

DEVELOPING YOUR MESSAGE



THE
ARENA

OVERVIEW: WHAT IS A CORE MESSAGE FRAME?

A core message frame is the distilled narrative your campaign consistently amplifies via all the communications channels at your disposal. It should be the heartbeat of the story you are telling online, in speeches, in the press, and at voters' doors. Campaigns are all about building and scaling relationships with voters to build trust, so it's incredibly important that the organization you are building is aligned around your message and empowered to deliver it on your behalf.

As you develop the core message of your campaign, the greatest challenge will likely be synthesizing it into one paragraph that quickly communicates who you are, what you're about, and why a voter should support you. In a noisy digital world, doing this well is more important than ever. Too often, campaigns lose their audiences because their messages are generic, vague, and disconnected. Other times, they lean too heavily on the candidate's resume or specific policy prescriptions, and lack focus, emotional resonance, and narrative.

A strong core message is:

- Clear, crisp, and concise
- Anchored in values and personal story
- Authentic to you and your vision
- Resonant with the experience and moral foundations of the voters you wish to serve

DEVELOPING YOUR CORE MESSAGE

STEP 1: PERSONAL STORY

Your personal story is one of the most powerful tools at your disposal — telling your story is an opportunity to show people who you are and what you care about. It is also your opportunity to connect your values to those of the voters in your district. Before you go through the exercise of mapping your values and developing your message, you should invest in practicing and refining your story.

Writing your personal story can be daunting: there's a lot to remember, and you're not sure what is important and what is not. It is essential at the beginning to get down as much information as possible and then refine it. The creative process can take many forms. If the thought of sitting down in front of a computer to write sounds unappealing, try writing by hand or recording yourself speaking. You can write yourself "interview" questions, or ask a friend to interview you. You can also lay out a timeline—from birth to now—and write major events on sticky notes. Next, stick them on the wall in chronological order, and consider which events were most formative in shaping your point of view or put you on the journey that led you to running for office. The point is to find a

creative process that works with you. Start alone if you need to, and then bring in friends and family to share ideas and memories.

Marshall Ganz, a professor and well known organizer at the Harvard Kennedy School, has developed a public narrative workshop that we highly recommend. You can find a worksheet that will guide you through the process of story development [here](#).

You should read the whole thing, but the principles and structure presented are synthesized in this excerpt:

A good story of self is drawn from the series of choice points that have structured the “plot” of your life – the challenges you faced, choices you made, and outcomes you experienced.

Challenge: *Why did you feel it was a challenge? What was so challenging about it? Why was it your challenge?*

Choice: *Why did you make the choice you did? Where did you get the courage – or not? Where did you get the hope – or not? How did it feel?*

Outcome: *How did the outcome feel? Why did it feel that way? What did it teach you? What do you want to teach us? How do you want us to feel? The story you tell of why you sought to lead allows others insight into your values, why you have chosen to act on them in this way, what they can expect from you, and what they can learn from you.*

The story you tell of why you sought to lead allows others insight into your values, why you have chosen to act on them in this way, what they can expect from you, and what they can learn from you. A public story includes three elements:

A story of self: *why you were called to what you have been called to.*

A story of us: *what your constituency, community, organization has been called to its shared purposes, goals, vision.*

A story of now: *the challenge this community now faces, the choices it must make, and the hope to which “we” can aspire.*

STEP 2: CORE VALUES

Once you have practiced, refined, and written down your story of self / us / now, it’s time to reflect on your core values and moral foundations.

Remember, values are different than issues. Values are the important principles that guide the decisions we make in life. Values unite us. Issues are topics on which we must have a position or choose a side. Issues divide us. This is a simple distinction, but it's an important one.

Think back to your personal story, and the choice or choices you decided to highlight. What values guided those choices? What values do you want to instill in the next generation? What values will guide your decisions as a policymaker and public servant? How did your experience shape your values? Write these down.

Now, think about the values of the people in your district. What's important to them? How does the experience of voters in your district shape their values? Brainstorm with your team (at most 4 - 5 people) and write those down.

Your Values	The Values of Your District
Your Experience	The Experience of the Voters

Now, pause. Take 12 minutes to watch [this TED talk from Robb Willer](#) on the power of moral framing to unite or divide.

Go back to your side-by-side list. Think about your moral foundations, and the moral foundations of the voters in your district. Where do they align? It may be that the answer to this question is a long list; if that is the case, try to narrow it to 3 - 4 shared moral foundations.

Your core message should be anchored in the intersection point of your values, experience, and moral foundation and the values, experience, and moral foundations of your voters. We will use the values you list at the intersection to inform the development of your core message frame. This is the next step.

STEP 3: CORE MESSAGE

At this stage in the process you should have:

- Your personal story (that you will continue to refine over time)
- A set of 3 - 4 core values that reflect the intersection of your experience and the experience of voters in your district

Now it's time to weave that together with your vision, and write no more than 5 - 7 sentences that crisply and concisely articulate what you want voters to remember about you. Remember, your core message is one paragraph that quickly communicates who you are, what you're about, and why a voter should support you.

Sometimes the story of self / us / now gets you there, and it's really just about condensing it. Other times, we need to process and reconstruct the message further. There is no cookie-cutter model that works for everyone when it comes to core message. If you're struggling to distill everything into one paragraph, we recommend answering the following questions.

1. In a few sentences, what is your story of self?
2. How has your personal journey shaped your values? (Note: name them explicitly.)
3. What problem do you see with the status quo?
4. What opportunities do you see to solve it?
5. How can we create the solution, together? (Note: for voters, the solution is always getting involved in your campaign/voting for you!)

Once you've answered these questions as concisely as you can, try to put it all together into one paragraph.

Read it outloud to yourself, to your team, to your family. Ask yourself these questions:

- How does it read?
- Does it flow?
- Is it easy to remember and retell?
- Does it communicate your personal story, your values, and your vision?
- Does it connect your experience with the experience of those you seek to engage?
- Does it feel authentic to who you are?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," then keep refining it. This process usually takes some time. But it's important to invest yourself in the process. This is about what you want to say to people, and how you want to make them feel.

STEP 4: MAKE A MESSAGE BOX

Now that you have your personal story, your core values, and your core message frame identified, it's important to translate that work into how you talk about yourself and your opponents. It's also important to be cognizant of painting contrast with what your opponent is saying about you and what she is saying about herself.

One framework for mapping out your talking points is what communications strategists commonly refer to as "The Message Box." It's pretty self explanatory — the idea is to populate each quadrant with short, crisp phrases. At the end of the exercise, you should have a visual map of the key message points competing for voters' attention and support from your campaign, and from your opponent(s). This exercise is best completed in small groups. That way, you have checks on biased points of view (which is unavoidable when doing the exercise alone) and avoid groupthink or laundry listing that might occur in large groups.

We recommended you start on the right side, with the upper right quadrant, "**Them on You.**" To get started, consider these questions: What are or will your opponents say about you? How will they characterize you? How are they messaging your background, persona, platform, motivations, and network? Plot 4 - 5 phrases you can expect to hear from your opponent(s) build their version of the narrative about you.

Repeat this process for "**Them on Them.**" What are they saying about themselves? What story are they telling? What values do they espouse? How are they talking about their vision? How are they trying to connect with voters? Again, plot 4 - 5 phrases or keywords.

Now, you should have alignment on what your opponent(s) have to say about you, and about themselves. With that and your core message in mind, it's time to sketch out talking points for your team to paint contrast in how you talk about yourself and your opponent. You should repeat the steps you took on the right, for the quadrants on the left, "**You on You**" and "**You on Them.**"

You on You	Them on You

You on Them	Them on Them
--------------------	---------------------

When you've populated each quadrant, you have a list of key talking points that you can expect from the other side, and talking points/core message points for your team to use. This is not a one-time exercise. As the political environment changes, the narrative from your opposition will too. Be sure to return to this exercise and update the message box regularly.

STEP 5: TAILOR FOR KEY AUDIENCES

Now that you've got 1) your personal story, 2) core values, 3) a core message, and 4) a message box contrasting you with your opponent(s), it's time to tailor your communication for key audiences. Consider the key constituencies you will be communicating with regularly, and consider how your core message might modulate based on their viewpoints and interests.

The core message should be consistent, but you will emphasize or de-emphasize different aspects depending on who you're talking to. An easy way to make this actionable is to come up with 2 - 3 talking points you want to be sure to mention with each audience. You may use the example table below to get started on this process, adding audiences as appropriate to your district.

Audience	What do they care about?	Core Talking Points
High-Dollar Donors	-Viability -Strategy -Democracy -Return on investment	
Students	-Equity and inclusion -Education: student loans, tuition -Gun violence prevention	
Democratic Clubs	-Ground game -Political endorsements -Policy chops	

STEP 6: PREPARE AN FAQ

Before you begin to deploy your message at scale, you should also prepare a list of talking points to respond to frequently asked questions. While you may choose to put an FAQ on your website, it's also helpful to have an internal-facing document for your staff to reference as they take questions from donors, politicians, volunteers, reporters, and voters. Having an internal FAQ will allow your

team to answer questions consistently.

In writing your FAQ, you should be sure to align your responses with your core message frame and personal story, so we recommend taking this step at the end of your message development process. We recommend crowdsourcing the questions to your staff or kitchen cabinet, but have one person (this could be you, the campaign manager, or your communications director) draft the responses. It's important that the candidate be the final approver, as the FAQ should reflect your voice, tone, and vision.

STEP 7: WRITE A MESSAGE GUIDE

The last step in the development process is to bring everything together into one document that you can share with your leadership team. Don't leave it on the flip chart or dry erase board — put it all in one place that is easy to access and update as you test your message and iterate on it moving forward.

Your message guide should include the following components:

- Story of self / us / now
- Core values
- Core message frame
- Message box
- Talking points by audience
- FAQ

Congratulations! The heavy lifting is over. Now that you know what you want to say, it's time to go out and test the delivery (with polling and focus groups if you've got the means to do so). Remember, as the climate changes, your message should be responsive. Plan on returning to your message guide regularly to make updates as you gather data on what resonates and refine your approach.