

Test: Narratives about change

Narratives are central to engagement, especially when change is taking place within an area. This applies if we are talking about a change being brought in by a council, like a channel shift or a regeneration project. And it applies if we are discussing a change happening thanks to external factors, like demographic shifts or macro-economic changes.

Below are two ways of testing narratives. The first looks at understanding the narratives around a change. The second looks at developing counternarratives.

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Step One: Gauge the narrative around the change you are discussing

The grid below shows four political narratives. It is based on the concepts of Robert Reich, way back in 1985. He said that all political campaigns fitted into four 'parables': 'The rot at the top', 'The mob at the gates', 'The benevolent community' and 'The triumphant individual'.¹

	We	Me
Fear	'The rot at the top'	'The mob at the gates'
Hope	'The benevolent community'	'The triumphant individual'

The grid has added labels to the parables, to show whether they are optimistic or pessimistic, and whether they are collectivist or individualistic.

The likelihood, if you are looking at a controversial change in your area, the narratives will most likely fit into the 'fear' categories – 'The rot at the top' or 'The mob at the gates'. The council's proposed narratives, meanwhile, are likely to be in the 'hope' category. Often this will centre on 'The benevolent community', but sometimes it will be a 'triumphant individual narrative' – based on the council taking down the barriers to success in the area.

Good engagement around change relies on understanding the strength of these narratives. If you don't understand them or are not engaging with them, then relations with the community can break down.

¹ [Political Parables for Today](#), Robert B. Reich, New York Times, November 1985

How you test these narratives depended how much resource you have. But if you are consulting about a major change – even one which appears wholly positive at first – it is important to give them some thought. As a minimum, you should have internal discussions, where you mark the narratives on a scale of -5 to +5, depending how potent they are. Ideally, you will be able to carry out primary research, teasing out the true strength of the parables.

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Step Two: Test your own narratives

A second part of this is about testing narratives, strategies and visions for what the change could involve for the area.

Christopher Booker's *Seven Basic Plots: Why we tell stories* is a famous text, looking at narratives. It sets out seven core narratives, into which most films and novels fit.

These include: 'Overcoming the monster', where a threat is overcome, and 'The quest', where a group sets off in search of something. 'Rebirth' involves the capture and then freedom – or error and then redemption – and 'Rags to riches' is a story of success against the odds.

Other stories which organisations often tell include the 'How we are different', the 'Who we are' narratives and the 'Apology and recovery' story. There are many other templates and formats.

Think about all of these, and about what the story of the change in your community is. Is it a tale of redemption and renaissance? Is it a story of learning what really matters?

By running exercises around these concepts, you can work both within the organisation and with residents, to test and develop positive stories about change.

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