

# COMMUNICATIONS

## How We Got Here: Our Working Notes

Communications teams are a key driver in advancing an organization's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. Working in close collaboration with the communities they serve, communicators choose the stories, words, and images that shape the realities of the non-governmental organization (NGO) community and the communities they serve.

By working for organizations with a wider reach than the average individual, communicators can also have a direct impact on the lives of the communities they ultimately serve. As a result, communications teams have an inherent responsibility and moral obligation to tell others' stories in an authentic way that affords individuals and communities the respect and dignity they deserve.

Each word that NGO staff write, speak, tweet, or post can have a colossal impact. Whether that impact is positive or negative depends on which words are chosen and how staff choose to use them. As daunting as that may sound, we cannot let the fear of saying or writing the wrong thing paralyze us into inaction. Many NGOs and their leaders—terrified of the consequences of saying the wrong things or saying things the wrong way—ultimately do a disservice to those they are trying to help by remaining silent. When those with the power to change remain silent, harmful practices and bigotry such as racism, ableism, sexism, and heterosexism thrive. Discriminatory practices thrive when no one speaks about them.

Transparency, reflection, and acknowledging past wrongdoings (including silence) are first steps in the path forward. However, surface-level messaging with vague mentions of diversity and equity is not enough. The voices, ideas, needs, and priorities of people from diverse backgrounds must be deeply embedded within our communications. We must recognize the unique experiences and realities of people from all backgrounds and advocate for protecting and celebrating those differences.

As NGOs, we strive to help people worldwide. As communicators, we have the additional mandate of helping the people we serve tell their authentic stories and a duty to center their voices in as much of that storytelling as we can. Moreover, we must ensure that the subjects of these stories are seen for their aspirations and contributions instead of merely for their disadvantages.

Our words have an impact. We must choose them carefully.

### Self-Reflection and Content Audit

As a first step in their DEI efforts, NGO communications teams must look within and assess outbound communications through a content audit. It is necessary for organizations, especially those serving marginalized communities, to understand that they cannot continue with the status quo—they must make their communications more equitable and inclusive. Communicators must also use this cultural mind-shift to assess past content.

A content audit aims to identify issues and language gaps and determine what it will take to revise any content that may be outdated or insensitive. NGOs should strive to uncover areas where, through language or information, they are failing to acknowledge the context of certain populations or communicate them in

a respectful way. In the worst-case scenarios, this includes reconciling content that uses language of the past (e.g., “Third World” or “wheelchair-bound”). There should be a broad representation of people across editorial content, and imagery should be authentic (i.e., not stock photos) and taken with the individuals’ consent (in the case of photos).

Once you have your findings, report them to senior leadership and your DEI partners, accompanied by an action plan to address them. Being transparent holds NGOs accountable to make the changes needed. Beyond any immediate fixes, a large part of your action plan will need to be an editorial process to ensure all content continues to meet your new standards.

## **Communicating Your DEI Initiatives**

Transparent communication builds trust, which is essential to ensuring your DEI initiatives succeed. When you are just beginning your DEI journey, it is critical to take the time to communicate your vision and goals to your stakeholders—including your employees, board members, funders, and the communities you serve. As you progress, routine communication becomes essential for creating a culture of accountability and ensuring that your words translate into tangible action.

## **Authentic Stories**

Stories are a powerful way NGOs can connect with supporters and donors. That said, NGOs need to be intentional about collecting and sharing stories, especially when working with vulnerable populations. Images and personal stories about the people NGOs work with play a vital role in helping organizations raise awareness. However, when collecting and using these images and stories, NGOs have a responsibility to protect the people they are portraying and communicate truthfully with an audience who may not be familiar with the unique contexts of these stories. NGOs must ensure that all content is collected and used ethically, truthfully, thoughtfully, and with respect for people’s dignity and culture.

Using a first-person perspective can be a useful tool for authentic storytelling. By doing this, the communities own their stories and their solutions. By sharing stories from a first-person perspective, organizations build credibility, demonstrate partnership, and add value toward common goals. This way of working also serves to enhance and showcase the capacity of local communication professionals and other technical experts.

Using **asset-based language**—as opposed to focusing on deficiencies or disadvantages—emphasizes individuals’ and communities’ strengths, aspirations, and contributions. Many NGOs that do essential, life-saving work undermine their mission by incorrectly labeling the communities and the people they seek to serve. For example, using phrases such as “at-risk youth” causes readers to associate “at-risk” with “youth.” Thus, youth become the problem rather than the ones experiencing the problem. The label “at-risk youth” places a false narrative in readers’ minds and subconsciously places blame on those affected. In some cases, it can also negatively affect the people meant to benefit from the NGO’s presence—the youth—by damaging their self-image.

To clarify, merely changing a few words does not embody what asset-based framing hopes to achieve. When writing about the communities we serve, start with the positive when introducing a group of people or a place and include those asset-framed stories. Although NGOs must still answer the question of why they are investing resources in a place or problem—either for donors or the general public—there are ways

to convey this messaging without making the insufficiencies of a community or individual into a spectacle or relying on harmful stereotypes and tropes to tell a story. One of the ways to do this is to clearly point out the systems at work, past and present, that have caused harm. If you are talking about a specific challenge, use language that reflects the systematic and systemic disparities that have contributed to that challenge. It is important to show that the situations we are describing are not self-caused problems. Rather, they explicitly describe systems that have failed the community and/or individual people.

## Editorial Process

When thinking about a new editorial process, consider that all your content and imagery need to be reviewed through a DEI lens. That means you need people who can assess your messaging and provide direct and honest feedback.

## Do No Harm Content Checklist

Is the content you are promoting respectful of its subject, or does it portray harmful and damaging stereotypes? Does your content afford its subjects human dignity and respect?

Before you finish an op-ed or send a tweet, take time to ask yourself these questions. Note that the questions below represent only a few examples of the types of questions communications teams should ask themselves when preparing to post new content and is not an exhaustive list.

- Can everyone access the content I am posting?
  - Have I taken the time to put **subtitles** on videos?
  - Have I designated **alternative text** for photos?
  - Are my PDFs **accessible** for e-readers?
  - Did I post transcripts of the podcast at the same time I posted the podcast?
  - Are acronyms spelled out the first time when being used?
  - Have I taken out all the jargon?
- Is the content I am posting reinforcing stereotypes?
  - Is this headline using harmful stereotypes as clickbait?
  - Is this photo exploitative of its subject? (i.e., “**poverty porn**”)
  - Are all doctors in your photos male?
  - In your animated video, are there people of all different body types?
  - Are you depicting women only as caregivers and not as engineers?
- Is there representation of diverse identities?
  - Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Hispanic communities, and other underrepresented racial and ethnic groups
  - Youth
  - Women
  - LGBTQIA+ people
  - People with disability
  - People from different levels of income
  - People of different religions
  - Single people
  - People who are married

- Parents
- People who are married without children
- Single people with children
- Bi- and multi-racial people
- People with different body types or features
- Am I using data?
  - Have I disaggregated my data by race, ethnicity, and gender?

## Recommendations

1. **Assess existing content and practices:** NGO communications teams must look within and assess outbound communications through a content audit.
2. **Prioritize transparency:** NGO communications teams must dedicate the time and effort to communicate their organization's DEI vision and goals.
3. **Show respect:** NGO communications teams must ensure that all content is collected and used ethically, truthfully, thoughtfully, and with respect for people's dignity and culture.
4. **Use asset-based language:** Instead of focusing on deficiencies, NGO communications teams should use asset-based language to emphasize individuals' and communities' strengths, aspirations, and contributions.
5. **Reduce harm:** Create a Harm Reduction Checklist to ensure all promotional content is respectful of its corresponding subject matter and does not contribute to harmful stereotypes.