

# POSITIONING FOR IMPACT:

## Asset Based Language Guide

Adapted from: Social Impact Architects. *Where Do We Go From Here? Using the Nonprofit Lifecycle to Plan Ahead.*

Our language reflects our values. This guide is designed to help staff, partners, and collaborators communicate in ways that center dignity, inclusion, and trust. Asset-based language is not about political correctness—it is about precision, empathy, and respect that strengthen credibility and connection.

Language shapes how people see themselves and how others see them. Using asset-based language creates narratives that affirm agency, resilience, and potential. It ensures our words reflect the respect, trust, and humanity we aim to model in every interaction.



## Positioning for Impact: *Why It Matters?*

### 1. Building Trust and Legitimacy

Language shapes perception and signals values. When organizations describe communities through a deficit lens, they risk reinforcing paternalism and eroding credibility. Asset-based framing restores balance by honoring lived experience and positioning communities as co-authors in the story of change. This approach builds the trust and authenticity that every mission-driven organization depends on.

### 2. Aligning Words with Mission

Most nonprofits speak of empowerment, opportunity, and equity—but not all communicate that way. Asset-based framing ensures your language reflects your mission, values, and the people you serve. By replacing narratives of need with stories of strength, organizations align internal and external messaging, creating coherence between what they say and how they show up.

### 3. Driving Engagement and Impact

The way we frame our work determines how others respond to it. Deficit-based stories can evoke sympathy, but asset-based stories inspire participation. By highlighting capability and potential, organizations invite funders, partners, and communities into shared ownership of impact. The result is deeper engagement, stronger collaboration, and outcomes that last.

# ASSET BASED COMMUNICATION

## Opt for Inclusive Language.

Language has the power to include or exclude. If you're talking about a group of people or an unknown person, always describe people in the way they prefer. When preferences are unknown, use the most inclusive option available. That will mean using "they/their" as a singular pronoun in some instances. It also means avoiding language that assumes gender, like "you guys" or "chairman."

Instead of...	Consider using...
mom/dad parent parent involvement	Family caregiver family engagement
Differently abled Handicapped He suffers from/is a victim of diabetes High-functioning	Person with a disability Students with disabilities He has diabetes Person who is (not) able to
his/hers, he/she	They (singular)
Chairman of the board	Board chair
Different/other languages Non-English speakers English learners	Languages other than English Multilingual families, dual-language learners Emergent Bi-linguals Individuals with limited English proficiency Families whose native language is not English Children who speak multiple languages at home

### Communication Do's

- *Humanize who you are talking about, rather than defining them by a characteristic.*
- *Use descriptors that are specific, relevant, and necessary, being careful to avoid coded language.*
- *Assign responsibility for gaps to the systems that created or are perpetuating the inequities being referenced.*
- *Avoid stereotypes about the people and communities you reference.*

### Communication Dont's

- *Assume that apathy is the reason why people don't engage.*
- *Reduce communities to labels or clichés—speak to their strengths and individuality.*
- *Use shorthand or coded language that reinforces stereotypes.*
- *Rely on stereotypes when describing people or communities.*

## Use Person-First Language.

Person-first language centers identity over condition. It reminds us that people are never defined by what they have, lack, or experience.

Instead of...	Consider using...
Differently abled Suffers from ADHD She is wheelchair-bound	Person with a disability Has ADHD She uses a wheelchair
SPED students High- or low-functioning	Students receiving special education services Person who is (or is not) able to
Low-income children (children don't have income!)	Children/families in poverty Children from low-income backgrounds

# ASSET BASED COMMUNICATION

## Say What We Mean.

Often, euphemisms creep into our language as a shorthand for other things. For example, someone may use “Title I school” to mean a school with a high percentage of students in poverty, or “urban community” to mean a school with a large Black or Latino student body – or more specifically poor and non-white students.

Pay attention to whether your words actually say what you mean. Clear, accurate language ensures that our messages reflect both our intent and our values. It’s always about making sure that your language is precise and reflects your organizational values as an equity-focused, mission driven entity.

Instead of...	Consider using...
Title I school	School that serves low-income families School receiving Title I funding
At-risk	Underserved communities (not individuals) At risk of ____ (specify the risk you mean) Children impacted by risk factors like . . .
Low-income families Low-income children (children don’t have income!) Low-income communities	Families who are economically disadvantaged Children experiencing poverty Children experiencing economic disadvantage Families impacted by socio-economic disadvantage Communities where economic disadvantage is concentrated
“Hard to reach” families	Families who have been historically underserved Families who have been marginalized



## Guidelines for Usage of Specific Terms:

Even familiar terms can be misunderstood or misapplied. When we choose precision over shorthand, we model care, accuracy, and accountability in how we describe the work and the people connected to it.

Term	Usage Guidelines
Under-resourced, underprivileged, economically disadvantaged	<i>These may be appropriate in a broad sense but avoid labeling <b>individuals</b> with these terms.</i>
Achievement gap, opportunity gap	<i>These words describe a problem to be solved. Instead of focusing on the problem, consider ways to reframe your language to talk about elevating all learners to reach their highest potential.</i>
Title I funding	<i>“Title I” describes a funding source, not a whole school or group of people. Don’t use Title I alone as a shorthand.</i>
Special education	<i>Use special education to refer to programs or services, not students (ie – children receiving special education services).</i>

“  
Words are things. You must be careful about the words you use or the words you allow to be used in your house.  
-Dr. Maya Angelou”



# ASSET BASED COMMUNICATION

## Use Asset-Based Language.

Do not center your organization as the solution. Instead, describe your work as one piece of a larger ecosystem and shared vision for impact. Words shape how people see themselves and how others see them.

Be mindful that people internalize the language and expectations they hear. Avoid motivating with negative-framed or fear-mongering language. Using asset-based language helps create narratives that affirm agency, resilience, and potential.

Deficit-based language...	Asset-based language...
Looks at people/situations through a lens of what is missing or wrong	Focuses on strengths, potentials, and opportunities
Carries negative connotations	Ensures all identities are seen and treated as valuable
Assumes circumstances about a person's life that may not be true, reinforces stereotypes and/or labels	Is specific and clearly conveys what we mean



## Be Culturally Responsive.

Commit to communicating in ways that acknowledge, value, and affirm cultural and social diversity across all audiences. Cultural responsiveness in communication is not a matter of optics—it is a practice of respect, accuracy, and inclusion. It reflects an organization's awareness of the cultural identities, histories, and lived experiences of the people it serves.

**Being culturally responsive means moving beyond representation toward relationship.** It asks communicators to seek understanding before assumption, and to ensure that the stories we tell reflect the perspectives and preferences of those most impacted. This includes not only how we describe people but also who participates in crafting and reviewing the message.

Implement brand guidelines, policies, and procedures that ensure all messaging authentically represents cultural identity, avoids bias, and excludes stereotypes. Communication should always be linguistically responsive to the families, communities, and partners you serve—reflecting the languages, dialects, and expressions that honor their experiences.

- ✓ **Capitalize Black, White, Indigenous, and other ethnic and racial identifiers when referring to people or groups.**
- ✓ **Capitalize the names of ethnic groups, tribes, and nations, and do not hyphenate them.**
- ✓ **Do not capitalize socioeconomic groups, generational names, physical characteristics, identities, or disabilities.**
- ✓ **Include diverse reviewers and stakeholders in message development to prevent cultural blind spots and strengthen authenticity.**

## Positioning for Impact: *The Reset*

Effective communication is never static—it evolves alongside the communities, partners, and missions it serves. Asset-based communication invites us to lead with awareness, empathy, and precision so that our words reflect the respect and equity our work demands.

As communities grow and language evolves, so must we. When our communication stays responsive and rooted in humanity, we do more than inform—we build trust, strengthen relationships, and extend the reach of our mission. That is the true impact of words chosen with care.

- Reflection Prompts:**
- **How do the words we use reflect—or contradict—our organization's values and mission?** Consider how language across your communications, fundraising, and storytelling either reinforces or challenges deficit-based narratives.
  - **What practices can we build to keep our communication responsive and inclusive over time?** Reflect on feedback loops, staff training, and community partnerships that ensure your language evolves as your impact grows.
  - **How can leaders model asset-based communication in everyday practice?** Think about how tone, word choice, and framing in meetings, emails, and public messaging can reinforce dignity, belonging, and shared accountability across your team and community.