

Guide to Navigating the Swamp of Human Services

Framing begins by taking public thinking into account when designing public-facing communications. Many communications efforts backfire because they fail to take into account that people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world.

These deeply embedded, widely shared default ways of thinking that the public bring to their issue are called “cultural models” by anthropologists. Cultural models are something we all use to process information quickly, but this efficiency comes at a cost because often these cognitive shortcuts are inaccurate. For example, FrameWorks research has found several cultural models that the American public brings to their thinking about human services, government, and wellbeing that hinder support for public-sector programs for communities. FrameWorks uses the heuristic of a swamp to talk about these patterns in public thinking. [The swamp graphic](#) is a visual distillation of the findings of in-depth cultural models research conducted as part of a multi-year investigation. This accompanying guide considers the most important cultural models and the implications of these ways of thinking for communicators. It concludes by giving strategies for navigating. Think of it as the top things to be aware of when you are seeking to convey what’s at stake with your work – so that you can “know before you go.”

For more background on the swamp of human services and for a tour guided by FrameWorks’ CEO Nat Kendall-Taylor, see this [narrated guided tour of the swamp in the Human Services Message Memo](#).

The major cultural models to be aware of:

- **Individualism.** Reasoning across many issues, Americans tend to believe that individuals’ good or bad choices or decisions are what determine their life outcomes. Reasoning from this perspective limits people’s ability to understand how social determinants and contextual factors influence and constrain choices. It also interferes with their capacity to see the importance and public benefit of human services.
- **Government is wasteful.** Americans also share a strong skepticism about the government and generally believe that wastefulness and inefficiency are widespread in the public sector. This is partially owing to a relative invisibility of the work. Explanatory examples that show how these problems really work can help people to think more deeply about the social issues that human services address.
- **“Black box” of wellbeing.** The topic of wellbeing is not generally on the public radar, which means that the public has difficulty thinking about how it develops or how it can be supported. When pressed, people generally identify two core components, both tied to self-sufficiency: health and financial security, leaving little room for conversations

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about the many other factors—from educational quality to workforce development to community resources—that play a role in establishing the wellbeing of a person, a family, or a community.

- **Human services are charity and should be temporary and limited.** The general public does not tend to recognize the prevention and advocacy roles that human services professionals play. Instead, members of the public see human services as an emergency measure reserved only for those who “deserve” to be helped because they have temporarily fallen on hard times. It is in this way that the individualism default model reinforces people’s belief that human services should be basic and temporary, since—according to the logic of self-sufficiency—the more services people receive, the more dependent they will become.

The reframing strategy:

The empirically tested framing tools designed as part of this reframing work equip communicators to navigate around these problematic facets of public understanding so that the broader significance and need for the work can be recognized and better appreciated. Knowing how people are currently making sense of your issue helps you make informed communications decisions about what to emphasize and what to avoid. Advancing the affirmative case as we call it might sound something like this:

The story that you’re telling:

When, as a community, we make sure that everyone can reach their potential and fully contribute to our communities, we all benefit. Maximizing the potential of the people who are our neighbors, our workforce, and our civic body ensures that our communities remain vibrant places to live, work, and play.

In the unhelpful ways of thinking brought to your issue by the public, because so much of the narrative action is focused on establishing worthiness, public support for human services is always vulnerable to attacks on the character and “deservingness” of recipients. Here are some strategies for navigating around those.

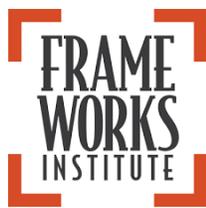
The power of explanation

“Most people don’t think about most issues most of the time” write Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky in a famous analysis of American public opinion. You can and should assume that you will need to explain in your communications, probably a great deal more than you think you will need to. Some of the specific things you will need to explain:

Define Human Services

A central communications challenge identified by our research is that human services are cognitive hole, meaning that people by and large don’t really know what this work is about, and

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what it entails. In our research, we found the public to be unfamiliar with the term “human services” and when we asked our research participants to define or explain the term, most people were simply stumped. Thus, one communication challenge that you know you are going to have to tackle here is explaining a great deal more about your work including why this is a matter of public concern. Try to avoid using the acronym HHS and other jargon whenever possible and especially at the top of a piece of communications. Spell it out!

Broaden Human Services

For example, the public needs to know that your work is about so much more than just direct services. However, from what we know about how human cognition works, we know that this communications goal can’t be accomplished simply by saying “we do more than direct services” – because in reminding the public of something that they already believe, you actually reinforce the misunderstanding. For more about why, see: [don’t think of an elephant](#). Thus, you must explain. One important strategy will be to provide details about the research, planning, and advocacy aspects of your work and how this informs direct services work.

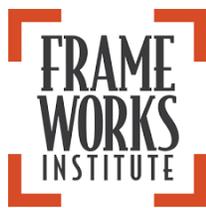
Explain 2G

This term is so crucial to understand because it is central to your work, because it exemplifies your approach, but also because it is at the very top (beginning) of so much of what you are saying. How a communication begins offers clues to audiences about how to interpret the information that follows. Without a sense for what 2G is and what this approach means, you can’t accomplish the work of building public support. In fact, the two above points work together – when you define human services (what they do, how they work), you offer important context—a wider-angled lens—through which readers can better understand how the 2G approach works and why it is so important.

If you don’t believe it, don’t repeat it.

In strategic framing, knowing what *not* to say can be as important as knowing what to include in a message. That’s because the words, tone, and images that experts and advocates choose in communicating about their work are cues that activate specific cultural models in people’s minds.

For example, knowing that the public might bring the belief that most people who utilize social programs need them because they have acted irresponsibly or do not value self-sufficiency you will want to avoid talking in these terms. Talk about building self-sufficiency can be problematic in that it can be interpreted through an individualism lens to be aimed at fixing a person, when the goal and purpose of human services work is to design and redesign systems that change contexts and improve access. The work is never about fixing a person, it exists at the community-level, because the challenges we are addressing with the work exist at this level as well.



Reminding people of what they already believe to be true *reinforces* their beliefs, even when confronted with evidence to the contrary. To avoid this kind of communications misfire, be sure to avoid any cues—e.g., words, phrases, images, and tone—that inadvertently remind people of their default assumptions and strengthen their preexisting misperceptions about human services, e.g. talking about the work in ways that seem to be saying that it should only be temporary, or basic needs or in ways that make it seem like it is about being charitable, rather than about improving a foundation of wellbeing for everyone – something that we all need to do well!

For more suggestions on what to avoid when communicating with the public, see the “quick start” table in the Human Services toolkit up on the FrameWorks’ website:

<http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/humanservices/elements/pdfs/quickstartguide.pdf>