Nonprofit Approach to Asset-Based Language: The Power of Intentional Communication

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NPA 622: Nonprofit Data Analysis - Capstone

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Instructor: Marco Tavanti, Ph.D.
## Research Questions

How does asset framing and asset-based language impact the work of a nonprofit organization who is serving young people in historically marginalized communities?

How does it impact its relationship with major stakeholders?

My research examines how asset-framing and asset-based language can positively transform nonprofit organizations and its relationships with primary stakeholders.
OBJECTIVES AND VALUES

Explore how asset- and deficit-based language is used in the nonprofit sector, particularly within the context of working with young people in historically marginalized communities.

Gain an understanding of how asset-based language influences relationship with the nonprofit’s primary stakeholders, such as the students/community it serves, donors, and staff.

Learn how nonprofit organizations can transition from asset-based framing ideals into actual practice.
DEFINITIONS

● **Asset-based**
  ○ Avoid words and phrases that look at situations or people from a “deficit” lens that prioritizes what’s missing or what’s wrong in one’s circumstances or life. Instead, prioritizing language that focuses on strengths and potentials.

● **People-first**
  ○ Putting the person ahead of characteristics.
  ○ Example: low-income students v. students who come from historically marginalized backgrounds

● **Specific**
  ○ Opt for descriptors that clearly convey what is meant, rather than relying on generalizations or “code words” that require the reader or listener to fill in the blanks.
METHODS AND APPROACHES

* Literature review of various articles
* 7 expert interviews conducted
  ● Nonprofit Executive Directors
  ● Director of Development
  ● Senior Director of Programs
* 10 content analysis of annual reports
  ● Education nonprofits
  ● Youth development nonprofits
  ● Workforce development nonprofits
# DATA ANALYSIS: Literature Review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words and phrases to avoid</th>
<th>Words and phrases that depend on context</th>
<th>Leading with asset-based language</th>
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<tr>
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DATA ANALYSIS: Expert Interview Findings

Language matters
- People are not defined by their circumstances
- Reframe how young people talk about themselves from a deficit-based perspective to an asset-based perspective

Focus on community aspirations
- Move away from the narrative of fixing a problem and invest in the strengths of the community
- Highlighting resiliency and inspiration to create an emotional connection

Unlearning and repackaging
- Keep an open mind and understand that asset frameworks require a lot of learning and unlearning
- Have open conversations with the people themselves to understand their perspectives and see how language is internalized
“Nonprofit organizations are used to using language like “low-income families”, “low-income students”, “urban youth”, “marginalized youth”, and “disconnected youth”. It is imperative work on not using these terms. We are individuals first and are not defined by economic status or mobility.”

“Using an asset-based framework and tying an emotional response that highlights the resiliency and inspiration of each student has, is changing the way we work with donors and students themselves.”

**Sound Bite - Denice Kelley**
DATA ANALYSIS: Content Analysis Findings

- 10 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations with a focus on young people in historically marginalized communities.
- 10 annual reports examined
- Focus on demographic information highlighted
- Focus on asset-based terminology throughout the annual report’s mission, vision, values, and about us
DATA ANALYSIS: Content Analysis Findings

Demographic Information of Population Served

- People of color: 27.8%
- First generation college: 16.7%
- Economic mobility: 27.8%
- ESL: 5.6%
- Place of birth: 5.6%
- Age: 5.6%
- LGBTQ+ identification: 5.6%
- Gender: 5.6%
**DATA ANALYSIS: Content Analysis Findings**

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<th>success</th>
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**Frequency of Asset-Based Words**

- **empower**
- **opportunity**
- **success**
- **potential**
IMPLICATIONS & FINDINGS

- We are able to honor and respect our communities without painting them in a negative light and defining people by their circumstances.

- Keeping ourselves accountable is imperative to identifying and eliminating problematic language from our vocabulary.

- Intentionally choosing positive language challenges us to communicate more accurately without falling back on stereotypes that perpetuate harmful misinformation or view others in a deficit point of view.
RECOMMENDATIONS

❖ Unlearning, learning, and relearning
  ➢ Educate staff members, donors, volunteers, and all primary stakeholders about the importance of changing the narrative and stories of the populations the nonprofit serves through conversations, workshops, and creating open and honest dialogue

❖ Don’t try to boil the ocean
  ➢ Change takes time! Unpacking deficit language piece by piece will be more beneficial than trying to make all changes at once.

❖ Develop authentic relationships with stakeholders
  ➢ Invest in donors and community members that align with the mission of the organization and are also invested in supporting the community’s strengths and aspirations
REFERENCES


Kretzmann, J. P. and McKnight, J. L. 1993. *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community’s assets*, Evanston, Illinois: ABCD Institute.


THE NONPROFIT APPROACH TO Asset-Based Language: The Power of Intentional Communication
Sarah Heraldo, MNA - Master of Nonprofit Administration - Capstone Project

SUMMARY
Language matters. Nonprofit organizations have historically created a story that begins with a “challenge” or “problem” to engage donors, as well as the public. Through expert interviews and literature reviews, asset-framing is explored to uncover the implications of how positive language affects nonprofit organizations at a macro level.

PURPOSE
To address how strengths-based frameworks and asset-based language, particularly through the lens of education and youth within historically marginalized communities, can positively impact the outcome of nonprofit organizations and its primary stakeholders.

RESEARCH
How does asset-framing and asset-based language impact the work of a nonprofit organization who is serving young people in historically marginalized communities?

METHODS
- Literature review
- 7 expert interviews were conducted
- 10 content analyses of annual reports

DATA AND ANALYSIS
10 annual reports revealed demographic information of population served, emphasizing:
- People of color, economic mobility, first generation
- Frequency of asset-based words

RESULTS
- It is possible to engage donors and the public without creating a deficit-focused narrative
- Keep ourselves accountable to eliminate problematic language in our vocabulary
- Intentionally choose positive language that challenges us to communicate more accurately without falling back on stereotypes

RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Unlearning, learning, and relearning
   - Educate others on changing the narrative
2. Don’t try to boil the ocean
   - Change takes time! Unpacking language piece by piece will be more beneficial in the long run
3. Develop strong, authentic relationships with stakeholders
   - Invest in community members who support community aspirations and strengths

REFERENCES


Kretzmann, J. P. and McKnight, J. L. Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community’s assets. Evanston, Illinois: ABCD Institute (1993).