

Philanthropy's New Voice: Building Trust With Deeper Stories and Clear Language

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CENTER FOR
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Summary

Foundations have an identity problem. Americans have little understanding of what foundations do and how they affect our daily lives.¹ This is not just a matter of brand identity for individual foundations; the lack of a clear narrative about what the philanthropic sector does, in a larger ecosystem of change, leaves people with questions.

This is a “narrative vacuum,” a space without coherently connected stories that help people make sense of a complex concept. This vacuum matters precisely because stories are humanity’s main tool for understanding. We learn from them, we draw meaning from them, and we instinctively weave them into larger narratives that guide our beliefs and perceptions. As Heather McGhee wrote in her book *The Sum of Us*, “Everything we believe comes from a story we’ve been told.”²

This vacuum puts the philanthropic sector—and consequently, foundations’ nonprofit partners—at risk of being defined by the stories others tell about them. We see this play out in harmful narratives in news articles and podcasts that question the intentions of foundations and their founders. Historically, when policymakers have been interested in further regulating the philanthropic sector, they have employed these themes to tell stories that undermine trust in foundations.

While it is always good to approach power with a critical lens, the lack of a sector-wide narrative allows for legitimate criticism of individual institutions to spill over into harmful narratives about the sector and philanthropy as a whole.

The good news is that collaboration across foundations—a commitment to telling transparent, nuanced stories about how foundations actually work—can help foundations fill the vacuum with constructive narratives and build trust-based relationships.

Philanthropy’s New Voice is the largest study of narratives in philanthropy. It is a robust, multimethod research effort to surface the American public’s and federal policymakers’ perspectives on philanthropy, current communications practices at foundations, and specific types of stories that can increase the public’s understanding of and trust in foundations. This study includes:

- A national survey of 3,557 Americans sampled from diverse identity and ideological backgrounds to match the U.S. demographics;
- A survey of communications practitioners who work in the sector;
- Fourteen interviews with four Congressional staffers, ten communications practitioners, and a scholar researching philanthropy;
- Multiple types of content analyses; and
- Social media listening across platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter).

1 Survey Results: American Perceptions of Philanthropy and Foundation Storytelling

2 From *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. (p. xxiii), by Heather McGhee, 2021, Random House Publishing Group. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/564989/the-sum-of-us-by-heather-mcghee/>

This report identifies actions the sector can take to fill the narrative vacuum and build trust through transparent storytelling and more intentional language. You can learn more about the research methods in the [methods section of this report](#).

Our research led us to six insights:

1. Americans have positive views about philanthropy but don't understand the charitable sector or the role it plays in their lives.
2. With some notable exceptions, members of Congress seem more interested in collaboration with foundations than increased regulation.
3. The philanthropic sector has not effectively established a shared narrative to counter harmful narratives about foundations.
4. The American public, Congressional staffers, and practitioners want foundations to be more transparent and share details about how philanthropy works.

In our national survey, the two story elements that increased respondents' trust the most were specifics about how the money is spent and how decisions are made.

5. Foundations' use of jargon and borrowed metaphors obscures their role in larger ecosystems of change.
6. Narrative change and storytelling work take a long time, which makes it hard to show the value of this work to leadership or boards.

Only 47.4% of sector survey respondents said they felt supported in their storytelling work.

69% of respondents said they had positive attitudes toward foundations.

However, 86.3% said they had moderate, little, or no knowledge about how foundations work.

Based on these findings, we recommend the following trust-building actions foundations should take, as individual organizations and collectively as a sector:

1. Tell stories within complex ecosystems in which foundations' roles are balanced with other actors who contribute to change.
2. Lean into your role as trusted messengers and tell great, ethical stories.
3. Commit to sector-wide storytelling to fill the narrative vacuum.
4. Tell stories that build the right kind of transparency.
5. Say what you mean, and mean what you say.
6. Commit the time and resources needed to support and evaluate long-term narrative change work.

Foundations have an opportunity to come together to build a shared narrative that can increase trust in the sector as a whole. A collective effort to develop this new voice for philanthropy is an essential endeavor for foundations to start now.

About This Project

United States foundations have more than \$1.5 trillion in assets³—roughly the equivalent of Mexico’s annual GDP. They are an essential element of America’s social sector and have contributed to profound change that is part of the fabric of our culture and society. They have supported public libraries, groundbreaking research, new approaches to building a more equitable world, and advancements that have led to longer, healthier lives.

But despite their reach, foundations have an identity problem. From small towns to Washington, D.C., Americans have a limited picture of what foundations do. This leaves the door open for others to define foundations through critiques and harmful narratives about foundations and the nonprofits they support. As society’s distrust in institutions overall has risen to record highs—including a five percentage point increase in distrust in philanthropy in 2023⁴ – it is imperative that foundations commit to the shared work of building better narratives about philanthropy for the sake of the sector and the nonprofits and communities they serve.

The Council on Foundations and the Center for Public Interest Communications have spent the last year researching the current narratives about philanthropy and the ways foundations can better describe their work to build trust. Our first research phase was a [landscape scan](#) that included an extensive review of foundation documents and news articles.

Two things stood out:

1. **Foundations need to tell better stories.** Foundations tell stories about the results of their work but not *how* they do the work. That obscurity is harmful in a narrative vacuum because critics can fill it with narratives that cast doubt on foundations and their partners.
2. **Foundations need better language to describe their work.** Philanthropy uses too much jargon and relies on harmful metaphors borrowed from the battlefield and the sports arena. Communicating in clear, transparent language could increase understanding of foundations’ role in our society and trust in the sector.

Our research draws on insights from practitioners working in the sector and actors outside that space, including policymakers and members of the American public. To see what we learned from each aspect of the research—including findings, descriptions, interview protocols, and survey instruments for each of the methods—visit the [appendices on the Council on Foundations’ website](#). The appendices include:

- A [landscape scan](#) that compiles our insights from an initial scan of news accounts, internal messaging documents from a handful of foundations, and available public polls that helped us understand how the American public sees philanthropy.
- The [results from a sector survey](#) we conducted of communications practitioners working for nonprofits and foundations.
- An [analysis of Congressional Research Service reports](#) that discuss foundations and how they operate.
- A [social media listening report](#) analyzing the public posts of members of Congress that mention foundations or philanthropy.
- An [analysis of the interviews with practitioners](#) who work in philanthropic communications.
- An [analysis of the interviews with legislative staff](#) to members of Congress.
- An [analysis of the results of a national survey of 3,557 Americans](#). The data from the survey is available on [the Center for Public Interest Communications’ website](#).

3 From *Foundation Assets Reach a Record \$1.5 Trillion, Propelled by Investment Gains and Big Donors*, by Michael Kavate, 2024, Inside Philanthropy. <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2024/1/29/foundation-assets-reach-a-record>

4 From *Trust in Civil Society* by Independent Sector, 2023. <https://independentsector.org/resource/trust-in-civil-society/>

Our Research Methods

Philanthropy's New Voice is the **largest study of narratives in philanthropy**. The Center for Public Interest Communications used a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to garner insights from people across the country who engage with philanthropy in myriad ways. All stages of the research for this project followed protocols for ethical human subjects research from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Florida. Using this mixed-methods approach, we explored three questions:

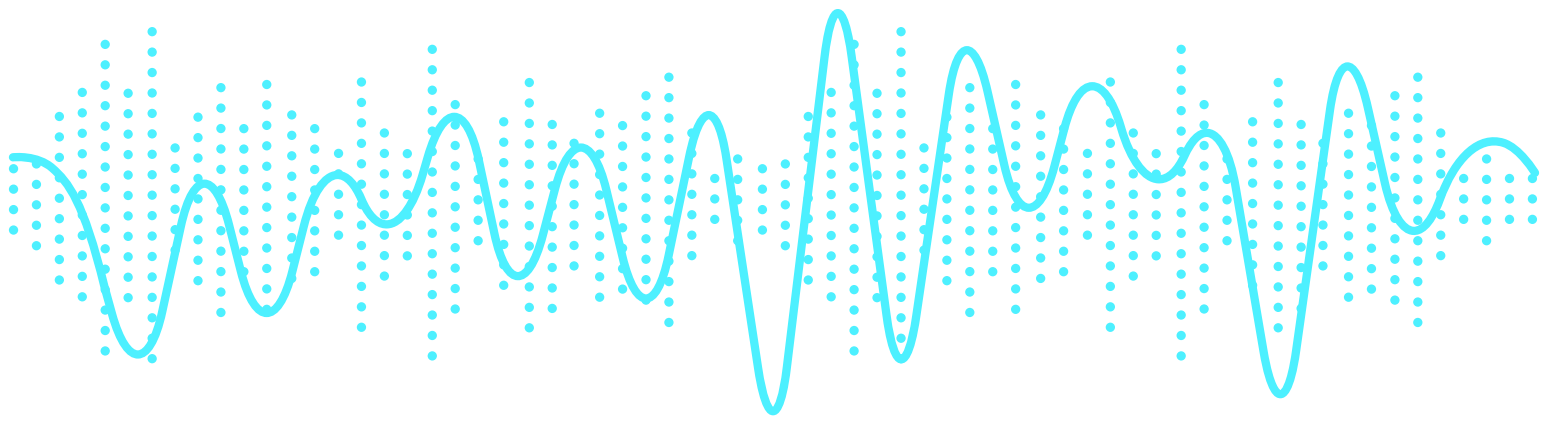
QUESTION 1

What shapes perceptions of foundations among policymakers and the larger public, and how do policymakers shape others' perceptions?

We hypothesized that policymakers know very little about how foundations operate, how they set funding priorities, and how they connect with the communities they serve.

To answer question 1:

- We **interviewed four congressional staffers** – two that worked for Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives and two that worked for Democrats in the U.S. Senate. We asked them a series of questions to help us better understand what shapes their perceptions of foundations and how they shape others' perceptions of foundations. We requested interviews with staffers from dozens of federal and state policymaker offices of both parties between September and November 2023. This was a time of heightened political tumult – including an extended period of time without a U.S. Speaker of the House – which led to mostly declined interview requests. To get a fuller picture for this research question, we added the following two methods as a support to the interviews.
- We searched the **Congressional Research Service (CRS) archive to identify reports** since 2012 that focused on foundations and identified five that focused on foundations, charitable giving, and regulation. We analyzed these reports in depth, reviewing not just the content but the sources the CRS researchers cited.
- We used **social listening tools** to analyze what members of Congress have posted about the sector on their public social media channels. Specifically, we used CrowdTangle to identify trends among 2,698 Facebook posts and 563 Instagram posts on Congressmembers' public profiles. We also used Netbase Quid to identify trends among approximately 45,000 posts across X/Twitter, online news, blogs, forums, YouTube, Tumblr, and other online media.



QUESTION 2

Which storytelling elements might increase the public's understanding of and trust in foundations?

We hypothesized that the narrative vacuum we discovered in our early assessment springs from a common practice of storytelling that leaves out the details of how change happens and tends to focus on single heroes or beneficiaries whose lives have been transformed.

To answer question 2:

We conducted a **national survey** of 3,557 Americans to better understand how stories and metaphors influence people's understanding of and trust in foundations.⁵

- We **tested 10 types of storytelling narratives**. These include adding transparency around how foundations work and make decisions, telling stories about people with lived experience and proximity to a particular social problem, and demonstrating foundations' ability to move quickly but stay with problems over time.
- We **tested some common metaphors**, including those that borrow terminology from sports, military operations, the finance community, or violence, and alternatives that invoke agriculture, water, parental love, and other terms from nature.

⁵ The sample included participants aged 18 and above who reside in the United States and were recruited through Dynata matching national demographics. The sample consisted of 1825 female and 1715 male participants; 14 identified as "other," and 3 chose not to report their gender. For age, 424 participants reported 18-24 (11.9%), 567 reported 25-34 (15.9%), 570 reported 35-44 (16%), 554 reported 45-54 (15.6%), 669 reported 55-64 (18.8%), and 773 reported 65+ (21.7%). For race and ethnicity, participants were asked to choose all that apply. 2,120 participants reported as White (59.6%), 691 Black (19.4%), 318 Hispanic/Latino/Latina (8.9%), 286 Asian (8%), 43 American Indian/Alaska Natives/First nations (1.2%), 8 Hawaiian/Pacific islander (0.2%), and 91 others (2.6%).

QUESTION 3

How do communications practitioners in this field approach their work—particularly storytelling—and shape public discourse and perception?

Our hypothesis was that communicators feel limited in their storytelling practices by a lack of resources and frequently share formulaic or foundation-centric stories that do not accurately portray how change happens.

To answer question 3:

- We **interviewed people who work on communications teams within foundations and consultants who work with foundations** to help them tell stories. We also interviewed a **researcher who studies philanthropy**. We conducted 45-minute interviews with 11 individuals and analyzed their responses for common themes.
- We conducted a **survey of the sector using snowball sampling**. A snowball sample asks respondents to share the survey with others, relying on networks to collect responses. We distributed the survey to foundation, nonprofit, and social change communications practitioners through the Communications Network, Free-Range Thinking, and the frank gathering community. This survey was in the field from June 23 until August 27, 2023, and we collected 77 complete responses.⁶

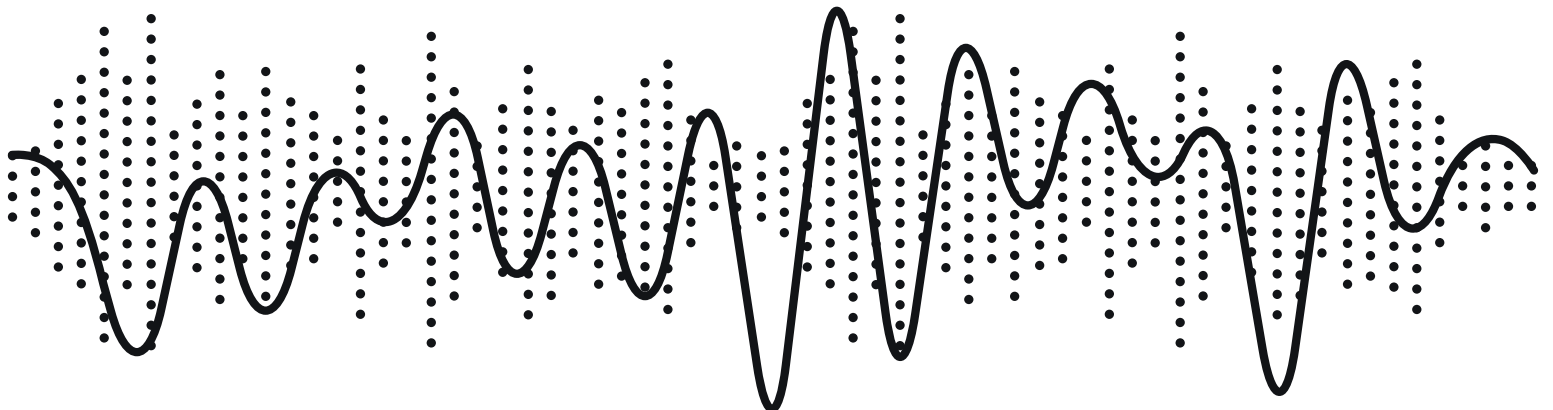
⁶ 77 respondents completed our sector survey and when asked what type of organization they worked for we received the following responses: Communication Agency 21.1%; Community Foundation 18.4%; Private Foundation 18.4%; Freelance/Consultant 15.8%; Family Foundation 3.9%; Corporate Foundation 1.3%; Other 21.1% (61% of "other" responses did not specify further; those that did included private schools, intermediary organizations, public universities, and nonprofits.)



What We Learned

Foundations tell a wide array of stories about their grantmaking, their grantees, and the issues they care about, but they frequently leave out details about how exactly that change happens and what their specific role was in the process. This means that there is no coherent narrative about what foundations actually do, shrouding philanthropy in mystery and hindering the sector's ability to build trust. The result is a siloed sector where foundations are divided into niches, telling stories only about the issues they focus on and not connecting their work to the specific and unique role foundations play in our progress as a society.

The sector—and the various audiences it interacts with, including the American public and policymakers—would benefit if foundations began focusing more intentionally on the sector's shared traits. This means telling compelling stories about how different actors play unique roles in addressing a challenge together. In this way, foundations can begin painting a picture of a larger ecosystem of change where communities, nonprofits, governments, and foundation staff can see how they support each other and replicate successful efforts to create a better world. Telling transparent and clear stories like these can help create a solid narrative from which foundations can build trust with communities and decision-makers as well as shut down misinformation about the role foundations play in the United States.



INSIGHT #1: Americans have positive views about philanthropy but don't understand the charitable sector or the role it plays in their lives.

In the first part of the national survey, we asked a sample of 3,557 Americans about their perceptions and understanding of philanthropy and foundations, employing many of the same questions used in the [Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy 2023 report](#). We found that most Americans have positive attitudes toward foundations: 22.1% said slightly positive, 35.9% positive, and 11% very positive. Only 6.3% expressed negative attitudes toward foundations. These numbers were similar to the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy's findings. Respondents also showed a high level of trust for foundations in relation to other institutions. They also trust foundations more than they trust other institutions, including religious organizations, the media, and Congress.

However, we also confirmed the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy's finding that Americans have only a superficial understanding of the philanthropic sector. This includes an expected lack of understanding of the technical and regulatory aspects of foundations. The jargon related to tax law is one part of the sector's opaque dictionary, which one of the practitioners we interviewed called "philanthro-speak."

For the most part, Americans don't know how foundations make decisions. When we asked the national survey participants how much they agreed with the statement "I feel like I understand what foundations do and how they operate," 40.7% responded "not at all" or "only a little." Close to half (45.6%) said they have a moderate amount of knowledge, and only 13.7% said they have a large amount of knowledge about foundations.

CHART 1 MOST AMERICANS HAVE POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD FOUNDATIONS

When asked, "On the whole, how do you feel about foundations?" 69 percent of respondents said they had very positive, positive, or slightly positive attitudes toward foundations. (Total n = 3557, decimals are rounded up to one decimal point.)

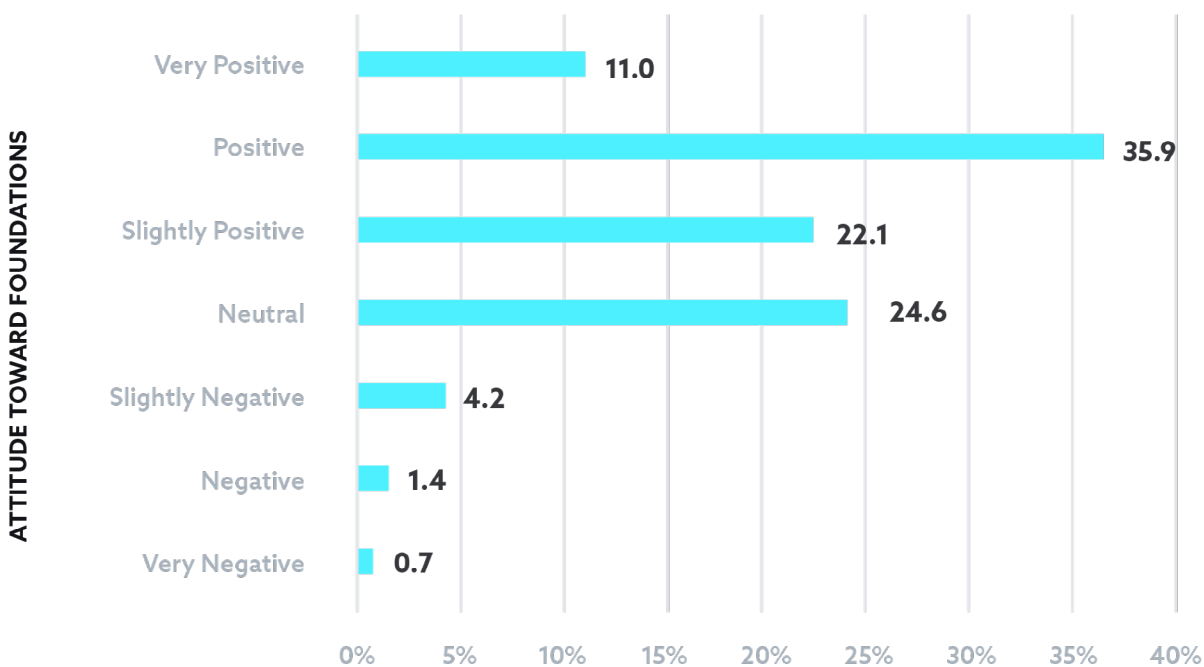


CHART 2 AMERICANS TRUST FOUNDATIONS MORE THAN MOST OTHER INSTITUTIONS

When we asked survey participants to rate a range of institutions on a scale from 1 to 5, with "1" being "not at all" and "5" being "completely," respondents ranked foundations among the most trusted—above universities, religious institutions, and individuals, and well above the national media and congress. (Total n = 3557, decimals are rounded up to two decimal points.)

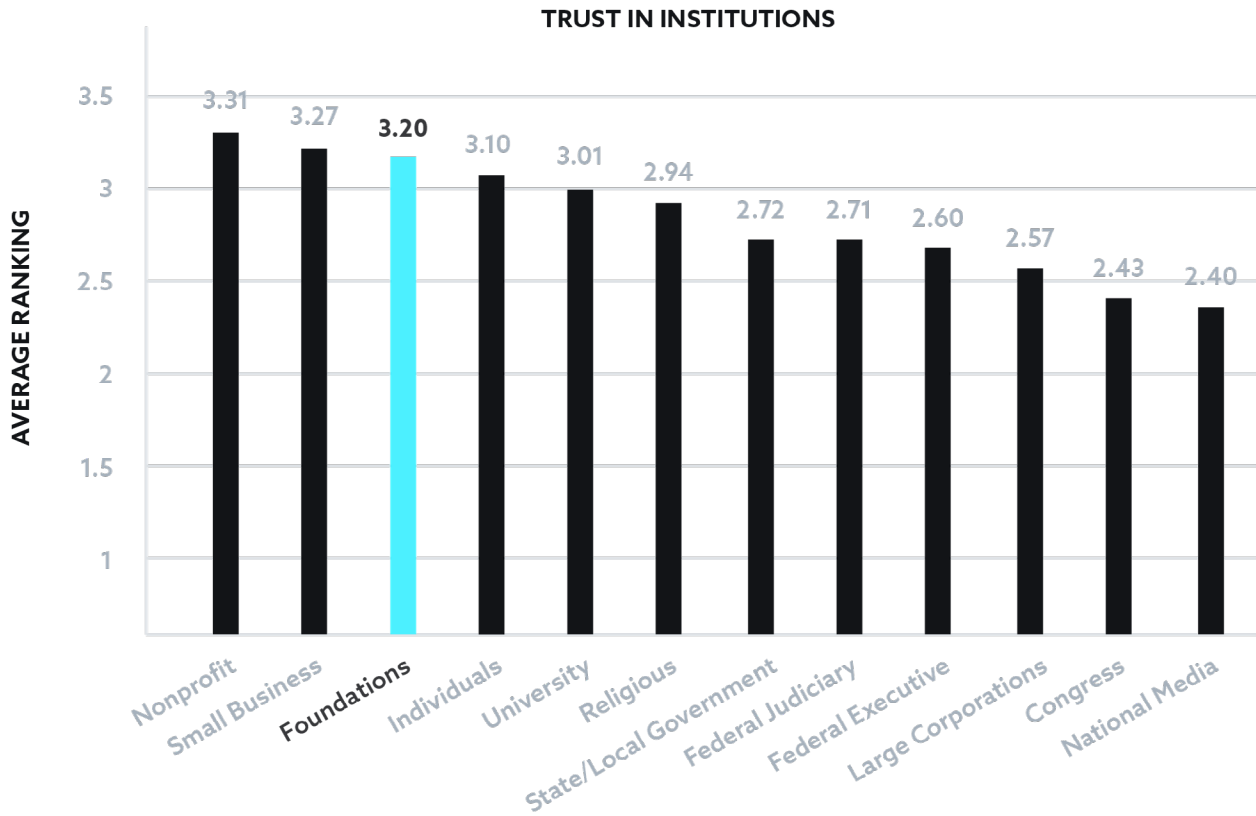
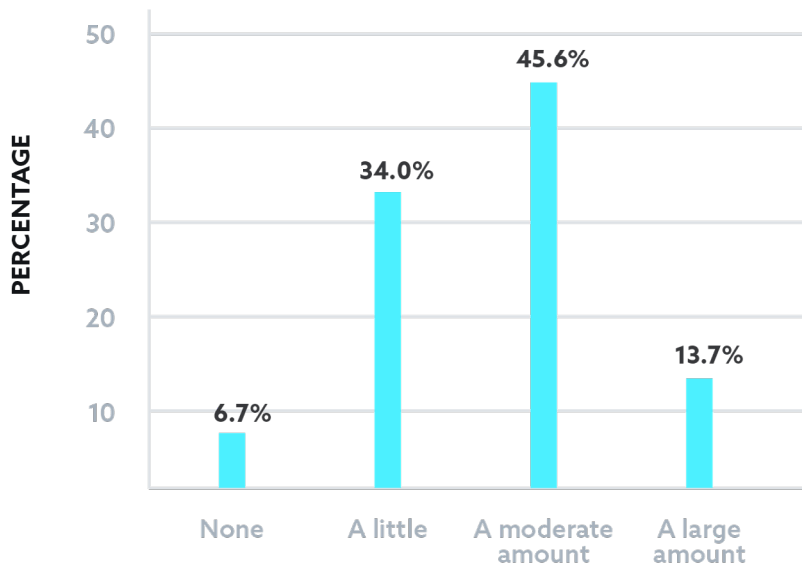


CHART 3 AMERICANS STILL DON'T FEEL LIKE THEY KNOW A LOT ABOUT HOW FOUNDATIONS WORK OR MAKE DECISIONS

After reading the stories in the national survey, we asked respondents if they agreed with the statement, "I feel like I understand what foundations do and how they operate." (Total n = 3557, decimals are rounded up to one decimal point.)



What is more surprising is that Americans are unaware of how frequently foundations and nonprofit services touch their day-to-day lives, from hospitals to daycares to youth athletic programs.

“We asked, ‘Did you or someone in your household receive services from a nonprofit within the past year?’ And what we saw was that only about 5% of our respondents said yes to that question...And we asked a follow-up question about the types of services that they’ve received, letting them give their own responses. We found many referenced basic needs-related services.”

Chelsea J. Clark, Ph.D.
Research Associate
Lilly Family School of Philanthropy



RECOMMENDATION 1

Tell stories within complex ecosystems.

- Include context about how these systems and issues came to be and whose choices made it happen.
- Tell stories about coalitions in action to show that collaborative action is possible and necessary.
- Skip savior narratives, and tell stories about relatable protagonists.
- Draw clear connections between people taking action from different perspectives, including communities, grantees, foundation team members, and people outside your immediate network.
- Include details about the steps this community has taken, including tasks that may seem mundane.

As we mention in the [landscape scan](#), the financial data that foundations share may seem transparent, but they are just a stack of windows with no walls to hold them up. To build trusting relationships, you must provide story-based context that is meaningful to people’s lives, not just numbers.

Fortunately, foundations have a unique opportunity to tell those kinds of stories by serving as narrative connectors.

“Oftentimes what we see in the media and other places is polarized communities, divided communities, and I think philanthropy can be a unifier. Philanthropy is not just for those of great means, but those who could mean to do great. It is a really powerful, universal opportunity and the most powerful element of this work and these stories. We want to find heroes, but we also want to be heroes, and I think some of the stories that we talk about allow people to see both.”

Kyle Caldwell
President and CEO
Council of Michigan Foundations

To start, revisit the purpose of your story. If you’re telling a story to demonstrate your impact or build your reputation, it’s going to be a lot harder to share the kind of complex, nuanced story that helps people understand what foundations can—and can’t—do. The research also showed that these stories, invoking the “foundations as hero” narrative, weren’t as successful in building trust as those that showed foundations as nimble partners or detailed exactly what grant dollars supported. So skip savior narratives and tell stories about relatable protagonists, not larger-than-life heroes.

Another way to avoid savior narratives and show the larger context of what you’re working toward is to include the work of social movements on your issue: What have these coalitions achieved? What goals have they worked toward? What actions has the wide network of changemakers taken to build to the

larger successes? This practice requires you to include characters who may not usually show up in your stories, details that may seem boring or mundane, and the unforeseen consequences of the choices that create systems.

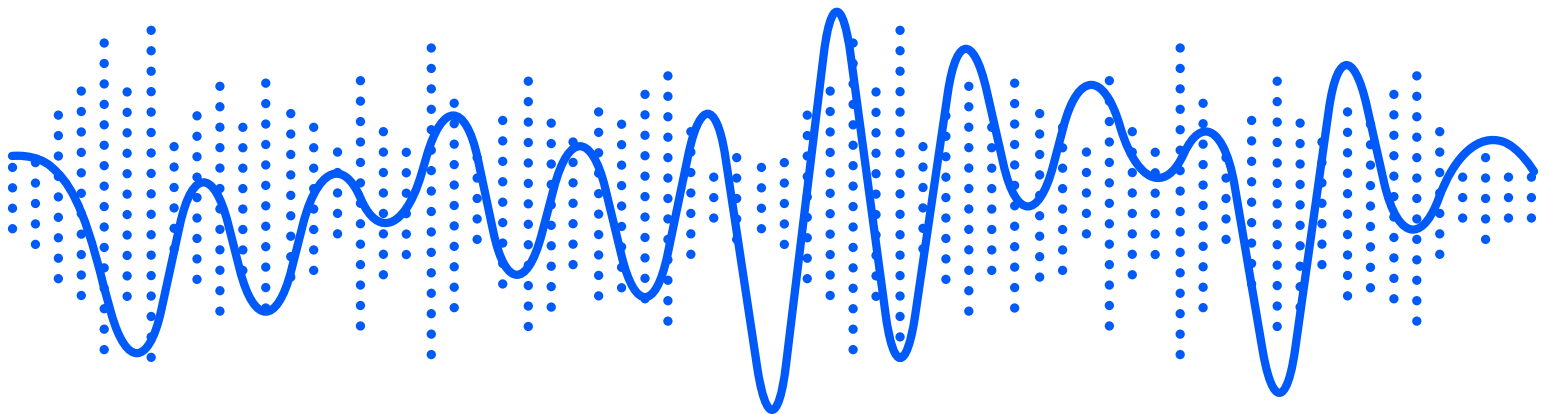
Heather McGhee's book *The Sum of Us* models this approach to storytelling. In each chapter, she goes deep into the history of a situation, identifies the people and choices that put systems in place, and includes the stories of real people whose lives were most affected by those choices and the systems they created.

In the chapter "Ignoring the Canary," McGhee takes on the mortgage crisis that unfolded in 2007 and 2008. While it was the result of a complex series of events, McGhee tells the story through the experience of Janice and Isaiah Tomlin, Black first-generation homeowners in Wilmington, North Carolina, with excellent credit and a spotless payment record. When they were approached by a lender who could help them access the capital in their home so they could send their children to parochial school, they agreed to the terms of the mortgage. What Janice and Isaiah didn't know, however, was that they qualified for a significantly lower mortgage rate than they received, and that the lender applied fees that totalled nearly 12 percent of their mortgage at closing—leaving them with a double-digit interest rate. Despite qualifying


for excellent terms, the Tomlins were among the first to receive what the mortgage industry later called subprime loans. Subprime loans allow lenders to charge higher rates with the justification that they are making loans associated with higher risk.

McGhee describes how lenders initially disproportionately targeted Black homeowners with mortgages in good standing for these loans. Nearly 90 percent of the subprime mortgages were refinances sold to homeowners as a way to access the equity in their homes, but ultimately burdening them with significantly more debt at a nearly impossible to repay mortgage rate. Subprime loans didn't put people into homes—they pushed them out. McGhee points out that these loans were "tested first on the segment of Americans least respected by the financial sector and least protected by lawmakers: Black and brown families."⁷ The Tomlins nearly lost their home, and Janice became the lead plaintiff for 1,300 hundred families who experienced just what she did.

McGhee's telling of this story includes the policy decisions that made it easier for lenders to target entire communities with these kinds of loans, corporate practices that focused on Black borrowers first, and the real consequences for families and entire communities. Weaving these threads together in all of their complexity, she makes sense of these stories in a way that few other accounts do.



7 From *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. (p. 70), by Heather McGhee, 2021, Random House Publishing Group. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/564989/the-sum-of-us-by-heather-mcghee/>



INSIGHT #2: With some notable exceptions, members of Congress seem more interested in collaboration with individual foundations than increased regulation.

The positive sentiment and trust we saw in the national survey also appeared in our analysis of people in the policy sphere. In our interviews with congressional staffers, we heard positive reflections on foundations' values and their role in supporting communities. They all pointed to strengths of the sector—being nimble, taking on challenges when the government can't, expertise on social issues, etc.—and described foundations as partners.

"[I look] at foundations as institutional partners in communities to help see work come to fruition ... Some of the policy ideas you may not necessarily be able to get through Congress or any legislative makeup at the time because there isn't enough evidence, foundations can serve that purpose. [I look] at the foundation sector or philanthropic sector as a proving ground for what is possible."

Congressional Staffer

"I see foundations as less self-serving. They are mission-based in a way that you can't be when you're trying to meet a bottom line or cut costs or things like that. I know there are internal funding constraints in each foundation, but it just doesn't seem heartless, like some private businesses can be."

Congressional Staffer

The congressional staffers also said that they want simpler and more accessible information about what foundations fund and how they work so they could identify opportunities for their constituents and partnerships for their members of Congress. One staffer said they liked sit-down opportunities with foundation leaders and that not many foundations engage in them.

Meanwhile, members of Congress rarely post about foundations on their public social media accounts—those mentions account for only 0.6% of their posts on both Facebook and Instagram—but they are almost entirely positive when they do. In the [UF Atlas Lab's sentiment analysis](#) of members of Congress' Facebook and Instagram posts using philanthropy-related terms, the research team found that 89.5% and 93.8% of posts, respectively, express what are likely positive opinions. We say "likely" because we used an AI tool to analyze thousands of posts. Many of these posts using the terms from our search reflected partnerships with specific foundations, suggesting that policymakers see foundations as collaborators.

Despite this positive sentiment, two events in the past five years suggest that Congress may be moving toward increased regulation for foundations. The first was a Judiciary Committee hearing in which Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) [alleged that a network of funders](#) had used their resources to influence the 2020 election. The second was [a bill introduced](#) by Senators Charles Grassley (R-IA) and Angus King (I-ME) that would have made significant changes to the way donor-advised funds⁸ are regulated, on the premise that some may use them to take advantage of tax incentives even as those donated funds aren't distributed to charities in a timely manner. To better understand the context of these policy moments, we looked at reports from the [Congressional Research](#)

8 [Donor-Advised Funds \(DAFs\)](#) are a philanthropic tool that allow donors to establish charitable accounts at institutions, such as community foundations, and remain involved in supporting the issues they care about. From *Donor-Advised Funds*, by Council on Foundations, n.d. <https://cof.org/advocacy/donor-advised-funds>

Service (CRS), a department within the Library of Congress that “works exclusively for the United States Congress, providing policy and legal analysis to committees and members of both the House and Senate, regardless of party affiliation.”⁹ The CRS assists Congress by responding to specific questions and preparing reports on legislative topics. As a result, its research aligns with the legislative branch’s policy interests and could indicate Congress’s interest in generating new legislation.

We found just five CRS reports from 2012 to 2023 that directly relate to foundations. This is a notably small number for an entity that produces more than 700 reports a year. The CRS reports did not mention any private foundations by name, seemed supportive of current tax standards for foundations, and recommended ways to incentivize philanthropic giving from the general public. The only philanthropic entities the CRS scrutinized were donor-advised funds, but this came from an interest in greater transparency and was likely associated with the [Accelerating Charitable Efforts Act](#).

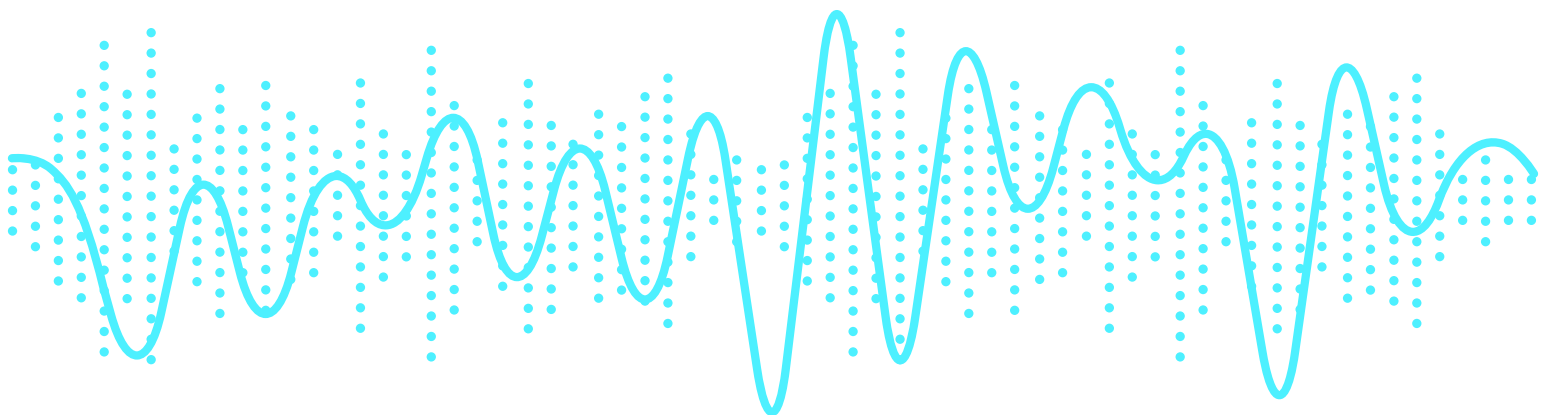
This absence of inquiries about foundation work, combined with the interest in more information for partnerships, presents an opportunity: a “blank slate” on which foundations can share stories about the work they value as well as the honest role foundations play in the larger ecosystem of people working on these issues.



RECOMMENDATION 2

Lean into your role as trusted messengers and tell great, ethical stories.

- Identify spaces where you are the trusted messenger, especially with policymakers, to tell nuanced stories whose characters have agency.
- Tell stories with relatable characters and vivid details to transport us to different viewpoints.
- Adhere to ethical storytelling principles outlined by groups like [Define American](#).
- Build transparent relationships with communities and policymakers that clearly and accurately define what foundations can and can’t do.
- Value the voices and perspectives of the people closest to the work in terms of inclusion and compensation.



⁹ From *Congressional Research Service Centers*, The Library of Congress. n.d. <https://www.loc.gov/crsinfo/>

Given its resources and connections within communities and across issue areas, philanthropy is uniquely poised to drive better storytelling—with policymakers and the public. As you work on building trusting relationships, consider how you might lean into this role in your storytelling.

Great stories are also good in that they adhere to ethical principles:

1. Good stories don't reinforce harmful tropes like deservingness or exceptionalism.
2. The people in the stories have control over how their story is told, the purpose for which it is told, and the contexts in which it is shared.¹⁰
3. The people at the center of the stories are presented as complex characters with rich lives and are not defined solely in the context of the problem or solution illustrated in the story. Their agency and voice are essential elements of the story.
4. Good stories connect individual experiences to the larger systems in which they unfold. They make systems visible where possible by showing how real people are affected by the decisions made by people with the power to shape systems.

We have listed some excellent resources on ethical storytelling in the "Keep Learning" section of the report.

Who we hear a story from is as important as the story itself. For example, legislative staffers told us that foundations are trusted messengers and that they value the time foundation staff spend meeting with them to describe funding priorities and the effect of this work in their states and districts. Foundations should lean into this strength and leverage their role as trusted messengers and storytellers, especially in the policy arena.

In other contexts, foundations may not be the best messengers. While our research for this project did not include any testing specifically around trusted messengers, there is a significant body of literature on the topic to inform best practices: We tend to trust people who are closest to a problem, who have lived experience, who witnessed an event or who have expertise on the topic. We also tend to trust people more if we see them as being like us, which reinforces the importance of building your story around authentic, relatable characters.

Our research found that including the voices of people closest to a condition, while essential from an ethical perspective, also helps to reduce concerns about foundations: One of the stories we tested in our national survey included quotes from people in the community and foundation staff working on the project. This story scored well among those we tested in addressing concerns about philanthropy.

For a powerful example of this type of storytelling, we can look to another sector trying to bolster trust: museums. Facing newly updated mandates to repatriate human remains in their collections—especially those of indigenous people—many museums have worked with the affected communities. This is a complex issue that, in the words of Elizabeth Merritt at the Center for the Future of Museums, requires museums to "learn trust, respect, and openness towards Native people."¹¹ That includes making space for them to lead on the repatriation process and telling the stories with the community at the center, not the museum. A recent story shared by the American Alliance of Museums shows how powerful this can be.

Isabel Handa, a freshman at Oberlin College with Native Hawaiian heritage, didn't necessarily see herself as the most qualified in repatriation. But when she joined an Indigenous matters working group that included Professor Amy Margaris, she learned that

¹⁰ This principle is inspired by the work of Define American and its guidelines for working with immigrant storytellers, as described in its February 2022 report, "American Dreaming." From *American Dreaming: The Roadmap to Resilience for Undocumented Storytellers* by Adrián Escárte, Sarah E. Lowe, & Valeria Rodriguez, 2022, Define American. <https://defineamerican.com/research/american-dreaming/>

¹¹ From *When the Ancestors Call to You*, by Isabel K. Handa & Amy V. Margaris, 2024, American Alliance of Museums. <https://www.aam-us.org/2024/01/10/when-the-ancestors-call-to-you/>

TABLE 1 SOME STORIES RAISE CONCERNS ABOUT FOUNDATIONS MORE THAN OTHERS

People are more concerned about how much influence foundations have when they read stories about how they “change the world” or how people are helped. They are less concerned when they read stories about how foundations adapt nimbly to issues and how money is spent. After survey participants read one of the stories or the control, they were asked to rate their concerns about foundations on a scale from 1 to 4 through four questions, with 1 indicating less concern and 4 indicating more. The answers from the four questions were then averaged to generate these rankings with higher numbers indicating more concern. (Total n = 3557, decimals are rounded up to two decimal points.) See the stories we used for this experiment [here](#).

STORY	LEVEL OF CONCERN (STANDARD DEVIATION)	NUMBER OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS WHO SAW THIS STORY
“Control”	2.48 (.72)	323
“Change the world”	2.43 (.75)	323
“People who benefit”	2.39 (.74)	324
“Listens to people”	2.37 (.76)	324
“Stay with issues”	2.34 (.73)	323
“How decisions are made”	2.34 (.73)	320
“People come together”	2.32 (.76)	321
“Rich individuals”	2.32 (.76)	322
“People closest to the situation”	2.31 (.68)	321
“Where money goes”	2.26 (.73)	323
“Nimble foundation”	2.24 (.70)	333
2.34 (.74) (average)		3,557 (total)


an Oberlin graduate teaching on O’ahu more than 100 years earlier had obtained a skull originally from a cave burial site and sent it to Oberlin, where it became part of the university’s collection. When Isabel contacted a mentor to ask for help, he told her that as the only Native Hawaiian at the university, she would need to return the ancestor home—immediately.

Isabel and Amy tell the story of returning the ancestor home in their own words in [“When the Ancestors Call to You.”](#) In a moment when many museums are coming to terms with the reality that what they have collected is not theirs, Isabel and Amy’s story offers a window into why repatriation matters. At one point, Isabel says: “I just kept thinking ‘No wonder I did not feel like I belonged at Oberlin, because white kids do not have to worry about their ancestors’ bones being held at their place of residence and education.’ The college benefits them, the academic opportunities benefit them, and people like me are stolen from their graves to be placed in archives as specimens. How was I supposed to feel safe? So I asked the ancestors to save both of us.”¹²

Isabel’s story allows us to feel what she felt—from the concrete challenge of weaving a basket to carry the ancestor home to the overwhelming responsibility of the task—all while preparing for her final exams. For her part, Amy was living with her own deep loss, and also working with the college to make it possible for Isabel to carry the ancestor home—in her backpack.

One of the elements that makes this story so rich is the way Isabel and Amy incorporate details other storytellers may have been tempted to leave out: negotiating with the Transportation Security Administration to ensure that the skull wasn’t exposed to the x-ray, or helping a flight attendant understand that Isabel could not check her backpack when overhead space on the plane ran out. Experiencing a story through the voices of the people who lived it, and in vivid detail, allows us into the minds of the central characters, generating trust and authenticity.

12 From *When the Ancestors Call to You*, by Isabel K. Handa & Amy V. Margaris, 2024, American Alliance of Museums. <https://www.aam-us.org/2024/01/10/when-the-ancestors-call-to-you/>.



INSIGHT #3: The philanthropic sector has not established a shared narrative to effectively counter harmful narratives about foundations.

In the [landscape scan](#), we identified three deep narratives about philanthropy rooted in a lack of understanding about what foundations do, how they do it, and the role of foundations in a larger community of change. They are:

- **Distrust of Wealth:** Narratives that center on philanthropy's wealth in relation to the people they serve, concern about where that wealth comes from, and skepticism about the intentions of philanthropy.
- **Unease with Private Funds Solving Public Problems:** Narratives that question or overstate philanthropy's role in political spaces either by stating that it threatens democracy or by claiming it "fills a gap," which has positive and negative implications.
- **A Single Hero Saves the Day:** Narratives that put the focus on an individual's story rather than the systemic problem. These narratives either make philanthropy the savior or rely on "bootstrap individualism" of someone directly affected. They leave us waiting for heroes who aren't coming and make it harder for people to see how important even mundane tasks may be to building the world we wish existed.

While many of the stories in the first two categories appeared in articles or opinions about philanthropy from observers, many of the stories in the last deep narrative came from foundations themselves—a reminder that current foundation storytelling practices are part of the problem.

When we interviewed practitioners, we asked for their input about these narratives. All the practitioners recognized the three deep narratives in popular discourse, and they considered all of them to be prevalent. However, the "single hero saves the day" narrative—also referred to as the "savior narrative"—was considered the most widely used of the three.

"I would say maybe the biggest single problem is that the savior narrative persists for both nonprofits and foundations. Person A was in trouble. Our organization got involved with them, they're fixed, now they're better, give us money. It's just that, no agency, and it's what Trabian Shorters talks about with deficit framing and the organization coming in as savior, et cetera. And there's no asset framing, and there's no agency for the individual. I think this continues to be maybe the biggest single problem in storytelling in the whole philanthropic sector, to my mind."

Andy Goodman
Director Emeritus
The Goodman Center

Fortunately, [the practitioners we surveyed](#) said they are moving away from "single hero" stories. When we asked them who their stories were about, the three top answers were directly affected people (64.5% of respondents), their grantee partners (51.3%), and community leaders (47.5%). Assuming that these stories portray the protagonists with agency rather than tokenization, this is a step in the right direction. However, as we want to build transparency in foundation storytelling, it is important that we include perspectives from within foundations as well, making clear what role they play in the day-to-day work.



RECOMMENDATION 3

Commit to sector-wide storytelling to fill the narrative vacuum.

- Be deliberate about working within individual foundations and collaboratively with the field to identify themes that honestly depict how foundations work.
- Incorporate those themes into a larger narrative strategy for the sector.
- Tailor those shared themes to your individual organization's values and vision.
- Tell stories that accurately describe what foundations do, and that contribute to the sector's shared narratives.

Narrative change requires collaboration and coalition-building. In the [landscape scan](#), we identified a narrative vacuum around what foundations do and how they operate, allowing harmful narratives to potentially develop in this space. While they may seem to focus on specific foundations or individuals initially, stories that cast doubt or skepticism on the work of one organization can spread to a sector as a whole.

Foundations tend to focus their communication and storytelling efforts on their priority issues or on their grantees. Occasionally, they partner with other foundations to tell an issue-focused or geographically based story. But there is a missed opportunity to define philanthropy's role in the changemaking process.

One practitioner said:

“So setting aside the problems these issue silos create for policy change or organizing campaigns, the narrative problem is that we wind up with an incoherent set of stories. They don't add up to a theme, a value that gets repeated long enough and by enough people to saturate the society for at least a decade, shall we say.”


Rinku Sen
Executive Director,
Narrative Initiative

Just as harmful narratives can harm the sector as a whole, collaborative narrative work can help build trust in the whole sector.

“Folks are trying to come up with a narrative that is a story for each issue. So ‘I'm a housing advocate, I need a housing narrative.’ ‘We are a coalition of labor unions, we need a labor narrative.’ But I think that what we actually need is one or two big ideas toward which we all agree to narrate. I don't think those ideas can be imposed on anyone. I think they have to emerge and be organized around.”

Rinku Sen
Executive Director
Narrative Initiative

To change the status quo, the sector has to work at two levels: within our individual foundations on specific issues, and collaboratively across foundations to coalesce around shared themes and messages. This will allow individual foundations to tell unique stories that harmonize around a positive narrative of philanthropy. The next step is to create spaces for this collaboration to happen.



INSIGHT #4: The American public, Congressional staffers, and practitioners want foundations to be more transparent and share more details about how philanthropy works.

Across the research methods, the American public, policymakers, and practitioners all expressed a desire for more transparency from foundations. Congressional staffers, while viewing foundations positively overall, said they wanted to know more about how foundations make decisions.

“I don’t really know a lot about how they work, or it’s based on guesswork. ... I just don’t know exactly how foundations establish what their mission is. How do they? How do they change that over time? How do they set their grants?”

Congressional Staffer

These staffers asked for specific examples of how the work is done so they know how to partner with foundations or connect constituents with opportunities when they get requests.

“[Put] your grant-making goals on the one-pager. And then give us some examples of organizations you funded in the past. That would be incredible. What are your goals? What are you seeking to accomplish? Give me not your performance, but give me the logic model.”

Congressional Staffer

The American public also wanted to know more about how decisions were made. The [national survey](#) tested different story structures to see which ones increased Americans’ trust in foundations. We told the story of how the United States modernized emergency medical services in 11 different ways: 10 stories that featured foundation and community involvement and a control description that gave the history without any mention of philanthropy. Survey respondents received one of these stories before being asked about their perception of philanthropy.

Each of the ten stories we tested included a unique detail about how foundations make choices and interact with communities. The story that most influenced survey respondents was “how foundation funds were used.” Including exactly what the money was spent on increased trust in the foundation and reduced concerns about philanthropy.

The responses to these stories show that people are interested in the work foundations do and the process behind their grantmaking decisions. This was reflected again when we asked respondents about what story elements most influenced their trust in foundations. The four top responses were how the money is spent, hearing from people who benefited from foundations, knowing that foundation staff listen to people closest to the situation, and knowing how decisions are made. Even when foundations award unrestricted funds or core support, describing how an organization used those funds can underscore the essential role foundations serve.

And practitioners noted that transparency like this is a good thing. The interviewees described a few different types of transparent stories that work well, including stories about how foundations are nimble, the potential of collective small investments, the lessons from failure, and the importance of showing the manageable steps toward success. They also emphasized that foundations need to do a better job

TABLE 2 ALL STORIES BUILD TRUST, BUT STORIES ABOUT WHERE THE MONEY GOES AND HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE ARE BETTER

Each survey participant was presented with a story about a foundation that tested a different aspect of how foundations do their work and then asked a series of questions about their trust in foundations. The participants rated each question from 1 to 7 where 1 was “Strongly Disagree” and 7 was “Strongly Agree.” We took the averages of those answers and organized them in this chart. A story that showed exactly where foundation funds went did more to increase trust than a story that included the role of people closest to the situation, and every story increased trust more than a list of facts. (Total n = 3557, decimals are rounded up to two decimal points.)

STORY	LEVEL OF TRUST (STANDARD DEVIATION)	NUMBER OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS WHO SAW THIS STORY
“Where money goes”	5.57 (.90)	323
“How decisions are made”	5.51 (1.00)	320
“Rich individuals”	5.50 (1.04)	322
“Nimble foundation”	5.47 (1.07)	333
“People come together”	5.47 (1.03)	321
“People who benefit”	5.44 (1.02)	324
“Listens to people”	5.44 (1.01)	324
“Change the world”	5.42 (1.07)	323
“Stay with issues”	5.39 (1.02)	323
“People closest to the situation”	5.39 (1.10)	321
“Control”	5.28 (1.10)	323
	5.44 (1.03) (average)	3,557 (total)

of telling the stories of the people doing the work—both the people in the community and the people at the foundation making decisions. Telling the stories about how decisions are made and who makes them demystifies grantmaking and makes the processes more human.

Stories like these push back on the idea that foundations or individuals are the hero without dipping into boring “press release” stories, whose headlines focus on the amount a foundation is giving and the problem they’re attempting to solve, without characters or agency. The specifics let others know what does and does not work, providing clear steps for how to take similar actions.

“I think one of the great failures of storytelling in the philanthropic sector is there are these amazing individuals working at foundations, bringing their expertise, their history, their point of view, who remain in the background because it’s not about us, it’s not about the individuals.”

Andy Goodman
Director Emeritus
The Goodman Center



RECOMMENDATION 4

Tell stories that build the right kind of transparency.

- Include the nitty-gritty details, like where ideas come from and how foundations make decisions.
- Bring authenticity to your stories with mundane details that show that change isn't magic.
- Be specific about how your foundation or the organizations you work with use the money rather than using formulaic press release-style stories.
- Include the perspectives of foundation staff, their actions, and their thinking.
- Tell stories about projects that may not have worked and what you've learned so that future partners can innovate, and we normalize failures as an essential element of success.

Foundations are required to report on their grantmaking each year to the Internal Revenue Service. Many foundations also issue annual reports describing their funding priorities and successes. This type of public accountability is critical, but not sufficient for building understanding and trust in the sector.

Humans learn through stories, not just data. Our research showed that including nitty-gritty details in stories, like where ideas come from, how foundations make decisions, and what the funding pays for helped people understand and trust foundations. Even mundane details like completing paperwork, going to meetings or travel logistics can make these stories more relatable and show that change doesn't happen magically.


For foundations, this means telling stories in which foundation staff and grantees are relatable people facing common challenges. Show how they make decisions, including what to fund and how much to award. Share where the idea for a funded initiative came from and how the grantee and foundation staff interacted. Did foundation staff approach a grantee and suggest they apply for funding? How did the foundation and staff decide to focus on an issue in the

first place? Include mundane details that bring these stories to life and establish authenticity. As you build these stories, include what may feel mundane; it may be illuminating to someone else. These practices can break down the abstraction surrounding foundations and how they do their work.

From 1997 until 2011, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation sought to tell just these kinds of stories. The [RWJF Anthology](#), an annual review of lessons learned from grantmaking, went deep into how the foundation learned about new ideas, and included the voices of the staffmembers behind the programs.

One standout example is a chapter from the 2011 anthology about Playworks, a national effort to bring play back to school playgrounds around the United States. This chapter, written by Carolyn Newbergh, describes how Playworks began in the mind of Jill Vialet as a program called Sports4Kids, and how the program came to the attention of Nancy Barrand, a program officer in the foundation. The chapter details the foundation's increasing investments in the program's growth, including the purpose of each investment. It also includes the voices of school principals who saw how Playworks transformed their schools, but who also struggled to find the funds to keep the program going.

While the purpose of the anthology was to help the foundations and others learn from its grantmaking, it includes dozens of stories that stand out for including the elements that lead to greater trust, particularly how foundations do their work and how they make decisions.



INSIGHT #5: Foundations' use of jargon and borrowed metaphors obscures their role in larger ecosystems of change.

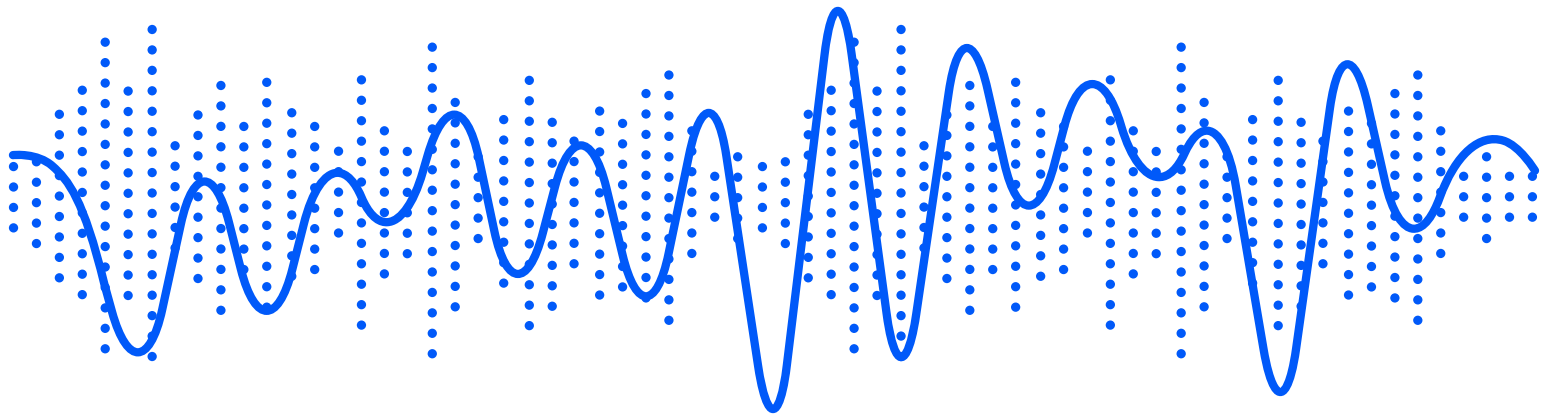
The results from the national survey and the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy's survey made clear that Americans do not understand what philanthropy actually does. This is due in part to the sector-specific language foundations use. The practitioners we interviewed all agreed that internal jargon—or “philanthro-speak”—needs to be eliminated from communication with the public, or at least explained clearly. This may seem like an obvious best practice for communicators, but people can forget just how many terms they use regularly are abstract and meaningless to the people outside—and sometimes even within—their sector. This abstraction can be tied up in data points or tax terminology (e.g., endowments, 501(c)(3), 990s), and sometimes the confusion can come from field-specific metaphors (e.g., top-down strategies, leveraging opportunities, capacity building, technical assistance).

These decisions may seem minuscule; however, language is a system that can be used to define insiders and outsiders. This “philanthro-speak” can create perceptions of exclusivity or mystery and reinforce structures that prevent nonprofits and the communities they serve from interacting with foundations in a way that actually promotes positive change.

“I think there is a focus on trying to increase transparency about what an organization does. But also, organizations have a lot of data and there's a desire to just get the numbers out there. Organizations will say things, like 'This amount of our spending goes to this, and this portion of our budget covers that.' Again, that's back to the organization wanting to demonstrate its impact. Organizations know that donors want to see the impact of their gifts.”

Chelsea J. Clark, Ph. D.
Research Associate
Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

To address this, some of the practitioners we spoke with said foundations should describe philanthropy's role within the community more often.



“Talking about the broader ecosystem as opposed to ‘this district does it right’ or ‘this one grantee is changing everything,’ you get a much broader sense of what’s possible. When you highlight the broader ecosystem, you also unleash this idea of abundant grantmaking as opposed to scarcity grantmaking, which makes grantees compete against each other.”

Claire Callahan
Director of Communications
Stupski Foundation

“[Foundations] want the money that they allocate to have the greatest impact. So they have to do the homework to figure out where’s the inflection point, where’s the leverage, where we can apply our funds. Not necessarily an organization, but either a way of doing things or a certain area, et cetera. And how they come to that, how they figure that out, to me, that’s sort of an overlap of transparency and clear storytelling.”

Andy Goodman
Director Emeritus
The Goodman Center

This insight showed up in the national survey, where respondents said that telling stories that include elements about how foundations work and how the money is spent is important for increasing their trust. In fact, the survey showed that telling any story at all is better than just giving the facts; each of the ten stories performed better than the control.

Another way for foundations to promote clarity in their storytelling is to use metaphors that accurately and honestly connect to their work. Metaphors are powerful tools because they ground abstract concepts in easily understood symbols or relationships.¹³ Foundations naturally do this within and beyond their work: the word “foundation” itself is a metaphor connecting the image of a building’s foundation to philanthropy’s role in communities.

One of the challenges we noted in the [landscape scan](#) is that the sector relies on borrowed metaphors that situate foundations in unequal power dynamics with the communities they serve. These metaphors come from war or other forms of conflict (e.g., “people on the frontlines,” “solutions with an [impact](#)”) or they position philanthropy above nonprofits or communities (e.g., “lifting up voices,” “oversight,” “bottom-up strategies”). Metaphors like these portray change as an adversarial, zero-sum game, making resources seem finite and heavily guarded.


Fortunately, foundations already use some metaphors that better describe their work. In our interviews with practitioners, we heard people in the sector talk about “ecosystems” of change or putting directly affected people in the “driver’s seat” so nonprofits can “navigate” us to change. Metaphors that portray abundance, future-oriented scenarios, and interconnectedness better align with positive narratives about change. And Americans find them to be accurate in describing the work foundations do.

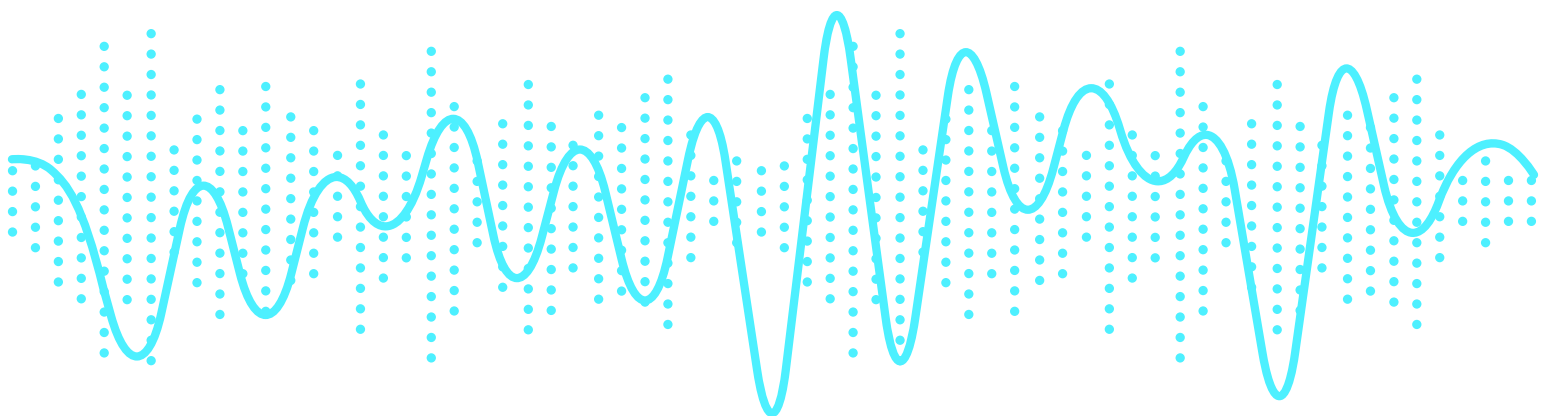
13 From *The Neural Theory of Metaphor*, by George Lakoff, 2009, Available at SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1437794> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1437794>

TABLE 3 USE ABUNDANCE METAPHORS TO BUILD TRUST AND SUPPORT FOR LONGER-TERM GOALS

As part of our national survey, we asked participants to rate various metaphors on how well they describe what foundations do. They rated them on a scale of 1 to 5 with “1” meaning “not at all” and “5” meaning “completely.” Participants rated nature metaphors (e.g., grow, flow) to be the most accurate, followed by war (e.g., frontlines, equip) and construction (e.g., build, develop).

These metaphors resonated similarly well with the public but convey different mindsets. Zero-sum metaphors portray change as short-term battles over finite resources and imply that there are winners and losers. Abundance metaphors allow for long-term perspectives with collaboration and community at the center. (Total n = 3557, decimals are rounded up to two decimal points.)

USE	TYPE OF METAPHOR	EXAMPLE	AVERAGE SCORE
	Nature (Abundance)	“Foundations help get money flowing to the people closest to the issues so they can produce lasting change.”	3.58
	Build (Abundance)	“Foundations help nonprofits build up big ideas to develop stronger communities.”	3.54
	Home (Abundance)	“Foundations make sure that underrepresented voices have a seat at the table.”	3.37
	Car (Neutral)	“Foundations put experts in the driver’s seat so that nonprofits can drive change.”	3.45
	Guide (Neutral)	“Foundations are like a guide for nonprofits to help them fund their projects.”	3.51
	War (Zero-sum)	“Foundations equip nonprofits with the tools they need to fight the good fight.”	3.57
	Sports (Zero-sum)	“Foundations help nonprofits tackle complex social problems with impactful solutions.”	3.52



As part of the national survey, we asked participants to rate various abundance and zero-sum metaphors on how well they describe what foundations do. Participants rated nature metaphors (e.g., grow, flow) to be the most accurate descriptors, followed by war (e.g., frontlines, equip) and construction (e.g., build, develop). These metaphors resonated similarly well with the public, but they have very different effects. Zero-sum metaphors portray change as short-term battles to be won where someone else loses, but abundance metaphors allow for long-term perspectives with collaboration and community at the center. If the point of philanthropic work is to build trust and move toward larger goals, then foundations should opt for abundance metaphors.



RECOMMENDATION 5

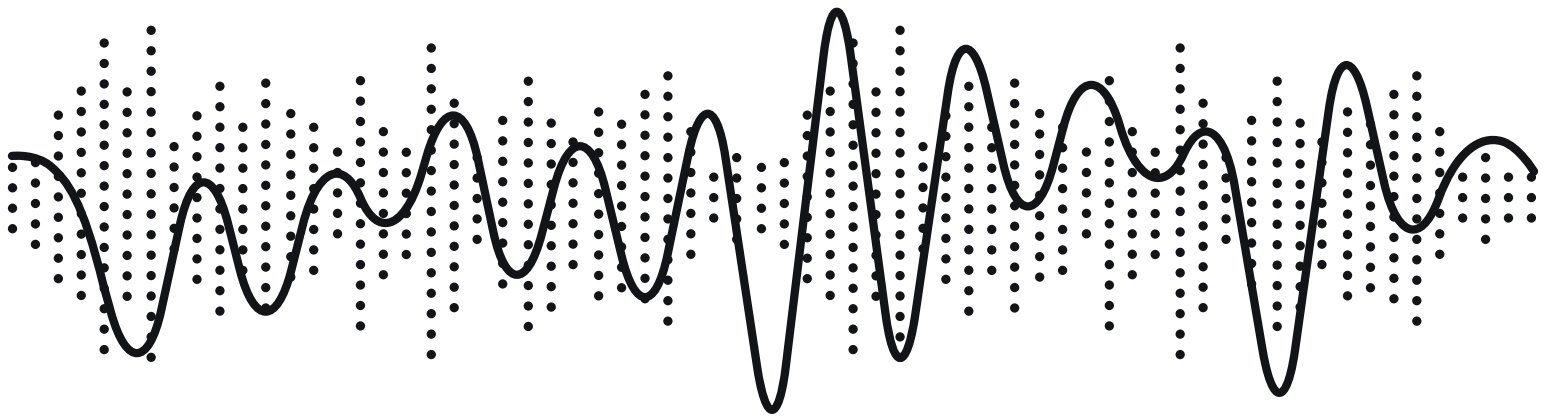
Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

- Use clear, visual language and definitions.
- Employ metaphors that reflect an abundance mindset instead of directly or indirectly suggesting scarcity or zero-sum mindsets.
- Eliminate “philanthro-speak,” the technical jargon that foundations use to describe their work.


Language is a system, and every system generates outcomes. Our language choices can help us open doors to people with different expertise—or shut people out because these terms aren’t understandable or don’t resonate with how they see the world. For example, recent research by scholars at Syracuse University suggests that nonprofits’ mission statements signal a set of moral values that also send political signals, which may make it harder for them to collaborate and build relationships with people who don’t share their political views.¹⁴

Instead of using technical or coded language, use visual, accessible terms and definitions with richer context. First, that means eliminating “philanthro-speak,” the shorthand many foundations use to describe their work. Not only does it hinder transparency, but it is also a way that funders may alienate people who can’t make sense of the terms.

We also need to use better metaphors. Our [landscape scan](#) showed us that the field leans heavily into metaphors associated with sports, the military, and violence—which all reflect a zero-sum mindset rather than an abundance mindset. In the national survey, we found that both types of metaphors resonated well with the respondents, meaning there is little risk in pivoting toward the abundance metaphors, which align more closely with the goals of building transparency and trust.



14 *From The nature and origins of social venture mission: An exploratory study of political ideology and moral foundations*, by David S. Lucas & U. David Park, 2023, *Journal of Business Venturing*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2022.106271>



INSIGHT #6: Narrative change and storytelling work take a long time, which makes it hard to show the value of this work to leadership or boards.

Part of understanding what a shared narrative of philanthropic work should look like is identifying what is preventing foundations from telling more transparent and clear stories. We surveyed practitioners at or with philanthropic organizations of varying sizes to see if any barriers stood out to them, and we asked interviewees for examples. The common threads we identified were that it is difficult to evaluate the success of long-term narrative change and that the teams doing this work need more resources and support from foundation leadership.

Quantifying the value of strategic communication is already difficult for practitioners: Metrics such as likes and clicks show basic engagement effects, but does this translate to actual behavior or attitude change? This becomes more of a challenge for narrative change work because it can take years to decades to see change happen. As one practitioner said:

“It takes up to 50 years to move deep narrative change, 50 years of saturating repetition. It took at least 50 years for enough Americans to think that abolishing slavery was a good enough idea to fight a war over it, to elect Abraham Lincoln instead of the other guy. It did not take two years. It didn’t take five years.”

“When funders today talk about ‘I’ve been funding narrative for two years or five years and things haven’t changed,’ I think to myself, ‘You haven’t been funding narrative. You’ve been funding strategic

communications—maybe more strategic, maybe less strategic, but communications—and you’ve been funding short-term efforts in an environment that is unfriendly to them.”

Rinku Sen
Executive Director
Narrative Initiative

Metrics, then, become a massive hurdle for this work. How do individual foundations measure how people feel about them? How do they feel about foundations as a whole?

“It’s hard to quantify. We can quantify by metrics from social media, likes and readership and things of that nature. But in terms of how it makes them feel about our PSO¹⁵ or if they continue to invest in our PSO, I think that’s harder to quantify. Our membership has gone up 27%... So, I feel like that’s a pretty good indicator that we’re doing a good job communicating the value, but I don’t know if it’s because of effective storytelling, necessarily.”

Ashley Heath Dietz
President and CEO
Florida Philanthropic Network

15 “PSO” stands for philanthropy-serving organization.

At the same time, communications teams at foundations and nonprofits tend to be small. They're not set up to tell the kinds of detailed, contextual stories that build trust and transparency, and some will likely see it as outside their role. When we asked sector survey respondents what they needed most to expand their storytelling capacity, the biggest response was staff or partners with storytelling skills (22.4%) followed by write-in responses (15.8%) like funding, time, and tools to help others tell their stories.

Multiple respondents said that they are the sole communications person, which means they have to find the stories, help develop stories, and then share the stories by themselves—in addition to their day-to-day communications work. Participants who wrote that their leadership had bought into storytelling said they had not received the funding to make it possible:

“Authentic, nonextractive storytelling requires significantly more investment than communications department infrastructure/budgets typically accommodate.”

The complexity of measuring this work and the lack of dedicated time and resources make narrative change difficult. One reason for this struggle may be that foundations’ storytelling goals don’t necessarily align with their overall communication or programmatic goals. In the sector survey, we asked

respondents to select all items corresponding to their communications and storytelling goals. The top communications goals were building the organization’s profile and brand (72.4%), helping people understand what they do (67.1%), and raising awareness about priority issues (56.6%). The top storytelling goals were demonstrating the importance of priority issues (67.1%), sharing the voices of directly affected individuals (56.6%), and highlighting collective action in response to a problem (55.3%).

Aligning these goals could help foundations find metrics that demonstrate how valuable storytelling as a practice can be to the sector. Telling nuanced stories that include communities, nonprofits, and foundations working together is a strong start.

It’s also worth noting that even though most practitioners cited building their organization’s brand and profile as their top communications goal, focusing on some of the lower-ranked options—like demonstrating the importance of priority issues and showing how people are taking action to solve it—might do more to build trust. Lastly, while helping people understand the work is an overarching communications goal, it’s not reflected as a priority in the storytelling foundations do. It’s also true that our survey of practitioners revealed metrics that don’t necessarily align with great or ethical storytelling: Practitioners told us they most often measure engagement on social media platforms (77.6%), website traffic or downloads (72.4%), and mentions in traditional news media (64.5%).

TABLE 4 TOP 6 GOALS FOR COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS INCLUDE BRAND-BUILDING AND HELPING PEOPLE UNDERSTAND WHAT THEIR ORGANIZATIONS DO

In the sector survey, we asked respondents to “select all that apply” from a list of potential goals for their communications efforts. (Total n = 77, decimals are rounded up to one decimal point.)

Building the organization’s profile and brand	72.4%
Help people understand what we do	67.1%
Raise awareness about priority issues	56.6%
Lift up the work of our grantees or partners	55.3%
Build our organization’s reputation	52.6%
Build support for solutions	52.6%

TABLE 5 TOP 6 PURPOSES FOR STORYTELLING INCLUDE DEMONSTRATING THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIORITY ISSUES AND SHARING THE VOICES OF PEOPLE WHO ARE AFFECTED

We offered survey participants a list of various purposes their stories might serve, and they were asked to check all that apply. (Total n = 77, decimals are rounded up to one decimal point.)

To demonstrate the importance of our priority issues	67.1%
To share the voices of people who are most affected by the problem	56.6%
To highlight collective action in response to a problem	55.3%
To show systems at work and how those systems were put in place	44.7%
To demonstrate our organization’s value	43.4%
To showcase wins (of both foundation or grantee partners)	43.4%

TABLE 6 WHAT’S TRACKED DOESN’T ALIGN WITH COMMUNICATIONS OR STORYTELLING GOALS

Survey participants were asked to identify what they track from a list of potential “metrics.” They could choose all that applied or enter their own responses under “other.” “Other” responses included blogs and webinars produced; inbound media requests; inclusion of narrative themes by leaders and grantees; radio interviews and podcast appearances; topic area mentions; video engagement; varies depending on the project. (Total n = 77, decimals are rounded up to one decimal point.)

Engagement on social media platforms	77.6%
Website traffic or downloads	72.4%
Mentions in traditional news media	64.5%
The number of stories created by your organization shared on your organization’s platforms	46.1%
Public speeches given by senior leaders	44.7%
TV appearances by senior leaders	42.1%
Other	17.1%



RECOMMENDATION 6

Commit the time and resources needed to support and evaluate long-term narrative change work.

- Make deeper investments into the team leading your storytelling strategy.
- Align your storytelling, programmatic communications goals and tactics, and metrics.
- Develop new metrics to evaluate narrative efforts that recognize the long-term nature of narrative change.
- Work with other foundations to identify shared metrics and what resources are still needed.

Foundations must provide their storytelling teams—whether they are housed in communications, development, or some other department—with the capacity to do this work right.

Fortunately, practitioners in the sector are already using stories and want to tell better stories, too. In the sector survey, we asked practitioners how frequently

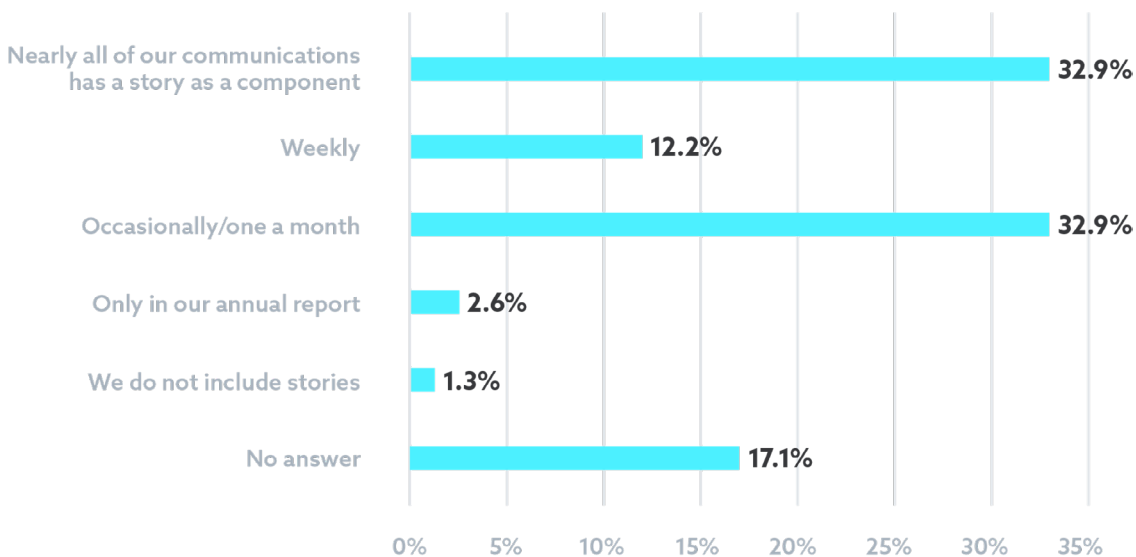
they incorporate stories into their work, and 78% of respondents said that they use stories at least once per month: 32.9% said they use storytelling in almost everything they put out, 12.2% said weekly, and 32.9% said about once a month. And three in four respondents went on to say that they want to use more stories, which echoes what we learned in our interviews with practitioners.

The practitioner survey respondents also said that they are telling more stories about systems, not just about directly affected people: 44.7% of respondents said that they use stories to show systems at work and how those systems were put in place, and 55.3% said they share stories highlighting collective action in response to a problem. This is a step toward the storytelling approach we recommend using more often.

Foundations and practitioners must reexamine the metrics they're using to track their success. This should not be an individual project but a sector-wide collaboration in identifying what is meaningful and how we can measure the connection between narrative efforts and real change. In the meantime, consider developing output measures that track who's quoted in the stories you share and the extent to which you've eliminated jargon or metaphors that invoke scarcity. As you look at your outcome measures, start with a theory of change that helps you identify precisely what you're hoping to change or help people understand through your storytelling.

CHART 4 PRACTITIONERS ARE ALREADY TELLING STORIES

We asked practitioners how often they include stories in their work, and just one respondent told us they don't use stories in their work. (Total n = 77, decimals are rounded up to one decimal point.)



Philanthropy's New Voice

Throughout the “What We Learned” section, we identified actions that foundations and the sector can take to tell better stories that increase trust in philanthropy. We compiled these recommendations—and the actions that implement these recommendations—below.

Read the full report at cof.org/content/philanthropys-new-voice-building-trust-deeper-stories-and-clear-language



1. Tell stories within complex ecosystems.

- Include context about how these systems and issues came to be and whose choices made it happen.
- Tell stories about coalitions in action to show that collaborative action is possible and necessary.
- Skip savior narratives, and tell stories about relatable protagonists.
- Draw clear connections between people taking action from different perspectives, including communities, grantees, foundation team members, and people outside your immediate network.
- Include details about the steps this community has taken, including tasks that may seem mundane.



2. Lean into your role as trusted messengers and tell great, ethical stories.

- Identify spaces where you are the trusted messenger, especially with policymakers, to tell nuanced stories whose characters have agency.
- Tell stories with relatable characters and vivid details to transport us to different viewpoints.
- Adhere to ethical storytelling principles outlined by groups like Define American.
- Build transparent relationships with communities and policymakers that clearly and accurately define what foundations can and can't do.
- Value the voices and perspectives of the people closest to the work in terms of inclusion and compensation.



3. Commit to sector-wide storytelling to fill the narrative vacuum.

- Be deliberate about working within individual foundations and collaboratively with the field to identify themes that honestly depict how foundations work.
- Incorporate those themes into a larger narrative strategy for the sector.
- Tailor those shared themes to your individual organization's values and vision.
- Tell stories that accurately describe what foundations do, and that contribute to the sector's shared narratives.



4. Tell stories that build the right kind of transparency.

- Include the nitty-gritty details, like where ideas come from and how foundations make decisions.
- Bring authenticity to your stories with mundane details that show that change isn't magic.
- Be specific about how your foundation or the organizations you work with use the money rather than using formulaic press release-style stories.
- Include the perspectives of foundation staff, their actions, and their thinking.
- Tell stories about projects that may not have worked and what you've learned so that future partners can innovate, and we normalize failures as an essential element of success.



5. Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

- Use clear, visual language and definitions.
- Employ metaphors that reflect an abundance mindset instead of directly or indirectly suggesting scarcity or zero-sum mindsets.
- Eliminate "philanthro-speak," the technical jargon that foundations use to describe their work.



6. Commit the time and resources needed to support and evaluate long-term narrative change work.

- Make deeper investments into the team leading your storytelling strategy.
- Align your storytelling, programmatic communications goals and tactics, and metrics.
- Develop new metrics to evaluate narrative efforts that recognize the long-term nature of narrative change.
- Work with other foundations to identify shared metrics and what resources are still needed.

A Path Forward

This project began with a recognition that the lack of a shared narrative about philanthropy put the sector at risk of misunderstandings that strengthen harmful narratives and leave the sector vulnerable to being defined by others—with serious implications for foundations and their partners. Filling this narrative vacuum requires a collaborative effort to tell stories that provide transparency about how change happens and clearly show philanthropy’s role in this work. This new voice for philanthropy is a research-backed path to building trust in philanthropy.

At the moment, the American public has positive perceptions of philanthropy, and—despite some criticism from specific legislators—policymakers appear to lean toward collaborating with foundations more than further regulating them. That makes the current moment the best time to start collaborating on a shared narrative.

Our research, across several methods, reveals a desire for more transparency from foundations. Specifically, Americans, policymakers, and practitioners want to know more about how foundations work and the steps to making change that may seem mundane to us. Removing the jargon in favor of stories with clear definitions and abundance-focused metaphors that accurately describe the role foundations play in an ecosystem of change can help foundations build trust in their relationships and counter harmful narratives that misrepresent the power of philanthropy in our society.

Narratives require an abundance of stories that come together in a coherent way. Kamal Sinclair has invoked the sentiment, “A single story is like a star—there are billions in the universe and each one is a valuable part of our shared reality; a narrative is a way in which we imagine the connections between those stars to draw a constellation, to make meaning and to find patterns.”

By leaning into a shared commitment to this narrative work—along with the time and financial investment it requires—we believe foundations can increase transparency and clarity, weaving a constellation of trust that points the way to the positive change we all want to see.

Acknowledgments

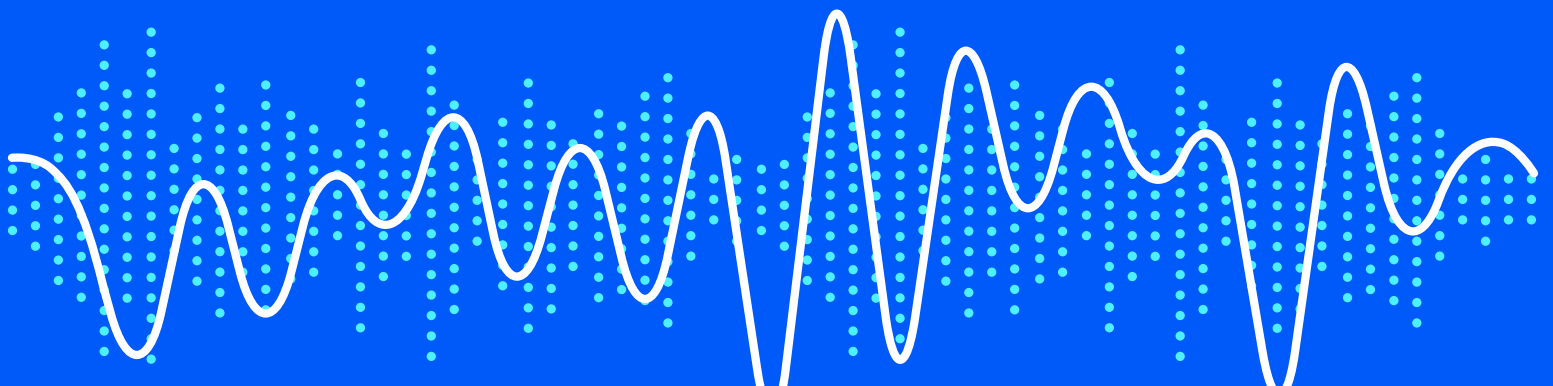
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Keep Learning

We've cited several great articles and resources throughout the report, and here are a few more to help you keep learning and build your skills.

1. [Free Range Thinking](#), a free newsletter produced by the Goodman Center, offers great insights about storytelling for social change and comes out every month.
2. [Ethical Storytelling](#) offers a set of values, resources and webinars to advance better practices among nonprofits.
3. The [BROKE project](#), the result of a collaboration among the Radical Communicators Network, Milli and the Center for Public Interest Communications, presents insights from research into how nonprofits and foundations represent poverty in their storytelling. The site includes pages of resources and worksheets on ethical storytelling that doesn't reinforce harmful narratives.
4. [This article](#) from the blog Behavioral Scientist by Jonah Berger lays out the science behind using concrete language to explain complex ideas.
5. [American Dreaming](#), a report by Define American, is a must-read on ethical storytelling.
6. The [Narrative Initiative](#) has a robust resource section that includes worksheets and other tools to guide narrative change efforts.
7. The Center for Public Interest Communications has synthesized and assembled research on the science behind great stories [here](#).
8. Check out Spitfire Strategies' [report](#) on rebuilding trust in civil society.

If you want to add resources, please send them to us. And if you'd like to look at the data from the survey, the survey instruments, and the interview protocols, you can find those on the [Center for Public Interest Communications' website](#).



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