

OPINION

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# 'You Can't Lift People Up by Putting Them Down': How to Talk About Tough Issues of Race, Poverty, and More

By Trabian Shorters

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PIERRE EDWARDS

*This article is the fourth of a new series called "Looking Ahead: the Future of Communications for Good," produced in collaboration with the Communications Network. Look for additional pieces every other Wednesday, and add your thoughts in the comments. Read the other articles in the series.*



## **LOOKING AHEAD: THE FUTURE OF COMMUNICATIONS FOR GOOD**

As the Communications Network celebrates its 40th anniversary, it is collaborating with the *Chronicle* to figure out what's coming next.

- How to Use Gatherings to Share Ideas, Connect, and Get Things Done (Opinion)
- To Craft Effective Social-Good Appeals, We Need Research, Not Crystal Balls (Opinion)
- Helping Government Workers Learn Is Crucial to Social Change (Opinion)

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Have you noticed that social-impact organizations working with black people often describe them in language that is so offensive that we wouldn't dare use it to their faces?

The "at-risk, low-income, minorities in high-crime, high-poverty, disadvantaged communities whom we seek to empower and transform" have far more going on in their lives than our denigrating short-hand acknowledges.

In fact, cognitive science and longitudinal studies strongly suggest that consistently defining people in denigrating terms is one way that racist narratives become institutionalized and part of the culture. Old-school philanthropy, social-justice, and social-innovation organizations that are wed to that old way do more harm than they realize.

While they are right to point out injustices, disparities, and needs, they are dead wrong to do it by deeply associating all these problems with the people who experience them. This unintentionally but categorically lets systemic instigators off the hook.

Fortunately, there is a vanguard of leaders choosing instead to define people by their aspirations and contributions before noting their challenges, which makes it much easier to see the systemic causes behind their struggles. Here's why:

You can't lift people up by putting them down. For at least 50 years, governments, nonprofits, and foundations have collaborated to wage the War on Poverty, as well as wars on drugs and crime, by making black people the poster children for these menaces to society.

Today, it's painfully clear that our 50-plus years of declaring ourselves the saviors and allies of people striving to get out of poverty or defying a racist society hasn't convinced either group that we are in fact their saviors or even their allies.

### **Lifting People Up**

Black people aren't particularly trusting of foundations, rushing to join the NAACP, or begging Teach for America or other such saviors to come to their communities.

That's because people know when you are afraid of them, when you don't trust them, when you seek to control them; even when you say it's in the name of "lifting them up" and "keeping them on track" so they can "avoid negative outcomes."

Far too many leaders communicate that "I not only believe that I am better than you, but I believe that I must intervene to stop you from becoming an even bigger threat and problem than you already are."

This is not only insulting, it's inaccurate and ineffective. Eighty-two percent of black men in America are not poor, and 57 percent are solidly middle class. They serve our country in uniform at the highest rates and are the most actively engaged fathers in the nation, according to federal statistics. So why does philanthropy only convey the image that they are absent or a problem or a threat?

You can't lift people up by putting them down. This is not just a moral truth; there's powerful scientific evidence supporting it.

### **Aspirations, Not Challenges**

Science proves the value of focusing on aspirations or contributions.

There are too many people in America whose worthiest aspirations and contributions are brutalized daily by relentless classism, racism, and assaults on their souls for repudiating the American myth by simply existing. We need to tell their story better.

My organization has trained and advised more than 1,000 foundation and nonprofit leaders to use a breakthrough we call "asset-framing for equity" to make a much stronger case for equity, better engage people of color, raise more money, and achieve greater impact — all while fundamentally undermining implicit racism. Those we have trained or advised include the heads of the Gates Foundation in the United States, the Heinz Endowments, DonorsChoose.org, and the Anti-Defamation League.

Our premise is that defining people by their aspirations and contributions is essential before acknowledging their challenges and investing in them for their continued benefit to society.

Underpinning our work is the research of Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Prize-winning scholar who is perhaps the world's leading authority on human cognition and decision making. His research shows just how wrong the nonprofit world's habit of stigmatizing people is — no matter how well intentioned.

Kahneman proved that human beings are incapable of making strictly rational choices. Our brains automatically draw on familiar narratives, and we are prone to disregard facts that don't fit those narratives — regardless of their veracity.

Stigmatizing narratives are especially powerful because our brains categorize stigmatized things as inherently threatening. That's why we instinctively want to avoid, control, or kill spiders, rats, and roaches. We have a similar aversion to anything stigmatized (including "at-risk urban youths").

Conversely, the simple practice of defining people by their aspirations and contributions prevents "dehumanization" and impairs stigmatization. Rats don't aspire, only people do. It is also a more accurate depiction of the realities people face.

"A black student striving to overcome a threatening environment and graduate" is a more accurate description than the "at-risk youth" label ever implies. In the first framing, we acknowledge that the youth is a student and the student's hopes for herself are threatened by the system in which she lives. That's reality, and in that reality, we are primed to fix the system rather than stigmatize the aspiring student.

## Raising More Money

For those of us still clinging to narratives that vilify those who are most impacted by a struggle, I ask, what about accuracy and being evidence-based? Is your work data-driven, or would it be more accurate to say its "negative data-driven." When there is scientific Nobel Laureate evidence that you are likely making grievous framing errors, do you consider changing?

Nonprofits are proving that focusing on people's aspirations raises more money — and improves programs.

DonorsChoose.org was r

anked the ninth most innovative organization in the world by Fast Company (Apple was No. 14) because it pioneered crowdfunding for classroom needs nearly 20 years ago. Today it raises over \$130 million a year, half of which comes from individual donors, and that success demonstrates that it's wiser to focus on students' talents than on defining young people by struggles beyond their control.

"We were willing to bite the bullet and take some loss of donors for the sake of not stigmatizing the students," says Charles Best, who founded DonorsChoose. "But the asset-framed projects outperformed the deficit-framed ones for fundraising."

The Heinz Endowment, Langeloth Foundation, Kenan Charitable Trust, and the Skillman Foundation each support separate fellowships that train dozens of leaders in how to put the focus on people's aspirations and contributions to change narratives and improve social impact.

The Ayiti Community Trust, Haiti's first endowed community foundation, is built on an approach we advocate. It has rejected the "relief model" of philanthropy and instead promotes the beauty and aspirations of the Haitian people.

The University of Miami and Deloitte University have offered seminars to their graduate students and executives to show them how to do asset-framing. And leading-edge impact investors like Camelback Ventures have made it a staple for their portfolio companies and open to their investors as well.

My organization, BMe Community, is applying the approach we train others to use in our own multiyear campaign called "The Next Narrative for Black America." The idea is that black Americans have always been assets to America, and it is time for them to envision

what might change in their cultural, economic, and political priorities if they viewed themselves as assets and required others to do so. It kicked off on Freedom Day (June 19) with an announcement of dozens of BMe Vanguard Fellows and a national Next Narrative conference in October.

Certainly, there are billions of dollars invested in pathologizing people and issues, but we believe that the best leaders of the 21st century will offer something much more accurate, more inspiring, and more effective at revealing and correcting systems of inequity. You can be one of them.

*Trabian Shorters is founder of BMe Community, a New York Times bestselling author, and former vice president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.*

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