that positions funders on top of nonprofits and community organizations, including “oversight” or “bottom-up strategies”
- Specifically for “Bigfoot” stories:
  - Conflict stemming from nonprofit organizations shaping their organizations to meet funder or grant requirements
  - Critiques of extractive storytelling or taking over an issue
  - Examples of philanthropic action undermining community organizations or movements

Examples of stories with this narrative:

- [Rich charities keep getting richer. That means your money isn't doing as much good as it could.](#)
- [George Soros and the Demonization of philanthropy](#)
- [Would The World Be Better Off Without Philanthropists?](#)
- [Philanthropy Serves the Status Quo](#)
- [The New Gilded Age](#)
- [Why Grantmakers Need to Break Their Restriction Habit—Permanently](#)
- [Framing the Flint Water Crisis: Interrogating Local Nonprofit Sector Responses](#)
- [How Rich Donors Like Epstein \(and Others\) Undermine Science](#)

### “Tainted Money” Narrative

“Tainted Money” narratives are characterized by a high level of skepticism in the sources of philanthropic dollars. This is another narrative that started back during the Gilded Age with criticism over John D. Rockefeller’s donations (Moody & Pratt, 2020). These concerns are tied to either how the money was created (e.g., exploitation of labor, the environment or communities), who is donating the money (e.g., funders who are known to have exploited or harmed people), or both.

Traditionally, we would consider this to be a problem to be solved with crisis communications; however, we as a field need to realize that this is a larger narrative worthy of our collective attention and reflection. The distrust of “tainted money” can easily spread to skepticism of philanthropy as a whole.

Some features of stories in this narrative:

- Questions about the source of funds or values of the funder
- A lack of trust rooted in skepticism
- An organization or community as the protagonist who openly rejects tainted funds
- A call to reject specific funding
- Conflict stemming from a reflection on history or a high-profile current event
- Sometimes overextension of crises

Examples of stories with this narrative:



- [Tainted Money and Tainted Donors: A Growing Crisis?](#)
- [Scrutiny of Donors and “Reputation Laundering” is Growing Thanks to COVID and Protest](#)
- [How Rich Donors Like Epstein \(and Others\) Undermine Science](#)

### What kinds of stories might displace “A Distrust of Wealth” narrative?

To shift this narrative, we have to tell stories with greater transparency. The natural inclination is to provide data, share our 990s or go through brand-building exercises like naming values and identifying a likable spokesperson. But data and tax forms are abstract, and these branding activities still rely on in-group jargon. This kind of transparency is like a stack of windows with no house to hold it up: We need to provide context and characters and get specific.

While we are still researching specific language or metaphors for the future, we have identified some concrete actions that philanthropy can take now to be more transparent:

- Be specific about what your funding does—not just about what issues you fund, but what your grantee partners do with it (e.g., salaries so community leaders can focus on solutions instead of payroll, marketing resources so nonprofits have the tools to activate their community).
- Identify who is actually doing the day-to-day work and put that community and the people in it at the center of the story. This helps shift the power from philanthropy to the community it’s helping.
- Go through your messages and highlight any idioms, jargon, or metaphors. Write out what these actually mean and determine if a more precise description would be better.
- Show how you set funding priorities. Include the voices and actions of people within your organization, and how they are interacting with the people doing the work to solve the problem. Highlight ideas that came from outside your foundation, and tell the stories of the people who had those ideas and how you are supporting them.
- Include the people within your foundation – including staff who play a range of roles – in your stories. Describe their interactions with the people you fund. Show how you’re learning from your partners.

### ***An Unease with Private Funds Solving Public Problems***

In our review, we noticed multiple narratives pointed to the role of philanthropy in relation to the government, specifically its involvement in democracy. These narratives took various stances on how helpful or harmful this role was, but all of them portrayed philanthropy as a stand-in for governance from the local to the national and, in some cases, international level.

“Unease” in this sense is really an uncertainty both with what the role of philanthropy should be and with the effect of philanthropic actions directly and indirectly on policy. Even internally, when we use abstract phrases like “filling gaps” or “taking on the biggest issues of our time,” it is unclear just how involved we are in this space.

Critical narratives make claims that philanthropy is a threat to democracy or a way for elites to decide what is best; however, even supportive narratives question the reliance on philanthropy

as a stopgap or refer to philanthropy as a necessary workaround to government inefficiency. These narratives call into question how we talk about our work. In the next phase of the research, we want to test new language and metaphors that could reduce this unease by clarifying philanthropy's role in problem-solving.

### “Threatening Democracy” Narrative

This narrative includes a wide range of stories from both the right and the left that frame philanthropy as an entity working outside of the democratic process to advance the policies it thinks is best. Joanne Barkan from [NPR's Throughline episode](#) states this issue clearly: “You can't vote out philanthropy (Abdelfatah et al., 2022).”

Like the “Who Wields Power?” narrative, “Threatening Democracy” narratives emphasize philanthropy's power to influence society; however, stories in this narrative suggest that philanthropy takes over certain roles from democratically elected officials to decide what is best for a population. Even if storytellers mention the benefits of philanthropy, they emphasize that philanthropy is a necessary evil rather than something inherently good.

This narrative includes stories about philanthropy having excessive influence in changing society and stories where philanthropy is a barrier to change or an enforcer of the status quo. Occasionally, these stories will tap further into fear-based stories. These include depictions of philanthropic funds as “dark money” for political entities or perpetuating hyper-politicized beliefs. People using this narrative in combination with fear will build stories about “elites” making decisions for us, stoking concerns about losing individual or community power.

Some features of stories in this narrative:

- Emphasis on concentrated power, decision-making, and influence on societies
- Clear connection of philanthropy to democracy, policies, or political identities
- Contrasting benefits of philanthropy with the risks of political influence
- Phrases like “lack of accountability,” “outside of democracy,” or even “anti-democratic”
- Conflict stems from philanthropy making changes that the storyteller doesn't want or philanthropy acting as a barrier to change
- Claims that philanthropy is deciding what is best
- Portrayals of zero-sum games
- Critique of philanthropy throwing money at a problem to make it go away
- Occasional references to “dark money” or depictions of malicious intent
- Use of conspiracy theories or disinformation (rarely)

Examples of stories with this narrative:

- [How philanthropy benefits the super-rich](#)
- [The Radicalization of Race: Philanthropy and DEI](#)
- [Five key ways the Koch brothers pushed their rightwing agenda](#)
- [Philanthropy Serves the Status Quo](#)
- [Framing the Flint Water Crisis: Interrogating Local Nonprofit Sector Responses](#)
- [How Rich Donors Like Epstein \(and Others\) Undermine Science](#)

## “Fill the Gap” Narrative

A seemingly more positive perspective on the philanthropy-government relationship is the idea of “Filling the Gap.” These stories still showcase philanthropy doing what storytellers think the government should be doing. The unease comes from the thought that policymakers are intentionally passing off responsibility to philanthropy or that philanthropy is becoming a tool that the government can use instead of governing.

The negative feelings in these stories tend to be pointed toward policymakers, which may be why some foundations feel comfortable using this sentiment in their messaging. However, these negative feelings could spread to critiques of philanthropy and its perceived power and influence. “Filling the Gap” leaves some ambiguity about what philanthropy does, and it may not be exactly what we mean. The sector should experiment with clearer language that better defines philanthropy’s role in the larger community of change.

Some features of stories in this narrative:

- Policymakers at the center of the story in external pieces
- Philanthropy at the center of internal stories
- Phrases like “filling the gap” or “stopgap”
- Conflict stemming from government not meeting public needs
- Depictions of an overreliance on charitable giving
- Occasional critique of philanthropy throwing money at a problem to make it go away
- Unease at where the role of the government should stop

Examples of stories with this narrative:

- Filling the gaps is a poor role for philanthropy

## What kinds of stories might displace “An Unease with Private-funded Public Problem Solving” narratives?

To reduce narratives rooted in an uneasy feeling about how problems are solved, foundations must change how they talk about their role in the process. The sector can’t just shout out, “We don’t do that!” The appropriate response requires foundations to recognize that skepticism is likely tied to the abstract jargon organizations use. Clarity is essential to displace this narrative.

Again, the Center is building narratives to test in the research phase. In the meantime, we have identified some concrete actions that philanthropy can take now to speak with more clarity:

- Reflect on the language you’re using to determine if it suggests you are taking over government responsibilities or stepping in to fill gaps rather than showcasing your role as a partner to a community
- Tell accurate, fascinating stories about your priority communities that put them at the center, emphasize their decision-making abilities, and demonstrate how you learn from them
- When framing your role as part of the community, show how you listen to the community to understand its needs and how your support can make a difference. Philanthropy can help community leaders take action in times where public funding is stretched; focus on

the benefits of philanthropy as a partner rather than a leader

## ***A Single Hero Saves the Day***

Social psychologists have noted that the United States is one of the most individualistic societies in the world, suggesting that we focus more on the “I” instead of the “we” (The Culture Factor Group, 2023). This is reflected in our storytelling: We focus on individual characters taking on a conflict and finding some sort of resolution at the end. However, these individualistic stories can obscure the systems that are the core of the conflict.

Our landscape analysis found a common story structure used by philanthropy and its critics: “A Hero Saves the Day.” In the realm of “magical stories” that skip to solutions, we meet a vulnerable civilian, a man made of money swoops in to save the day, and the problem is solved. This can create harmful tropes about the agency of communities while also overstating philanthropy’s role. We need to avoid stigmatizing communities and obscuring their agency.

While individualism is still prevalent in the U.S., research from [FrameWorks](#) has found that “systems thinking is on the rise (FrameWorks Institute, 2022).” The stories we tell need to consider this shift, identifying the systems that affect communities and situating ourselves as collaborators for problem solving instead of heroes.

### “Savior” Narratives

Stories that fall into this narrative put philanthropists or foundations at the center of the action. Philanthropy is the protagonist, and money is its tool of choice. These stories emphasize the direness of the issue, oftentimes emphasizing deficit terminology like “vulnerable,” “marginalized,” or “at risk.” The vagueness of these words has a stigmatizing effect, leaving the reader to fill in their own reason that the individual or community should be perceived this way (Munari et al., 2021). Research has shown that these depictions can have negative policy effects because they stigmatize individuals instead of highlighting the systems creating inequalities (Ledford et al., 2022).

Philanthropy’s critics tap into this narrative to ask why people with immense power, or long-dead rich people, should get credit for solving our problems. They emphasize the distance between philanthropy and the audience.

Some features of stories in this narrative:

- A lack of systems
- Philanthropist or foundation at the center
- Phrases that emphasize a lack of power for communities
- Emphasis on the resolution and the role of philanthropy in that resolution
- Overemphasis on the role of philanthropy in general
- Criticism with phrases like “save” or “savior”

Examples of stories with this narrative:

- Would the World Be Better Off Without Philanthropists?

- [Dead billionaires whose foundations are thriving today can thank Henry VIII and Elizabeth I](#)
- [Giving Billions Fast, MacKenzie Scott Upends Philanthropy](#)

### “My Life Was Transformed” Narratives

These stories follow an individual who experiences trouble but overcomes it with the help of a foundation or nonprofit. Because the center of this story is not philanthropy, we can trick ourselves into thinking that this is a preferable narrative; however, these stories usually emphasize the stigmatizing context of the protagonist’s situation while either stripping them of their agency (i.e., the foundation or nonprofit does the work of pulling them out) or overemphasizing their individualism (i.e. “bootstrap individualism” with no acknowledgement of the systems in the community).

The stories in this narrative are extractive. They tend to cast people in stereotypical roles that perpetuate systems of oppression. To challenge this, we need to tell system-based stories and include protagonists from a variety of backgrounds that experience the impact of systems.

Some features of stories in this narrative:

- A lack of systems
- An individual protagonist at the center
- Stigmatizing or stereotyping language about the context
- Resolution stemming from the support of a foundation or nonprofit
- Language associated with “bootstrapping” like “pulled themselves out” or “overcame” without clear ties to a community

### What kinds of stories might displace “A Single Hero Saves the Day” narrative?

To end “Single Hero” stories, we have to tell stories that place philanthropy in a supportive role **within** a community, not at the center. These stories have to acknowledge what systems are harming a community and how the community responds collaboratively.

We are working on a model to help philanthropy tell system-based stories as part of this work. We can start taking action now, however, by reimagining our stories:

- Tell engaging stories about real people and the systems they experience. Show how their relationships, trust, effort and collaboration are what actually solves the problems.
- Question the metaphors and language you use to describe individuals or communities: Do they stigmatize or invoke stereotypes? For example, an article from [Stephanie Munari, et al.](#), suggests using “priority community” with an explanation of why you prioritize them rather than calling a group “vulnerable” or “at risk.” [The CDC also has recommendations for word choice.](#)
- Avoid telling a “press release” story (i.e., a story that shares how much money was given in this grant cycle). Identify who you funded and let them be the subject of those stories. Instead of announcing that you gave a nonprofit \$50,000, tell the story about how that nonprofit uses funds to provide access to specific programs in its community.

## ***Better Stories: Overall Recommendations for Displacing Harmful Narratives***

Throughout this section we have outlined steps philanthropy can take now as we continue to find a shared narrative. The core philosophies of these recommendations are to be transparent with narrative context, to provide clarity with the language you use, and to tell system-based stories with the community at the center. In the next phase of our research, we will build on these recommendations with more research on stories, metaphors and other tools we can use to build a more harmonic sector.

### Summary:

- Identify who is actually doing the day-to-day work and put that community at the center. This helps shift the power from philanthropy to the communities you serve.
- Tell accurate, fascinating stories about your priority communities that put them at the center, emphasize their decision-making abilities, and demonstrate how you learn from them. Tell stories about the systems they experience. Show how their relationships, trust, efforts, and collaboration are what actually solve the problems.
- Be specific about what your funding does. Not just about what issues you fund, but what you grantee partners do with it (e.g., salaries so community leaders can focus on solutions instead of payroll, marketing resources so nonprofits have the tools to activate their community).
- Show how you set funding priorities, and share why you've chosen them. Include the voices and actions of people within your organization, and how they are interacting with the people who are doing the work to solve the problem.
- Go through your messages and highlight any idioms, jargon, or metaphors. Write out what these actually mean and determine if a more precise description would be better.
- Reflect on the language you are using to determine whether it suggests you are taking over government responsibilities or stepping in to fill gaps rather than showcasing your role as a partner to a community.
- Question the metaphors and language you use to describe individuals or communities: Do they stigmatize a community or invoke stereotypes? For example, this article from [Stephanie Munari, et al.](#), suggests using “priority community” with an explanation of why you prioritize them rather than calling a group “vulnerable” or “at risk.” [The CDC also has recommendations for word choice.](#)
- Avoid telling a “press release” story (i.e., a story that shares how much money was given in this grant cycle, or that simply puts a price on the problem). Identify who you funded and make them the subject of those stories.
- When framing your role as part of the community, talk about how you listen to the community so they can take action early. Philanthropy can help community leaders take action in times when public funding is stretched. Focus on the benefits of philanthropy as a partner rather than a leader.

## Let's Use Better Language

The narratives perpetuated about and by the sector are flawed, but so is the language we use. The base units of the stories we tell are the words and metaphors we choose and the way we put the stories together. In the philanthropy world, we don't always mean what we say, and we've acquired a lot of bad habits.

In the review of materials shared by the Council on Foundations and other related stories, the Center saw a variety of vague metaphors, abstract concepts, and language choices that misrepresent the work that philanthropy does. Not only does this language create uncertainty for people outside (and often inside) this space, it also embeds a sense of power that centers foundations in the work instead of showing how they are part of a community of change.

Below are some of the major insights about language and storytelling that we – as a field – should consider changing. In the next phase of our work, we plan to research what language and narratives better describe our work and resonate well with our community.

- Opt for specific, clear descriptions instead of relying on “catch-all” terms
- Review the language you use to describe your work to see if it features too much jargon or tax language. Replace these with more precise descriptions or definitions
- Be mindful of metaphors that create a top-down or bottom-up orientation because they create a system of power with foundations on top of nonprofits and nonprofits on top of communities. This includes phrases like “lifting up diverse voices,” “leveraging,” or “elevating leaders”
- Replace the “bringing people to the table” metaphor – which suggests a concentration of power – with language about listening to or following the community
- Remove violence-based metaphors borrowed from the military or sports, like “tackle problems,” “on the frontlines,” or “causing impact.” Using these metaphors can amplify negative emotions and create a sense of zero-sum games
- Avoid using phrases that stigmatize or stereotype, like “felon,” “addict,” or “vulnerable.” Research shows they can increase perceptions of dangerousness and reduce public support for policies that could address the issues we are working on (Ledford et al., 2022).
  - [The CDC has a list of preferred terms you can use.](#)
- If you are using data, put it in context with a clear narrative
- Use the active voice to make clear who is taking action and what they are doing

### ***A Note on Abstraction, the Enemy of Precision***

Making change requires us to embrace concepts that can be hard to talk about or name. It also requires us to choose where to concentrate our efforts. When we try to capture too many ideas into one bucket or use fill-in words to represent ideas instead of concrete examples, we create abstraction. This invites people to find their own meaning.

Some of the social justice and philanthropy buzzwords we use also fall into this abstraction trap. We found very little concrete language in the materials about the specific roles foundations and nonprofits play. Additionally, foundations quote a lot of tax law, which can even be unclear to



people in the philanthropy and nonprofit sectors. Counterintuitively, data and numbers can be abstract. Research by [Rebecca Hetey and Jennifer Eberhardt at Stanford](#) suggests that people use data to affirm their existing beliefs (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018). Books like “[Damned Lies and Statistics](#)” show how easy it is to recontextualize data points because they are fundamentally abstract. Even though philanthropy makes far more data available today in an attempt for greater transparency, we found that the data are not offered in a narrative context. Contextualizing this data within a deeper narrative of our work will make what we do more concrete.

In a [2022 poll from Ipsos](#), pollsters found that while “most Americans (82 percent) support the important role that charitable foundations play... they remain unaware of specific details about foundations and donor-advised funds, which have become the vehicle of choice for the wealthiest givers (Collins, 2022).” The report then noted that after learning about the tax breaks associated with charity and how the donations accumulate in foundations and donor-advised funds, 81 percent began to develop negative feelings toward philanthropy: “The vast majority ... do not believe taxpayers should subsidize the wealthy to keep money on the sidelines through private foundations that will exist in perpetuity (Collins, 2022).”

This is abstraction in action. Because foundations don’t tend to be specific about how they operate – or have focused mostly on cash flow rather than how they work with communities to solve problems – observers have been able to define philanthropy’s work in a way that is meaningful to them using some of the narratives we described.

In a recent post in the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#), for example, Dr. Carmen Rojas, president and CEO of the Marguerite Casey Foundation, wrote:

*“First, let’s look at the many ways the word ‘equity’ has been defined in our sector. Foundations and donors used this word to describe everything from the redistribution of money to those most directly impacted by racial capitalism and defunding the police, to the hiring of one leader of color in an otherwise all-white institution, to launching a coding program focused on getting more people of color into tech. This lack of clarity has resulted in many more of us talking about equity while far less of us are living it. As I once heard a leader in our sector note: ‘All actions in the name of equity are not equal in their outcomes (Rojas, 2023).’”*

Abstract terms are alluring because they allow us to avoid using painful or uncomfortable terms or to make choices between terms and potentially leave something out. But abstract terms are vessels that need to be filled with meaning. If we don’t provide that meaning, others will.



## A Path Forward: Principles for What to Do Right Now

### Here are the ways we can do better:

In the ways we tell our stories:

1. Tell accurate, fascinating stories about real people: the people who are affected. The people making decisions and why. The people who need help. Make room for tension and uncertainty and messiness. Include some of the parts that may seem boring to you but will help others understand what the work actually looks like. Include systems in those stories, and the choices that brought those systems into place. Show how relationships, trust and people working together help solve the problem.
2. Describe what funding actually supports in a specific and granular way. Which bills get paid with the funds foundations provide? Does grant funding make it possible for people to get paid for work that couldn't be done in other ways?
3. Include "why" statements that are meaningful and connect to moral values and shared identity.

In the language we're using:

1. Question your metaphors. Are you using metaphors from other sectors? Do they accurately describe the condition or situation you're attempting to make clear? Might a precise description work better? Instead of people on the ground, "people who are closest to the problem."
2. Avoid coded phrases that carry baggage but don't increase transparency or understanding.
3. Use active voice. Passive voice obscures who is taking action and hides agency.

Let's work together to find what's better.

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