

## Keynote Address: "Why Communications Matters"

Dr. Gilliam challenged the conventional thinking about communications and developing a set of strategic communications tools. He continually focused on the word "frame," noting that the prioritization of public and charitable dollars is affected by how issues are framed. He challenged the participants to think about domestic violence issues in such a way that engages the public to want to solve them through public policies, not only personal actions.

### Frames

Frames are "... organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (from Reese, Gandy and Grant in *Framing Public Life*). (Detailed information regarding frames can be found in Dr. Gilliam's presentation.)

Examples of existing frames that impede progress in the field of domestic violence include "It's the woman's fault," and "Why doesn't she just leave?"

### Frame Transformation or Reframing

In order to put forth a new set of ideas, it is necessary to reframe the issue. New values often must be planted and nurtured, and old understandings jettisoned in order that "erroneous beliefs" can be reframed. When communications are inadequate, people default to their existing frame, or the "pictures in their heads." When communications are effective, on the other hand, people can see an issue from a different perspective.

### Seven Framing Lessons (see attached PowerPoint presentation)

- (1) Communication is fast and frugal.
- (2) We reason within the frame, assign responsibility to actors within the frame and solve the problem with what we've got. This point was illustrated by showing a picture of cows grazing and learning that they were sick. We were asked to guess why they were sick, and most guessed the farmer did not take adequate care of his herd. The top of the picture was then revealed to show a big factory spewing pollution. Thus, we could reason that despite the farmer's best efforts, environmental conditions were responsible for the poor health of the COWS.

(3) Ideas and issues come in hierarchies. Level One consists of big ideas like equal opportunity; Level Two represents issue types like women's rights; Level Three is the specific issue like daycare.

Example of hierarchies: Dr. Gilliam showed a cartoon with two pictures of George W. Bush. In the first photo, George was agreeing that affirmative action gives some unfair racial preferences; in the second, he was wearing his Yale sweatshirt holding a signed photo of his dad saying, "Enjoy being a legacy!"

Level three in this cartoon was an attack on affirmative action; level two referenced class values that provide a de facto affirmative action for the privileged; and level one raised the big picture idea of fairness and equality in a democracy.

(4) Framing is storytelling.

(5) Order matters. Once a frame is established, it will dominate the conversation and crowd out subsequent frames.

(6) In order to take responsibility, you have to be able to picture yourself as an actor in a system/scenario.

(7) Numbers are not frames. Use fewer numbers and incorporate "social math," math that ordinary people can understand, to embed frames in numbers.

### Developing Effective Frames

Persuasive communication cannot depend on simply putting information in front of people. It must change the lens through which they see the information. If your frame doesn't work, your issue will fall off the public agenda. Effective frames tell us what this communication is about; signal what counts and what can be ignored; "fill in" or infer missing information; and influence decision outcomes. Values, metaphors and models, numbers/social math, messengers, visuals, tone and context all may be important elements of an effective frame.

In developing effective frames, we must understand people's existing, dominant frames and anticipate the way our communications will interact with these default frames. We must identify alternative frames that, although may initially seem weaker in some ways; hold more promise for promoting your policy outcomes. In developing the frames, specify the

frame elements – the messengers, metaphors and models – that will support and invigorate the new frames.

### **Why Do Communications Matter?**

Dr. Gilliam ended his address with an appeal not to underestimate the importance of communications as leaders of organizations providing domestic violence services. He listed several reasons why communication matters including it shapes the culture, directs the thoughts and actions of policymakers and influences the public agenda.