

War is not the answer: Framing collective action for road safety

The recommendations in this Framing Brief are based on our analysis of traffic safety in San Francisco Bay Area English, Spanish and Chinese news outlets and our ongoing work on media advocacy with community groups across the country.

Equity. Community. Shared responsibility. Those values are the foundation of Vision Zero, an international movement built on collaboration across sectors to eliminate traffic deaths and severe injuries and ensure safe mobility for everybody. Equity is central to the Vision Zero frame because everyone deserves to be safe on the streets we share.

It's hard to imagine who would oppose a campaign that promotes safety for everyone. But there's a dominant frame that pervades the conversation about traffic safety that undermines equity and shared action. This frame characterizes city streets as a battleground and movement on those streets as a war in which every road user must look out for him or herself. In this Framing Brief, we explore the nuances of the divisive frame applied to city streets and identify ways that traffic safety and Vision Zero proponents can move the conversation toward community, cohesion and shared action for safety.

Framing traffic safety: “Psycho bikers” and “dangerous drivers”

“Keep honking, I'm reloading.” “I'm walkin' here!” Traffic as battle pervades our pop cultural landscape. But it goes much deeper than that: The metaphor pervades even news coverage, which is a uniquely credible source that sets and reflects the public agenda. Berkeley Media Studies Group's recent analysis of San Francisco news coverage uncovered heated language that echoes a larger sense of frustration and division, as when a San Francisco Chronicle columnist argued for a policy that would target “psycho-bikers, the ones who roar through intersections, barely missing pedestrians, challenging cars and generally behaving like morons.”¹

Blame is a central feature of the battle frame: Collisions are the fault of “dangerous drivers,” “distracted pedestrians” or “aggressive bikers.” Calls for policy change are then framed in the context of penalizing different groups, as when a San Francisco advocacy group called on the police to “focus enforcement on autos, as they’re the source of the most dangerous collisions.”² In the face of this divisive, accusatory frame, it’s perhaps not surprising that road users feel frustration, isolation and anger, all of which can bubble over with public safety consequences.

What are the implications of such a divisive frame for building a citywide movement that requires collective action? How can we move toward a community where everyone on the road shares the goal of safety and is willing to invest in Vision Zero?

Shifting from portrait to landscape

The current framing around traffic safety supports the “default frame” of personal responsibility. Most Americans’ gut-level understanding of any problem is that individual actions like work, discipline and self-determination will outweigh other factors, such as the conditions in which they live. The problem with the default frame is that it hides the environment we move within and keeps the focus narrowly on the details of a single person. In the case of traffic safety, often that narrow, individual focus perpetuates blame and overshadows the very real systemic changes that could be made to improve safety, such as changes to the built environment or to policies that influence people’s behavior.

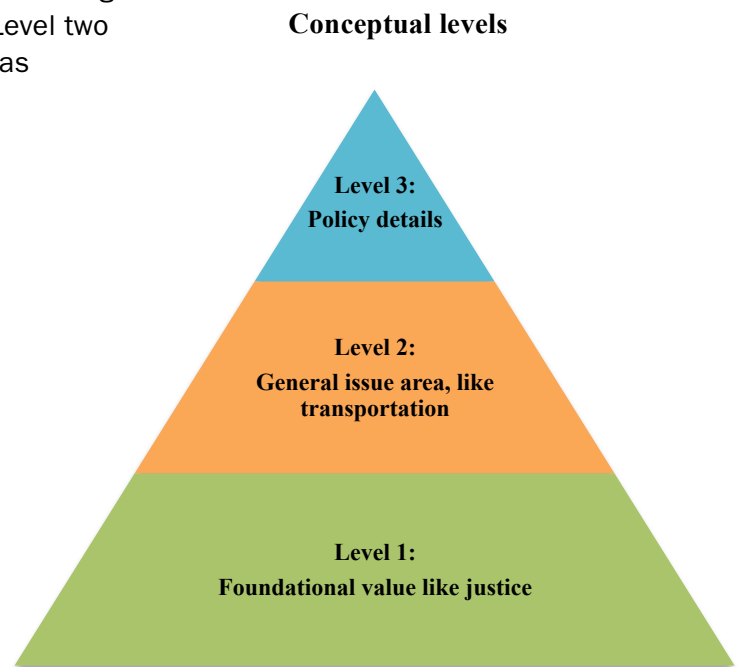
To make the case for Vision Zero, proponents need to broaden the default frame from its emphasis on individual road users to a landscape perspective that makes visible the external factors that shape individuals’ behavior in the environment. By painting a broader picture, supporters can help people see that built environment and policy decisions influence safety for people walking, biking, riding transit and driving. With that landscape view, the policy and systemic strategies needed to address the most substantive barriers to road safety will make sense to people.

Incorporating values

Vision Zero stakeholders must also shift the frame around traffic and mobility to evoke values like community, equity and shared responsibility. By highlighting those values, stakeholders will be better able to connect with residents and policymakers and create support for the concept of Vision Zero and the policies needed to carry it out.

Why do values matter? An effective message goes beyond facts and figures to connect with people on the level of their deeply held values — the principles and standards that guide how they think the world should work. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff describes the importance of values within three conceptual levels of understanding.³

Values ground the frame and the message and are prioritized at level one. Level two articulates the issue area, such as transportation or health. Level three is about the details of the policy approach. Too often, stakeholders communicating about a particular issue get stuck at level three, mired in policy minutiae. That’s a problem because inundating people with facts and figures may not shift their thinking, especially if those facts are out of sync with their underlying beliefs. But voicing the values helps people connect with the issue, recognize its importance and, ultimately, motivates them to act.



Putting it all together: Developing effective messages

An effective message answers three questions:



The answers to the questions should cue up the landscape so the audience can see the context for the problem. Otherwise, the default frame of individualism will kick in and obscure the policy discussion. The description of the problem in terms of the environment can then connect to the values that motivate action. Naming the solution helps locate responsibility and helps the audience see that despite the complexity of the problem, there is something we can do about it.

Regardless of the specific policy proponents are trying to advance, they must connect it to values that evoke shared responsibility and collective action. Stakeholders can ask themselves: What values should we evoke in arguing for a traffic safety policy? Why do we care about this? Whatever the policy, connecting it with shared values can help people see the importance of the policy for the whole community.

In the examples below, we've shown how a traffic safety or Vision Zero proponent can use this strategy to talk effectively about policy. The values can be different as long as they reflect the principles you hold.

VALUE: Justice

Traffic collisions disproportionately affect people living in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. It's not fair that road users in those communities can't feel safe on our streets. We need Vision Zero's focus on prioritizing safety when we design roads or set speeds or



enforcement priorities. Vision Zero ensures that everyone using San Francisco's streets has the chance to get where they need to go, safely.

VALUE: Can-do spirit

Traffic collisions in San Francisco have already taken the lives of too many people this year. Every one of those deaths is an unnecessary tragedy. San Francisco has led the country in so many other ways: With Vision Zero, we now have the chance to innovate again — and save lives in the process. Vision Zero is a proven way to reduce traffic deaths by prioritizing safety in all our decisions about the city's transportation systems. San Francisco is and should continue to be a leader in Vision Zero for all.

VALUE: Interconnectedness

Traffic collisions in San Francisco have already taken the lives of too many people this year. We're each safer when we're all safer. Vision Zero policies prioritize safety in every aspect of our streets, from designing and maintaining roadways that encourage safe behavior to setting appropriate speed limits and ensuring that people know the rules of the road. That helps us create and maintain safe streets for everyone — whether we're driving, walking, biking or riding transit.

Conclusion

Whenever they're communicating about traffic safety, Vision Zero stakeholders should ask themselves: "Do we make it easier for people to see why changes to the environment to improve road safety are necessary?" When they do, then proponents will be making the case they want: Safe, equitable mobility depends on all of us, and we all have skin in the game because whether we are biking, walking or riding, we all use the road. By making explicit the shift to collective action and shared responsibility for ensuring safe streets, everyone in San Francisco can share in the work it will take to realize Vision Zero for all.

Interview gone wrong

Once proponents for a policy know how to frame an issue, they have to learn how to talk about it in public and to reporters. Because policymakers track issues in the news, the way the media portray topics like traffic safety may influence policy decisions on the issue. Although journalists choose the interview questions and, ultimately, the text that makes it online, on the air or into print, advocates have a lot of control over how the interview unfolds. Still, that can be easier said than done under the pressure of rapid-fire questions. Staying on message and keeping policy goals at the forefront requires preparation and practice. Without it, even the most seasoned speaker can get off track. Let's see what happens when a Vision Zero stakeholder trying to reframe traffic safety and make the case for shared action gets in front of the camera.

REPORTER: As you know, last week a San Francisco resident was killed by a reckless driver downtown. Why does this keep happening?

ANSWER: Of course, I first want to honor the life we lost and offer my sincerest condolences to the family. And as we reflect on that tragedy, I think it's also important that we think about what can be done to prevent future deaths and spare other families and communities the pain we are feeling now. I'm proud to live in a city that values the safety of every road user with the Vision Zero initiative, which prioritizes safety in every decision that's made about our streets.

So far so good! Let's keep going.

REPORTER: But this was a reckless driver. Isn't the problem really bad behavior? How can we be sure people drive better?

ANSWER: Yes, it's very important for drivers to take responsibility, especially on our crowded streets. That's why a key piece of the Vision Zero campaign is education. We want to make sure every driver in San Francisco knows how to be as safe as possible.

REPORTER: So educating drivers is important. How can we be sure all drivers know and abide by the rules of the road?

ANSWER: There are many things we can do to improve driver education, like requiring longer training for teachers and creating ways for parents to be involved in educating their teens.

Now you are off track. These answers are valid, but they don't support your goal of reducing traffic deaths through collective Vision Zero action. Instead, the focus has turned to individual behavior that could reinforce blame on different groups of road users.

Let's try it again.

REPORTER: So educating drivers is important. How can we be sure all drivers know and abide by the rules of the road?

ANSWER: Of course drivers need to abide by the rules of the road. But one of the great things about our city is that we all use so many different types of transportation — very few of us are “just walkers,” “just transit riders,” “just bikers” or “just drivers.” That’s why the Vision Zero approach is critical. Through structural changes that prioritize safety we can make every aspect of using our streets easier, safer and more forgiving of collisions, no matter how or where you’re using the road. After all, we’re each safer when we’re *all* safer.

REPORTER: You mentioned structural changes as parts of the Vision Zero framework. Is more construction really the answer? It’s hard enough to get around in San Francisco.

ANSWER: That’s a great question, and I appreciate you asking it. Vision Zero is rooted in collaboration. We maintain strong communication between different departments and communities to ensure that we’re streamlined and are taking into account other projects (like construction projects or enforcement activities). We know that building and maintaining safe streets throughout the city doesn’t depend on just one department, it depends on *everyone*.

Now you're on track. Instead of reinforcing blame and division, your message is connected to Vision Zero and to larger themes of shared action. The reporter can follow up with questions about the policies and what actions are happening locally. Or the reporter may ask another distracting question. But by staying on track, you will have the discussion you want to have, focused on approaches that will ensure safe, equitable mobility for everyone.

References

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