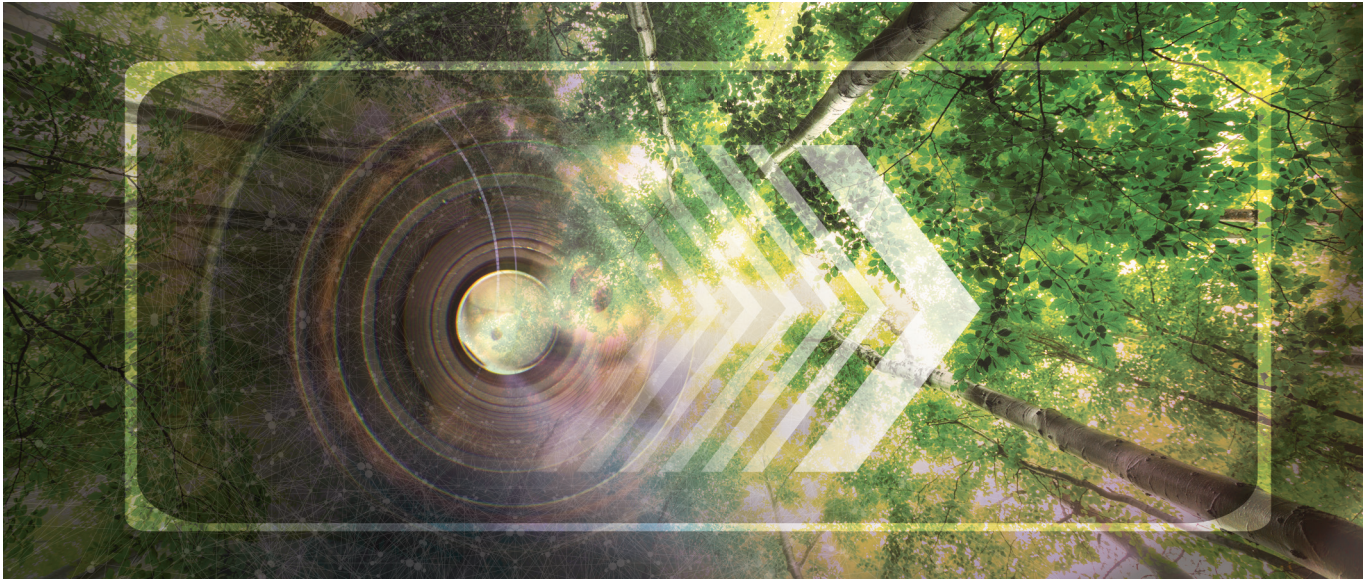




Why Framing Matters: Ways to Move Forward



Chances are if you've read this column or heard me speak in the past couple of years, you've seen or heard the words "framing matters" and you know that I am a self-proclaimed "geek" of framing science and believe it is a key tool for anyone interested in moving system transformation in health and human services. In recent months, I have doubled-down on that belief, especially as we witness drastically different narratives playing out across our nation.

In prior issues of *Policy & Practice*, we have introduced you to framing and what effective framing can do to make our shared narrative more productive and impactful. We have also introduced you to experts, especially our friends at the Frameworks Institute, and the results of their research relevant to our field (see www.frameworksinstitute.org). At APHSA, we continue to be both eager students and practicing champions of framing. We are increasingly mindful

of the pitfalls we all can fall into when describing why human services matters and what can be done to improve outcomes for children, families, and communities. In this column, I share two framing strategies that can help us avoid the most common mistakes and produce more effective frames.

First, we need to widen our lens.

Think about what happens when you add a wide-angle lens to your camera and turn to its widest position—what do you see? You capture as much of the landscape before you as possible within the frame.

In the human services space, when we widen our lens, it helps us avoid the fundamental attribution error—i.e., the predominant belief that we can "fix" an individual or family through a program or service without addressing the environmental factors in their lives. In our field, too often we tell an individual

success story to policymakers or the public believing that it perfectly illustrates why a program or service works. Consider, for example, the story of a young mother who recounts the impact on her life when she is able to get a job with a meaningful wage. If the story focuses on her journey, it will likely be overwhelmed by the deeply embedded American value of hard work and grit. In other words, listeners will attribute her success to her resilience and fortitude alone, not also to the services around her. Too often, the story we believe we are telling simply isn't heard. What is heard is the story of someone who overcame the odds (what Frameworks refers to as the value of "self-making"), rather than how the human-serving systems supported and empowered their journey.

We have to get better at showing the full landscape. This means when we

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share success stories, we must paint the full picture. Frames that include the environmental and community context up front in our narrative are far more effective. Whole family or multigenerational approaches that bridge sectors are particularly helpful frames for showing what works across the lifecycle of a family in the community in which they live, work, and play. Consider the connected systems at play, for example, in shaping the trajectory of young parents who find initial support in a TANF program (human services system) that provides them with new job skills (workforce system) that lead to a quality job (employer), and where child care subsidies (early learning and care) mean Dad or Mom can take that job and simultaneously assure quality early learning and care for their children.

Another way to apply this metaphor is to flip the lens completely to tell the story of how the human services system is a fundamental building block for healthy human development and well-being. When we show how education, health, employment, and other sectors are naturally connected to human services, we turn the focus

to how human services can prevent unnecessary reliance on government supports, positively impact population health and well-being, and reduce downstream costs.

Second, we need to use numbers more effectively.

We are bombarded with news stories involving large numbers. Especially related to government or charities, we hear about billions of dollars spent on services or the historic number of people served in a program. These frames evoke an unproductive response and almost always result in default

thinking about government waste or ineffective use of charitable dollars.


There are two keys to remember when using numbers to illustrate your point. First, it is important to provide the “why” up front. Numbers alone don’t tell the story and won’t move people to a more productive frame. This is true even when you’re making a compelling case

for a program’s return on investment to a community. Before you introduce how effective a service is, you need to first show what is at stake and why it matters. For example, building

on Frameworks research in human services, we know that the shared American value of human potential is an effective means of connecting people to the idea that all of us should have the opportunity to live to our full potential and that well-being is not something we are born with but is built by the environment around us. Once we have set that stage, we can use numbers to help explain the issue and what the policy opportunities are to prevent or resolve the problem.

“Social math” is the practice of translating statistics and other data so that they are meaningful to an audience and helpful in advancing public policy. Comparisons to familiar things can be helpful; for example, comparing the cost benefit of making investments in a school over a prison—both well-known institutions.

Using numbers this way is a part of effective framing. When it is done well, social math disrupts old mindsets and can open up new ways of seeing the issue and the solution(s).

All of this takes practice. At APHSA, we have developed training curricula, tools, and technical assistance supports on framing tailored for health and human services. If you are interested in exploring these services, please contact me or Jennifer Kerr, who leads our Organizational Effectiveness practice, at jkerr@aphsa.org. 

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