

MODULE 8 – CREATING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

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When we talk about a shared understanding between stakeholders, we are talking about language, frames, and framework. Since you just talked about data, let's look at statistical significance as an example.

In everyday English, "significant" means "important." However, in the everyday language of statistics, "significant" means "probably true", "not due to chance." Hence, a research finding may be "true" without being very important. When statisticians say a result is "highly significant", they mean it is very probably true. However, "true" may not necessarily mean it is a highly or very important finding.

Unfortunately, statistically significant numbers may not tell us exactly what we want to show in determining an issue as important or one solution as the best, especially when we frame issues and solutions in terms of how much and how many.

Policy analysts and policymakers look for causes to understand the world and to assign who or what is responsible for problems. Stone discusses four types of causal theories commonly used in policy arguments-- accidental causes, intentional causes, inadvertent causes, and mechanical causes. Once you recognize the different types, you can analyze how policy makers and researchers strategically look at issues, or as Stone says, by framing them as causal stories.

Accidental causes include natural disasters and anything that belongs to the realm of fate. Intentional causes are problems that are direct consequences of willful human action. Saying that someone or something intentionally caused a problem places blame and assigns responsibility for that problem to an individual or an institution. Inadvertent causes are the unintended consequences of human action, often seen as a side effect of an existing earlier policy decision.

Mechanical causes include events caused by things that have no will of their own. This is different from natural causes, in that human-machine interaction itself can result in problems, such as the failure of a child protection tracking system when the system fails to update or to flag a potentially serious problem due to software issues.

Researchers don't look at causes the same way. Causes are possible trajectories to solutions to an identified slice of a problem that has implications for practice. Researchers are not trained to personalize nor to state conclusions unless the numbers back them up. Facts are also seen as solutions. They are intended to change people's behavior.

Having a hearing, holding a conference, or disseminating policy briefs are typical efforts by policymakers to offer a solution. Publishing best practices or conducting comparative effectiveness research are typical efforts by researchers to offer a solution. Both use facts, but differently. And that leads to communication difficulties.

Why can't they communicate? Well, researchers have difficulty communicating their findings in ways that policymakers can easily understand. Policymakers have trouble communicating what it is they really need to know from researchers. For example, most research articles do not provide actionable items that are easily identified by policymakers. In addition, research is seldom published in materials that policymakers read and vice versa.

Policymakers many times may not actually read the research. The research is digested for them by their staff or given in soundbites-- that is, information out of context. A policy problem may actually drive the result in research being conducted related to a specific issue, whereas research oftentimes is not to be conducted just simply to effect policy change.

Since priorities are different and they occur at different times, sometimes one can simply say that researchers and policy agendas are out of sync with each other. Other times, research findings may contradict established priorities and programs, which policymakers then are reluctant to change due to economic or political pressures.

Another problem is that inconclusive or conflicting research findings based upon the variety of different methodologies may make it difficult to determine the validity of the data and the strength of the argument for change. Causality is very difficult to prove with 100% accuracy. Although researchers may make cautious claims policymakers want more certainty that they are making the right choice.

And finally, researchers and policymakers don't really trust each other. Researchers see policymakers as authoritarians and not understanding the science. Policymakers see researchers as those folks from the ivory towers who do not understand the policy process.