



“We focus on shared values—principles that many of us hold across different communities, even when we differ in politics, culture, or experience.”

Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

FUTURE OVER FEAR: TOOLS TO BUILD A DIFFERENT STORY

Leading With Values



Photo Credit: Shot by Somali

So, What Are Values, Anyway?

Values are the core beliefs that guide our thinking, shape our behavior, and reflect the world we want to live in. They represent the conditions we want to protect and the future we're working to build. In narrative strategy, values act as a moral and emotional compass—giving meaning to the stories we tell and serving as connective tissue across movements, issues, and audiences.

At The Opportunity Agenda, we focus on **shared values**—principles that many of us hold across different communities, even when we differ in politics, culture, or experience. These are the values we're fighting to protect and bring to life. They help bridge divides and build narrative power that reaches across audiences.

Sometimes, though, these values mean different things to different audiences. It's always important to define our values; to be clear about what we actually mean when we say them; and, in some cases, to reclaim them from our opposition.

EXAMPLE: “Security”

We want our audiences to think about “security” as the capacity to have the tools to meet their and their families’ basic needs, not the “security” that conjures images of militarization, policing, and hoarding wealth and resources. While this may be using the same word, given the context, the meaning can be significantly different.

Leading with shared values helps us speak to what matters most. When we ground our messages in values, we're more likely to reach the people we're working to engage.

HERE ARE THE **CORE VALUES** THAT GUIDE OUR WORK:

Opportunity

Everyone should have access to what it takes to reach their full potential, not only to provide for themselves and their families, but also to thrive.

Voice

A healthy society depends on the ability of all to participate and for all to be heard and have ownership in the public square.

Community

We are stronger when we nurture connections with one another and the environment. Further, we are committed to incorporating an antiracist lens into our daily practice.

Equity

All people are created with equal rights, inherent dignity, and the potential for creativity and growth. Dedication to equity is essential for working toward a more just and antiracist society.

Safety

Everyone has the right to exist safely in their community, their workplace, and their homes. We strive to foster an environment in which people are treated the way they wish to be.

Why Lead With Shared Values?

Research shows that starting with shared values is one of the most effective ways to open dialogue. When we lead with issues or policies, people often bring strong opinions, assumptions, or resistance—shaped by dominant narratives and misinformation—which can close the conversation before it even begins.

But when we lead with shared values, we can establish common ground. We invite people into a conversation based on what we all want to protect or make real. From there, we can build toward the policies, systems, solutions, and cultural shifts that reflect and reinforce those values.

Different starting points shape how your message is received. Here's what happens depending on where you begin:

START WITH	PURPOSE	THE RESULTS
Policies	> Names a specific law, rule, or program meant to fix a problem.	> Many people may have already drawn a line in the sand on certain policies, closing the door to deeper conversation. Others may tune out or feel powerless when policy feels too technical or disconnected from their lived experience.
Issues	> Describes a problem or pattern that affects people or communities.	> Issues can feel abstract, politicized, or overwhelming. Even when we show how they affect us all, people may tune out if the connection to their lives isn't clear. With growing issue fatigue, many disengage, thinking, "What can I really do about it?"
Values	> Connects to what people care about, hope for, and want to protect.	> Sharing values opens the door through connection, shared purpose, and emotional resonance and helps people stay in the conversation by grounding it in what we all want to protect and work toward together.

Leading with values doesn't replace facts—it creates the trust and connection needed for facts to land.

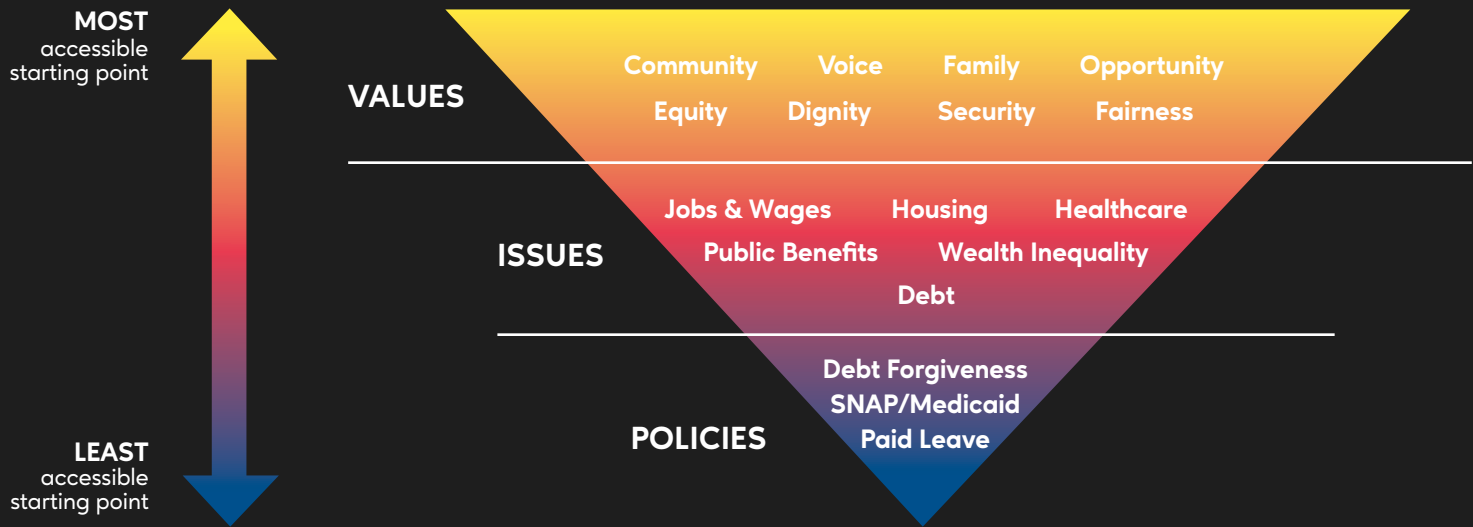
EXAMPLE: Income Inequality & Public Assistance

Let's say you want to build support for a public assistance program. If you start by naming the policy or citing statistics, such as eligibility requirements or budget figures, some audiences may check out or push back before you even finish your sentence. That's because terms like "welfare," "government aid," and "public benefits" often trigger deeply rooted biases and misinformation. People might picture harmful stereotypes about laziness, dependency, or fraud—ideas reinforced by decades of racialized media narratives and political rhetoric.



Why Lead With Values?

Research shows us that values are one of the most powerful access points to conversations with folks, whereas starting with issues or policies can be met with resistance.



But if you begin your message by centering values like **dignity**, **economic opportunity**, and **security**, you open a different door. You might start by saying:

“*In a country as wealthy as ours, everyone should be able to care for their families and live with dignity—even when hard times hit.*”

That framing connects emotionally before diving into details. It invites people to see the issue through the lens of shared humanity and fairness, not through political talking points or distorted assumptions. From that place, your message is more likely to land—and move someone closer to your vision.



TOA PRO TIP:

Make values visible with murals or story-based art.

Words matter, but visuals carry power too. People often absorb meaning from images faster than words. What we show—who’s in the picture, what’s happening, what values are visible—shapes how a message is felt and remembered. In our [We Can Thrive Together toolkit](#), we partnered with artist Rommy Torrico to create a visual that lifts up community, collaboration, and care for the land. The artwork speaks volumes without a single word, making our values vivid and undeniable.

Narrative doesn’t only live in language—it comes to life through culture, the art we make, the visuals we share, and the stories we tell together.

