

WHAT'S WORKING IN RURAL CASE STUDY 4



Communicating for Connection: West Virginia Community Development Hub

THE ISSUE: POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND FALSE NEUTRALITY

The most recent polarization of the national political discourse has made communication a delicate and difficult matter for many rural development organizations and practitioners. The complex challenges faced by rural communities are often reduced to one-dimensional sanitized sound bites, rather than authentic solutions-focused communication. And the politicization of descriptive terms like equity, inclusion, and climate change has made it difficult for practitioners and organizations to communicate with their constituencies and policymakers.

Complicating the challenge, the US nonprofit sector has a long history and culture of studied neutrality in the face of any issue seen as political. This “neutrality” is anything but neutral in practice: given a power imbalance, neutrality will always favor the more powerful group. For organizations and practitioners working to implement the [Thrive Rural Framework](#) in their communities—which calls for dismantling rural-discriminatory practices based on race, place, and class—neutrality rings false. At the same time, connecting across political divides is more important than ever, and audiences are ready to stop listening at the slightest sign of identification with the other “side.” This creates a unique challenge: **how can rural development practitioners move beyond neutrality and still communicate effectively with community members from across the political spectrum?**

As organizations address this challenge, the opportunity is clear: communication is fundamental to community and economic development success. Effective communication across audiences enables organizations to connect with their communities, engage external stakeholders like funders and governments, and advance transformational projects to completion.

THE SPOTLIGHT: WEST VIRGINIA COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT HUB

The [West Virginia Community Development Hub](#) (The Hub) supports West Virginians with the tools and training they need to lead and spark positive change in their hometowns and across the state. The Hub was founded in 2009 by a small group of community development leaders who saw an opportunity to catalyze community growth and transformational change in rural areas of West Virginia. As a highly effective [Rural Development Hub](#), The Hub’s role is to be a facilitator, convener, and connector, helping communities envision their futures and access the resources to make the vision a reality. The Hub’s work is grounded in the belief that every West Virginia community has assets available to build new economic opportunities, vibrant community environments, and networks of engaged residents.



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THE PRACTICE: COMMUNICATING TO CONNECT

As a facilitator and convener, The Hub has long seen itself as a neutral party, and its communications have reflected that sense of neutrality. In recent years, however, increasing political polarization and awareness of the problems with neutrality in the face of inequity spurred the organization's leadership team into action. They worked to clearly articulate organizational values to create connection rather than division and alienation along political lines. This has been challenging work, and the organization's communications staff have moved carefully and made a strong effort to learn from the process. Their work has identified five key elements of communicating to connect.

Articulate Values

The first step The Hub took in its current communication journey, led by then Director of Strategic Network Communications Emma Pepper, was to articulate the organization's values clearly. Answering the question "What do we stand for?" allowed the leadership team to provide a firm grounding for the organization as a whole and for the communications team's work in particular. Having clearly articulated values gives an organization a "place to stand" when they talk about their work, which is very different from a neutral approach that avoids conflict. In fact, an avoidance approach can get in the way of connection because it can come across as deceptive or inauthentic. Communicating to connect is easier when the communicator can be authentic and clear about where they are coming from and what they value. A simple distillation of [The Hub's values](#) is available on its website.

Listen to Find Authentic Language that Connects

Grounded in clear values, The Hub seeks to communicate its work across audiences—including residents of West Virginia communities, rural development practitioners, funders, and local and state government officials—in a way that builds connection and understanding. The first step in finding the right connecting language is to identify the potential flashpoints: polarizing topics that need special attention to framing and word choice. When identifying these topics, The Hub's communications team looks carefully at the terms used and distills them, asking: What are the polarizing words here? What is the plain-language meaning, beyond the buzzwords? How can we say this in a way that connects, beyond the flashpoints?

Finding the connecting language involves careful listening across contexts, noticing the different words people use in politicized contexts and those they use when connecting with each other in the community. For example, when communicating about environmental concerns, The Hub tends to begin not by talking about "the environment," a term that has become a political flashpoint, but about "the land," a term that West Virginians across the political spectrum use to describe their connection with the natural world. The goal is to keep the audience engaged long enough to make a real connection, rather than having them shut down immediately upon hearing a certain word or phrase.



Jorge Rodriguez-Stanley, Communications Associate:

"The first thing I do is pay attention to words within politics. What are people saying? What are the words that are being used to identify sides? We avoid those. We talk in a way that doesn't sound like we're politicians."



**Emma Pepper, former Director of Strategic Network Communications
(now an independent communications consultant):**

"You have to spend time in the writing, being really intentional. I am always listening when I'm out in the community. I listen to the way people talk. I read a lot of first-person perspectives, and I listen to how people are talking when they're talking about a place they love and when they're talking about polarizing things."



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Choose Words Carefully, but Don't Mince Them

While The Hub's communications team chooses its words carefully and intentionally to inspire connection rather than alienation, they remain true to their values and don't shy away from potentially controversial topics. For instance, the communications team will often frame equity work in plain language like "bringing more people to the table." However, this doesn't mean they avoid confronting issues related to racism and classism, which are fundamental challenges for West Virginia communities. The organization's website prominently features [The Hub's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Journey](#), clearly explaining why racial equity work is central to the mission.

While finding plain language terms for hot-button issues can create opportunities for connection, The Hub's communications staff is very aware of the risk of distilling language down so much that it loses its meaning or becomes inauthentic. They emphasize the importance of reviewing drafts and considering whether the terms used open opportunities for connection or avoid the difficult issues that need to be addressed head-on. In the latter case, The Hub's practice is to revise the language using the organization's values as a guide, emphasizing directness, simplicity, and authenticity.

Tell Human Stories

One of the most important ways The Hub communicates to connect is by telling stories about specific people and places. These stories allow readers and listeners to hear from fellow West Virginians and learn from their experiences in a way that humanizes the issues. The story format helps the audience move past polarization because this is a neighbor speaking to them, not a politician or someone from outside the community. The Hub's [Redefined: Real Stories from West Virginia](#) and the blog series [VISTAs of West Virginia](#) show this approach in practice.

Ground Communication in Action

When The Hub feels pressure to communicate quickly, they take a step back, stay intentional, and ask: is this communication grounded in our actions? Have we done the work to communicate authentically on this topic?

This means that they rarely release statements on current events, even if many other organizations are doing so. For example, in 2020, when organizations across the country were releasing statements on racial equity in the wake of George Floyd's murder, The Hub took a different approach. Instead of releasing a statement, they looked inward, spent time listening and learning, and developed an equity framework that they put into action with their work, including communication.

The Hub's focus on groundedness and authenticity in communication builds trust with their audience, which is vitally important in a polarized context.



Stephanie Tyree, Executive Director:

"We won't be pressured by a wave of public statements to put out a communication ourselves unless it is grounded in our values and can be backed up with action — where we've demonstrated that we're walking the walk, not just talking the talk."





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TRY THIS AT HOME: TIPS FOR PUTTING THE PRACTICE TO WORK

The Hub offers the following tips to other organizations seeking to undertake this work:

1 MAKE THE COMMITMENT

The Hub's communication staff emphasized that commitment at the highest level of the organization is what allows them to do this work: the entire leadership team is committed to living and communicating the values they articulated. Additionally, the communications director is included as a full member of the leadership team.

2 BE PREPARED TO PUT IN THE TIME

The Hub acknowledged that their intentional approach to communication takes extra time—time to think through the framing of issues, time to listen to how people are talking about issues in communities, and time to choose the right language to connect. This means that the communications team moves more slowly, which can be an adjustment for new staff members coming from faster-moving fields like journalism.

3 FIND THE OPENINGS

When you have a potentially polarizing topic, find a way in for the people you need to reach. For example, many people in West Virginia communities shut down when they hear the term "climate change." Still, they know that flooding is becoming a bigger and bigger issue for their home places, so a conversation about flood mitigation can be an excellent first step in addressing bigger issues related to climate resilience.

4 PACE YOURSELF

Introduce new topics and let them percolate with your audience before coming back to them (e.g., in newsletters). Alternate familiar content with new or challenging topics so the audience has space to assimilate new material.

5 PAY ATTENTION TO SHIFTING CULTURES AND NORMS

If you've been trained in the culture of neutrality, it can be hard to move beyond it. Similarly, it can be difficult to be less pointed if you come from an advocacy or organizing background. Cultivating outside perspectives can be helpful if everyone in your organization comes from the same professional or cultural background.

6 TRY NEW THINGS AND BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT LEARNING

Approach new practices and topics with humility and a willingness to learn, and let your audience know you are learning together.

7 REVIEW AND REVISE

Have several people with different perspectives read materials and offer feedback—you can't always predict how a piece will be perceived, so take the time to test out and revise new language.

8 REFLECT AND EVOLVE

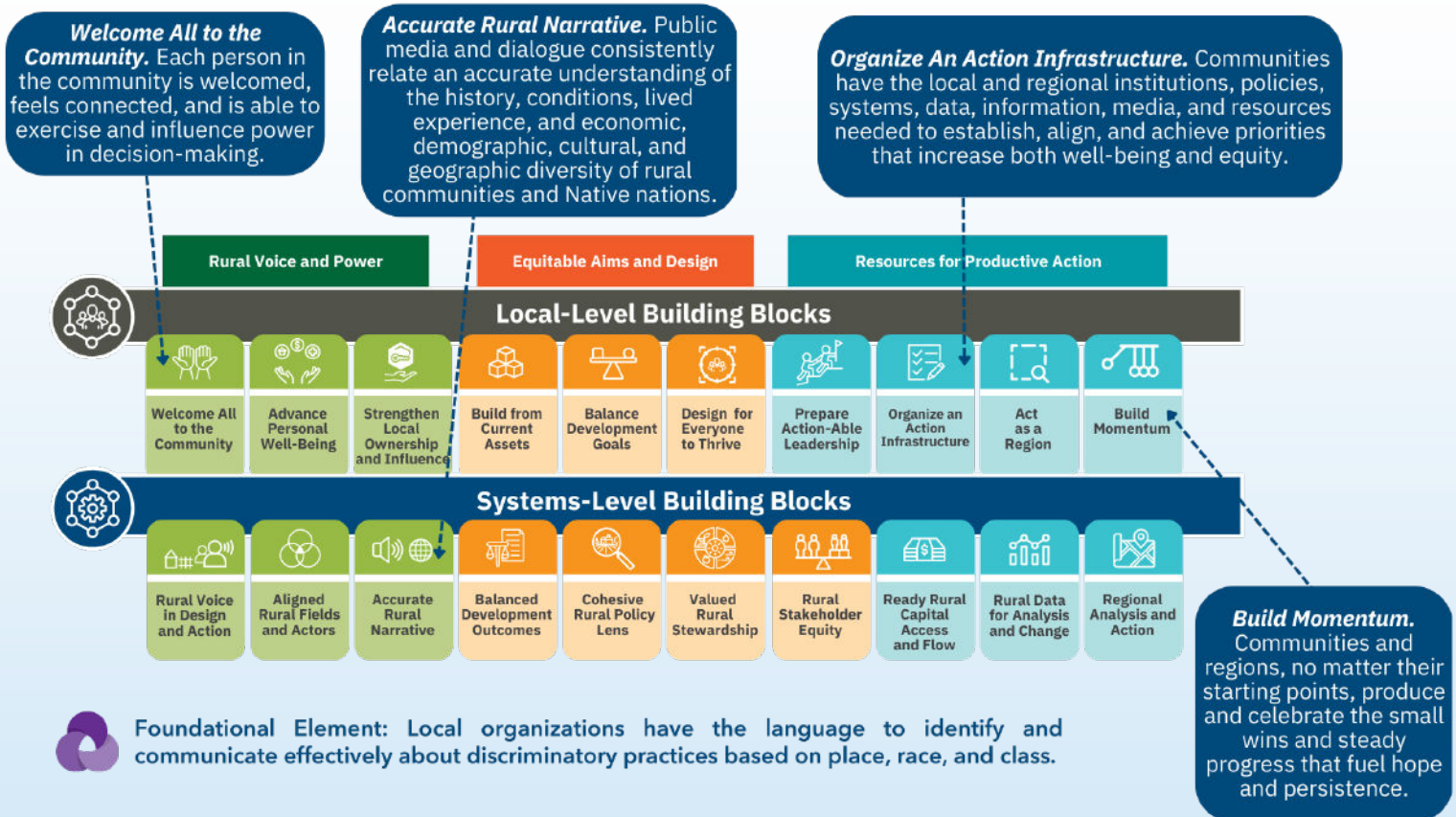
Organizational values are not something you can "set and forget." Keep internal conversations going as a living commitment on the part of the organization and leadership, regularly revisiting the key questions "Who are we reaching? Who are we missing? What does it mean for our work?"





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COMMUNICATING TO CONNECT IN THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK



Community Strategies Group



Since 1985, the [Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group](#) has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

Aspen CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field.

The foundation of our work is the [Thrive Rural Framework](#) — a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

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