YOUR CORE MESSAGE

A Guide for Nonprofits and Foundations

springboard
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If your answer to the question "What does your organization do?" begins with "Um …," you need a core message. If you struggle to connect the different elements of your organization's work, you need a core message. If you can talk comfortably about what you do but struggle to talk about why you do it, yep – you guessed it – you need a core message.

A core message – similar to an "elevator speech" – is a concise, compelling description of the work your organization does and its impact.

You only get one chance to make a first impression, and a strong core message can set the tone. Whoever is reading or hearing your message needs to understand what you do and why it matters before they take action to support you. When you can clearly and consistently describe the problem your organization solves, how you solve it, and the impact of those efforts, people (including your colleagues!) are more likely to buy in.

A core message is also useful in "framing" your work. While the idea of a "frame" is much debated in the communication space, we think of a frame as the conversation about what the conversation is about. So, for example, a nonprofit working to reduce air pollution might frame its work primarily in terms of environmental conservation, or it might employ public health or race equity frames. Your core message will help you make a conscious choice about how you frame your work.

Your core message is an expression of your organization's "brand" – your organization's core identity. As observed in our 2020 *Build on Brand* report, "your brand gives you a compass for developing an overarching message that describes your organization's work."

In short, a core message is the communication tool you never knew you always needed. Building one for your organization will be challenging, but that's why you have this guide.
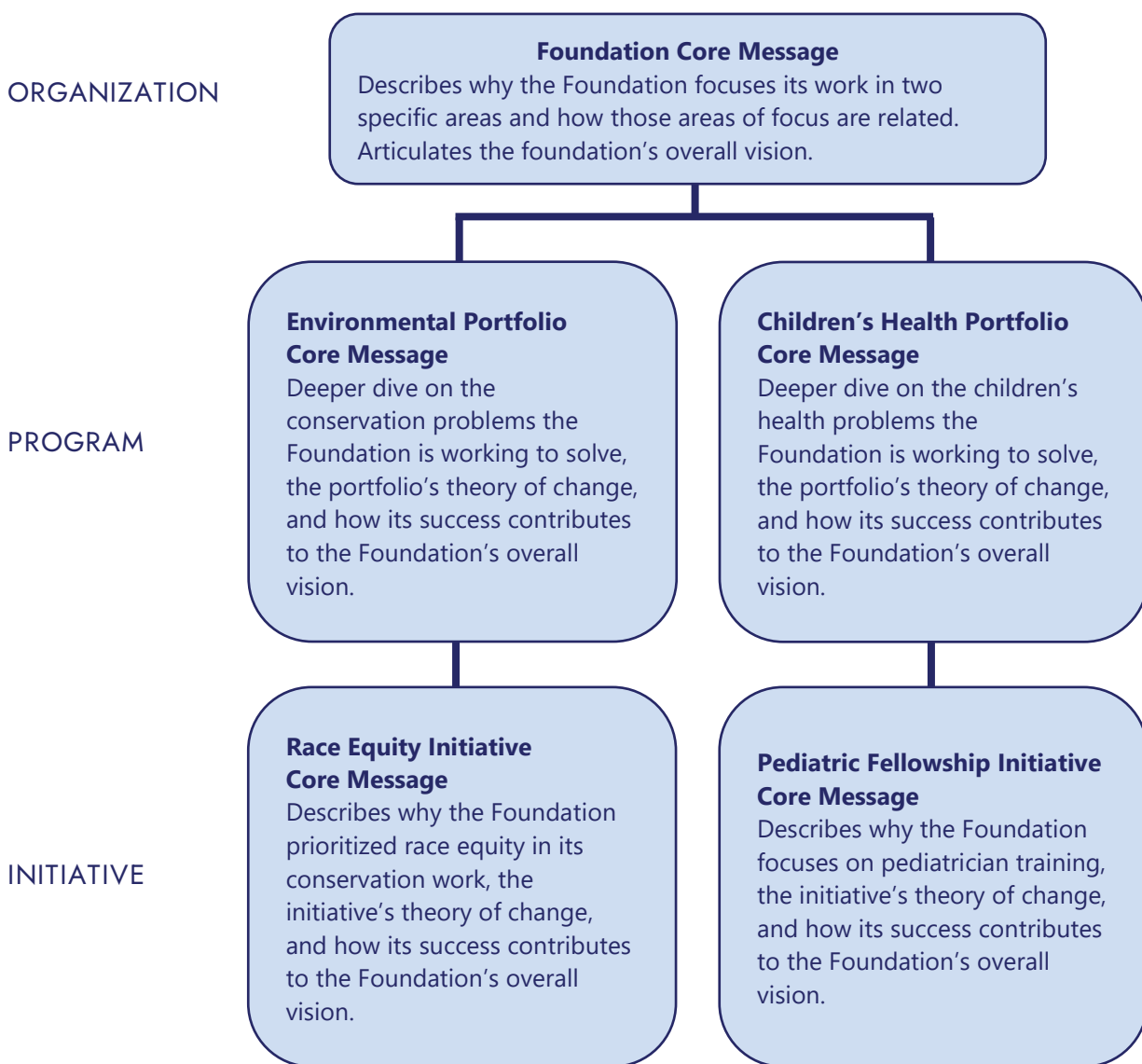
Let's get started.

Core message for what?

When we originally developed the core message, we imagined it as a tool for organizations. We soon realized that this would be too limiting. We have since developed core messages for organizations, initiatives launched by organizations, and products like a community-based economic development plan or a new data visualization tool.

At its highest level, a nonprofit or foundation will have a set of aligned core messages, with the broadest "organizational" core message at the top having room within it for the core messages of each of the organization's initiatives and products. Consider these examples:

ORGANIZATION

Foundation Core Message
Describes why the Foundation focuses its work in two specific areas and how those areas of focus are related. Articulates the foundation's overall vision.

PROGRAM

Environmental Portfolio Core Message
Deeper dive on the conservation problems the Foundation is working to solve, the portfolio's theory of change, and how its success contributes to the Foundation's overall vision.

Children's Health Portfolio Core Message
Deeper dive on the children's health problems the Foundation is working to solve, the portfolio's theory of change, and how its success contributes to the Foundation's overall vision.

INITIATIVE

Race Equity Initiative Core Message
Describes why the Foundation prioritized race equity in its conservation work, the initiative's theory of change, and how its success contributes to the Foundation's overall vision.

Pediatric Fellowship Initiative Core Message
Describes why the Foundation focuses on pediatrician training, the initiative's theory of change, and how its success contributes to the Foundation's overall vision.

While "nested" core messages of this sort are best practice, you don't have to do it all at once. We offer some thoughts below on building nested core messages.

How can you use it?

Applications are virtually endless! From website content to talking points for presentations and policy meetings, you can incorporate language from your core message into a range of communication projects.

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A conservation collaborative applied its core message to develop materials for members to share with others outside the community who were interested in the work, including a one-pager, webpage text, and social media graphics. An early childhood funder used its core message as the introduction for its testimony before the District of Columbia Council. Nonprofits have used their core messages in applications ranging from in-person presentations to website copy.

Core message elements

A strong core message is built around answers to three questions:

1. What problem are you trying to solve?
2. What is your unique response to that problem?
3. Why does it matter?

These three elements each do different things, but they are designed to work together to help you make a coherent, compelling case for your work. We'll get into much more detail on each of these elements in the Building Your Core Message section below.

Problem

The problem statement is the most important of the three, because it explains why your organization or initiative exists. If the problem didn't exist, there'd be no need for the work you do. If the problem were different than you describe in the problem statement, it'd need a different response.

Unique response

A strong unique response statement shows how your work is responsive to the problem. We chose the word "response" carefully, because some problems are very big, and there are no silver-bullet "solutions." So it's about conveying how the work you do makes progress toward your goals, even if it's not a complete solution.

But it is critically important that your unique response statement describes how your work is responsive to the problem you described. Your unique response describes:

- What your organization does to respond to the problem you described in the problem statement, and
- How that makes things better for the person or people whose problem you described in the problem statement

A strong unique response statement also describes why your organization or initiative is unique – or, at least, distinctive. The more you can do to distinguish your response from that of other nonprofits working on the same problem, the more compelling your core message will be.

Payoff

The payoff statement is all about helping the person you're communicating with see why your success matters. It describes the impact your organization or initiative will make in addressing the problem. It's important to ensure that the benefits you describe in the payoff statement are framed in a way that aligns with the problem. That means keeping it realistic – conveying the impact of your work without overstating it. It also means describing the benefit of your work from the perspective of the same people whose problem you described in the problem statement.

All (OK, mostly) about you

We at Springboard Partners are committed to the idea that persuasive messages – messages designed to help a specific audience take a particular action – have to be based on the values your audience already holds and the barriers you'll have to overcome to engage them. But your core message is different. You might use it in a wide range of contexts involving lots of different audiences, and that's OK. In fact, that's what it was designed to do.

The core message is largely a tool for you. It makes it easier for the people who work in and with your organization to talk about the work. And it promotes consistency, so your audiences are getting essentially the same introduction to your work no matter who they hear it from.

As we'll discuss later, there are some ways you can tailor your core message for a specific audience, by carefully selecting your supporting points. And, if you have time, that's the best practice. But the messages themselves aren't audience-dependent.

Considerations

Doesn't have to start with the problem

While our approach begins with defining the problem and ends with describing the payoff, your core message doesn't have to follow that construction. Depending on the context, you can

begin your core message by highlighting the future payoff you're working toward, or by sharing the unique way your organization approaches its work. The order matters less than the content!

Focus first on honestly answering the question — worry about length and wordsmithing later

It can be tricky to develop a message that captures the essence of your work and resonates with everyone on your team. As you begin drafting, resist the urge to nitpick your word choice and edit your thoughts. Instead, focus on simply answering each question as honestly as possible. Your message will look messy in the development stage, and that's OK!

Not a script to repeat word-for-word

Your staff members, board members, or partners may think of your core message as a script they must memorize and recite word-for-word every time. That's not what it's about. It's about conveying concepts consistently and comfortably, not about memorizing and regurgitating. In fact, one idea we'll recommend later is to work with your team to put the core message in their own words.

Short and simple

As we noted above, your core message is used on your website, as an introduction during presentations, or in other similar applications. There's no maximum length for your core message, but it should be short enough to comfortably fit those and similar applications. In general, we recommend a couple of sentences for each message element.

Burying your messages in a pile of caveats and exceptions undermines their persuasive power (and gets confusing quickly!). Stick with simplicity. Not only do you want your readers and listeners to pay attention long enough for you to inform them, but you want your colleagues to feel confident using it.

Jargon terms like "population health" and acronyms like EPSDT rob your messages of emotional power, and sometimes even meaning, and they turn real problems facing real people into abstractions. Use easy-to-understand language, even if it takes longer.

The problems your organization works to solve are complex – perhaps even systemic – and fixing them requires more than what your organization can do alone. Don't be afraid to highlight partial solutions in your core message. For example, if your organization focuses on addressing food insecurity among children, it's appropriate to state the impact your work has on ensuring kids have access to healthy meals at school, even if you're not eradicating world hunger.

Not all you'll say - supporting points prove the point

To strengthen your message, consider including a compelling statistic, a carefully-chosen fact, or an engaging anecdote to illustrate your key points.

For example, to prove the importance of paying attention to maternal mental health needs, one organization included a fact: maternal mental health problems are more prevalent than breast cancer, yet less researched and funded. When you hear "breast cancer," you likely think about the color pink and the month of October. Comparing the awareness of and prevention measures in place for breast cancer, which is less pervasive, to the awareness of and prevention measures in place for maternal mental health, which affects far more men and women, illustrates the need.

Broadly speaking, there are three types of supporting points:

1. Statistics – A number used to underscore your point. Examples:
   - *About ⅔ of Asian American people in the US are immigrants*
   - *The U.S. wastes 108 billion pounds of food every year*
2. Facts – An accurate statement that does not employ a number. Examples:
   - *Maternal mental health problems are more prevalent than breast cancer*
   - *When you account for population, the United States has the biggest carbon footprint of any country on the planet*
3. Story or anecdote – The illustrative experiences of real people who have lived through the problem you work to solve or whose lives were improved by the work you do.

We employ only one rule with respect to supporting points: the fewer the better. Too many supporting points can obscure your message, so aim for no more than three. Beyond that, choose your own adventure! You might choose to include the supporting point in the message itself, or you might leave it out of your draft but use it in practice, when talking with or writing for people outside your organization. And, importantly, each user of your message can – and, in fact, should – build their own supporting points. That's part of the process (described below) of making the core message one's own.

Don't do this alone!

It's important to have more than one perspective at the table when drafting a core message. Not only does it help to flesh out ideas and to check assumptions, but it makes the task less daunting.

Building your core message

We designed the core message tool around answers to three questions, because that approach makes it easier to start drafting. The best way to get started is to answer the three core message questions. This section presents them in order, but as noted above, you may find it easier to draft your unique response statement first. If you don't know where to start, consult your organization's brand. And again, don't worry about wording at all for your first draft – answer the questions honestly, knowing that nobody but you will likely ever see those answers.

Your problem statement

As we discussed above, the problem statement is critical to an effective core message. You should plan to spend the most time and energy on your problem statement.

It may be helpful to explore a couple of common challenges nonprofits and foundations face in drafting problem statements. Those are specificity and alignment.

Your problem statement must be specific enough to make your unique response meaningful. For example, consider FisheryProgress.org, an initiative of the conservation nonprofit FishChoice. "Fishery improvement projects" (FIPs) bring suppliers, retailers, and food-service companies together with conservation groups and scientific experts to address environmental challenges in more than 100 fisheries worldwide. FisheryProgress.org validates their progress reports and makes them available on a single, accessible website.

A broader problem statement like "as the number of FIPs has grown, it's gotten harder for conservation-minded seafood buyers to track their progress" won't work. It doesn't say enough about the specific needs the site meets. But saying just a little more about the problem makes FisheryProgress.org a common-sense response:

Problem	Before FisheryProgress.org, getting information about FIPs' progress required searching dozens of websites. And even then, prospective buyers or conservation advocates faced inconsistent documentation and questions about the data's reliability.
Unique response	FisheryProgress.org brings all of that data together on one site, using standard metrics to assess progress, and ensuring that data is independently verified.

It's also critical that your problem statement and your unique response be aligned. If your problem statement is off-target, your unique response won't sound right, and your core

message won't hang together. Let's start with this example from a fictitious nonprofit that encourages corporate leaders to employ responsible labor practices:

Problem	Corporate boards have a legal responsibility to build companies that can succeed today and in the future. But too often, big employers focus exclusively on quarterly profits, ignoring the needs of working families struggling to get by.
Unique response	We develop informational materials and provide training to help new board members at large corporations understand how issues like food insecurity, unmet health and mental health needs, and housing insecurity at home affect retention, attendance, and performance on the job.

The problem statement here doesn't make it clear why an intervention like the one described in the unique response can make a real difference. That's because it presents the problem in terms of the company's employees and their families, when corporate board members' ultimate responsibility is to shareholders. Consider this revision:

Problem	Corporate boards have a legal responsibility to build companies that can succeed today and in the future. When employers focus exclusively on quarterly profits, ignoring the needs of working families struggling to get by, they actually undermine their own long-term productivity and competitiveness.
Unique response	We develop informational materials and provide training to help new board members at large corporations understand how issues like food insecurity, unmet health and mental health needs, and housing insecurity at home affect retention, attendance, and performance on the job.

As you revise your draft, it may be helpful to ask yourself "whose problem is it?" In the example above, the first version describes the problem as affecting working families. But board members have a responsibility to the company, not to families.

The second version redefines the same bad corporate behavior as a problem for the investors board members represent. That descriptive change made it clearer why board members have a reason – in fact, a responsibility – to learn about the needs of the company's employees and their families.

In some cases, it's also useful to think about this as more of a "need statement" than a problem statement. This example from a housing security nonprofit illustrates the need statement approach:

Problem	Families with low incomes can often pay monthly rent, but not the first-month's, last-month's, and security deposit many landlords require to get an apartment in the first place.
Unique response	Our renters' revolving loan fund covers the initial costs of becoming a renter, and families pay their loans back in manageable monthly installments. As one family repays their loan, we lend the money back out to help another family.

Being unable to get an apartment is, of course, a "problem" – a big one. And the problem statement isn't any different, but thinking of it as a need may make the drafting process easier.

Checklist

Your problem statement should:

- ☐ Be clear and understandable to someone with no experience or technical expertise in the field you work in, and who is hearing about the problem for the first time
- ☐ Make it obvious what the problem is and whose problem it is
- ☐ Describe the problem in a way that leads the reader / listener to want a response like the one offered by your organization or initiative
- ☐ Be as concise as is possible to do all three things above

Your unique response statement

Once you've got a rock-solid problem statement, it's time to talk about how your work responds to the problem. As you begin drafting a unique response remember this: both words matter.

As described above, the best core messages describe the organization's or initiative's work in a way that differentiates it from others working to solve the same problem. Recall the bad corporate employment behavior example above. Training board members on why treating workers more responsibly is good for business is one potential response to that problem. Here are three others:

- Advocate for a change to the law requiring that employees hold no fewer than 10% of seats on the board of directors of any publicly-traded corporation
- Engage activist investors to force reforms of corporate policy and practice
- Engage economic columnists and business news pundits to hold bad actors accountable for shortsighted decisions counter to long-term shareholder interests

If the problem you work on is worth solving, there are very likely other nonprofits trying to solve it. As you draft, look for opportunities to add superlatives, like "only," "first," "biggest," or "most effective." Even if you don't use those exact words in your draft, thinking about the things that make your work different from the pack will help you draft a better unique response.

More importantly, your unique response must be responsive. That just means that your unique response statement must clearly communicate how the work you do responds to the problem you're trying to solve. If it's not, your unique response statement may be missing a critical element of the work you do, or your problem statement may be off the mark.

Checklist

Your unique response statement should:

- ☐ Clearly describe what your organization or initiative does, such that everyone on your staff could see their work fitting under that description, even if the description doesn't literally mention their role or division
- ☐ Clearly demonstrate how your work responds to the problem you describe in the problem statement; if it doesn't, revisit the problem statement to see how you can adjust.
- ☐ Differentiate your work from that of other organizations such that it would be difficult for another organization or initiative working on the same problem to claim your unique response as its own
- ☐ Be as concise as is possible to do those three things

Your payoff statement

The payoff statement allows you to demonstrate your work's impact. It's your best chance to humanize your work, by showing your reader or telling your listener how your work improves the lives of the people you serve. It's where you can describe how your work makes communities safer, makes the country more prosperous or equitable, or protects the whole planet by making sustainability easier or more cost-effective.

As noted above, it's important to align the payoff with the problem. If your problem statement defines the problem you're trying to solve in terms of elementary educational performance, your payoff statement should describe the benefits of your work in similar terms, with references to things like improved student test scores or high school graduation rates. But if you describe the problem in terms of racial bias in education, your payoff should describe your work's impact using indicators of improved equity, like reduced disproportionality in school discipline, test scores, and graduation rates.

If possible, describe the payoff of your work in terms of gains already realized for the people your work benefits, like this: 93% of students who complete our tutoring program can read at grade level on their next annual assessment. If your initiative or organization is new, describe the payoff in terms of your goals, like this: We expect real increases in standardized test reading scores.

Checklist

Your payoff statement should:

- [ ] Paint a realistic picture of what solving the problem looks like
- [ ] Describe those gains from the perspective of the person or group of people whose problem you described in the problem statement
- [ ] Be as concise as is possible to do those two things

Now what?

Once you've drafted your core message, and run it through your organization's approval processes, it's time to put your new core message to use.

Spokesperson training

People who routinely talk with important external audiences about your work should be trained on your core message. While there are some complexities, that boils down to helping your colleagues understand the ideas your core message aims to convey, craft supporting points that personalize the message for them, and practice. Training should begin with your executive director, communication team, and development director. But if someone on your team talks with clients, partners, funders, grantees, journalists, or other important external audiences, they should be trained too. And don't forget to train your board!

Part of organizational culture

Eventually, you want using the core message to be automatic – just something everyone at your organization consistently does, like the weekly staff meeting (but more interesting) or Friday happy hour (but less interesting). You can gradually socialize the core message with your team by implementing ideas like:

- Modeling best practice, with the organizational leaders using the core message consistently in external communication

- Using department meetings as recurring opportunities for practice or Q&A on the core message
- Using all-staff meetings as a forum to share supporting points, so members of your team can hear what makes the message authentic for their colleagues
- Sharing examples of the core message applied to written or multimedia communications
- Employing your core message in job descriptions and other hiring materials, so prospective hires begin grounding themselves in it even before they join your team, and then making core message training an early part of your onboarding process

Nested core messages

Once you have effectively implemented your first core message, consider going back through the process for a program, initiative, or product. As you do, your organizational core message should be your first reference point. The problem statement you articulate for your program or initiative should fit within the problem statement in your organizational core message, and the same is true for the other message elements.

When you have created your first nested core message, draft additional ones for initiatives and programs as needed. This approach will make it easier to communicate about new initiatives. It will also improve the cohesiveness with which you talk about different aspects of your work and contribute to a culture where every new important thing your organization does has a core message that makes sense in the context of related core messages.

Routine maintenance

Your core message is an important tool you use to communicate your understanding of your work and why it matters. That understanding will likely change over time. When you update your brand or your strategic plan, or when you have a significant leadership change, take a critical look at your core message.

Do you still understand the problem the same way? Are you doing something fundamentally different than you did when you drafted the core message? Honestly answering questions like these can tell you whether you're good to go or if it's time for an update.

Stay in touch

We want to hear what you think about this guide. What's missing? What feels wrong? What's awesome? Shoot us an email at hello@springboard.partners to share your thoughts.

We shared this guide because we think anyone can build a core message for their organization or initiative, and because we think everyone should. But there is a bit of process to take into account, and it can sometimes help to have an external partner who isn't as invested in your work. If we can help your organization build a core message, please reach out – we'd love to work with you.

Meanwhile, thanks for reading, and we can't wait to read your first core message!