

Framing on Your Feet: Using the Core Story of Human Services to Answer Frequently-Asked Questions

The vast majority of questions and comments that communicators hear from the public and policymakers can be predicted by the research-based “[swamp](#)” of cultural models on that issue.

If you can predict, you can prepare.

A strategic framer prepares by anticipating the questions that will emerge from the swamp; considering the “traps” that are lurking in a possible response; and then, choosing a well-framed response with the potential to build a more productive way of thinking about the issue.

*The sample question-and-answer sequences here show this thought process in action. Note that the models provided aren't intended to simply script “the right answers” to questions you might be asked. Rather, this is a teaching tool, offering illustrations of how to frame your issues by applying the **Building Well-being Narrative**.*

Q: In a time of tight budget pressures, why should we devote scarce resources to non-essentials like opportunities for recreation for youth or seniors?



THE FALSE START ANSWER

Providing services like recreation for youth and seniors might not be as essential as food and shelter, but these types of services are indeed crucial. For one, they serve as gateways to other social services. The older adult who shows up for the coffee might stick around for the blood pressure screening or a diabetes management program. And in fact, research shows that older adults who participate in senior center programs can learn to manage and delay the onset of chronic disease. As a bonus, they experience measurable improvements in their social, spiritual, emotional, mental, and economic well-being. The same line of argument holds for youth opportunities: we have to serve the whole child. Investing in our human capital is a long-term strategy, but one we can't afford to miss.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

The purpose of our public budgets is to support the shared well-being of all our residents, young, old, or in between. When we do this, we make sure that everyone can reach their potential and fully contribute to our communities.

If we think of well-being as something that is built, then we can tell right away that it requires many different materials. Recreation opportunities actually provide many of the materials that are essential for well-being: physical activity, social relationships, a sense of connection.

A good public budget is one that meets our needs now and also plans for our future. We all need opportunities to thrive, and so programs like these are a responsible use of our resources.

THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- By describing “food and shelter” as the essentials, and other aspects of wellness as “a bonus,” this response falls into the Basics Trap.
- By positioning recreation as a “gateway” to other social services, this answer is likely to feed into a fear about dependency, rather than build support for integrated human services.
- While the passage closes with an appeal to the social good, it does not explain how providing recreation or other services besides food and shelter help our communities “thrive,” define what “human and social capital” is, or explain why investing in it is a good thing.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- By starting with the Value Human Potential rather than restating the unproductive frame embedded in the question, this response redirects the conversation toward reliable, tested themes that build support.
- Human Potential establishes the collective benefit of investing in well-being.
- By focusing on the “many different materials” association available through the Construction Explanatory Metaphor, the response makes a case for recreation as an essential, not just a “nice extra.”
- This response frames a “good” budget as one that anticipates and provides for people’s needs, rather than playing into the “tough times require tough choices” embedded in the original question.

Q: Why should we make it a priority to ensure that human service professionals are well paid? It seems to me that the kind of work they do is pretty much charity work. People get into that sort of thing for the outcomes, not the income.



THE FALSE START ANSWER

Over the past few years, the dedicated nonprofit professionals in our community have gone without raises in order to prevent budget cuts for the most vulnerable city residents. But this kind of self-sacrifice isn't sustainable. As costs of living rise, not getting a raise is the equivalent of getting a pay cut. And, as in any business, when a nonprofit can't pay its staff well, eventually, workers leave for something that pays better. High staff turnover erodes our organizational capacity over time, which leads to uncontrolled, ad hoc and unplanned loss of services to critical populations. As the cost of living rises without any increased funding, we have less money to pay our remaining staff, which may mean we have to close programs that city residents rely on -- and some nonprofits may have to close their doors entirely. Paying staff well is a way to protect our social safety net.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

If we want our community to thrive and remain vibrant, we have to maximize the human potential of all our residents. This potential is realized when people experience physical, social, emotional wellness. Well-being is built, much like a house is constructed. And just as we would turn to knowledgeable contractors or carpenters for a construction project, our community turns to human service professionals to tackle the complex job of building well-being. These professionals might build children's foundations by pushing for high-quality early learning or helping teens avoid drug and alcohol problems. They build well-being in adulthood by studying mental illness or working to make housing more affordable. They shore up older adults by involving them in tutoring programs that keep them engaged in our communities, or providing meals to those who can't get around. By supporting people throughout their lives, human services professionals construct and maintain well-being for everyone. To attract and retain the skilled professionals to work on the all-important project of community well-being, we need to provide compensation that reflects the value they bring to society.

THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- By describing the sector as "dedicated" and "self-sacrificing," the response reinforces the assumption that human services are about Kindness and Charity.
- This response falls into the "Black Box Trap" by failing to explain or offer examples of human services.
- This response emphasizes the impact of low pay on the organization and its staff but neglects the collective effects on the larger community.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- This response establishes a strong frame by using the **Building Well-being Narrative** before directly addressing the question of pay. This "proactive" framing work prompts the public to consider the compensation issue in light of a fuller account of the work that human services professionals perform, and the value it provides to us all.

Q: Your organization is advocating for more income assistance for the poor. Given that those approaches only breed dependency, why shouldn't we be cutting cash handouts altogether?



THE FALSE START ANSWER

Many people think that direct aid to working families – welfare, food stamps, even tax credits – create dependency. “Let’s give people a hand up, not a hand out,” they say. This belief may make for a nifty sound bite, but it flies in opposition to the facts. Research shows that if you give aid to a family, you increase the chances that the child will not live in poverty as an adult. If we want to end poverty in America, we need to give families more support, not less.

Let’s look at nutrition benefits –what we used to call food stamps. A study from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that when a family receives food stamps, the positive impact on children lasts long into adulthood. Kids who benefitted from food stamps were more likely to grow up to achieve economic self-sufficiency than their peers. There are also pronounced health benefits for these kids into adulthood, particularly for women. Children who receive adequate nutrition are more likely to become healthy and productive workers. A handout is a hand up. Now that’s a nifty sound bite – and it just happens to be based on the facts.

THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- This response reinforces the negative frame – that economic support for low-income families creates dependency -- by repeating it.
- By failing to expand the purpose of human services, this response leaves in place the limited definition of financial well-being.
- “Ending poverty in America” is viewed as an unrealistic goal by the public.
- By using a Rhetorical Tone that proceeds as if the communication is a debate, lends credence to the opposing view while increasing that chances of alienating “bystander publics.”



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

By making sure that everyone can reach their potential and fully contribute, we are taking a necessary step keep our communities vibrant. We know that well-being doesn’t just happen – it has to be built, much like a house. And maintenance or even additional materials are sometimes needed to make sure that everyone in the community keeps doing well all around - socially, mentally, physically, and yes, financially. When people encounter a bad break in life—such as getting laid off during a recession or needing to care for an aging parent with mental health issues—we can shore up their well-being to make sure the stormy weather isn’t catastrophic.

Contrary to popular belief, providing income assistance to a family actually makes it less likely that their children will need those programs as adults.. This makes sense when you think about it. A little more income makes all sorts of things possible – a healthier diet, higher quality childcare, a little more time to spend quality time with children. Kids with access to any of these things are more likely to thrive. Why? Because we have stepped in to build a stronger foundation of well-being, which affects the sturdiness of the structure built on it. We advocate for income assistance because it is one of the most useful tools we have to build the community well-being that we all depend on.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- Opens with the Human Potential Value to define the problem in terms of a shared stake in well-being.
- Works within the Construction Explanatory Metaphor to make a case for assistance in times of acute need without undermining a broader view of human needs and services.
- Counters the myth of dependency without restating it. Offers a clear explanation of the evidence-based position that makes intuitive sense, which makes it more likely to “stick.”