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The Visionary: Setting the Foundation for Change

“Plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

Step 1: Know Your Policy Goal

“Ignoranti quem portum petat, nullus suus ventus est.

If a man does not know to what port he is steering, no wind favors him.”

—Seneca, Epistolae, LXXI, 3

A clear, well-defined policy goal is the linchpin that turns intentions into transformative impact. Successful policy entrepreneurs excel at generating and identifying such goals, actively seeking ideas from diverse sources, including other nonprofits, foundations, and

like-minded citizens [1]. In the following pages, we will explore how to identify actionable policy goals to tackle our most pressing challenges.

Why a Policy Goal Matters

Defining a clear policy goal is the first step to setting the agenda. Many well-intentioned initiatives are launched to address significant problems. An oversight of many is the absence of a clear solution. Without this, such efforts tend to waste resources and only raise awareness about the issue, achieving minimal real-world impact. Focusing excessively on problems also reinforces feelings of powerlessness and despair, leaving people vulnerable to populists who offer false promises of security.

In contrast, initiatives guided by a clear vision of how the world would change if specific solutions are adopted have the power to inspire. They offer hope for an alternative world and provide a sense of direction and purpose in our otherwise chaotic and ever-changing reality. When people are concerned that problems are worsening, a clear goal shows them how they can be fixed, reinforcing the belief that we can shape a better world.

Defining a Clear Policy Goal

- 1. Identify the challenge:** Start by clearly defining the issue you want to address, whether it is deforestation, ocean plastic pollution, hunger, poverty, or international peace.
- 2. Research and collaborate:** Identifying effective systemic policy solutions can be complex. In-depth analysis, collaboration, and consensus-building with partners and colleagues is fundamental. You should leverage data and evidence from trusted sources and organizations to formulate your goals. Many of them have worked hard to figure out solutions for our most pressing challenges. There is no need to reinvent the wheel.

Take the challenge of world hunger, for example. Drawing on the collective input of a diverse coalition, the SDG2 Advocacy Hub has

produced a menu of actionable policy ideas to bolster food production and tackle malnutrition [2]. One of their ideas is the “Beans Is How” campaign, which sets out to double global bean consumption by 2028 through specific policies such as requiring beans to be included in school meals. Not only does it promise to nourish lives, but it also does so in a planet-friendly and sustainable manner.

A policy goal is more likely to become a reality if it follows the SMART criteria: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.¹

(a) **Specific**

An actionable policy goal is explicit about the world we want to create. It leaves no room for confusion. It states the *what, who, where, when, and why* of change.

For instance, Fraidy Reiss cofounded the NGO Unchained At Last after being forced into marriage at 19 in New York City’s ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. Realizing that rescuing underage girls from forced marriages wasn’t enough, Fraidy focused on changing state-based laws that permit child marriage. Collaborating with other NGOs, they have successfully revised laws in at least 10 US states that once allowed child marriage. They aim to end child marriage across all 50 states by 2030.

(b) **Measurable**

Setting goals means creating specific criteria to measure progress and impact. This demonstrates success and keeps partners engaged, which is critical for future achievements.

In early 2023, Craig Cohon, a Canadian businessman and accidental ultra-endurance athlete, planned to launch his Walk It Back campaign—an extraordinary six-month journey by foot from London to Istanbul to “walk back” his lifetime carbon footprint. To put his money where his mouth was, Craig invested a significant part of his pension fund toward supporting the development of carbon removal

¹Its criteria are commonly attributed to Peter Drucker’s Management by Objectives concept. The first known use of the term occurs in Doran 1981.

technologies. He also aimed to catalyze conversations with city mayors he met about the policies needed to remove carbon from the atmosphere at scale.

A significant barrier for partners and cities to initially support the campaign, however, was the inability to quantify its impact. Through detailed calculations of every aspect of his life, Craig identified his lifetime carbon footprint as 8,147 tons—equivalent to the annual energy use of more than 1,000 average US households. Removing this equivalent through policy change became the campaign's initial goal.

Since its start, the “Walk It Back” campaign engaged 19 city leaders, resulting in policies that will remove 100,000 tons of carbon—over 10 times Craig's lifetime carbon footprint. For example, the city of Deventer in the Netherlands agreed to make all its new government buildings with concrete from sequestered carbon dioxide. With the completion of his walk, Craig continues to leverage his growing network of cities to advocate for policies that could remove an additional 1 million tons, equivalent to the annual emissions of over 215,000 passenger vehicles.

(c) **Achievable**

An achievable goal prioritizes objectives based on available resources and does not try to do so much that it becomes unwieldy. Focusing on a few areas over many can increase the likelihood of delivering real-world impact.

For example, the UN's 17 SDGs have 169 targets. Very few have been implemented since they were agreed to in 2015. Critics argue (not without controversy) that a more achievable approach might have focused the world's attention on a few key priorities, such as reducing child mortality. Ultimately, it often pays not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Breaking down ambitious, daunting goals into manageable, incremental milestones can be helpful. Take Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty (FFNPT) as an example, which seeks to accelerate the shift to clean energy by getting countries to agree to a comprehensive phase-out of fossil fuel

production [3]. Immediate adoption by major fossil fuel-producing countries, such as those in the Gulf and the US, was and is an unlikely prospect for now. However, that does not mean the effort has no merit. Indeed, the FFNPT effort was launched specifically to bypass the UN Climate Conferences' incapacity to deliver a plan for fossil fuel phase-out because of its need for consensus. The FFNPT, in contrast, relies on generating momentum for a phase-out, even without the participation of the biggest fossil fuel-producing nations.² It has steadily done this by securing endorsements from small island nations most affected by the world's ongoing fossil fuel production. The campaign is now gathering backing from additional countries, including fossil fuel producers such as Colombia and Timor Leste to reach a tipping point. The idea is that once there's enough support, it will be able to isolate and pressure the remaining holdout countries, broadening the feasibility of a full phase-out.

(d) **Relevance**

It may seem obvious, but a goal must be directly related to the challenge you are addressing. These days, we often hear about the likely impacts of climate change on all areas of life, from how we grow our food to the spread of infectious diseases. However, not all of these impacts will occur immediately. Although extreme weather frequency has increased in recent years, it will be many decades before climate change emerges as a leading driver of mortality compared to other current influences, such as a lack of vaccines [4]. As a result, policies aimed at mitigating climate change, while necessary, are less relevant to improving mortality rates in developing countries between now and 2030,

² Taking inspiration from the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, and the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, this approach involves constructing treaties without the involvement of powerful nations, notably the US. By generating ample momentum, these treaties not only secured passage through the UN General Assembly but also established new diplomatic norms, making defiance challenging even for nations that refused to ratify them. For example, the US never joined the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention but did eventually agree to their phasedown. See Burke 2022.

as called for by the SDGs.³ So if your goal is to reduce preventable child deaths by 2030, focus on policies addressing existing health and development disparities, as they will have the most relevant impact. For instance, increased government funding for organizations such as UNICEF and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, can facilitate the rapid procurement and deployment of new vaccines against malaria—one of the leading causes of child deaths worldwide [5].

(e) **Time-Bound**

Setting a timeframe or deadline creates urgency and accountability. It is also necessary to avoid exacerbating problems. During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns had to be implemented rapidly to effectively contain the disease's spread. Suppose we also do not enforce the policies needed to halve our collective global emissions by 2030. In that case, we risk losing the opportunity to keep temperature rises below 1.5 degrees Celsius, which most experts agree is needed to avoid catastrophic climate change.

In some instances, policy implementation involves a long and arduous process. Where the outcome is potentially years away from being won, identify what is achievable in the short-term to advance the issue and build momentum. Setting specific short-term objectives prevents the effort from feeling futile and keeps supporters engaged. This is particularly important in negotiating peace agreements. For instance, accomplishing short-term, time-bound goals such as prisoner swaps or access to aid can help build confidence in the long-term peace process.

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³The SDGs' health aims include, by 2030, ending preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births, and by 2030, reducing the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births.

The Power of Bold Goals

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.”

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German polymath and writer [6]

Bold and SMART policy goals serve as magnets for raising resources and rallying supporters. Arrey Obenson, former secretary-general of Junior Chamber International, highlights how these goals can compensate for other deficiencies, such as lack of experience, expertise, and access. As he notes, “Others perceive your imagination, believe in it, and join in its achievement” [7]. This holds particularly true for, as Benson puts it, “naively audacious” goals. In a world facing numerous crises, this type of audacity aligns with the craving, especially among young people, for a clear sense of purpose [8].

I experienced the power of “naive audacity” during Global Citizen’s inaugural policy campaign, “The End of Polio,” in 2011.

Our policy goal was to secure an additional A\$50 million from the Australian government for global polio eradication efforts.⁴ Polio, a debilitating and ancient disease, had already been reduced by 99.9%, thanks mainly to the leadership of Rotary International in decades past. However, the eradication program risked being undermined by a persistent funding gap, and some governments, including Australia, had stopped funding entirely.

We deliberately focused on polio eradication instead of a broader goal like ending poverty because the latter seemed too overwhelming for citizens to grasp. We could demonstrate, however, that the broader fight against poverty was achievable by showing progress

⁴Polio eradication efforts are led globally by the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, which consists of Rotary International, UNICEF, the World Health Organization, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and supported by organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

against a specific disease. As for the A\$50 million target, it was not based on any sophisticated analysis. On the back of a napkin, our cofounder Simon Moss and I doubled Australia's previous contributions to a clean A\$50 million. Our next challenge involved convincing the Australian government, led by Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Without a clear starting point, in March 2011, we drafted a letter to Prime Minister Gillard outlining our request. Though we didn't expect an immediate response—if any—we found the exercise helpful in articulating the arguments supporting our goal. One crucial argument was that the forthcoming Commonwealth leaders' summit was taking place in my hometown of Perth, Western Australia, in late 2011. This summit, we argued, presented a unique opportunity for Australia to renew its funding for polio eradication, particularly considering that, at the time, three out of the four polio-endemic countries were Commonwealth members.⁵

Surprisingly, our letter reached Melissa Parke. A former UN human rights lawyer who was also a local member of parliament in Perth at the time, she agreed to deliver it to the prime minister's office on our behalf. She was sensitive to the possibility that the forthcoming Commonwealth summit, without a clear goal, risked being dismissed as an expensive talkfest by ordinary citizens. Our policy goal could potentially infuse it with a meaningful purpose that was easy to grasp. It could offer a win-win solution.

A few weeks later, we were given an extraordinary opportunity—a 10-minute meeting with the prime minister herself. Looking back, I believe our policy goal's simplicity and clarity are what attracted her initial interest. Following her advice to keep things concise (she mentioned she was already on her third shot of Red Bull for the night), we presented our arguments. After hearing us out, she expressed interest in supporting us. Still, there was a catch: politicians ultimately

⁵The Commonwealth of Nations is largely made up of former British colonies (though it has added countries outside of this shared heritage in recent years such as Rwanda). It meets every two years for a Heads of Government Meeting.

require public support to allocate what is ultimately taxpayers' money. Ahead of the summit, she wanted us to demonstrate public backing for the government to announce new funding for polio eradication. She needed a mandate.

In the moment and eager to maintain the prime minister's interest, we proposed a concert to bring people together the night before the summit. Intrigued, she felt this might demonstrate a sufficient level of public support. Upon leaving the meeting, we were thrilled by the apparent agreement and, at the same time, wary of the upcoming challenge: How would we produce a concert and campaign, bringing together thousands of people in just a matter of months? Note I had not organized anything remotely at that scale before. Although my fellow cofounders had some event experiences, they were not in Perth but in London and New York at the time, planning the expansion of Global Citizen internationally.

Nonetheless, our clear policy goal and tacit agreement with the prime minister attracted valuable connections. This compensated for our lack of experience. One particular moment stands out: I received a call from Lindsay Hadley, an American producer, while sitting on a university park bench (at that time, I was still finishing my law degree). An email we had sent out seeking support for a concert had reached her. Despite recognizing our group's inexperience and limited resources, the clarity of our goal and the clear path to secure significant new funding to combat polio resonated with her. It is not every day, after all, that people get to say they helped to make polio just the second human disease in history to be eradicated. Inspired, she chose to support us, turning down other job opportunities.

With Lindsay's support and the efforts of Hugh Evans, Global Citizen's CEO and cofounder, we were able to make additional connections. The late Sumner Redstone of Viacom agreed to support the concert financially. Momentum began to build when Grammy Award-winning artist John Legend agreed to fly to Perth to headline it.

Through these connections, we were also connected with Ryan Gall, a Californian filmmaker and social impact strategist who introduced us to an innovative concept of “gamifying” advocacy. Ryan’s novel approach involved offering concert tickets as rewards in exchange for taking action, such as signing our petition calling on Commonwealth leaders to support polio eradication. By incorporating this method into our plans, our campaign attracted 25,000 petition signatures from people hoping to gain one of the 5,000 free tickets we had. We then presented this petition to the prime minister’s office, fulfilling her request to mobilize public support.

On the eve of the summit, The End of Polio Concert garnered significant media coverage. It made a strong public call for the Australian government to deliver new funding for polio eradication. The following day, at the summit, Prime Minister Gillard committed A\$50 million and urged other leaders to support the cause, resulting in A\$118 million in new funding for polio eradication.

Leveraging the momentum from the campaign, we were able to advance our broader goal of ending extreme poverty. Just nine months later, in September 2012, at Ryan’s behest, the inaugural Global Citizen Festival occurred on New York’s iconic Central Park’s Great Lawn. Since then, over US\$43.6 billion has been distributed in response to Global Citizen campaigns, affecting nearly 1.3 billion lives with the support of many incredible partners. As for polio, with only two countries remaining endemic and just six cases reported in 2021. Since 2011, the Australian government has continued to support financially every year.

Ultimately, our campaign’s success for polio eradication began with a “naively audacious” yet SMART policy goal that united a diverse coalition, including government officials, musicians, nonprofits, student volunteers, and everyday citizens. This led to unexpected encounters and responses, and helped us overcome our own limited experience and connections.

Step 2: Know Which Stakeholders Matter and How to Appeal to Them

“One thought experiment that I used to pose to the members of my team is to imagine that they had 15 minutes with the president. If he thought that they had a compelling idea with strong evidence to support it and a solid implementation strategy, he was willing to pick up the phone and call anyone” [9].

—Thomas Kalil, former advisor in the Clinton and Obama White Houses

Identifying Relevant Stakeholders

To influence change effectively, you must identify the key individuals or groups with the authority to implement your policy goals. This groundwork is essential for targeting your efforts and understanding whom you must build relationships with, whether at a local, state, federal, or international level. Relevant stakeholders can range from city council members to influential global figures. Still, the real challenge lies in gaining access to and persuading these decision-makers.

Accessing top decision-makers, especially high-profile government leaders, can be formidable. If direct contact proves challenging, consider reaching out to influential individuals within their network. These figures could be advisors, donors, colleagues, peers, or even members of the public who can help convey your message effectively.

Never underestimate the importance of advisors, particularly in the busy schedule of a top public official. Being friendly and building relationships with key staffers is always a valuable strategy. Even if you're familiar with the official in question, their staff will likely play a crucial role in helping them fulfill any promises they make. They are generally critical in deciding which briefs their superiors read, which policy proposals reach them, the messages they deliver

in speeches, and even how they schedule their time. Try moving past the formal stage so you can reach them quickly if needed. I always try to get on text message and Whatsapp terms with leaders or their advisors as soon as possible. This helps prevent you from being stuck in the lobby when you urgently need their support. Find ways to also show appreciation for their help, such as recognizing their contributions in front of their manager. Even symbolic gestures will likely be remembered.

Outreach can also extend to those directly benefiting from your proposed policy change. You can garner support through their representatives, such as trade unions or special interest groups, who can advocate for your cause.

Additionally, consider the value of engaging with individuals who may not be in power but are likely to assume influential roles. These individuals are often more accessible and open to collaboration. For instance, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reportedly made it a practice to meet with government officials *and* opposition parties during his visits to foreign countries. This approach can prove strategic, as opposition parties will likely remember these interactions when they eventually come to power.

Being Targeted

Whether your advocacy efforts are directed toward a head of state, a local legislative representative, or a school board member, it is crucial to be clear *who* your target is. This clarity informs the subsequent steps discussed in this chapter. Your goal should be to ensure that your advocacy tactics are centered on reaching and persuading the specific individual(s) necessary to achieve your objectives. To maintain this focus, it's beneficial to continually ask yourself, "How will this tactic effectively reach and persuade the individual(s) I need to engage to accomplish my goal?"

As a follow-up to the previous step, let's consider a real-world example from 2015 when Commonwealth leaders including the late Queen planned to gather in Malta. The Commonwealth had long

supported eradicating polio, but there was a challenge. Malta, the summit host, wasn't a significantly wealthy nation or affected country. So why would its then-prime minister, Joseph Muscat, care about ending polio? The only way to find out was to target and try to reach him directly. Those involved in the polio eradication movement, from Rotarians to everyday citizen advocates, utilized various strategies, such as tagging his accounts on social media (what I referred to as "Twit-Plomacy" before Twitter was rebranded as X!) and writing emails to his public address. They even published open letters in the country's leading daily newspaper. The targeted nature of the campaign got Muscat's attention, and he responded, "I've received your emails, tweets, and letters; what about a phone call?" Once he understood how close the world was to eradicating polio, he seized the opportunity to make it a significant focus of his summit, exclaiming, "I feel like this is one of the few things that might make a difference." True to his word, Muscat secured an agreement from over 50 presidents and prime ministers to renew their funding and support [10]. It pays to be targeted and directly ask for help when possible.

Additionally, make it as easy as possible for your targets to be able to help you. Handle any necessary groundwork to save them time and enhance follow-through. Show them the value add of working with you. This proactive approach may contribute to their willingness to collaborate in the future. In Muscat's case, aware of his limited staff already dealing with logistics for over 50 leaders, I drafted much of the invitations, articles, and speeches myself. Given my relationships and expertise in polio eradication, this approach proved more efficient for all involved. During the summit, I even assumed a pseudo-Maltese diplomat role, liaising directly with other government delegations in hotel lobbies to ensure their attendance at Muscat's polio-focused press conference. Chaotic summit experiences have taught me never to assume anything, even when delegates express support verbally. Leveraging our successful partnership, Malta emerged as a key ally in pushing the British government to prioritize polio in the subsequent Commonwealth leaders' gathering a few years later [11].

Leveraging Effective Messengers

Legitimacy and credibility are key when considering who will be the most persuasive messengers for relaying your policy ask to the target decision-maker. This could be you or another intermediary [12]. Research by psychologist Geoffrey Cohen has shown that people are more receptive to ideas from like-minded individuals. Unsurprisingly, Democratic voters offer more support for Republican ideas when they believe those ideas are coming from fellow Democrats, and the same holds vice versa [13].

As a specific example, in 2020 Global Citizen aimed to persuade the (first) Trump administration to support a campaign for equitable access to COVID-19 resources in developing countries during the pandemic. Recognizing the then Boris Johnson-led UK Government's relatively close ties with the Trump administration, Global Citizen leveraged the British ambassador's connections to secure a significant commitment of more than US\$500 million. A message from the British government resonated far more powerfully than if it had solely come from Global Citizen or the World Health Organization, especially given the Trump administration's decision to withdraw the US from the latter.

Lastly, it's crucial not to overlook the importance of your messenger's ability to connect with others [14]. Effective messengers must cultivate authentic relationships and be likable. This greatly influences whether people respond to them, engage in meetings, return their calls, or simply want to grab a coffee. While this may seem self-evident, it's worth emphasizing, particularly in our polarized era where too many conversations start with critiques rather than constructive dialogue. Relationships matter.

The Power of Strategic Framing

Not all stakeholders will initially support your policy goal, especially if they perceive it as conflicting with their constituents' interests. Others may need to discern its benefits to the people they represent. Remember, people and countries are rarely solely

motivated by altruism.⁶ To gain their support, you must answer a fundamental question for each stakeholder: “What’s in it for them or those they represent?” [15]. For instance, fiscally conservative governments may be more receptive to arguments for increased foreign aid emphasizing a national interest benefit, such as addressing the root cause of illegal migration.⁷ Similarly, leaders of emerging economies such as Brazil, Kenya, and South Africa where youth unemployment is a critical issue, may be more receptive to climate initiatives that deliver jobs for their citizens [16]. When your target stakeholders see a win-win proposition in your policy goal, this can motivate substantial and powerful action.

Think creatively about how you frame propositions and test your assumptions. For instance, we are often led to believe that it is hard to win people over on policies with a short-term cost but a long-term benefit. Studies have shown, however, that strategic framing *can* be effective in certain circumstances by appealing to interests beyond the present. For example, one study involving 59,440 participants across 63 countries asked participants to write a letter to be read by a future child in 2055 describing their personal actions to address climate change. On average, the studies found that those who wrote these letters were more likely to support ambitious climate change mitigation policies—including in the US [17]. Conversely, the same study found that asking people to share doom-and-gloom messaging on climate change led to a decline in support for such policies.

⁶While there is evidence of some decisions being made essentially for moral reasons, including on child labor, landmines, the “blood” diamond trade, small arms, and sweatshops, the research suggests that this is done only when it is convenient or relatively costless for governments to do so, or if values are effectively tapped into. See Busby 2007.

⁷For example, Italy’s right-wing coalition government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni favors this frame. However, it is questionable whether foreign aid does in practice result in reduced migration (as opposed to other more concrete outcomes such as on health and education). See Käppeli, Jennison, and Fattibene 2022.

Strategic framing can also drive significant policy implementation by appealing to politicians' political self-interest and personal values. For instance, President George W. Bush increased HIV/AIDS relief funding in Africa following a concerted campaign effort from the faith community, influencers such as Bono, and the NGO he cofounded, the ONE Campaign. This diverse coalition framed the AIDS crisis in Africa as an opportunity for the US to save many lives with relatively little budget while also appealing to the president's Christian values [18]. The collaboration ultimately led to the launch of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) in 2003, alongside the most considerable upsurge in US foreign aid since the Marshall Plan. It's been alleged that Bono's fame, in particular, gave the Bush Administration "some hipness and credibility with liberals" from an unusual ally at a time when the White House was deeply unpopular [19]. For his part, Bono rarely, if ever, criticized the Bush Administration's war in Afghanistan, instead framing development spending as a means to "drain the pool of angry youth who might join militant organizations" [20]. He has since never been shy about praising Bush's commitment—arguably for good reason [21]. Regardless of the Bush Administration's motivations, the undeniable reality remains: between 2003 and 2023, PEPFAR saved over 25 million lives, reduced AIDS-related deaths and new HIV infections, and contributed to 5.5 million HIV-free births [22].

Reframing issues to align with self-interest can also lead to powerful shifts at the community level. Take the case of sanitation, with nearly 500 million people worldwide still practicing open defecation as of 2020, leading to severe malnutrition, disease, and economic burdens [23]. The problem is that communities that practice open defecation frequently have access to latrines and other sanitary facilities. They just don't use them. Like many issues, this challenge is best addressed locally by community leaders. Motivating them to act relies on first convincing them not only that it is in their interest to do so, but that it is even a problem that needs fixing. This is where "Community-led total sanitation" (CLTS) and the innovative technique of "triggering" come into play [24]. It leverages the

emotional impact on the community when they see the direct link between open defecation and the spread of diseases laid out in front of them.

This is how CLTS works: In the middle of the community, local leaders and residents gather around a central meeting point as volunteers draw a chalk map of the village on the ground. A local community health worker brings a bag of sawdust and invites community members to sprinkle it on the map to indicate where they defecate. Soon, parts of the map are covered with piles of sawdust, with a few piles placed inside the village. They see how much human waste has piled up in the village. The health worker then explains how flies transfer germs from human feces to nearby food, making the communities realize they've been effectively consuming each other's waste, resulting in widespread illness and increased health costs. This realization generates pressure on their leaders to act, advocate for funds from the central government to build latrines, and implement policies banning the practice of open defecation.



Figure 1.1 Community in Bihar, India, 2016 implementing CLTS.

Credit: Jay Gunning.

Such approaches are paying off. In 2014, the global prevalence of open defecation was twice what it was by 2023. Once the world's open defecation capital, India, in particular, has made significant progress by implementing CLTS approaches to change behaviors and offering subsidies for building latrines to meet increased demand (Figure 1.1). Despite ongoing challenges, and with its goal of ending open defecation still unmet, the UN reports that the practice in India decreased from 41% to 17% in less than a decade [25]. As a result, millions live healthier, more productive lives.

In summing up this step, effective policy entrepreneurs must develop similar skills as business entrepreneurs who create products that meet customer needs. The primary difference here is that those with the power to implement policy remain subject to the whims of their constituencies. In such situations, additional strategies may be required to generate momentum for a specific policy goal and place it firmly on their agenda.

Step 3: Mastering the Art of Timing

“Public officials cannot enact any policy they please like they’re ordering dessert from a menu. They have to choose from among policies that are politically acceptable at the time. And we believe the Overton window defines that range of ideas” [26].

—Joseph Lehman, a colleague of Joseph Overton

Understanding the Overton Window

So you have set a clear policy goal and identified the key stakeholders you need to influence. Next, it is crucial to establish a realistic timeline for implementing that goal.

In today's polarized landscape, success often depends on identifying the right moment to advocate for your policy goal and recognizing opportunities to broaden its acceptability—to yank an idea out of the crosshairs of culture wars and partisanship. Understanding the “Overton window” theory can be invaluable.

Named after American policy analyst Joseph Overton, the Overton window defines the entire range of policies generally acceptable to society at a given time (Figure 1.2). The theory assumes that politicians and those with the power to implement policy more broadly will only support policies within this range. The Overton window is not fixed. The parameters of what society finds acceptable can gradually change as social norms evolve. Conversely, it can rapidly expand or contract in response to a crisis (as many of us witnessed with the quick acceptance of previously unthinkable lockdowns in early 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic's scale became apparent).

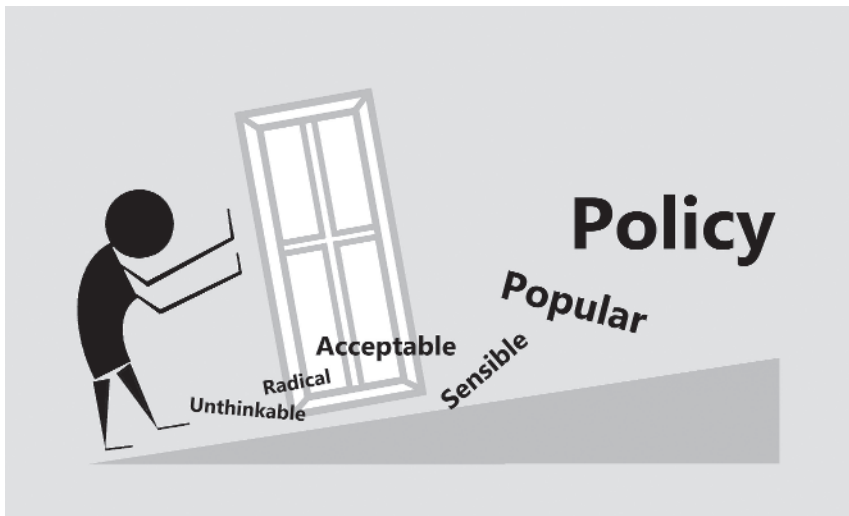


Figure 1.2 Pushing the Overton window.

Credit: Wendy Chen.

You can generally determine whether a policy is in the Overton window based on available polling to measure society's views. The good news is that abundant polling information exists on various community, national, or global policy issues.

The Open Society Barometer is one such example. It highlights views within and between countries concerning the strategies for effectively addressing global problems. Take climate change as an example. In the 2023 survey conducted across 30 countries, 71% of 36,344 respondents agreed that wealthy nations should

take the lead in compensating low-income countries for economic losses caused by climate change [27]. This sentiment was, perhaps unsurprisingly, more prevalent in lower-income countries. Nevertheless, majorities also emerged in the United Arab Emirates, Italy, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This shift in global sentiment may help explain why, after many years of gridlock, countries finally agreed to place “Loss and Damage” caused by climate change on the official agenda of the UN climate talks in late 2022 and even established a loss and damage fund (although, as of late 2023, it has raised only a fraction of the estimated need).

Regardless of the survey you rely on, it’s essential to check the methodology and ensure it’s reliable and that the respondent size is broad enough to be credible [28].

Shifting the Overton Window

What should you do if your policy solution falls outside the Overton window? In such cases, policy entrepreneurs, social movements, and think tanks must engage in efforts to convince relevant segments of the public, especially those to whom leaders are accountable, that these policies *should* be within the Overton window. This process can be arduous and time consuming, requiring a long-term commitment to many of the strategies and steps outlined in the next chapter as it relates to leveraging the strengths of allies, nurturing diverse coalitions, and not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Generally, though, the Overton window can be shifted in four practical ways [29]:

(a) **Pushing for Extreme Policy Positions**

Joseph Overton argued that pushing for extreme positions can be effective at changing public opinion and making more moderate policy solutions acceptable [30]. For instance, in the context of climate change, this phenomenon is often

referred to as the “McKibben effect,” named after environmentalist Bill McKibben, the founder of the advocacy group 350.org [31]. Research indicates that when radical policy proposals such as fossil fuel divestment gain prominence, the public debate transitions from whether action should be taken on climate change to what should be done. This often results in increased support for more moderate solutions such as clean energy subsidies, which seem less radical by comparison. The lasting impact of the McKibben effect is evident in the reshaping of the climate debate in the United States. This was exemplified by the enactment of the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act after years of policy failures, which represented the most substantial climate change legislation ever approved in US history. Notably, in 2025, even amid rollbacks to IRA energy tax credits, politicians from both parties and across red and blue states continued expressing support for clean energy—as well as for proposals like carbon tariffs driven by economic and security concerns.⁸

It is worth noting that pushing for extreme positions can be risky, as it may negatively affect public perceptions of a broader movement, leading to the discrediting of even more moderate policies by association [32]. British advocacy group Just Stop Oil ended its campaign in 2025 after the UK government backed its call for a ban on new oil and gas licenses. The group declared victory, but polls showed public disapproval of its tactics, and bipartisan support for climate action has since eroded [33]. In other cases, advocates for more extreme positions can undermine support for more moderate policy solutions if they publicly attack the latter for not being pure enough. This is why it’s crucial to seek allies and approaches, however extreme, that can enhance rather than undermine the

⁸The 116th Congress: (2019–2021), with the House of Representatives controlled by Democrats and the Senate and the Presidency by Republicans, approved a notable \$35 billion investment in clean energy R&D. See Cassidy 2023; Kaplan and Grandoni 2020.

collective bargaining power of policies within a larger coalition. These strategies should also avoid putting vulnerable segments of the population at risk of further marginalization—a topic we’ll explore further in the next chapter.

(b) **The Foot in the Door Technique**

The “Foot in the Door Technique” is often used in sales to convince a person to agree to a large request by first obtaining their agreement on a more minor, manageable request [34]. Similarly, in policy advocacy, it can be practical to advocate for more minor, incremental shifts in policy before aiming for more significant changes.

Such gateway policies serve as specific measures or initiatives that act as steppingstones toward more comprehensive policy reforms in a particular area. They are crucial for initiating reform or progress, eventually leading to substantial changes in the policy landscape through increased political and public support for a specific policy direction.

For example, the conservative Canadian government led by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006–2015) significantly increased funding for child, maternal, and newborn health in developing countries [35]. Harper noted that public support for foreign aid is generally low when framed broadly. However, it increases significantly when specific examples are provided of how aid dollars improve people’s lives, disproving the prevalent notion that foreign aid does not work. The positive results of the Harper government’s efforts to save the lives of mothers and children thus gave the government the runway to make more profound and more influential changes on international development in Canada, including creating a new Ministry of International Development within the Department of Global Affairs, and establishing Canada’s first Development Finance Institution [36].

(c) **Pulling Policy “Ropes” Sideways**

The economist Brian Caplan suggests that in policy implementation, most people focus on one or two so-called

tug-o-war “ropes,” and they interpret peoples’ partisan positions based on where they fall along these ropes [37–39]. Examples of today’s policy ropes include, among others, advocating for more robust climate change mitigation measures for businesses versus opposing regulations to protect businesses, advocating for increased corporate taxes versus reduced taxes, and supporting a universal versus private health care system.

In times of hyper-polarization, individuals in positions of influence are under tremendous pressure to emphasize their loyalty to a particular side of these ropes to fit in and be identified with one specific partisan group. Demonstrating support for the other side of the rope leads to cries of betrayal and harsh political consequences. How do you break out from such gridlock? Caplan asserts you can avoid triggering the partisan games that polarize ideas and drag them into culture wars by pulling the ropes “sideways” along unconventional dimensions. These ropes are less likely to be salient in the media and therefore subject to less polarization. The more media prominence given to a particular rope, the more chance you have of getting caught between partisan struggles. Conversely, supporting less common dimensions, even of the same polarized issue, is less likely to be seen as a victory for the other side and, therefore, encounters less resistance [40].

One classic example of pulling the ropes sideways is how the British abolitionist movement, after years of setbacks, accelerated the timeframe within which it was possible to outlaw the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Contrary to popular belief, this support was not entirely based on the moral strength of abolitionist arguments alone; in fact, the trade continued to expand notwithstanding the apparent strength of the abolitionist campaign. As Britain went to war with Napoleonic France (1804–1815), abolitionists were accused of sedition for appearing to undermine the British economy

at a time of national emergency. However, the initial legislative steps to undermine the slave trade began with seemingly innocuous laws that, on their surface, supported Britain's war efforts against France. These measures "questioned the wisdom of supplying enslaved Africans to Britain's enemies," especially France and Spain [41]. The first significant anti-slave action was thus a ban on British slave traders operating in the waters of foreign powers. After this action, momentum soon shifted, and a blanket ban on the trade as a whole followed. It took far longer, in some cases decades, before the timing was ripe in other countries to make similar progress against slavery.

More recently, the swiftness with which marriage equality became acceptable to the mainstream in many Western countries can be seen as an example of pulling the ropes sideways. The marriage equality movement shifted its approach from framing the issue along a civil rights dimension to a less divisive one focused on love, commitment, and family values [42]. This change was accompanied by arguments rooted in freedom and the idea that you should treat others as you would want to be treated. This led to a rapid increase in public support. Marriage equality in the US progressed from no state allowing same-sex marriage to nationwide legality within just over a decade [43]. Ultimately, a few pioneer states paved the way, and a pivotal 2015 court decision triggered a wave of state-level actions, culminating in a change to federal law [44]. This brings us to the last way to shift the Overton window.

(d) **Responding to a Crisis or Triggering Event**

In times of crisis, the Overton window of acceptable policies can suddenly burst open. As Lenin famously stated, there are "decades where nothing happens; weeks where decades happen." Recent years have shown us how crises have a unique power to expand the range of policy options, rendering previously unthinkable ideas politically viable.

At the beginning of the 1980s, racial apartheid seemed deeply entrenched in South African society. While international and domestic pressure had been increasing, what truly shifted the situation was the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and the removal of the excuse that Nelson Mandela's African National Congress were Soviet-sponsored terrorists [45]. This change allowed those in the apartheid government who supported reconciliation to win the argument for releasing Nelson Mandela and commencing the dismantling of apartheid. As FW de Klerk, the then president, stated, "I would not have been able to do that . . . if the Berlin Wall did not come down. I was helped by the fact that the threat of expansionist USSR communism fell away, and when we saw that window of opportunity, it helped us to jump through it by accelerating the process" [46].

Sometimes, a triggering event, organized in response to a natural or manufactured crisis, can help challenge societal attitudes toward a particular policy approach. Speeches have traditionally played a significant role in this regard. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 is widely credited with influencing the successful passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. King delivered the speech during the march on Washington, responding to widespread racism in the US. Similarly, John F. Kennedy's bold challenge to land a man on the moon captured the public's imagination, and increased Congressional spending for NASA. His 1962 speech aimed, in part, to galvanize Americans in response to increased tensions with the Soviet Union.

Popular culture and entertainment can also change the Overton window. Despite criticisms for being paternalistic, the Live Aid concerts of 1985 influenced an entire generation of Britons to think globally and consider their country's

responsibility in eradicating hunger and poverty.⁹ As the “Live Aid Generation” assumed positions of power, Britain emerged as one of the world’s most generous nations regarding foreign aid spending.¹⁰ For the politicians who supported this commitment, it wasn’t just political but personal. For example, former Prime Minister David Cameron faced calls to cut Britain’s foreign aid budget in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. He cited watching Live Aid on his 18th birthday as a critical factor in his decision not to balance Britain’s books on the back of the world’s poorest [47]. Regrettably, the combined economic impact of Brexit and the post-pandemic economic slowdown narrowed the Overton window once more. In 2021, the UK government made a controversial decision to cut Britain’s aid budget significantly. This move seemed unthinkable a few years earlier but was done with little public outcry.

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We will return to the concept of the Overton window in the final chapter, where I identify several contemporary opportunities for bold policy implementation where common ground might be found.

In the end, though, one of the most effective ways to persuade people about the merits of your idea is to craft compelling narratives. Even if your policy goal falls within the Overton window and aligns with the interests of those with the power to implement it, the key challenge is getting it on their agenda, particularly if it’s a

⁹The Live Aid Concerts were organized in response to the Ethiopia Famine of the mid-1980s.

¹⁰Among the wealthy G7 nations, Britain was, up until 2021, the sole country to fulfill its commitment of allocating 0.7% of its gross national income to development assistance. This level of spending was even enshrined into law due to strong political support.

neglected issue. This is where the power of storytelling and narrative building becomes indispensable.

Step 4: Mastering the Art of Storytelling

“Humans think in stories, and we try to make sense of the world by telling stories.”

—Yuval Noah Harari, historian, philosopher, and author

Harnessing storytelling can help build trust and rapport. This is an essential precondition for establishing any common ground, whether with affected communities, the public, or the influential individuals holding the power to make a difference. It is an even more critical skill to have at the ready at times of great division, intolerance, and crises like the present.¹¹ Without open dialogue, our empathy weakens and our fear of the unfamiliar strengthens. Over time, this leads to anxiety and exclusion. A well-told story, however, can plant the seeds of connection and partnership where nothing else resonates. It gives us an excuse to talk—and to keep talking—where there is no other basis for dialogue.

Storytelling also helps us cut through the noise. As political strategist Mark McKinnon notes, a simple story can help people make sense of our complicated, information-overloaded reality [48]. According to McKinnon, most, if not all, presidential elections have been won based on who has the most powerful story, not who has the best policy or even ideology [49].

And yet . . . countless leaders, from heads of state to charity leaders to peace negotiators, have missed vital opportunities to move policy forward because they did not understand the power of storytelling. Instead of focusing on building a genuine connection,

¹¹In the US alone, Americans valuing tolerance toward others has declined. In 2019, 80% of Americans viewed tolerance as necessary, but by 2023, this number had dropped to 58%, a worrisome trend. See Zitner 2023.

they perhaps launched into a deluge of statistics or a string of talking points. Maybe they did not notice the skeptical, glazed-over look of the person opposite them, wondering, “Why should I listen to what *you* have to say on this issue? What gives you the right to lecture me?” Answering such questions can often be the difference between the person you are speaking to walking out and forgetting about your policy goal versus becoming a committed champion. Storytelling is one of the best, most effective ways to achieve the latter.

In “Step 1: Know Your Policy Goal,” I outlined how Prime Minister Gillard was responsive to our polio campaign. Yes, it was partly because our policy goal was relevant to her interest in needing a purpose for a summit she was hosting, but that only explained half of it. When she announced A\$50 million for polio eradication, I asked why she had followed through. Her advisors told me it was because she liked the stories we had shared: stories of heroic Rotarians who had raised millions of dollars worldwide, and especially the stories of resilient polio survivors who had overcome so much personal pain and still found ways to give back. It was a reminder that we’re not moved by facts or statistics but by stories of humanity. In other words, people move people.

How do you tell a memorable story? When I reflect on the most powerful stories shared with me, what stands out the most is the *why* and the *how* rather than the *who*, *what*, or *when*. Regarding *why*, sharing your motivation for promoting a specific policy allows people to respect where you’re coming from, even if they disagree with your ideas. It’s what helps establish credibility. Understanding why is often the first step to mutual understanding and, even if begrudgingly, respect. It humanizes your intentions and demonstrates sincerity in your efforts. It fosters open dialogue and can be a starting point for finding common ground or areas of compromise. This approach works both ways. It’s always worth asking the person speaking why they believe in a particular policy position. Such *active listening* might tell you something about their values and worldview that you can relate to [50]. Finding common ground or shared values helps create a stronger

foundation for constructive dialogue. It makes it easier to address policy disagreements.

In terms of *how*, people want stories that demonstrate practical solutions and a way of making sense of the chaos. They want direction in a rudderless world. Solution-oriented narratives can give a sense of purpose to those open to new ideas and approaches, whether in power or not. Even if they disagree with your proposals, good conversations focused on solutions help us refine our ideas and make better, more substantial arguments. This clarity gives us greater confidence in our ideas. It lets us understand different viewpoints without getting defensive, creating an atmosphere more conducive to finding common ground. In summary, such stories “help us develop the essential skill of *negotiation*: learning to manage ego, bridge differences, and reconcile challenges” [51].

While a few of us are born storytellers, it’s better to spend some time preparing your story before essential meetings with key stakeholders. Here are a few practical tips to help you craft compelling narratives:

Identify your core narrative: Start by identifying the central message you want to convey with your story. What’s the key takeaway you want your audience to remember?

Avoid the common mistake of excessively focusing on the problem. Communications strategist Thomas Coombs’s approach of hope-based communications suggests that when we center our narrative on the problem, we reinforce it in the minds of our audience, which contributes to their overall sense of powerlessness and cynicism [52]. This makes people susceptible to other simplistic populist narratives based on fear and security.

Bring it back to the power of *how*. Ground your narrative in solutions. As Coombs notes, “People want to be part of something successful” [53]. Focus on how the stakeholder you’re speaking to can contribute to implementing the solution: how they can help build the world as it should be, not how it is. Let that be your takeaway.

For example, consider the story shared by Brianna Fruean, a young climate advocate from the small Pacific Island nation of Samoa. With her country at the frontlines of the climate crisis, Brianna has every right to talk about the existential threat her people face through no fault of their own. Yet, as much as Samoa is a victim, she uses her platform as a recipient of various international prizes to also talk about *how* her people are rising to withstand the crisis. “I bring with me the voices of a Pacific that refuses to give up . . . we can teach you how to fight back like us” [54]. In practical detail, for instance, she talks about how Samoan villages have learned to quickly rebuild after severe winds. Rather than leaving her audiences disillusioned, she leaves them with a clear message about how we can all do something: “We are not drowning; we are fighting. Now the world needs to hear us and follow our lead” [55].

Finally, “Narratives must be continually rewritten, updated, and revised” to remain influential [56]. Similarly, assessing who is best positioned to convey these narratives is essential, ensuring the widest possible pathway to garner support (see “Step 2: Leveraging Effective Messengers”).

Ground your story in shared values: Ensure your narrative connects to how your audience views the world and how its implementation is consistent with that view. Connect it also to a value that cuts across ideological divides. Some conservative lawmakers in both the US and Australia, for instance, shifted their stance on marriage equality after learning about the impact of discrimination on mental health and suicide rates in LGBTQ+ communities.¹² This change aligned with their overall value for life.

¹²I once met a legislator who told me he was persuaded to support marriage equality after meeting with the mothers of those in the LGBTQ+ community who had committed suicide.

Demonstrate the possibility of change: If we want people to be part of the solution, show them stories of others contributing to it. This is especially effective if you can showcase how people overcame similar difficulties or tensions your audience might share.

Between the late 2010s and the early 2020s, business leaders came under growing pressure to introduce policies that significantly cut their emissions. Even those willing to act were often held back by practical questions around how to implement change. Perhaps unhelpfully, much of the campaigning toward them solely focused on *what* they should be doing, not *how*. To help motivate such leaders, the band Coldplay agreed to share their sustainability story with a group of business leaders convened by Global Citizen.

In 2019, in a BBC interview, Coldplay frontman Chris Martin said the band would not go on tour again until they could do so in a way that was “as environmentally beneficial as possible.” One of Martin’s major stipulations was that they should cut the tour’s carbon emissions by more than 50%. Their manager, Phil Harvey, shared concerns about how they could achieve this. Given the absence of a blueprint for sustainable touring on this scale, he realized they would have to create it themselves. In 2022, the band announced one of the world’s most eco-friendly tours, incorporating a range of innovations. These new measures included powering the entire show with a rechargeable electric battery from repurposed BMW car batteries. The show battery was charged using biodiesel generators that ran on recycled cooking oil, as well as solar and wind power—and even audience-generated kinetic energy through specially designed power bikes and kinetic dance floors. Additionally, the band offered discount merchandise to those who used sustainable travel options to attend the show. By sharing these stories with business leaders grappling with the same challenge, the band moved the dialogue from whether a business should reduce

its emissions to the most practical way to achieve it. After all, if one of the biggest bands in the world could do it, so can others.

Demonstrate momentum: Provide evidence through your story that momentum is building behind your proposed solution. List who else is already on board with the proposed policy. Everyone wants to be part of a train going in the right direction. But highlight *why* your audience's involvement is equally and uniquely critical, allowing them to be a hero in the story and supercharge existing momentum.

Idris and Sabrina Elba, then serving as UN ambassadors for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), embarked on a journey to Sierra Leone in December 2019 to witness IFAD's remarkable work firsthand. They saw how financial assistance, seed access, and equipment could empower struggling farmers to bounce back after a crisis.

But they also saw how they could help far more people by encouraging governments to contribute as much as US\$2 billion in total to help up to 100 million farmers. This was far more significant than any charitable donations they could make themselves.

After this eye-opening experience, the Elbas took their mission to the world stage, touring the capital cities of major wealthy economies. In these meetings, they passionately advocated for increased support for IFAD. They highlighted the growing list of countries already stepping up to help but tailored their message to explain why the support of each particular country was crucial.

In some cases, they emphasized that certain nations served as role models for others. In others, they pointed out that a lack of support would send a discouraging signal to potential contributors. They also underlined how specific countries' dedication such as Canada's to empowering female farmers would lead to IFAD also making this a priority.

During a Zoom meeting amid the pandemic, their efforts paid off when President Macron announced a 50% increase in France's commitment to IFAD. This success story demonstrates the power of showcasing momentum and how your audience's involvement can have a significant impact.

Show, don't just tell: Don't assume your listener will automatically agree that something is important. Humanizing your story is the best way to demonstrate why they should care. Try to focus on stories about individuals. People respond less to abstract ideals or statistics, no matter how horrific. Telling personal stories is also an effective way to circumvent division.

As the Israel-Hamas conflict kicked off in October 2023, many people became hyper-concerned about inadvertently choosing the wrong words or even how to have a conversation about the divisive conflict. A woman at a conference I attended cut through this by telling a story about a scholar she had supported. He had left the Gaza strip some years prior to pursue a research opportunity, knowing he could never return. The speaker called the man a few days after the conflict broke out to see how he was getting on. He was distraught, as his family and kids remained in Gaza. Trying to distract the man from his pain, the speaker told us how she shifted the conversation toward the fact that he had become a US citizen. "Suddenly, it dawned on me," she recounted, "I said to him, you can vote in the next US election." The man responded that he had never voted before as he was too young when the last elections took place in Gaza back in 2005, in which Hamas was elected. Many in the audience were surprised. In telling such a personal story, the woman simply made the point not to condemn all of the Palestinians and hold them responsible for the horrific actions of Hamas. After all, they haven't had a chance to vote out their leaders for 18 years.

Authenticity matters: People can often tell when someone is genuinely enthusiastic about a cause. However, being authentic also means not forcing your passion or coming across as insincere, which can have the opposite effect. Your story should also be truthful and supported by credible evidence. Exaggerated or implausible claims can undermine your credibility and the impact of your narrative. It's best to let the merits of your story speak for themselves. This means being up front about what hasn't worked and how failings have been overcome.

The polio eradication program is a case in point. It has set multiple deadlines for eradicating polio, beginning in 2000. Each deadline has been missed. Yet, it has managed to maintain the support of donors and Rotarians, mostly everyday citizens, for decades because it has been up front about its failings and how it has addressed them. Indeed, as of late 2023, it has a special independent monitoring board devoted to this purpose. Being open about our learnings can sometimes disarm critics, inviting them to be part of the solution.