



NARRATIVE POWER

in practice

Turning communications into real-world change

2026 COLORADO HEALTH SYMPOSIUM





We believe language access is a **fundamental right** — and a cornerstone of equity, dignity, and inclusion.

Language justice means creating spaces where everyone can fully participate, express themselves, and be heard — in the language of their heart.





Land Acknowledgment

In his own words

Stephen Paquette shares his perspective on why we acknowledge the land — expanding the narrative many of us have come to know.

In Our Voices · Sheridan College



Who We Are

SE2



Elizabeth Garcia

She · Her · Ella



Susan Morrissey

She · Her

Social Impact Agency

Narrative & Storytelling

Community Outreach & Engagement

What you'll get today

1

**Foundational concepts
of narrative change —
and how mindsets shift
over time**

2

**How narratives shape
community power,
belonging, and equity**

3

**Practical ideas you can
apply to your own
work right away**



Join at **slido.com**
#7759124





Name/Location

Nombre / Ubicación



Warm-up: Story Speed Round

🕒 2 minutes

1

Introduce yourself to the person next to you.

2

Share a belief you once had that turned out not to be true.

3

Why did you believe what you did? For how long?

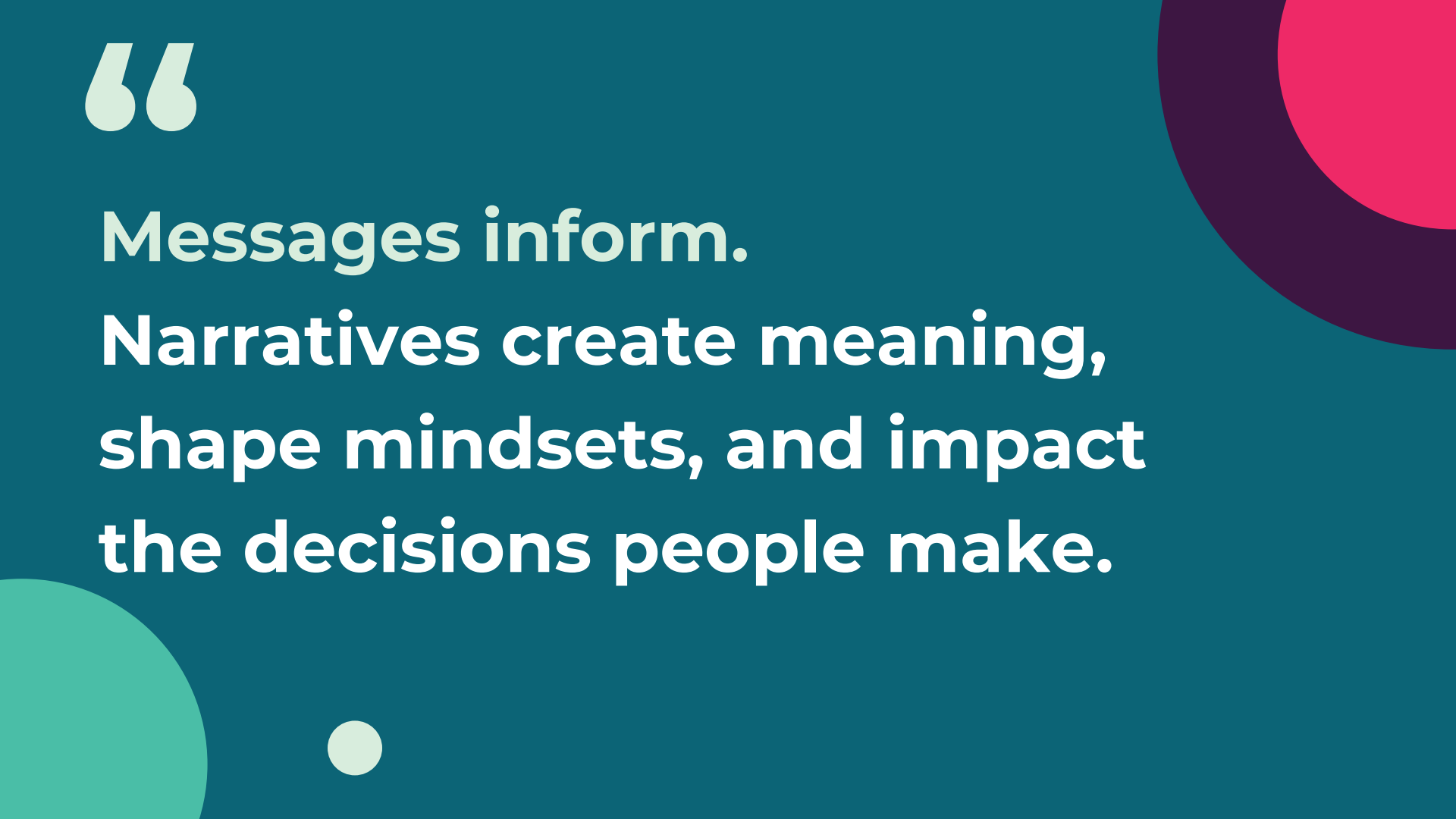
4

How has your mindset changed — and what led to that change?



01

Understanding Narrative



“

Messages inform.

**Narratives create meaning,
shape mindsets, and impact
the decisions people make.**

What's a Narrative?

1

Shared pattern of stories, told over time

2

Create or reinforce people's perceptions and mindsets

Unlike stories, narratives take longer to develop — and longer to shift.

What's a Mindset?

1

Collection of beliefs, attitudes, and ways of thinking that shape how you see the world

2

Influence how you respond to challenges, make decisions, and learn from experiences

From Stories to Real-World Impacts



Stories string together into narratives → Narratives shape mindsets → Mindsets drive decisions on policy, funding, voting, and support

One example: child care

STORY

A single mother loses child care when her provider closes. She misses work, falls behind on bills, and struggles to find reliable care.

NARRATIVE

Child care is essential infrastructure that helps families work, children thrive, and communities stay strong.

MINDSET

From:

Child care is a private family responsibility.

To:

Child care is essential infrastructure that helps families work, children thrive, and communities stay strong.

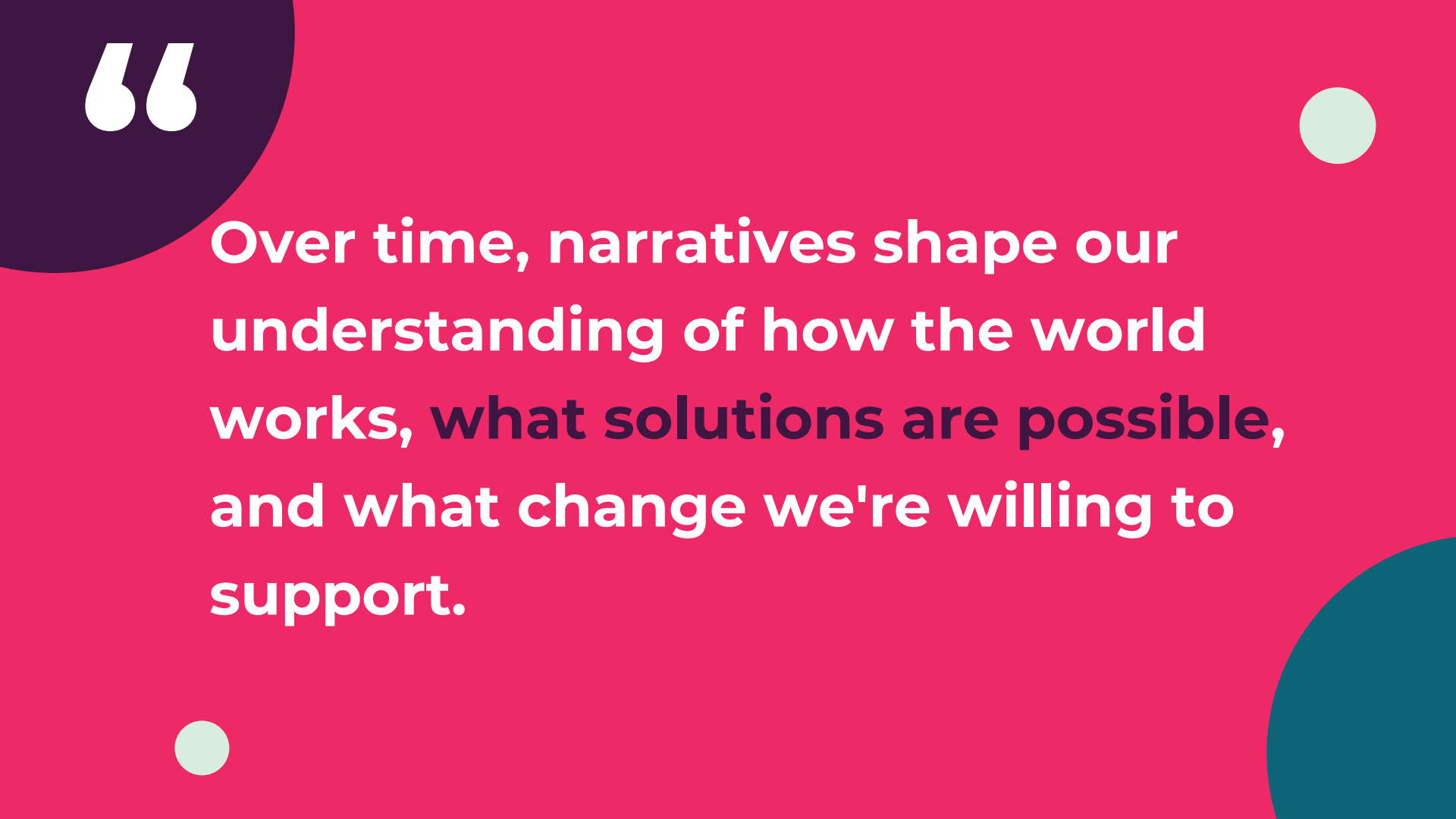
IMPACT

Public investment in child care

Better pay and support for providers

Policies that expand access

Employer, community, and government partnerships



“

Over time, narratives shape our understanding of how the world works, **what solutions are possible,** and what change we're willing to support.





Read Between the Lines

What mindset is each statement reinforcing?

“

People need to make better choices to improve their health.”

What mindset is this reinforcing?

“

**There's not enough to go around.
If you get more, I get less.”**

What mindset is this reinforcing?

“

**Everyone deserves the opportunity
and resources they need to be
successful and thrive.”**

What mindset is this reinforcing?

Positive Mindsets

● Shared Wellbeing

We all do better when everyone has what they need to thrive.

● Fairness & Equity

Systems should work fairly for everyone — not just for some.

● Shared Opportunity

Everyone deserves a real chance at a healthy, stable life.

● Belonging & Dignity

Every person matters and should feel valued, respected, and heard.

● Abundance

When communities work together, they create more opportunity.

● Hope & Possibility

Change is possible, and we can build something better together.

Negative Mindsets

● Individual Responsibility

People just need to make better choices.

● Zero-Sum, Scarcity

There's only so much — if you get more, I get less.

● Misplaced Blame

Blaming people rather than the systems around them.

● Deservedness & Othering

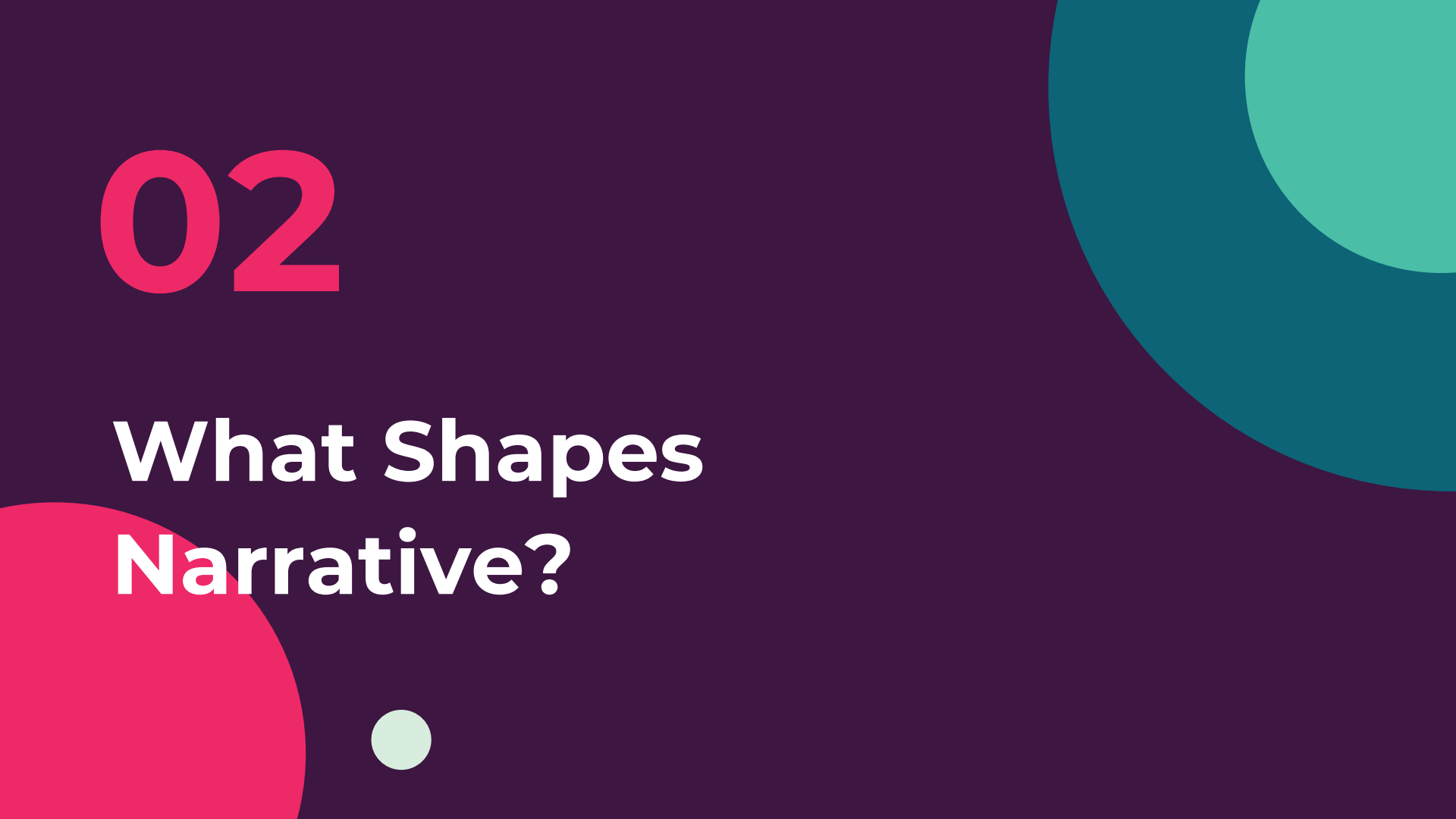
Your circumstances reflect what you “deserve.”

● Fatalism

Systems are impossible to change, or too broken to fix.

● Protectionism

Keep things as they are to stay safe and stable.



02

What Shapes Narrative?



Shared Values

**Start from what we have in common:
People pursue opportunity, prioritize
family, work hard, and want dignity,
stability, and belonging.**

Sandra's story

30 years working, raising children,
and contributing to her community —
yet trapped in a system that keeps
her in uncertainty. Even so, she finds
belonging through community and
care for others.

Begin with people — not policy



A CIRC storyteller — opportunity, family, and belonging

Shared values, unequal conditions

- Hard work does not always create stability.
- Families are doing what they're told should lead to success.
- Yet housing, food, health care, and everyday costs remain unaffordable.
- Many people work hard and still cannot make ends meet.

The problem isn't individual effort. It's the conditions people are navigating.

Narrative change requires commitment

- **Mindsets change through repetition — not one moment.**
- **News cycles move quickly; mindsets move slowly.**
- **Repeat a narrative across stories, speakers, and platforms.**
- **New examples can reinforce the same core idea.**
- **A narrative strategy helps us stay consistent over time.**

Culture

The shared stories that tell us what's normal — shaping how groups understand success, failure, morality. Culture is the water we swim in.





Context

History and place, social conditions, collective memory, and the political and economic moment. The same story lands differently in different contexts.

Power

Who gets to tell stories, whose stories are believed, and which narratives are reinforced or silenced. Narrative change is about who gets to author reality.





Narratives aren't neutral.

**They shape who belongs, who
deserves support, and whose
voices are heard.**





Framing

The choices you make when you tell a story — point of view, what's a problem, who's responsible, and what comes next.

Framing impacts meaning



Whose point of view is used?



How are problems defined?



What happened — and why?



Who is responsible & has power to make change?



What's the solution & what comes next?

Case study: Elder Young

COMMUNITY-LED · UNSCRIPTED · CULTURAL EXPERTISE



Why it worked

- Built with the storyteller
- Minimal editing
- Created space for nuance
- Community-led dissemination

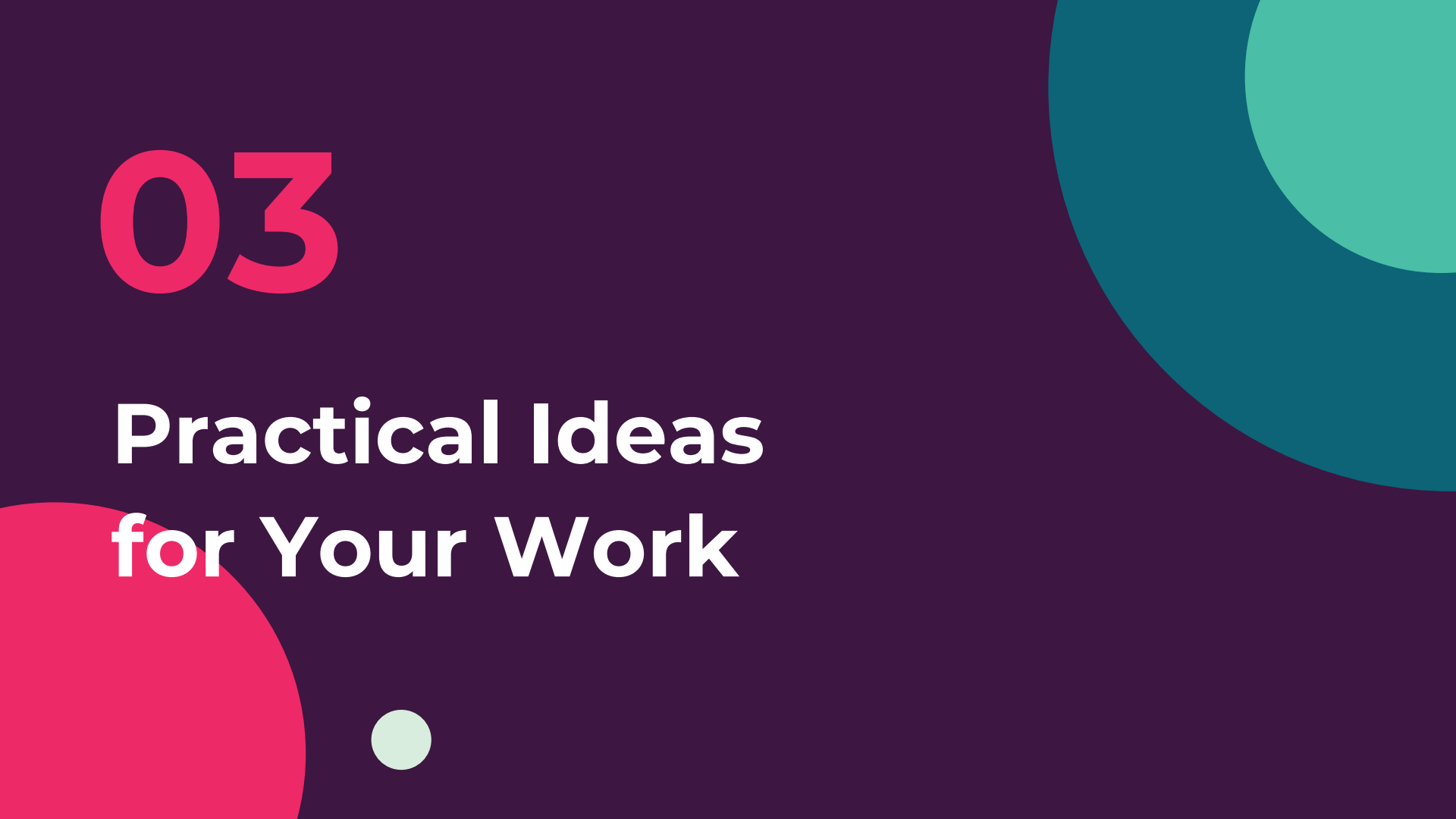
Case study: 988 Colorado

WHEN POLITICS RESHAPES HOW WE TELL THE TRUTH



What we did

- Centered healing over identity labels
- Used visual cues vs. overexposure
- Adapted tone + rollout for safety
- Safety > visibility — dignity first



03

Practical Ideas for Your Work



LOOK BENEATH THE MESSAGE

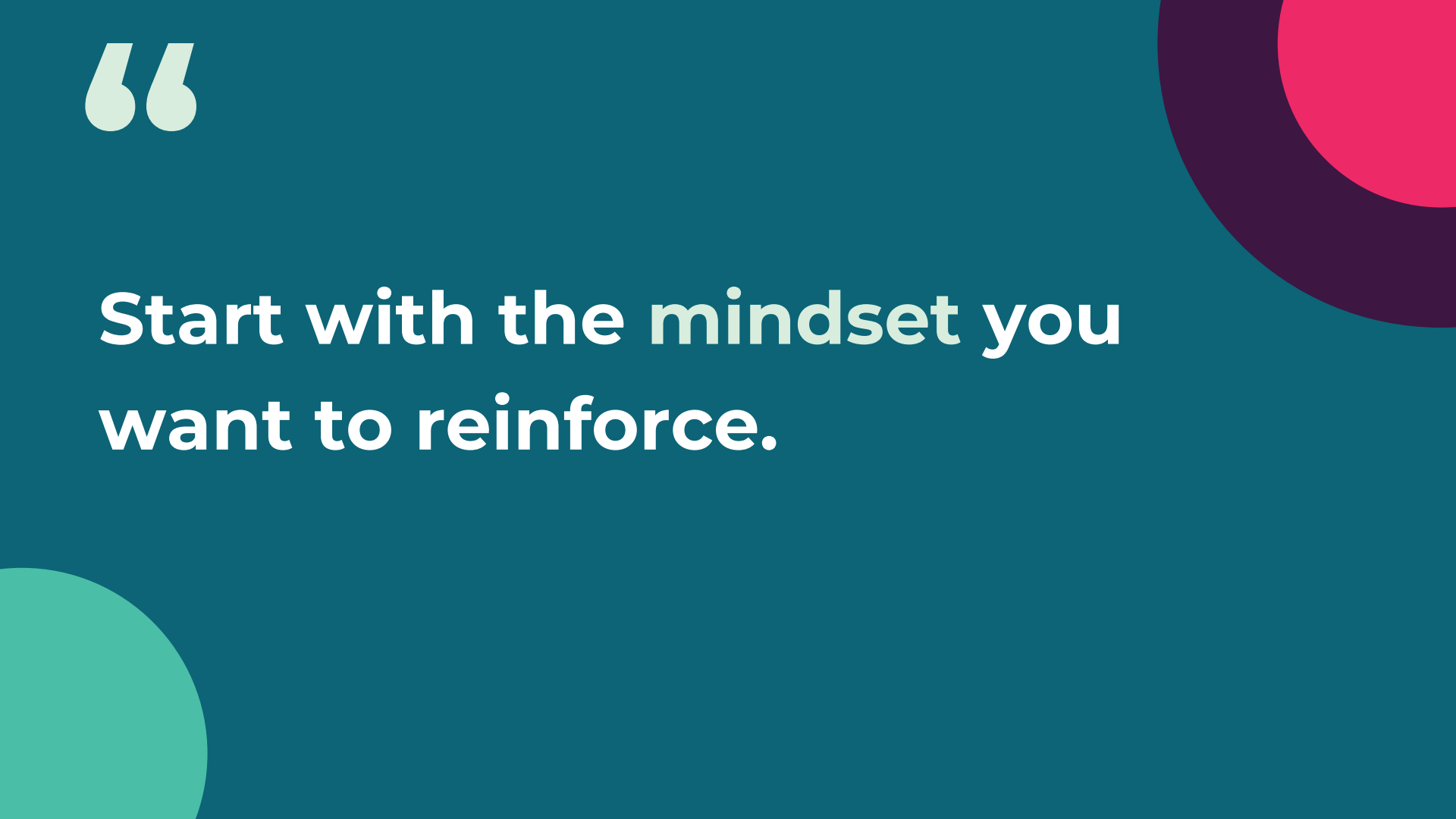
**What does your communication
say about **how the world works?****



What's beneath the message?



If people heard this for 10 years, what would they believe — and what would they support?



“

**Start with the mindset you
want to reinforce.**

“

Instead of asking,

“What do I want people to
know?”

“

Ask,

**“What do I want people to
~~know~~ believe?”**

From mindset to narrative

1 START WITH THE MINDSET YOU WANT PEOPLE TO HAVE

Communities thrive when everyone has the opportunity to be healthy.



2 BACK INTO THE NARRATIVE

Health is shaped by the conditions where people live and work — not simply by personal choices.

Use messages and stories that feed that narrative.

Which narrative gets support?

Health is largely an individual responsibility.

Health is shaped by the conditions where people live, work, learn, and connect.

- ✓ Policymakers invest in prevention, not just treatment.
- ✓ Public funding supports upstream solutions.
- ✓ Communities help shape decisions that affect them.
- ✓ Cross-sector partnerships become the norm.



RUN A NARRATIVE CHECK

How do I know if I'm reinforcing the **wrong** narrative?

Run a narrative check

1 Who is the hero?

The organization, an individual, or the community?

2 Where does the problem live?

Inside people, inside systems, or both?

3 What does it suggest about the solution?

Try harder, get help, remove barriers, or act together?

4 What feeling remains?

Pity, fear, blame — or hope, possibility, shared responsibility?

A cautionary example

What narrative does this campaign tell about the people it aims to help — and who it centers as the hero?



Sevenly + Food for the Poor · 2014



A communication that went sideways

RUN A SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

**Same intention,
different narrative.**



**We help vulnerable families overcome
barriers.”**



We help vulnerable families overcome barriers.”

✓ **Families are weak**

✓ **We are the experts**

✓ **They need us**

✓ **The organization creates the change**





Families already have strengths. Our role is to remove barriers and expand opportunities so they can flourish.”



Families already have strengths. We remove barriers and expand opportunities so they can flourish.”

✓ **Families have agency**

✓ **Barriers aren't personal failures**

✓ **Organizations support, not rescue**

✓ **Change comes from strengths & opportunity**



Changing the Narrative

GROUP EXERCISE

- 1 Select a notecard. Review it in small groups of 2-3 people.
- 2 What narrative does it tell?
- 3 What mindset(s) does it reinforce?
- 4 How would you rewrite it? What new narrative does it tell?

Affordable Housing Program Expands

MESSAGE

Too many families are struggling because they cannot afford housing. Our program provides rental assistance and housing resources to help low-income residents meet their basic needs and avoid homelessness.

NARRATIVE: Housing is primarily about helping people in crisis. The solution is charity or services.

MINDSET: Deservedness • Deficit thinking

Affordable Housing Program Expands

MESSAGE

Too many families are struggling because they cannot afford housing. Our program provides rental assistance and housing resources to help residents avoid homelessness.

REFRAMED MESSAGE

Stable housing is a foundation of healthy communities. When people can afford to live where they work and raise families, neighborhoods become stronger, healthier, and more connected.

NEW NARRATIVE: Housing is community infrastructure, not simply an individual need.

Take Charge of Your Mental Health

MESSAGE

Depression and anxiety affect thousands of Coloradans each year. If you're struggling, make healthy choices, reach out for help, and take steps toward improving your mental health.

NARRATIVE: Mental health is an individual responsibility. Recovery depends on personal choices.

MINDSET: Personal responsibility · Self-reliance

Take Charge of Your Mental Health

MESSAGE

Depression and anxiety affect thousands of Coloradans each year. If you're struggling, reach out for help and take steps toward improving your mental health.

REFRAMED MESSAGE

Mental health is part of all of our health. People are more likely to thrive when communities provide connection, support, and access to care. Creating those conditions benefits everyone.

NEW NARRATIVE: Communities create the conditions for wellbeing.

Helping New Americans Access Services

MESSAGE

Our organization helps immigrant and refugee families overcome barriers by connecting them with health care, education, housing resources, and legal services so they can become successful members of our communities.

NARRATIVE: Immigrants are recipients of help; They become valuable after receiving services. The organization is the hero.

MINDSET: Charity · Service provider as rescuer

Helping New Americans Access Services

MESSAGE

Our organization connects immigrant and refugee families with health care, education, housing, and legal services so they can participate fully in our communities.

REFRAMED MESSAGE

Colorado has always been strengthened by people who bring new ideas, skills, and cultures. When immigrant and refugee families can fully participate, our communities are healthier, more connected, and more resilient.

NEW NARRATIVE: Everyone contributes to our shared future.

Debrief

SURFACE MESSAGES

Housing assistance

Mental health

Immigration support



DEEPER NARRATIVES

What makes a community healthy?

Who is responsible for wellbeing?

Who belongs in “us”?

Which would you rather receive funding for?

04

Resource & Commitment



Keep in touch.

Let's keep changing the narrative — together.

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