

Reframing Work & Labor

WorkShift Toolkit

What is WorkShift?

WorkShift is a multiyear initiative by the FrameWorks Institute designed to build public support for restructuring America's labor systems, with a particular focus on care work and manufacturing.

The project began by identifying a core tension: While Americans deeply value work as a source of dignity, identity, and financial stability, the reality for most workers is insecurity and exploitation. In response, FrameWorks developed and tested new framing strategies to shift how the public thinks about work—moving away from individualistic narratives of personal success and failure toward a systemic understanding of how power, policy, and structural inequity shape labor markets. WorkShift is supported by funders, including the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the Square One Foundation, and the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation.

Why are reframing strategies for care work and manufacturing part of WorkShift?

Care work and manufacturing are two of the clearest examples of how cultural assumptions can lead society to undervalue entire sectors of work—with consequences for workers' pay, protections, and wellbeing. Care work is often thought of as the natural domain of women, and not as real work. Manufacturing is considered “men’s work” and a core sector of the economy, but at the same time it’s thought of as a low-status, dirty, dangerous job for people with limited prospects in life. While the challenges these workers face are different, they share a common assumption: that the way these jobs look is natural and inevitable. By developing framing strategies for both sectors within the same research project, WorkShift ensures that the messages for each reinforce rather than contradict each other and that together, they help move the public toward a clearer understanding of how power shapes labor systems and how collective solutions can address them.

What does *reframing* mean, and how is it different from regular messaging or public relations?

Messaging is about finding the right words for a specific moment or audience. Framing is a longer-term endeavor. Frames are the choices we make about how an issue is presented—what is and isn't emphasized, our tone, the values we evoke, the explanations we use—consistently and across communications. It's a strategy to shift how people *think* about an issue over time, across many platforms, and shared by many messengers.

Framing strategies are tested and designed from building blocks like values, metaphors, and simple explanations of how things work. We can embed frames into our messages, but the actual language of the message itself can be adapted as needed. Framing isn't a script; it's flexible and responsive to communicators' needs and audiences.

What are cultural mindsets and why do they matter for talking about work and labor?

Cultural mindsets are deeply held assumptions about the way the world works that are widely shared across a culture or society. Cultural mindsets are highly durable and transcend issues—for instance, the *Individualism* mindset assumes a person's outcomes are determined primarily, if not solely, by the choices they make. In recent years, a more systemic mindset about how institutions, and not just individual effort, shape economic opportunity has become more prominent.

When it comes to work, though, this kind of systemic thinking continues to be much weaker. Instead, people are more likely to assume that invisible forces shape the labor force, and that whether someone lands a good job comes down to natural aptitudes or their own drive and determination. This WorkShift reframing strategy builds on shifts in thinking about the economy and helps create a context for changing the systems that organize work. It does this by moving people's thinking toward more structural understanding of the problems workers face, increasing their sense of solidarity and raising their support for real and lasting change, today and into the future.

What is your research process? How did you decide which framing strategies to recommend?

The framing strategies recommended in WorkShift are grounded in mixed-methods research and developed in close collaboration with an advisory board of advocates, scholars, and organizers. The process began with descriptive research to understand how the public and the field currently think and talk about work—including stakeholder interviews, in-depth interviews with a cross section of the US public, a literature review, analysis of organizational communications, media scans, and a large-scale public survey. Researchers then developed and rigorously tested candidate framing strategies to see which ones shifted public thinking in productive directions by building understanding, changing attitudes, and raising support for effective solutions. To learn more, see the [WorkShift Methods Supplement](#) for the first phase of research, and the Methods Supplement for the second phase.

Can I put these framing recommendations into my own voice and style?

Yes. The recommendations and the examples used in this toolkit should not be considered a script. First, think about the mindsets that come into play when you communicate about work and labor. Examine your messaging to ensure you aren't unwittingly falling into common traps in public thinking, such as *Individualism* (the idea that individuals are responsible for their own success and failure in life) or *Gender Essentialism* (the idea that men and women are naturally, biologically suited to different jobs). Then, consider incorporating effective frames into your communication while staying true to your style and voice. Start with the frames that feel most natural or easy to implement and adapt them for context, outlet (for example, newsletters, reports, or social media), and the language in which you communicate with your audiences.

My organization focuses on one particular aspect of work or economic justice. Do I have to use all of these reframing strategies in my communications?

No. Not every framing recommendation is going to be suitable for, or fit into, every communication. Make strategic choices about which frames work for your organization's mission and your audiences. Then amplify your message through repetition and coordination with other communicators using the same framing strategy.

When using the framing strategies, which audiences should we target?

The framing strategies developed through WorkShift are meant to be used with the widest possible audience. Creating the change we need in our labor system requires showing that everyone in society has a stake in how work and our economy are designed. Reaching the general public is what makes it possible to shift the national conversation and change cultural mindsets in a deep and lasting way.

At the same time, the strategies can be adapted for audiences with different roles and different levels of familiarity with work and labor issues. This might include workers themselves, union organizers, workforce trainers, employers, policymakers, journalists, researchers, community and faith leaders, and advocates working on issues like racial equity, gender justice, and economic fairness. The framing strategy can and should be adjusted in response to different contexts and to connect with different audiences.

We are in policy gridlock right now. How is this framing strategy going to help us advance our goals?

Framing alone cannot break a political logjam—and that's not what it's designed to do.

Framing is not a substitute for organizing, lobbying, or direct political pressure. However, building broad, durable public demand for the kinds of structural changes that workers need is critical for long-term change. Policymakers respond to political will, which is shaped, over time, by how the public understands an issue. There are very few moments in history when big, lasting changes happened without a significant shift in public thinking first, from labor protections to civil rights to marriage equality.