

Chapter 2

How can we make the case?



“The moral and business concerns are not mutually exclusive. That has oftentimes been a misconception – sometimes organizations understand it as they have to choose one or the other.”

– Victor Mark-Onyegbu, Grants Lead at Africa No Filter

“There are business challenges which have to be a part of the conversation, and you have to accept the business reality around that.”

– Clare Spurrell, Director of Strategy & Communications at CARE International Secretariat

“We’ve continued to say something to please someone – to get money most of the time – and that has dented how a society is seen.”

– Chilande Kuloba-Warria, Founder of Warande Advisory Centre

How to win over decision makers

From our discussions, we heard that improving on ethical storytelling is not just about the craft or the production process. It's often about having critical conversations with staff and senior leadership about the risks and necessities of adopting new practices, so that new organizational practices can be put into place.

Change management is something **Levis Nderitu** and **David Verga** know well.

In his role as Director of Global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at PATH, an international NGO that works to accelerate health equity worldwide, Nderitu has practiced the art of holding difficult conversations many times over. As Head of Brand and Creative at PATH, Verga is responsible — among many other tasks — for disseminating ethical storytelling practices across an organization that spans several continents.

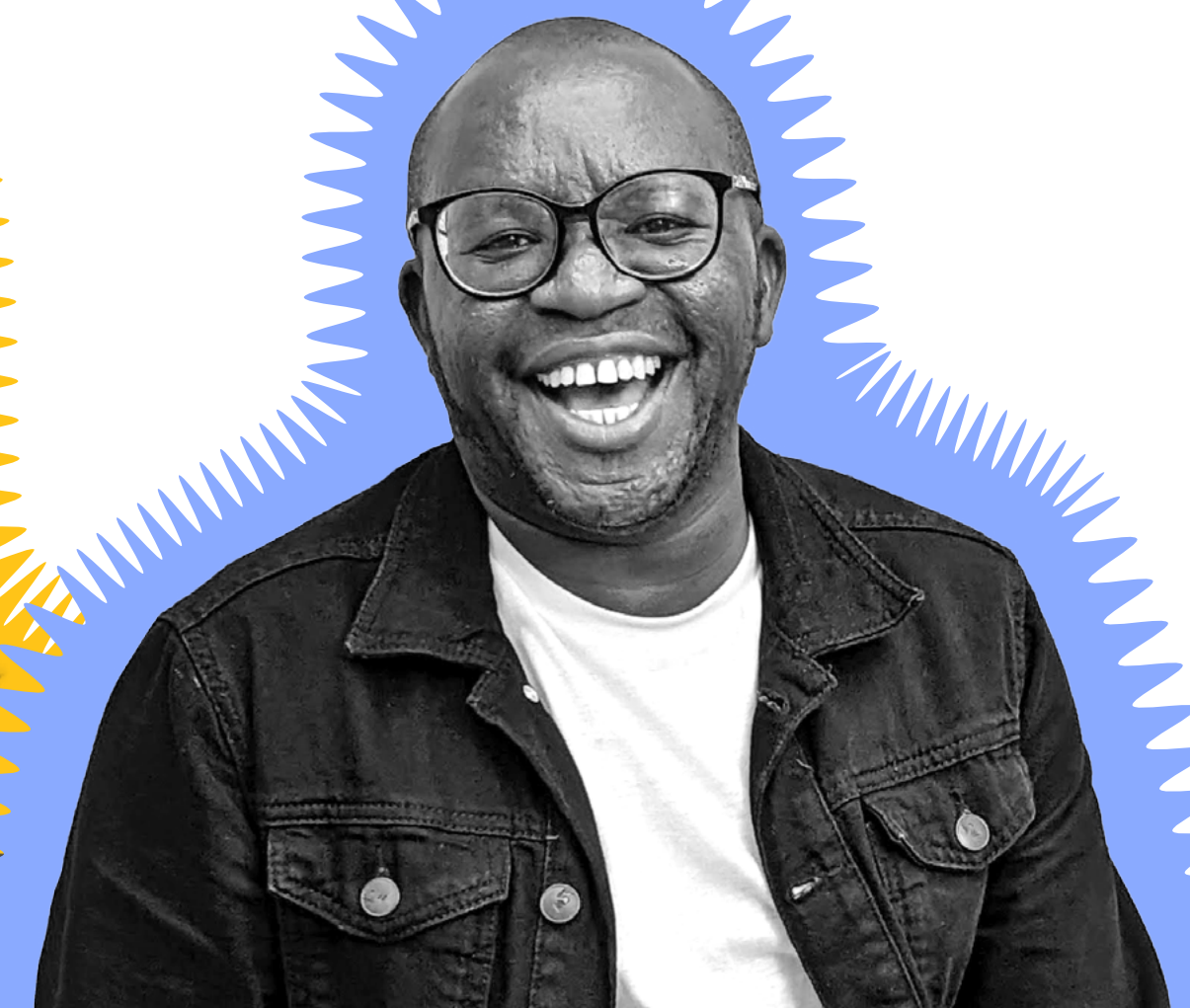
In this chapter, Nderitu and Verga draw from their respective roles to offer practical advice to those wanting to initiate change from within. They introduce three different ways to engage team members and senior leadership in the process of implementing ethical storytelling practices.

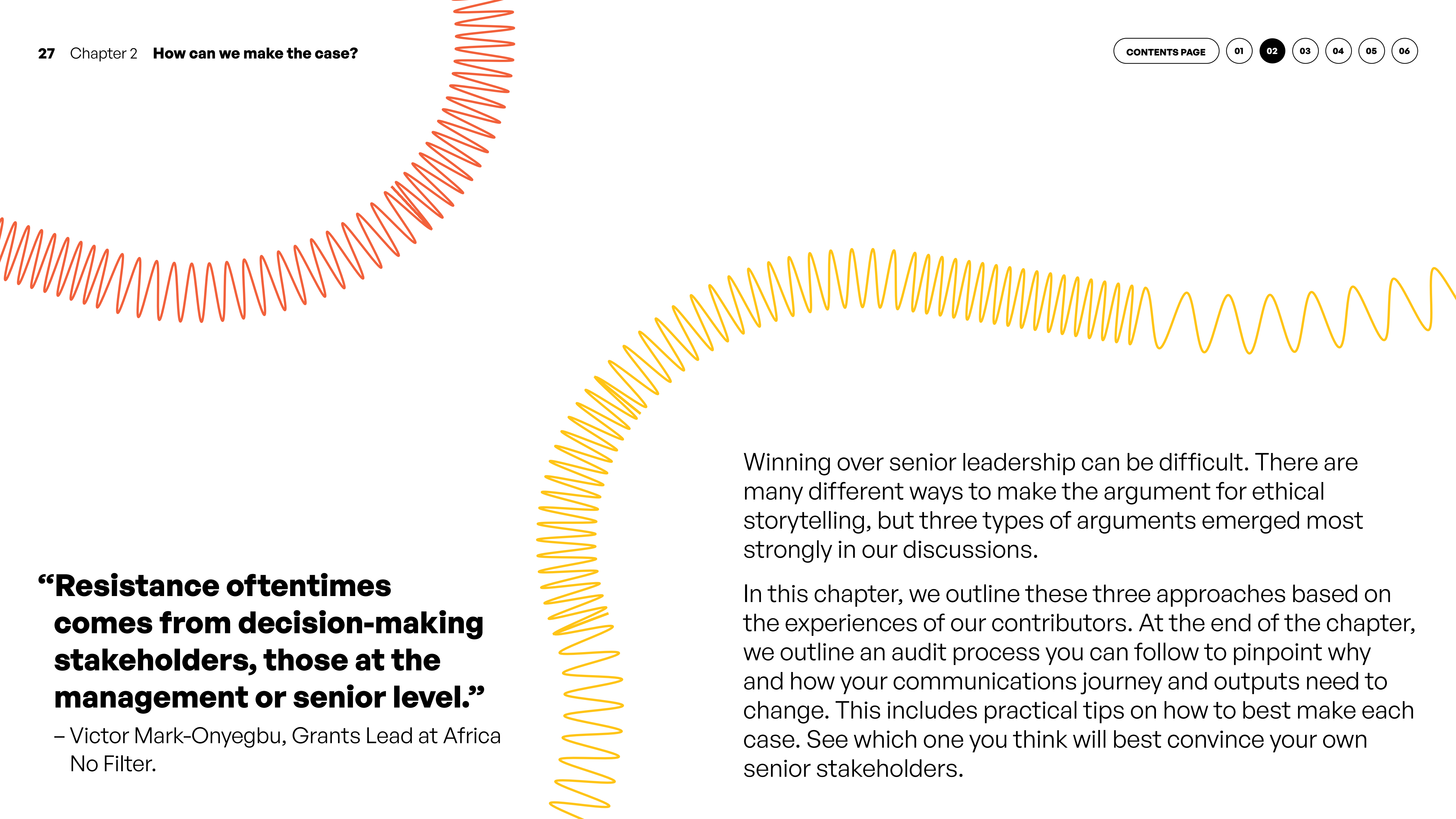
Note: We've included quotes from community members who took part in consultative workshops held in 2022 in the lead-up to this toolkit. The workshops were held anonymously so that participants could express their views more freely. Their names have been kept hidden throughout this toolkit in accordance with their preference.

David Verga



Levis Nderitu





“Resistance oftentimes comes from decision-making stakeholders, those at the management or senior level.”

– Victor Mark-Onyegbu, Grants Lead at Africa No Filter.

Winning over senior leadership can be difficult. There are many different ways to make the argument for ethical storytelling, but three types of arguments emerged most strongly in our discussions.

In this chapter, we outline these three approaches based on the experiences of our contributors. At the end of the chapter, we outline an audit process you can follow to pinpoint why and how your communications journey and outputs need to change. This includes practical tips on how to best make each case. See which one you think will best convince your own senior stakeholders.

01

The Business case

Senior stakeholders may think ethical storytelling is at odds with their financial, reputational, and impact-based goals. This case is applicable when organizations can actually better achieve their goals through ethical storytelling.

This case is often most relevant for high-level decision makers such as a board of directors, directors of philanthropy, communications, finance, or any institutional leader responsible for budgeting.

An open conversation about the tensions and nuances of the business case.

How do you balance the business goals of an organization with the moral goals of the sector? Is this balance possible?

The business case takes into account the financial and reputational risks faced by organizations (especially if fundraising is key to their survival). But the conversation also

needs to include non-financial considerations, which the moral and sociocultural case can address. You can pair one or more of these cases together. This way, you can demonstrate the effectiveness of ethical storytelling with numbers, but you don't lose the humanity of why you're seeking change.



How do you convince leaders to choose ethical storytelling?

← Click here to watch **Levis Nderitu** (pictured) lead a discussion with **Chilande Kuloba-Warria**, **Clare Spurrell** and **Victor Mark-Onyegbu** that explores the question above and dives into the tension between the moral and business case.

To see the discussion in full, [click here](#).

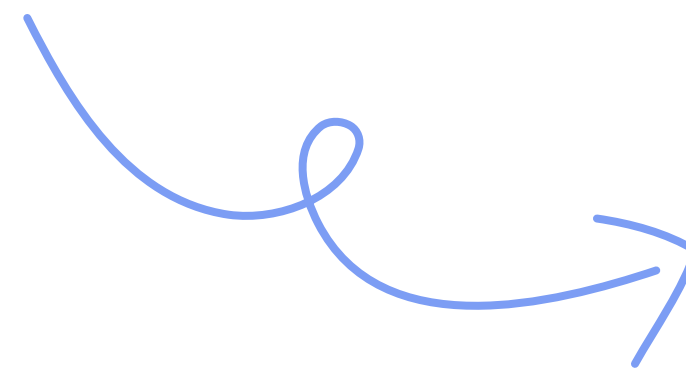
How do you justify change when it risks losing funding?

Leaders often fear that changing messaging will result in losing donors. You may hear pushback like, “This messaging has always worked” or “This is the way we’ve always done it.” People may allege that “the data suggest our methods are fine.”

There is often perceived tension between the stories that communicators think donors want, and the stories community members

actually want to tell. In reality, many donors are becoming more responsive to ethical, well-rounded storytelling, not less. By demonstrating this evolution of donors, leaders can see that now is the time for communications to shift.

Another approach to highlighting why ethical storytelling is relevant to them is to illustrate how their goal is hindered by not thinking about the long-term consequences of communications:



Reflection Prompts

Leaders are often guided by what they believe donors are looking for. How might you show them that donors value ethical storytelling more than ever?

“Global perceptions of local challenges are influenced by the images non-profits broadcast. One-dimensional images intended to elicit an emotional response by conveying “poverty” or “suffering” undermine long-term progress by implying the communities being shown can’t help themselves. These images deter large-scale investment and perpetuate the false and harmful narrative that communities need “saviors” rather than partners.”

– David Verga, Head of Brand and Creative at PATH.

When you can use the business case to advocate for change

Ethical communications are beneficial for business because they lead to:

1 More effective communications

There is an assumption that more ethical communications can't be as effective, but research by Jess Crombie and David Girling (2022) shows it can achieve the same fundraising as current methods, and potentially even more. As audiences and priorities are changing, people are looking for communications and messaging that steer away from white saviorism and traditional power dynamics, and uplift new voices.

[Click here](#) to access research from **Jess Crombie & David Girling (2022)** that shows how ethical storytelling is more effective through data.

2 Long-term reputational growth through keeping up with industry norms

With the development sector becoming more conscious of the need for power shifts and ethical approaches, it has become important for organizations to update storytelling practices to keep up with industry norms.

“My approach has been to present the need for new and ethical storytelling as an imperative, as an inevitable approach if organizations are to be considered responsive to the contemporary concerns of today.”

– Victor Mark-Onyegbu.

“There are long-term and net benefits for the reputation of organizations. This becomes an asset of the organization in the future”

– Victor Mark-Onyegbu, Grants Lead at Africa No Filter

3 Better and more sustained impact

As communities feel better represented and heard when ethical communications are created, they are more likely to trust the organization. This trust leads to more impactful programs, because community collaboration and advice are vital for success, and stronger relationships give you the legitimacy to operate in the community in the long term.

“Many organizations reached flood-affected areas and started distributing food items and tents but they did not do any homework on what is actually needed. Many of my relatives

are among flood victims and they told me that they are in need of mosquito repellents, medicines, and clean drinking water but relief organizations are just providing tents and used clothes.”

– Focus group in response to questions on community involvement in programs, conducted by ICARUS (Pakistan) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.

Ultimately, improving impact, strengthening bonds with communities, and applying a progressive, reciprocal, and ethical approach to communications leads to reputational and business benefits for organizations.

Levis Nderitu
Director of Global Diversity,
Equity & Inclusion at PATH

Victor Mark-Onyegbu
Grants lead
at Africa No Filter



When organizations are timebound, how do they still tell stories respectfully?

→ [Click here](#) to watch Levis Nderitu lead a discussion with Chilande Kuloba-Warria, Clare Spurrell and Victor Mark-Onyegbu.

Chilande Kuloba-Warria
Founder and Managing Director
at Warande Advisory Centre

Clare Spurrell
Director of Strategy & Communications
at CARE International

To see the discussion in full, [click here](#).

02

The Sociocultural Case

The sociocultural case is for you if the senior stakeholders you work with do not see cultural understanding is vital to build sustainable relationships and maintain authenticity.

This case is for internal or external use and is particularly important for organizations working across sociocultural divides, for country directors, and for the executive directors of these organizations.

Reminding stakeholders that there can be different and equally valid perspectives on an issue is sometimes essential to making the case for ethical storytelling.

“While advocating for complex attitude change towards sexual and gender minorities for example, I realized that people could understand the business case. They debated the moral case, that our idea of what’s right is universal across cultures. To me, what was missing was the nuanced sociocultural case, which recognizes the distinctiveness of societies and cultures.”

– Levis Nderitu.

An open conversation about the tensions and nuances of the sociocultural case.

Is the sociocultural case enough to convince leaders?

For those managing budgets and bottom lines, this case might not be compelling on its own. People far removed from impacted communities and from story-gathering and storytelling processes are unlikely to be convinced that the trust, authenticity, and engagement offered by these changes are worth the great time and expense required.

It may work well to combine this case with the business case to respond to their concerns and place the sociocultural benefits in the bigger picture of becoming a more sustainable organization.



Why does ethical storytelling matter?

↑ Click here to watch **Levis Nderitu** lead a discussion with **Chilande Kuloba-Warria** (pictured), **Clare Spurrell** and **Victor Mark-Onyegbu**.

To see the discussion in full, [click here](#).

Is the time required to learn a new social and cultural landscape worth it as an organization?

On the one hand, it is a process that deserves a high-level commitment, which might hinder some organizations.

“It requires committing to lengthy growing pains. From a change management point of view, there are serious operational, financial, and human resource changes that can take years to realize. Plus, organizations lose economies of scale when they distribute staff and resources more equitably across the places where they work. But if your organization can’t currently afford to restructure your comms teams and get local people telling local stories, should you tell those stories at all?”

– David Verga.

But on the other hand, there should at the minimum be a mindset shift towards greater collaboration and cultural understanding.

This is key because in one culture, one way of portraying or speaking could be considered right, whereas in another, it could be considered wrong.

It’s all about taking the time that you can to speak to those from the culture and adapt based on their expertise.

“We were presented to them as a problem. Africans were a problem, the problem was the Africans and how we do things in our culture. [And] if we are the problem, there’s no way you can invite the problem to the table.”

– Chilande Kuloba-Warria.

“We want to be represented as traditional people. For example, if we are being represented as farmers on any platform, we don’t want them to dress us up in formal suit rather show us in cultural clothing. They shouldn’t perceive us of having less knowledge or education.”

– Workshop participant in response to a Mini Me exercise, conducted by ICARUS (Pakistan) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.

When you can use the sociocultural case to advocate for change

1 The risk of isolating communities due to a lack of cultural understanding

Without adequate sociocultural context, nonprofits risk alienating the very communities they seek to support.

This can happen when they erase or omit parts of a community's story or when they perpetuate harmful power dynamics and neocolonial power structures (even if this is done inadvertently).

It can also happen when a storyteller tells stories only from their own perspective or enforces their own ideas of what is right or true onto those being represented. Global or international nonprofits are especially susceptible to harmful communications missteps because the cultural divide between staff members and communities can be so great.

2 The risk of misrepresentation due to simplistic or linear portrayals

Human beings are nuanced and complex; that needs to be reflected in the stories that are told about them. Who are they? What makes them unique individuals?

When we don't tell stories with that kind of nuance and intersectionality, our narratives are just stereotypes and propaganda. Stories should honor people by presenting them in a well-rounded context. When communicators tell stories that present people in the context of their lives, we deepen trust and strengthen community engagement, and in so doing, enhance the potential impact of our programs and organizations.

“Every story, every person, everything has positive and negative sides. If you only show the negative side, without truly representing their struggle, that creates a negative impact.”

– Interview Participant in response to questions on the impact of stories from the sector, conducted by BRAC (Bangladesh) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.

“**You take away my voice and soul when you misrepresent me.**”

– Chilande Kuloba-Warria.

Reflection Prompts

- Are you aware of the tropes, conventions and stereotypes that are often associated with the subject you are communicating?
- And are you finding thoughtful ways to deviate from them where appropriate?

03

The Moral Case

The moral case showcases how better communications enable us to fulfill our duty to those we ultimately seek to serve.

This case is particularly effective for building broad support within a mission-driven organization.

“There are two camps: one is, we must tell ethical stories, we must not do harm, and the other one is, we must really raise money so that we can do good. And those two camps being entrenched in the absence of a third way, where we can hold the complexity of those priorities and honor both of them without needing to come into conflict around it all the time.”

– Michael Kass, Founder of the Center for Story and Spirit.

An open conversation about the tensions and nuances of the moral case.

If your communications are already raising money for a moral cause, does the ethical approach matter?

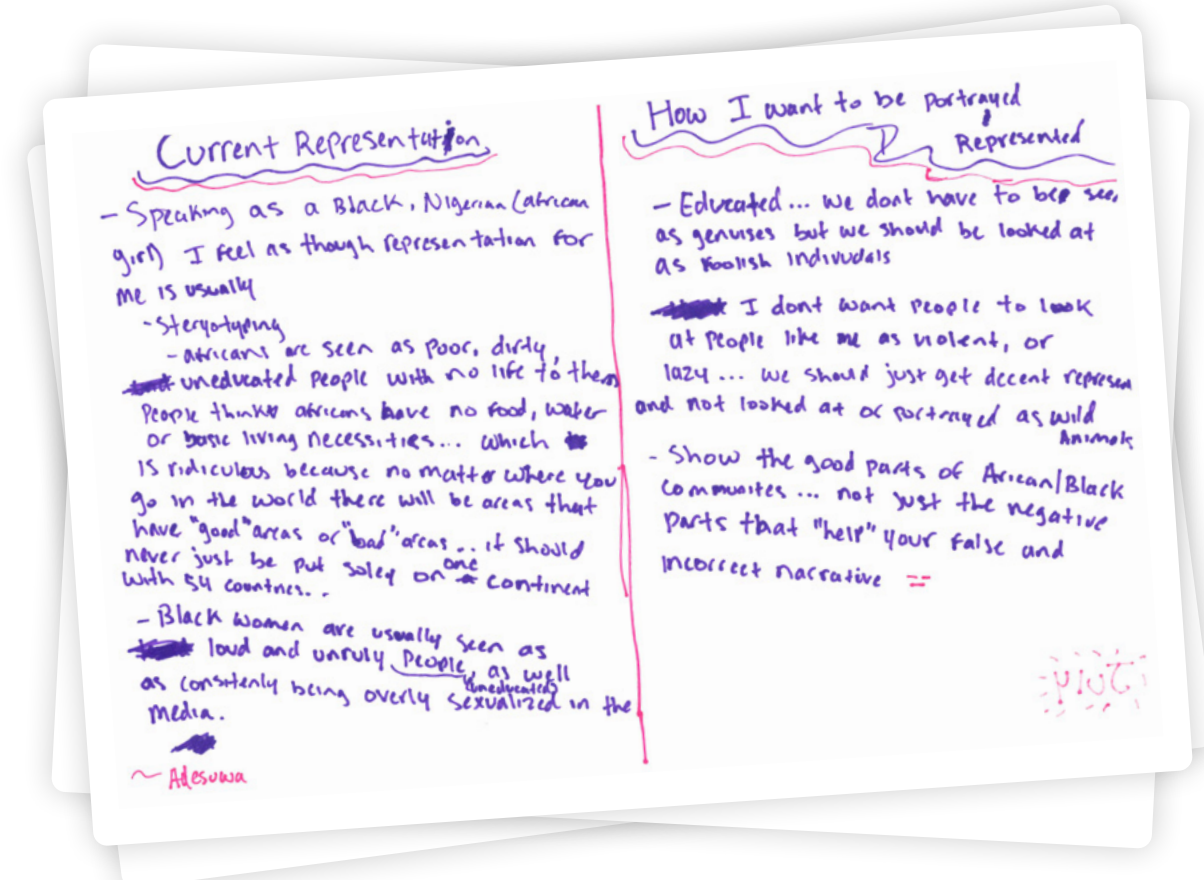
“The ends justify the means”. You are likely to encounter this troubling, but often-used excuse for perpetuating harmful communications. The thinking goes something like, “If we’re raising money to help solve a problem, it doesn’t matter if the communications are ethically questionable.”

The real motivation behind this argument is path-dependence. It can lead to unintentionally reinforcing harmful narratives about those represented because of a hyper-focus on creating “sob stories” that evoke pity and guilt in donors.

In the long run, this does not work toward the goal of empowering communities, and it avoids putting in the effort to see if more ethical communications can be more effective, which could lead to an even stronger impact. A balanced approach is the best way to acknowledge business realities while prioritizing the moral.

“Show the good parts of Black communities... not just the negative parts that “help” your false narrative.”

← Written testimonial from workshop with children and teenagers in response to a Mini Me exercise, conducted by Children’s Aid (United States) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.



Is the moral case enough to convince leaders?

For those managing budgets and bottom lines, the moral case alone might simply not be compelling enough.

People far removed from impacted communities and from story-gathering and storytelling processes are sometimes not convinced that the trust, authenticity, and engagement offered by these changes are worth the time and expense required.

It may work well will often work best to combine this case with the business case to respond to their concerns and place the moral benefits in the bigger picture of helping you achieve your organization’s wider goals.

When speaking to leaders, be cognizant of the fact that each person is at a different stage of their learning journey. This fact should never stop you from advocating for change, but keeping it in mind can help you create allies rather than opponents.



People do things for their reasons, not yours.

When you can use the moral case to advocate for change

There is more than one way to make the moral case. Some approaches that our contributors have found effective in the past are:

1 Encourage stakeholders to consider the cumulative impact of negative tropes

“The effect of stories over time makes it morally imperative to adopt harmless practices. Stories become the narrative of the place and people. If you look at what narratives have done to Africa over time you can see the negative consequences of stereotypes.”

– Victor Mark-Onyegbu.

2 Consider the transformative power of positive stories

The way we talk about things becomes the way we think about them. That means in addition to doing great harm, communicators can do great good.

Editorial standards, brand standards, and organizational policies can all be updated to protect privacy and dignity, account for inherent power dynamics, and limit potential harm.

“I want more people to know about my journey and be inspired to help 10 other Cynthias like me.”

– Interview Participant in response to questions on being featured in stories by NGOs, conducted by BRAC (Bangladesh) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.

Reflection Prompts

Where do your stakeholders’ priorities lie? How might you start with their concerns before emphasizing your own?

The Process: **Audit. Identify. Assemble.**

This three-step process offers guidance on how to present your case to senior stakeholders in a compelling way. It will help you understand why and how your communications journey and outputs need to change, and how you can approach decision-makers with this information most effectively.

01

Audit your communications

First, conduct an initial review that includes:

- **All communications standards and guidelines.** Start with your brand and/or editorial standards. What rules govern the use of imagery and the gathering of consent? What rules govern the descriptions of your work, or of community members? Your organization may also have official policies related to the safeguarding of community members, partners, and staff. What policies and organizational values are already in place that could support your case for more ethical storytelling?
- **All communications from a set time period.** It's unlikely you'll have the time to look at everything publicly available, so focus on the last three, six, or 12 months. Try to review all the different types of communications and the different channels where they are shared, rather than reviewing everything your organization has ever published. As you review, note (1) where and how your organization's communications are falling short of current standards and policies, and (2) any areas of potential harm that could be addressed by modifying or adding to current standards and policies.

“[CARE] committed to doing an audit of our image database. For example, we looked at how many images were taken by white men from the Global North, and how many photos were taken by women, and the level of deep consent. We also introduced subjective questions of ‘Is this image empowering or dignified? Does it represent our mission?’”

– Clare Spurrell.

- **All metrics for performance.** How does your organization measure the success of its communications?

What goals have you and your colleagues been optimizing toward? Do those goals reflect community concerns or priorities?

Next, gather input from others and outline recommendations:

- **Gather input from others.** Once you've done the work of assembling an initial audit, share the draft with fellow communicators, colleagues, and — if possible — community members. Gathering input across your organization's departments, geographies, and cultures is essential. Terms, concepts, and standards will be perceived differently across cultures and languages.
- **Identify the next steps.** After a comprehensive audit, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the volume of changes you feel your organization needs to make. Remember that this is a journey and, whether personal or institutional, journeys take time. Divide the changes into short-, mid-, and long-term categories. Be transparent with your colleagues about where the organization needs to head in the long term, but be realistic about what can and must be accomplished in the year ahead.
- **Start by stopping harm.** If you're not sure what to prioritize, start by stopping harm. It takes no time or resource to stop using harmful imagery or telling stories “about people without people,” whereas it can take years to develop truly ethical, contextual, community-informed communications. Both are essential in the long term, but if you can stop harm today, do it!

Note: this initial input is to identify areas of harm and the general direction your communications need to evolve. It is not adequate for guiding a years-long evolution — it is just to get you started and “make the case” for change.



What are practical steps organizations can take towards ethical storytelling?

↑ Click here to watch **Levis Nderitu** lead a discussion with **Chilande Kuloba-Warria**, **Clare Spurrell** and **Victor Mark-Onyegbu** (pictured).

To see the discussion in full, [click here](#).

Click here to access an audit checklist made by David Verga.

02

Identify decision-makers and tensions

Now that you've gotten initial input and consensus, identify the decision-makers you'll need to convince, and keep in mind the tensions they will face.

For example, you'll likely need permission and funding which will involve:

- The executive team and/or board of directors.
- Program and/or project leads.
- Philanthropy and/or communications leads

Executives, board members, and leaders will likely face tensions around:

- Budget management and the “bottom line.”
- Entrenched donors (don't “upset” the money.)
- Risks of communicating sensitive topics.
- Managing third-party content creation.
- Institutional and team bandwidth.

03

Assemble your case

Now that your audit is complete and you've gathered input, outlined and prioritized the next steps, an identified decision makers, it's time to make your case. Will you use the business, sociocultural, or moral case?

Or a combination of all three? Use your experience as a communicator to determine what will be most effective for your specific situation and audience. Below, we offer advice on how to best make each of the three cases to stakeholders.

In order to best make the...

Business case

Review your current comms budget. Determine what is spent on story gathering and storytelling, then develop an estimate for what a more ethical approach might cost in the short and long term. Use data and numbers and research. Find other organizations that have made successful transitions and maintained — or even grown — their donor base since implementing more ethical storytelling practices. Show them the cost is worth the benefit, especially when fundraising is the prime aim.

- Demonstrate the risk of NOT changing. Unethical story-gathering and storytelling practices increase risk to our clients, reputation, and institution. Showing examples of the reputational damage organizations experience because of unethical communications and sharing the sector standard of more ethical communications are powerful ways to demonstrate the cost of not changing.

- Frame it as evolving your approach to align with shifting donor preferences. Stories and images that spotlight suffering without context are beginning to push donors away rather than draw them in.

Increasingly, donors are expecting to receive ethical stories and are channeling their donations toward organizations that operate and message in ethical ways.

- Ask trusted donors for quotes about their desire for different stories and/or develop a small focus group to test current and new messaging.

“The landscape of funders is evolving to one that is more socially aware.”

– Victor Mark-Onyegbu

Sociocultural case

- Take a hard look at your organizational chart and note potential gaps in lived local experience. The most effective way to bridge sociocultural divides is to remove them altogether by employing communicators in and from the places where organizations work. Sometimes communicators must even ask themselves, Am I the right person to tell this story? Or is someone with lived experience a better choice?

“Many team members were local and were speaking Saraiki local language so it made us trust them.”

– Workshop participant in response to a journey mapping exercise, conducted by ICARUS (Pakistan) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.

“Or if it’s being bold and saying ‘actually I’m not capable of telling this story and I would like to help you restore your sense of agency, and if you feel like you’re able to do it, write it yourself.’ That would be a powerful way to uplift.”

– Raquel Thomas, Operations Associate at Grantmakers for Girls of Color.

- Highlight successful examples. Collaborative and contextualized storytelling often results in more innovative and effective nonprofit communications.
- Ask community members for feedback about your organization’s current communications and what they think of the images and the narratives, and how things might be more authentically presented.
- Learn about cultural differences through those with lived expertise. For a better understanding, you can have open conversations with staff or community members from the culture and incorporate learnings into the communications process.

Moral case

- Emphasize the importance of shifting power from the organization to the community, and how this shift leads to better communications as well as more impactful programs and sustainable progress.
- Provide historical, social, and cultural context. Become a student of the historical, social, and cultural contexts that surround your organization’s mission, and the communities it seeks to support. Many mission-driven sectors and organizations have complex histories rooted in, or echoing, colonial power structures.
- Present as a chance to further your organization’s mission and values. Demonstrate how evolving your communications could better align them to, and even further advance, your mission and impact.

Click here

to access a PowerPoint deck tool which will help you make the case you choose to your senior stakeholders. The deck, which is for you to adapt and build out, includes an explanation of each case, its implications, questions for reflection, quotes from expert voices and place for a case study.

For further inspiration on how to make your case:

For help making your case, draw on messaging and momentum from global movements like Black Lives Matter and worldwide institutional progress in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Draw on your own institutional values, goals, and mission. Gather quotes from community members, fellow communicators, funders, and partners. And, of course, use the templates in this toolkit to help organize your thoughts and share a succinct but impactful executive summary.