

NARRATIVE CHANGE FOR HEALTH & RACIAL EQUITY: EXPLORING CAPACITY & ALIGNMENT

HIGHLIGHTS FOR FUNDERS



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NARRATIVE CHANGE FOR HEALTH & RACIAL EQUITY

In 2019 and 2020, The California Endowment (TCE) commissioned a study to understand the capacity needs and strengths in California related to narrative change to advance health and racial equity. Given the emergent nature of narrative change practices and the ecosystem, TCE recognized that it was critical to not define “capacity,” but rather explore it with participants across the ecosystem. The participatory design engaged narrative change leaders and power builders within California and nationally in shaping the study focus, data sources, and interpretation of results. Over 40 leaders participated across the three phases of the study, engaging in individual interviews and group discussions to share their experiences, explore emergent concepts, and jointly interpret the findings.

The full report explores many capacity needs. This attachment focuses on the findings most directly related to funders, as the study participants reported that funders are a critical audience for their insights and proposed actions. A study is only participatory, and not extractive, if the participants have an opportunity to inform how their words and knowledge are used to make decisions. Ideally this attachment will be brought to funding partners by and with the study participants as part of a conversation, not as a representation of their thinking.

Actionable Insights for Funders

Study participants articulated a diverse array of approaches and ways of understanding narrative change. This is not surprising in an emergent field, where **there are no “best practices” or widely agreed upon ways of advancing change. Some organizations may participate in multiple approaches**, depending on campaigns and coalitions they are part of, the consultants that campaigns are working with, and the needs of the campaigns. **Each approach is distinct in how it centers different voices; the tools/tactics being used; how reach and impact are thought about; and even which capacities are priorities.** These approaches are **not in competition with each other**, so much as being representative of distinctions that currently exist in how narrative change is understood and deployed across these organizations.

The majority of study participants described their approaches to narrative change as being led by the communities most harmed by the current narratives (Approaches A and B in the table on the next page). Approach B achieves reach across geographies and communities using grassroots strategies while building alignment on shared narratives. Participants using Approach B were the most likely to describe success and optimism about future success related to aligning narratives across communities to drive larger scale change, most likely because they are doing this work already, in a variety of different community-driven ways.

“Narrative change accelerates when a story of local struggle, rooted in place and community, joins a broader story of shared movement and experience.” *Bernice Shaw, CSS*

In contrast, many campaigns in California have historically led with research (Approach C) and reported challenges with aligning narratives across communities. This research-led approach is often participatory, though not community-led in the same way as Approaches A and B. Study participants emphasized that these **approaches are not mutually exclusive**, but do serve different purposes and provide different types of value.

“The person with the most authentic voice is the person who can say that is my firsthand experience. Therefore, I can offer that story, but I can also say what I think would make it better.... one of the ways we build power is by giving people who are in closest proximity to the oppression the choice and the option to be able to use their experiences in their voice to make change.” *Shanelle Matthews, RadComms*

Table 1. Four complementary approaches to narrative change

	Approach A	Approach B	Approach C	Approach D
Summary	Narrative change as embedded into a larger power building and organizing approach that centers the voices of their community members.	Centers the voice of community members while also actively working across many communities and building networks working on aligned narratives.	Research-driven process, which may include many organizations at the table, that engages communities to deploy messages, frames, and narratives.	Mix of research and community-driven processes, all oriented around policy change processes (narrative as a tool to change policy).
Voices Centered	Begins first and foremost with the voices of people in their communities. Audiences are often the community members.	Often begins with a central narrative focus, but centers the voices of each community within that focus. May seek to reach larger audiences than just the communities.	Begins with research using strategic communications tools like polling, focus groups, and message testing. Explicitly focuses on larger audiences and significant reach.	Centers policymakers as the audience to reach, often with community members as the storytellers.
Reach/ scale/ desired impact	Deeply focused on the needs of one or a couple communities.	Works across communities, seeking alignment on central narratives.	Explicit, central goal of reaching many people and broadly shifting narratives.	Prioritizes policy change as the primary outcome.

All four approaches are grappling with **the intersection of building power and changing narratives**, though what this means differs across approaches and interviewees, including:

- For some, power building is foundational and narrative is a strategy to build power;
- For others, narrative change is insufficient - narrative power is needed to drive meaningful changes.
- For Approach C, there is a tension between deploying resources to build power in communities to help change narratives and scaling the reach of narrative campaigns through other tactics that are less community-driven.

Questions for Funders: What approaches are you investing in most significantly today? How are you supporting efforts to bridge across approaches? What barriers to advancing specific approaches or bridging across approaches might you unintentionally be creating?

Capacities that are Under-Resourced

Interviewees identified many different **capacities that organizations working on narrative change simply need more of** – some of which are needed across many organizations and some of which are needed only by a few organizations that can then share those capacities (Table 2, next page).

“For too long, we’ve just accepted that nonprofits don’t need narrative and communications capacity. But it is clear our investments in narrative change need to include those on the ground – local organizers, strategists and communicators – who are networked together.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

Table 2. Critical narrative change capacities

Critical, but missing or insufficient:	Critical, but somewhat intangible:	Less critical, but missing:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications knowledge & skills • Trauma support for storytellers • Understanding stories • Conducting research • Planning skills • Physical facilities • Rapid response capacity • Ethnic and community-controlled media • Cultural work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity to take actions that spread positive narratives (where actions, not words, change the narrative) • Humility, recognizing narrative change expertise as critical, but not the only expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencing the institutions (schools, museums, gov) where narratives are reinforced • Disseminating stories/narratives on TV/radio

Specific to communications capacity, grassroots-focused organizations largely **did not want more communications capacity via new staff** with specialized roles (preferring capacity be built across existing staff and deeply embedded in the organization), while organizations focused on network and coalition building called out the **need for more dedicated communications staff**, including in grassroots organizations.

Many participants are interested in various types of shared infrastructure, particularly around communications capacity or other narrative capacities, including via **multi-organization “hubs”** for narrative change, shared technology access, shared communications expertise, and infrastructure to help amplify narratives.

“Storytelling happens in all these different forms: in dance and music and theater and visual art... narrative means a story and that means storytellers/cultural workers.” *Anonymous*

Specific Capacity that is Over-Resourced: Participants consistently held a strong point of view about their desired role for how national communications firms show up in California’s narrative change work: **they want to see less involvement, less funding, and more investment in communities.** They do not believe these firms share their values, bring enough value for the cost, offer relevant products, or build local capacity. They asked that smaller, more value-aligned firms be engaged instead, and only for the specific skills not available in communities.

“Stop paying for expensive comms firms disconnected from the community who ‘hoard’ resources, knowledge, and contacts.” *Anonymous*

Questions for Funders: Which capacities are you investing in now and how? Who makes decisions about which capacities you’ll support? How might this look different in the future?

Feedback for How Funders Support & Show Up

While the interview questions did not ask for feedback about how funders are supporting narrative change, all of the interviewees offered insights about how funders can change their behaviors in order to better support narrative change work. At the center of how study participants reflected on the role of funders in narrative change was one core message: **step back, release control, and trust us.** Trust in the people in communities leading this work; trust the partnerships that exist already; trust the messages that emerge from communities; step back and give room for communities to have power.

“Trust-based philanthropy is needed. If there is a belief that power is in the community, allow those orgs to use the resources to utilize their power and build it.” *Mayra Alvarez, Children’s Partnership*

At a practical level, study participants had advice on what it looks like to step back and trust grantees:

- **Put trust in the processes that you fund**, in order to generate outcomes that you can support, instead of holding power over the outcomes;
- **Support communities** to advance narrative change, rather than investing in communications firms to identify narratives and produce messages;
- **Support more narrative change capacity**, including communications staff, amplification, and rapid response;
- Offer this support in ways that are less directive, less likely to trigger competition among narrative change organizations, and less focused on funder priorities (more **focused on grassroots priorities**);
- **Allow the time** for collaborative processes – let them move at the speed of trust;
- **Offer flexibility**. Ideally, provide general operating grants, decreasing the burden of negotiating deliverables again and again. These grants are critical for supporting the core capacity in the field.
- Allow room for your grantees to engage in trial and error, **conducting experiments** that contribute to growth and better outcomes, even though some will fail;
- **Be more innovative** yourself – move away from traditional grantmaking structures and find other ways to support narrative change in movements, such as social enterprise investments and utilizing more intermediaries who are part of the field;
- **Step back, and only step in** where you have unique power and opportunity and where your partners are asking for your support; and
- Don't build a new infrastructure to support narrative change, or build up your own infrastructure, but instead help to **embed narrative change capacity in existing social movements and coalitions**. The need for strong, established relationships and multi-purpose coalitions was emphasized by many stakeholders.

“Trust us, trust our strategy, trust our ability to do this. You know, test us, let us be accountable for the things that we're doing, but give us enough runway to try and build different planes and see if they'll take off as opposed to saying to us 'I'll fund the wheel on the plane. I'm really interested in the wheel.’”
Joseph Phelan, ReFrame Mentorship

“Tread lightly so it doesn't distort the situation. Invest in a way that contributes to impact and outcomes.”
Discussion Group

Funders' Role in Evaluation & Learning

Study participants shared many ideas that represent, collectively, a move away from predefined outcomes and metrics and a move toward more emergent approaches and grantee-led evaluation. They believe metric-driven approaches can result in decisions that limit the creativity of campaigns, limit the number of voices in the campaign, and fail to see many of the things in the campaign that mattered, but were not as measurable.

Participants want to see grant agreements that don't predefine outcomes and associated metrics, learning processes that help learn from successes and failures, and a wider recognition of the non-linear process by which narratives are changed.

Questions for Funders: What specific steps could you take to “release control” to your grantees and the field of narrative change leaders in California? Are there any practices recommended by the interviewees that you are ready to let go of or any you're ready to add?

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