



Role of Story in Systems Change

why how we talk about it [and
who talks about it] matters



“New Zealand needs to completely change the way criminal justice works. One of the major challenges is to **turn around public attitudes**. [We need] a “national **conversation**” ... a **better informed nation**.” - Minister of Justice, Andrew Little

“There is a case for change. .. Our big challenge is to draw to all New Zealanders **attention** what has actually been happening and to **win a social licence** to say we have to do things differently.”

- Minister of Justice, Andrew Little

‘Social licence’ - one of the levers in social change

what matters + what works + effective ways to talk
about what works + credible messengers =
social licence for systems change

First part of my career focused on 'what works'

But that doesn't create system change without:

- what matters (values & pre-existing beliefs)
- effective ways to talk about what works &
- credible messengers

New information - in itself - **won't shift** narratives or the pre-existing beliefs and frames that underlie them.

What shifts narratives?

Cultural narratives are shaped by pre-existing beliefs + new information from trusted messengers (incl media) + perceived majority view (social proof)

What matters? Start with values.

Everything we communicate is embedded in a 'frame', belief or world view.

Most people hold a range of pre-existing and sometimes **contradictory beliefs** on a complex issue like criminal justice

We all use **shortcuts** to assimilate new information. Considering whether it is **compatible** with what we already know is one.

Information **incompatible** with what we already know and believe is more likely to be **rejected**.

Values and worldviews need to be accounted for when communicating what is true, what works and what to do.

What works: acknowledging values inherent in discussions about evidence (not just talking about facts), and working with, rather than against, people's values and worldviews.

Even the most effective, evidence-based approach to messaging **won't convince everyone.**

At either extreme of the spectrum, people are very hard (almost impossible) to move.

Good news: on most issues, **the 'persuadables' make up the majority of the population.**

Credibility of communicator is used to judge accuracy of information.

- Group membership and lived experiences affects **perceived credibility**.
- **Not all groups value or trust law/science** experience has given them little reason to.

Social proof & noise

When we make a judgement about the accuracy of information we use our perceptions of the **popularity** of that belief.

People come to believe a view is more widely held than it is if the view is **repeated often & loudly** in social & media circles.

The work of systems change involves *seeing* systemically—looking at the elements, interconnections, and wider purposes of systems—and *acting* systemically. **Story** plays a vital role in helping us do both of these things.

- Ella Saltmarshe

Story and value-based messaging is a direct route to our **emotions**.

And we use emotions to judge how new information fits with what we already know & believe.

Story creates **meaning** out of patterns. It **coheres** communities. Story and value-based messaging ('what matters') engenders **empathy** across difference.

Story can reshape:

1. Personal narratives about our lives.
2. Cultural narratives that frame the issues.
3. Mythic narratives that influence our worldview.

But first we need help to see the water we are swimming in...

“Story is for a human as water is for a fish—all encompassing and not quite palpable.”

—Jonathan Gottschall

Marianne Elliott

The Workshop

TALKING ABOUT WHAT MATTERS AND WHAT WORKS
FOR ALL NEW ZEALANDERS

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