

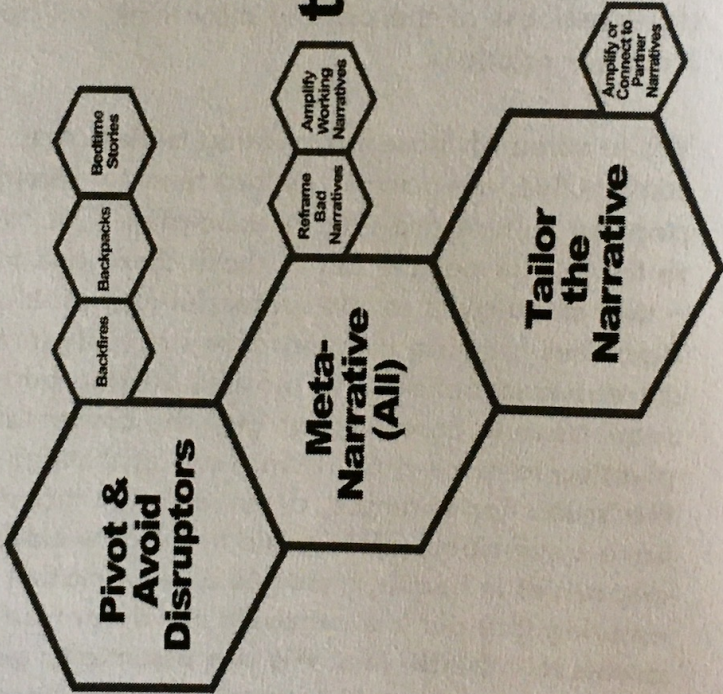


Principle #2: Navigate the Dominant Narratives and Negative Disruptors

It would be so much easier to make our case if our stakeholders were blank slates (without existing opinions, perceptions, stereotypes and biases). Unfortunately, this is not the circumstance we face. More often than not, our stakeholders have already formed opinions about the issues we are trying to solve, opinions about the relevance and importance of those issues, as well as judgements about the deservedness of the people they think will benefit from our solutions.

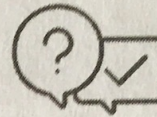
While some of those preexisting beliefs are constructive, the narratives that tend to dominate our popular culture are usually unhelpful. Our task is not to try to talk people out of these dominant narratives – that strategy is rarely successful and usually backfires (pushing people more staunchly in support of stereotyped beliefs and biases). Making our case requires us to carefully reframe the conversation – pivoting to more productive ways of thinking about the issue. For example, a conversation that might have been about affordable housing or addressing disparities in health, becomes a conversation about ensuring that our zip codes do not determine our access to a better life. We are essentially getting at the same problems, but people may not have the same defenses up or pre-existing stereotypes about zip codes as they do about affordable housing or health disparities. That 's our work in Principle #2.

2. Navigate the Dominant Narratives



Reflection Questions:

- Have I identified the preexisting beliefs and dominant narratives that shape public opinion about my issue?
- Have I avoided triggering the dominant narratives that reduce support for the case I am making about that issue?
- Am I reframing the conversation and amplifying alternative narratives that can help me better connect to my stakeholders?



Your Ticket to Implementing This Principle

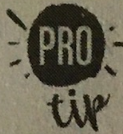
Your task is to skillfully navigate around the dominant narratives. Opening the conversation with something your stakeholders appreciate, may help you open the door to the conversation you want to have. You are not trying to change the subject or avoid tackling the biases you see, but by pivoting first, you are buying yourself some time by getting people who would otherwise easily avoid the conversation, to listen. Think of it as “relabeling” – the same practice that designer retailers use when they want you to buy something that was once objectionable to you when it was priced 100x over cost! If they can do it, so can you!



Sample Success Measures

- KPI:** We are consistently pivoting away from the dominant narratives to ones that avoid harmful backfires
- Outcome:** Our stakeholders are using/reinforcing our new narratives & engaging less in stereotypical/biased conversations on this issue
- Impact:** We have unseated the dominance of harmful narratives associated with this issue, in favor of more positive ones





THE ART OF AN EFFECTIVE PIVOT

"That's an interesting question, but there's a bigger issue for us on the table that we should consider . . ."

The ability to pivot from the conversation on the table to the one you want to have, is one of the most important casemaking techniques to have in your toolbelt. If you've ever watched two good debaters go at it, I'm sure you've seen the fine art of an effective pivot. To pivot literally means to take a conversation topic that might be on a specific subject and move it to answer it on your own terms. That is, shifting the conversation back to a frame or a storyline that is consistent with the case that you are making. Think of this casemaking technique as helping your stakeholders and strategic partners stay focused on the mission, stay focused on what's important, stay focused on your call-to-action.

Pivots are a critical part of casemaking efforts because no matter how thoughtful we are in crafting our case, dominant narratives and negative disruptors are commonplace. Dominant narratives are common societal narratives that reinforce ways of thinking that make it more difficult for people to see their collective interest in having systems designed for equity. For example, someone might say, "yes I know that people need health care insurance, but they should get a job or figure out how to get health insurance on their own."

What is the Difference Between *Dominant Narratives* and *Negative Disruptors*?

Dominant Narratives are common explanations, beliefs or ways of thinking that get reinforced through culture (*i.e. through the stories we tell and our cultural norms*) that make it more difficult for people to see their collective interest in having systems designed to produce equitable outcomes. Because dominant narratives are so normalized through their repetition and authority, they have the illusion of being objective and apolitical, when in fact they are neither.

Negative Disruptors often function like dominant narratives in that they can disrupt calls for collection action around equity and they get circulated through culture. What distinguishes negative disruptors is that they are not tightly held beliefs but rather, they are *statements of resignation* about the possibility of change. When people start to plan on the future they aspire to, negative disruptors function as reminders that social change is impossible, the battle for equity is a fool's errand and selective examples of how/when our past efforts to create social change have failed.

That's the dominant narrative of individual responsibility talking and because of the repetition through which it is retold, that kind of narrative is hard to overcome for those trying to advance new policy models for nationalized health care.

Similarly, negative disruptors are equally harmful to our casemaking. Negative disruptors are those statements of resignation that can deflate people's excitement about leaning forward. For example, a typical disruptor in conversations about policy responses to homelessness often looks like this, *"those people are all drug addicts and they'll never be able to be positive contributors to our community."* This person may not be trying to enroll you in a belief system, but the comment is meant to dampen any bright ideas that you might have about creating new policies, programs, services or investments for people experiencing homelessness. No matter what issue you are talking about, there will always be negative disruptors or statements made with the explicit purpose to shut down the aspiration to find better solutions. We have to be strategic to work around them!

If our goal is to make a powerful case, we'll have to keep our stakeholders and strategic partners on course. That means, we have to master the fine art of the pivot. Take the dominant narrative or negative disruptors that you've been handed and turn that conversation right back around to the issues that you

know matter. The better your “pivot” strategy, the more likely you are to keep your audience focused. We’ve all engaged in the pivot at one point, whether we realize it or not. The good news is that there are examples everywhere – from the board room in business, to politics on the cable news channels, to your loved ones at home. Here’s an example from my personal collection!

Me (to my 11-year-old son):

“Hey buddy, have you done your homework?”

My son:

“Hey mom, I love you so much. What’s for dinner?”

Who can argue with a kid that starts a sentence with “I love you”! His homework did get done but he managed to buy himself some time with that one. Some pivots are more effective than others but let’s be clear, our ability to pivot determines a large part of how we’re received.

Take the case of Lance Armstrong when asked about using drugs to enhance his performance in competitive cycling. Though it didn’t come in the form of an interview, interviewers were talking for years about his almost supernatural performance on the bike.

Interviewers to Lance Armstrong:

“What are you on?”

Lance Armstrong reply via his Nike Commercial:

“What am I on? I’m on my bike busting my ass six hours a day. What are you on?”

Armstrong was able to use humor and a bit of bravado to push back on claims that tarnished his image (although we should note that eventually those claims were found to be true)! The point here is that he was able to pivot to the conversation HE WANTED TO HAVE, which was about the sport he loved and how hard he was working to stay relevant in it.

As with everything else in this world, pivots can take both good and bad forms—and are put into play for strategic reasons. But how often have you been in a situation where you wanted to have a productive conversation about an issue but the people you were talking to were stuck in another frame? Or they were pushing back on your ideas using narratives that were totally unhelpful, misinformation or “alternative facts” – possibly even, lies? Or perhaps, they were stuck in a bedtime story (as we defined it earlier in this Guide) and they weren’t able to hear your position because they couldn’t shake their own pre-conceived notions?

There are indeed some people for whom, having you share your facts, data and evidence to the contrary helps them to see your point of view. Unfortunately, it is more often the situation that you’ll have to either navigate around those unproductive perceptions or simply acknowledge what you have in common and pivot back to safer territory. So, mastering the fine art of pivoting is essential.

The good news is that the dominant narratives and negative disruptors are usually pretty predictable –

rarely are people creative enough or interested enough to come up with entirely new disruptive things to say every time they meet you! Their lack of creativity and predictability gives us the opportunity to develop (and practice) a standard way that we'll pivot around the issues they raise.

Here are a couple ground rules about effective pivoting.

(1) NEVER, EVER repeat back the unproductive information – even to clarify. When you repeat back the negative things you've heard, you simply give your audience another opportunity to hear the other point of view...again! Refuse to entertain the unproductive information – especially if it reinforces dominant narrative, negative stereotypes, bias or bigotry.

(2) Don't spend much time trying to refute negative narratives or bogus claims/disruptors either.

Because most negative disruptors are almost never the real issue for people (they are more likely defensive shields that people throw up to protect themselves against the idea of change, the imperative to act, etc.), it isn't a good use of your time and it rarely helps. You are on stronger ground if you go back to your own narrative, reinforce the values that you are upholding and work to educate people who are receptive (new champions) about why your solution is the best course of action for our

future.

(3) **Learn the difference between a defensive pivot and an offensive one.** There are two kinds of pivots—the goal of one version is to defend ourselves against unfair or untrue characterizations (defensive) while the goal of the second one is to actively move the conversation away from oppositional narratives and back onto ones that are more productive (offensive). Practice using both so that when you're hit with a negative disruptor, you already know how to make the play (defensively or offensively) that allows you to get back to your own casemaking.

(4) **Instead, use bridging statements to find something that you can agree about and then, get back to your own narrative.** So, the best pivots tend to be those where you acknowledge something in common or some part of the other person's statement that you agree with, and then move back onto your narrative or frame. You are not required to agree with their arguments, but you can always find that one small idea, concern or nugget that you share in common. You might share your concern with the health of the community, or the accountability to our systems, or the wellbeing of our seniors. If that's all you can muster, go to those kinds of themes first.

Some examples of bridging statements:

- *"I share your concern for our community, that's why I believe..."*
- *"Yes, about 10 years ago I would have said the same thing but here's what changed how I see this..."*
- *"Thank you for saying that, it reminds me that..."*
- *"I can see how you could come to that opinion given your concerns, but the bottom line is that..."*
- *"You put a number of important issues on the table but what it all comes down to is this..."*
- *"Well I remember that happening as well, but my recollection suggests that..."*
- *"Yes, you've given a lot of information. What people really need to know though is that..."*
- *"Yes, those are important concerns, but we find the more troubling concern has to do with..."*

(5) Practice the way that you'll pivot with others so that there is consistency in the alternative direction that you are setting. Given that you are not the only ones likely facing the same kinds of negative disruptors, work out a consistent way that you (and others responding on the issue) will pivot. Develop and practice a consistent pivot with other advocates so that

together you begin to rewrite the story, change the narrative and rewrite the way that people see the issue over time.

Here's an example of a good pivot: When he was campaigning for health care reform, President Barack Obama and his team made a number of strategic pivots to navigate around the negative disruptors in the public debate. Opposers of the legislation argued that people would lose their ability to choose their own physician as well as access to their existing health plans.

President Obama's pivot looked like this: *"If you like your health care plan, you can keep your health care plan. But under this plan, those same insurers will never be able to deny you coverage for a pre-existing condition if you change plans."* First, he acknowledged something he could agree with and then, Obama would talk excitedly about pre-existing conditions – an issue where public support was rock solid, so he knew he was on solid ground. If you want to advance a strong case for change, master the art of the pivot and get to solid ground. Caucus with others who are actively advocating on the issues you care about and work together on the specific pivots that will help you circle back to solid ground. That's the way to keep people focused on the story you are telling.

TRY ME!

The dominant narratives and negative disruptors around homelessness are toxic, making it difficult for solutions to gain traction. Pivot to a shared/common experience that reinforces the notion that people without shelter need the same things as everyone else: an address and the stability that it offers.

The Power of an Address

Washington, DC is one of the most prosperous and vibrant cities to live in the U.S. and home to many of the most powerful addresses in the world. Yet in the shadows of the White House, the Capitol buildings, national monuments, 175 embassies, luxury condominiums, upscale retail and restaurants, many of our neighbors do not have a home to call their own.

Having an address is powerful—whether you are a world leader, a business owner, or a childcare worker. An address is required to register to vote, to enroll your children in school, to get a government I.D. or to apply for a job, to file any kind of government claim, and so much more. Research tells us that an address, a place to call home, provides us with so much more than the actual house number conveys — a sense of belonging, a connection to community, the ability to plan for the future, better health & employment options.

While the region is home to a multitude of powerful addresses, far too many people in our region lack

stable access to one. Often nestled between our high-profile addresses – the embassies, the monuments, the museums and the transit corridors – are tents that have become makeshift shelter to an increasing number of people who are locked out of the opportunity that an address provides.

Far too many of our neighbors lack the power of an address. They live in tents and sleeping bags in our parks and along our streets. Even more line up nightly to sleep in emergency shelters. Thousands more are living in unstable and often unsafe housing circumstances. Many of us know someone—a cousin, a friend, an employee—who is teetering on an edge so razor thin that any unforeseen event, expense, or challenge would put them in the street.

Despite the dire statistics about homelessness in our region, there is some good news to share. First, we are not alone. In fact, a small cadre of cities across the country are solving this issue by working together in multi-sector collaboration to redesign the systems that were meant to address the housing needs of their residents. It is our time now: time for our city to join a growing list of regions across the country that are tackling the issue of homelessness and winning.

In a region as prosperous as ours, with so many prominent leaders and some of the wealthiest addresses in the world – we can and must do better. This should not be our reality and it cannot become our new normal.

Our work will ensure that everyone who lives here, no matter the circumstance, has the power of an address.