

Strengthening Organizational Capacity for Narrative Change: Insights from the Pathways Narrative Project

The Pathways Narrative Project was a two-year collaborative initiative that aimed to strengthen the capacity of nine nonprofit organizations in five places (Colorado, Indiana, New York, Texas and Washington DC) to leverage narrative change as a tool to enable more equitable access to fulfilling education and career pathways for Black and Latino young people, and young people from low-income backgrounds.

The work of these organizations focuses on ensuring young people have access to the credentials, agency, skills, and social capital needed to thrive in their careers, through a variety of different approaches. These include connecting students and employers through internships, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning opportunities; developing affordable applied degree programs; mobilizing young people and grassroots advocates in support of policy change; and convening and aligning partners from the education system, business sectors, and beyond. What they have in common though, is a recognition of the fact that dominant narratives about education, work, and what it takes for young people to succeed (e.g., narratives like college being the only path to a good

job or that learning only happens in the classroom) can have a big influence on their ability to reach their goals. Narratives are also often specific to place and context, which meant that these organizations—with a strong knowledge of regional actors and their work at the intersections of K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems—were well-placed to explore: which narratives might be harmful to the changes they hope to realize? Which beneficial narratives might help to enable those changes? And how might they advance those narratives through their work?

Narratives are systems of stories, understood both consciously and subconsciously, and shared by groups of people. They shape our attitudes and behaviors towards people, places, objects, and ideas.¹ Narrative change strategies seek to counter, modify, or replace harmful narratives that can impact social change, through the creation and deployment of new or different narratives.²

Capacity strengthening programming for the Pathways Narrative Project

From October 2021 through June 2023, these nine organizations participated in a 2-year project with Wonder: Strategies for Good (Wonder), centered on strengthening their capacity to:

- Identify narrative change goals (Phase 1: Change)
- Map the narrative landscape to better understand the existing dominant narrative (Phase 2: Landscape)
- Understand the mindsets of target audiences (Phase 3: Mindset)
- Use mindset insights to develop and test sample messaging (Phase 4: Persuasion)
- Implement and measure the impact of narrative interventions³ (Phase 5: Action)

Capacity strengthening was focused on specific, earlier-stage aspects of narrative change work:

namely, supporting organizations to understand how narrative might be a useful lever for achieving their broader organizational change goals, identifying beneficial narratives that could help to advance those goals, identifying and understanding audiences and their priorities, and applying these insights to the development of content (such as language, stories, messages, and messengers).⁴

Alongside the work being done with Wonder, ORS Impact (ORS) served as a learning and evaluation partner, working with the nine organizations to understand their experiences of the project, and what lessons were being learned about how to build narrative capacity. The findings below are drawn from a pair of capacity surveys (conducted in June 2022 and June 2023), interviews with participants, and from technical assistance touchpoints and discussions throughout the project.

¹ Source: Wonder: Strategies for Good (2021)

² Source: ORS Impact (2021). *Measuring Narrative Change: Understanding Progress and Navigating Complexity*.

³ All organizations approached this slightly differently, given the differences in their work and audiences. Narrative interventions ranged from developing workshops on narrative/research findings for partners and allies, to updating communications materials and collateral to reflect audience insights, to training staff on how to talk about projects and programmatic work in ways that aligned with desired narratives, to engaging young people to act as messengers for narratives in policy hearings.

⁴ There are other capacities that are relevant to narrative change which were not a central part of this project because of how it was conceived and designed, such as strategic planning for narrative change, community engagement, building coalitions and networks to advance aligned narratives, and distributing and amplifying content at scale, among others. References to narrative capacities and narrative work throughout this brief focus on the specifics of this project and the knowledge and skills it aimed to build, acknowledging that this doesn't encompass the entirety of skills, knowledge, and approaches needed to drive narrative change.



Overview of findings

By the end of the project, **participants reported increased capacity** to understand narratives and their potential role in social change, to generate insights into key audiences, to apply those insights when crafting messages and stories, to cultivate messengers and champions, and to shift approaches and tactics based on what they were learning. However, we also found that while individuals were feeling increasingly confident in their skills and knowledge, some were **less sure if or how they might be integrated into their organization's work more broadly**.

Given this, we took a deeper dive into the question of what's needed to strengthen organizational capacity for narrative change, speaking with participants about what could help to support buy-in for narrative as a lever for change, develop knowledge and skills across staff, ensure that research insights are embedded throughout the organization's work, and strengthen the integration of narrative goals and priorities into strategy.

In the remainder of this brief, we highlight some **key factors and conditions that can support the integration and uptake of narrative as a tool**:

- Getting clearer on *how* narrative might work as a lever for the kind of change you seek
- Securing strong buy-in, particularly from leadership
- Ensuring that narrative change feels connected to broader organizational priorities and goals
- Engaging a broad cross-section of staff in reflecting on insights and implications, to prevent silos
- Thinking beyond communications capacity when it comes to organizational readiness
- Having dedicated resources and staffing
- Measuring shorter-term change

We also consider some implications and future directions for strengthening narrative capacity in the Pathways space, in particular the **opportunity to engage a broader ecosystem of actors to advance shared narratives**.

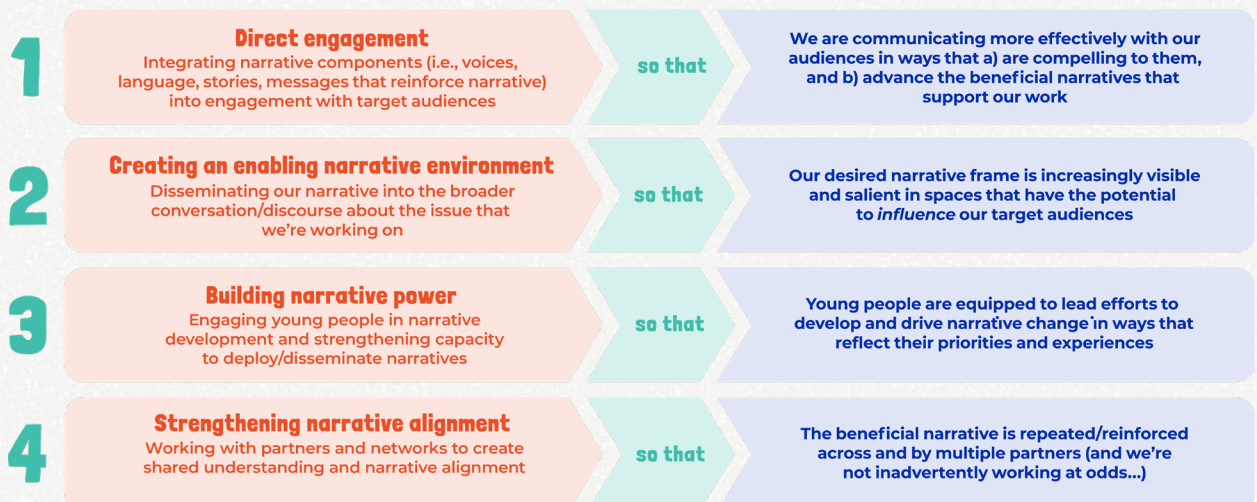
What supports the uptake and integration of narrative capacities at the organizational level?

Getting clearer on *how* narrative might work as a lever for the kind of change you seek

Narrative change is one way to catalyze systems change; changing narratives can help to create the conditions for the other kinds of changes organizations seek to influence (like changes in behaviors, policies, or practices), by making those changes feel both possible and necessary. However, it can be tricky to conceptualize exactly how narrative (and narrative

insights, like those being generated through the Pathways Narrative Project) might be operationalized in service of those broader systems outcomes. As such, in collaboration with participants, we developed a framework that sought to articulate some of the different ways narrative might function in their work.

Framework: Narrative as Enabler





For some organizations, this looked like taking messaging and audience insights and applying them to how they talked about their work, for example in publications, on their website, or in programming or training (what we labeled “direct engagement” in the framework). For others, it centered on proactive communication and dissemination efforts, like developing media and social media strategies, or cultivating champions in ways that might shape public discourse in key spaces (creating an enabling narrative environment). Some organizations—such as those playing a backbone or intermediary role in collective efforts—concentrated on creating buy-in for narrative as a social change approach among partners, and

strengthening alignment around language, messages, and messengers (strengthening narrative alignment). Others focused on shifting voice and definitional power: elevating the voices of young people and training them to shape and disseminate narratives (building narrative power). Understanding the type of narrative work organizations were engaged in was often a first step in conceptualizing meaningful outcomes, and subsequently deciding what to measure. While these categories are not mutually exclusive, there was often one ‘bucket’ that felt most relevant or compelling to particular organizations and helped to clarify (and communicate) some of the how and why of narrative work.

Securing strong-buy in, particularly from leadership

Because narrative change felt relatively new as a concept and strategy to many participants, there was a lot of reflection on the importance of raising awareness within their organizations about what narrative change is and how it might be useful. As one participant put it, “some nonprofits just don’t fully recognize the value of [narrative] in advancing their missions. And if there’s that disconnect, it’s not going to work. Being able to have common buy-in is critical.” A prerequisite for buy-in is building a shared understanding around narrative concepts and terminology, such that staff are on the same page when they talk about narrative. The second part of the equation is building alignment and consensus around how narrative change can act as a strategic lever for achieving desired outcomes. Having this kind of buy-in was considered particularly critical among leadership: before investing in building capacity, leadership needs to understand what narrative change is and be on board with the idea that it’s an important and viable strategy to advance their broader goals. However, others noted that because

narrative ideally permeates all aspects of the way an organization works—teams from communications, to programs, to development need to be deploying aligned messages, languages, frames, and stories—building buy-in and consensus should be prioritized across all staff.

Some organizations also noted that securing buy-in for a narrative change strategy, both within their organizations and among partners, may require mindset shifts within the organization itself. These included a greater tolerance for ambiguity (rather than a desire for concrete, timebound benchmarks or goals), flexibility, and a willingness to experiment, try, fail, and learn: “I think we need to have an open mind, because it’s work that a lot of people aren’t doing. Or if they are, it’s very new. They need to be able to adapt because we’ll come up with one thing and then we test it and [if] it doesn’t work, we just have to change things and be open-minded and adapt.”

Ensuring that narrative change feels connected to broader organizational priorities and goals

Closely related to the idea of buy-in, we found that organizations who were clear on how narrative change could contribute to their overall strategic goals found it easier to a) design their narrative and audience research, b) identify and articulate how they were going to integrate research findings into their work, and c) plan for how this work would likely continue once the project ended. Those who participated in the project felt that narrative work will be most sustainable and potentially impactful if narrative is recognized as a priority, and if narrative goals and activities are deeply integrated into strategy and planning, rather

than sitting separate from the organization’s core work and feeling like a “competing priority” or “added extra”. As one participant noted, “an organization [needs to] prioritize narrative and tie it to its larger mission and strategic goals. Because if you don’t have that tie-in, it’s not going to be successful—or it’s just going to be that side project you’re working on.” Another, who was focused on strengthening access to work-based learning opportunities, talked about how narrative felt “integral” to their organization’s broader goals: “advancing narrative change alongside the change management we’re seeing on the ground will be really



critical if we want the broader ecosystem to change... current mindsets and mental models prohibit the kind of change we seek, [so] if we think about some of the influencers we're trying to move, we need alignment and precision in terms of language to get to our

intended behavior and mindset change." They went on to say that their organization is in the process of developing a five-year strategic plan, and that narrative "will be all over that".

Engaging a broad cross-section of staff in reflecting on insights and implications, to prevent silos

Several participants expressed concern that narrative work could become siloed within the team that participated in the project. At the end of the project, a few teams were still grappling with how to move the work beyond those directly involved, and ensure uptake across the organization as a whole: "it can be very siloed, right? We're doing this amazing work, but we have programs still running the way they are, the development team are still doing their thing too.

So, it's hard—there's never a pause in the work, so how do you integrate [narrative] and center it?" This suggests that, even if capacities are built and reside within specific teams or individuals, a broad cross-section of staff (including leadership) should be engaged in reflecting on insights and developing the implications of/implementing findings—and that this will require making concerted time for both sharing learning and findings, and applying that learning to strategy.

Thinking beyond communications capacity when it comes to organizational readiness

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we heard that having existing communications capacity within an organization was an asset, particularly given this projects' focus on audience and messaging. Participants with a background in communications could leverage pre-existing skills and knowledge that made the work feel easier. One participant noted that "we have had a lot of focus on strategic communications [so] we had a good baseline to engage in this work...in terms of how we're communicating the right messages, but then also connecting it to our overall goals." From the other end of the spectrum, another respondent noted that "I don't have communications expertise, and I wonder if, for me, some of that felt newer [and more difficult]." Interestingly, though, communications capacity was sometimes presented as a double-edged sword, in that it could lead to increased siloing: when communications staff were the ones participating in the project, it could lead to the assumption that narrative work is "a communications thing", rather than a strategy that needs to be integrated across organizational functions. This means that while communications capacity is extremely helpful to narrative change work, concerted efforts will still need to be made to ensure widespread uptake across the organization.

Moreover, while communications capacity is a central facet of much narrative change work, it was particularly helpful in the context of this project which focused on

audience research and message testing (a traditionally communications-relevant skillset). But communications capacities are not the only valuable skill: we also saw that other existing capacities could help to scaffold this work and had the potential to make it more effective and impactful. If we think more broadly about narrative change efforts, there may be other organizational prerequisites, beyond just communications capacity, that come into play. For example, given that narrative change requires alignment and amplification among many partners, we noticed that organizations who are already anchors of collective efforts (e.g., intermediary organizations, or backbone organizations for a collective impact effort) felt well-positioned to carry their narrative work forward given their existing relationships and ability to convene and support collaboration within their ecosystem. Similarly, when thinking about building narrative power—that is, shifting definitional power to young people and equipping them to advance the narratives that are meaningful to them—we saw that organizations who came into the project with a power-building lens and who had an established infrastructure to engage and train young people were well-positioned to take this work and run with it, embedding narrative deeply into their strategy. We consider this further in the section on future directions, where we explore the idea of an ecosystem approach to narrative change, where different actors may be best positioned to take on different roles.



Having dedicated staffing and resources

Across the board, participants reflected on how critical it was to have dedicated staff and resources to do narrative work – to do narrative research and inquiry, unpack its implications, and make sure it found its way into organizational strategy and programming. This was in line with the idea that it shouldn't be considered an “add-on”, but something that is given adequate priority and support. When it came to this particular project, Wonder sometimes ended up playing a role similar to that of an external consultant (actually implementing some parts of the research work) due to time and capacity constraints within organizations. When thinking about the work going forward, participants were eager to continue to build on their experiences but noted that “[developing] thoughtful narrative content—that takes a lot of time, especially with our small team.” When reflecting on what it would take to do this work well, some suggested it would require at least several hours a week, others that it

needed a position (or a significant part of a full-time job) dedicated to it. One participant noted that “we need 1.25 of us, you know?” while another explained that “a person to really help engage in [this] would probably be my first tool, or what we would need as a resource.” For some, this raised the question of which types of capacities they should invest in building going forward—whether they needed to be able to do all aspects of end-to-end research, or whether they should focus on creating shared understanding of narrative and the ability to adapt and use narrative and audience findings in an authentic, meaningful way for their audiences and constituencies. Regardless, all participants agreed that integrating narrative meaningfully into strategy requires investment, appropriate resources, and trained staff who can dedicate their time to it—an important consideration particularly for those funding narrative change work.

Measuring shorter-term change

Throughout this project, participants also sought to identify what they could measure that would help them understand what was changing as a result of their narrative work. Building measurement capacity—and having ways to demonstrate progress—was a real priority when it came to buy-in and organizational uptake, but came with some challenges, including knowing what could be measured in the short-term that would provide meaningful directional information. Moreover, participants were taking different approaches to narrative change and testing a range of different interventions—from incorporating audience research insights into their communications and collateral, to training young people as messengers, to aligning partners around key concepts and learnings from the project. One-size measures wouldn't fit all.

Within this context, it was important to identify some nearer-term outcomes for narrative work, rather than jumping straight to longer-term changes, such as in discourse and mindsets, which are compelling but can take many years (even decades) to shift. Instead, participants worked to identify meaningful changes

‘closer to home’: for example, increased capacity to use narrative research, or increased buy-in for and understanding of narrative within their organizations or among their partners; or identifying a discrete/direct audience in which they might see knowledge or awareness shifts within a couple of years. That said, there were also some organizations who were integrating what they were learning as part of this project into longer-term advocacy and policy strategies, and in one case a key legislative win occurred in the course of the project. As such, there was no one sequence of outcomes that held for all organizations—where organizations might anticipate seeing changes, and on which timelines, really depended on the type of work they were doing, where they were in that work, and how narrative was being leveraged to support it. Given this, we built a ‘menu of options’ for measuring short- and medium-term narrative change outcomes: a range of possible outcomes and indicators that helped organizations choose what felt most relevant to them, which could then be modified and adapted as needed.



What's needed going forward?

As we reflected with participants on the future of this work, one theme emerged strongly: the need for greater **collaboration, partnership, and alignment** with a diverse set of other actors in their ecosystem. While strengthening capacity at the organizational level was important and necessary, many highlighted the fact that narrative change is not something that one organization does alone—it requires strong alignment and amplification of the stories and messages being shared, and the voices being centered, across many different partners in order to achieve traction. “If you don’t have alignment, you’re screwed! Think about...the amplification that we could achieve if we could all be aligned in our engagement with [our] disparate audiences.”

Thinking about **pathways narratives at the ecosystem level**—that is, mapping, engaging, and resourcing the constellation of actors who might contribute to driving narrative change within a given place or context—could help to advance this work in a number of ways. While, for the purposes of this project, each organization was working on issue-specific narratives and audiences most relevant to their work, there was a strong desire to **understand cross-cutting or shared pathways narratives** that they could be working with each other, and with other partners, to move.

While ecosystems are necessary for advancing shared narratives at a scale, they also have other important functions: namely, connecting individuals and organizations in a way that allows them to **“share knowledge, expertise, skills, ideas, capacities and work”**.⁵ Over the course of this project, we saw that different organizations had different assets and vantage points when it came to driving narrative change efforts. Some felt well-positioned to take more of a leading role—for example, one participant noted

that “[we’re] definitely a key organization within the spaces that we’re in, right? A lot of organizations rely on us, and it seems like [instead of just] dispensing information, we can align on this work together.” Another recognized that socializing the idea of narrative change, and key audience insights, could be a central part of “the larger convening and systems change role that we play”, while another stated that, as a backbone organization, their role is to bring in new thinking and resources to their region that “if we didn’t exist, would not be available...so [being a resource around narrative] strengthens our value as an organization.” Other organizations did not feel as well-positioned to take on this role—either because of the type of work they did (more programmatic/implementation focused) or their current staffing and resource structures. In reflecting on their future directions, they instead suggested focusing on integrating narrative insights into their own work—that is, using them to ensure that their own communications and programs were contributing to beneficial narratives (but not necessarily taking on a leadership role in the broader system).

This highlights the importance of recognizing that **different organizations can (and should) play different roles in advancing narratives**—and that, consequently, while there is a baseline of shared knowledge and buy-in that will be helpful, **different capacities will be relevant depending on those roles**: for example, research and analysis; network building and convening; engaging communities in developing and disseminating narratives; strategic communications; and others. As this work continues to develop, future efforts to strengthen organizational capacity in place could be well-served by mapping who is part of the narrative ecosystem, what roles they are positioned to play, and tailoring support and resources accordingly.

⁵ Race Forward (2022). *Butterfly Lab Narrative Design Toolkit: An Introduction to the Narrative System and the Narrative Ecosystem*.

About the Pathways Narrative Project

The Pathways Narrative Project is a two-year collaborative initiative, led by Wonder: Strategies for Good and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation and others, that convened nine organizations working in five places (Colorado, Indiana, New York,

Texas, and Washington, DC) to improve education and career pathways for young people. Together the cohort explored how to leverage the power of narrative to advance programs and systems change in the pathways space.

pathwaysnarrative.org